

Doccia porcelain in the Palazzo Madama, Turin

Museums and their future are the talk of many in our troubled pandemic times. Most of us are powerless to influence their future, but we can highlight some of the treasures held in the great national institutions to keep in the forefront of our minds what we need to fight for. Examples of this are the subject of this paper, a pair of large Doccia porcelain ewers in the Palazzo Madama, Turin with a direct link to the Victoria and Albert Museum (the V&A), and also a Doccia polychrome figure there with a similar link to the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. And herein is the kernel of the story that follows.

The Palazzo Madama, which houses the Turin City Museum of Ancient Art, also displays a large collection of paintings, statues, church ornaments, and decorative art, mostly from the Middle Ages to the 18th century. In its decorative art collection is an outstanding collection of ceramics, particularly porcelain, and mainly by Italian factories. The building, situated in the centre of the city in Piazza Castello, opposite the opera house (Teatro Regio Torino), has two quite different stylistic aspects, the south-western facing castle architecture dating to the 15th century, (1) and the north-eastern Baroque façade by Filippo Juvarra added in the early 18th century. (2) The site of the Palazzo was originally of the 1st-century BC gate in the Roman walls of the city. Two of the towers of the Palazzo in the rear of the building, although restored, still testify to this original function. The building has had many additions and reincarnations since the 14th century to its present use as a national museum.¹



1. Palazzo Madama, rear area bearing the 15th century styles of a castle.
Photo: the author.



2. Palazzo Madama, Baroque façade by Filippo Juvarra, completed in 1721.
Photo: the author.

On display in the ceramics galleries of the museum, are two large Doccia porcelain ewers in the white. (3) These ewers were modelled from terracotta examples now preserved in the Doccia Museum, Sesto Fiorentino, near Florence.² The terracotta models were designed by Massimiliano Soldani Benzi (1656-1740), a Tuscan sculptor active mainly in Florence. After his death, his heirs sold some of his wax models to Marchese Carlo Ginori (1702-1757) of Doccia, the founder of the factory in 1735. His chief modeler, Gaspero Bruschi, adapted some of the wax models for porcelain moulds. Bronzes of these models are in the Victoria and Albert Museum collection. (4) These pieces are purely ornamental, and were made for the Florentine Senator Giovanni Battista Scarlatti. The bronze ewers were cast in c.1721 from wax models, and the models or moulds from them used in this process were later employed to create the porcelain examples at Doccia. There are references to the ewers in Soldani Benzi's correspondence, some of which is in the Bodleian Library Oxford.³

The figures on the ewers depict Galatea, a Nereid (sea nymph) of Greek mythology, seated on a pair of dolphins in the case of one, whilst on the other, Neptune, the Roman god of the sea, is riding a dolphin and Triton is riding a seahorse. These works of art are in the high baroque manner, and include depictions of tritons blowing on conches, a cornucopia held by a child triton, a sea deity, and a child with a double fish tail holding a shell. The handle on the Galatea piece is in the form of an aged sea-god, whilst the handle on the Neptune example is in the form of a bare-breasted winged female figure. These are characteristic elements in the baroque ornament of the time.



3. Doccia porcelain moulded ewers depicting *The Triumph of Galatea* (left) and *The Triumph of Neptune* (right) , c.1737-50, modelled after Massimiliano Soldani Benzi. Palazzo Madama (Dono D’Azeglio, 1874. Inv.3431/C), Ht. 69 cm. Photo: the author.

Also in the Palazzo Madama, is a large polychrome-painted figure of *Jupiter and the Eagle*, (5) also by Doccia from a model by Giuseppe Piamontini (1663-1744). There is an original bronze in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.⁴ (6) A plaster model is in the Doccia Museum.⁵ (7)

John Winter⁶ gives an interesting and informative account of the process in making these large figures in porcelain at Doccia:

Once the manufactory had the moulds, the *formattori* then usually produced copies of the sculptures in red wax or, in the case of larger figures, in gesso; many of these still exist at Doccia and elsewhere. Although a



4. A pair of bronze ewers depicting The Triumph of Galatea (left) and The Triumph of Neptune (right) made for Senator G B Scarlatti by Massimiliano Soldani Benzi in 1721, Ht. 79.7 cm. ©Victoria & Albert Museum (A.18-1959 and A.19-1959).

few are of fine quality, no doubt reflecting the mould- making and wax- modelling talents of such sculptors as Vincenzo Foggini and Anton Maria Weber, many were left in a relatively rough state with mould joins still visible and with little additional finishing to the surface. These were clearly intended as a visual inventory for the manufactory's use and presumably also for prospective clients; they also served as models for study by apprentice sculptors. Importantly, they could also be used to make replacement moulds should the original ones be damaged through use. (8)

Winter continues:

The large figures and groups were fired in separate sections – the single biggest pieces being about sixty centimetres high – and after firing and glazing were joined together with a gesso-based cement. Later a technique was developed making it possible to join several sections of moulds together, producing a single unified *forma* into which a more liquid porcelain paste was poured, creating figures of less mass which were therefore less likely to be damaged during the firing process. The second firing after the glaze had been put on the figure was a hazardous process, since it aggravated damage already done in the first firing....Large pieces which were to be painted in colours produced even more problemsIt may be that Carlo Ginori intended to leave most of the large figures in white, which could be suggestive of marble, but, in any case, it would have proved extraordinarily difficult to produce them in coloured versions.

And most relevant to this paper:

The largest known early coloured figure is that of *Jupiter and the Eagle* after Piamontini in the Museo Civico d'Arte [Palazzo Madama], Turinprobably made around 1750, which, with a height of sixty-four centimetres, was a remarkable achievement.

This remarkable figure has pride of place in its own case in Palazzo Madama, where the visitor is able to



5. Doccia porcelain figure of *Jupiter and the Eagle*, c.1745-50, modelled after Giuseppe Piamontini. Palazzo Madama D'Azeglio, (Dono 1874. Inv. 3429/C), Ht. 64 cm. Photo: the author.



6. Giuseppe Piamontini, *Jupiter riding an Eagle*, c.1700 bronze, Ht. 46.5 cm. ©Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (WA1960.1.5).



7. Doccia model of *Jupiter and the Eagle*, plaster. ©Doccia Museum.

study it from all angles as its display cabinet, like most of the cabinets in the museum, is free standing and glazed on all sides. (9)



8. Some of the wax models in the Doccia Museum, Sesto Fiorentino.

In circa 1735-7, Marchese Carlo Ginori founded his hard-paste porcelain factory at his home, Villa Doccia, with its kilns fueled by the forests behind the property on Monte Morello in Sesto Fiorentino, near Florence. (10) The factory was one of the earliest porcelain factories in Italy after the short-lived Vezzi factory in Venice had opened and shut in the 1720s. For ten years, Ginori experimented with different porcelain recipes and collected models and moulds for porcelain figures.



9. Ceramics Gallery, Palazzo Madama, showing the Doccia porcelain figure of *Jupiter and the Eagle* in its case, centre foreground. Photo: the author.

Finally, in 1746, he began to sell the factory's products to the public. Ginori did however employ top-rate workers to produce his wares, so that he rapidly gained a reputation for quality of design and manufacture. His factory, Doccia, as it became known, was soon in receipt of orders from the highest echelons of society and nobility.

Carlo Ginori died in 1757, leaving his three sons to continue the factory. Doccia, in its various forms over the centuries, continued in production, latterly as Richard-Ginori, but became bankrupt in 2013, and was bought out by Gucci, who plan to continue production in modern chinaware. Villa Doccia remains extant, and has been on the property market since 2020.⁷ (11)



10. Thomas Salmon, 'Villa di Doccia de' Marchesi Ginori', 1757, hand-coloured copper engraved print.



11. Villa Doccia in Sesto Fiorentino today (2019). The extant estate covers over 106 acres. ©Knight Frank Tuscany.

The porcelain examined in this paper demonstrates the exceptional quality, aesthetic sense, and technical ability developed in the early years of the Doccia factory under its founder, Marchese Carlo Ginori. Although, like many other factories in Europe and the United Kingdom, Doccia used the artworks of the finest artists of the day from which to adapt forms for their own production, their skill, sensitivity and well-developed techniques enabled products of the utmost perfection, whilst pushing the boundaries of what was achievable in their chosen material, hard-paste porcelain. That these fine objects are today in the collections of the ancient building that is the Palazzo Madama in Turin, leave the visitor with an overwhelming sense of wonderment at the achievements of these pioneers in an age nearly three centuries before the universal research, technical developments and technological advances of the centuries that followed them.

Patrick Hagglund, April 2021

Notes

¹Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palazzo_Madama,_Turin.

² Maritano, Cristina, *Le ceramiche di Palazzo Madama Guida alla collezione* (Turin, L'Artistica Savigliano, 2008), p.88.

³ See: <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O312113/ewer-depicting-the-triumph-of-ewer-soldani-benzi-massimiliano/>.

⁴ Maritano (2008), pp.90-1.

⁵ Montanari, Tomaso (ed.), Zikos, Dimitrios (ed.), *Making Beauty- The Ginori Porcelain Manufactory and its progeny of statues* (Florence: Mandragora, 2017), fig.12, p.108.

⁶ Kräftner, Johann (ed.), *Liechtenstein Museum Vienna- Baroque Luxury Porcelain- the manufactories of Du Paquier in Vienna and of Carlo Ginori in Florence* (Munich.Berlin.London.New York, 2005), John Winter, 'Porcelain sculpture at Doccia', pp.181-2.

⁷ See: <https://www.tuscany-realestate.it/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Villa-Doccia-CES-Brochure.pdf>.