

Marquis Carlo Ginori and his *pietre dure* workshop

An addendum to ‘Marquis Carlo Ginori and the founding of the Doccia factory 1737-1757’

by Patrick Hagglund, July 2024

The reader may well wonder what relevance the technique of *pietre dure* has to ceramics, given this paper is written for the London Ceramic Circle. What follows is an investigation into the *pietre dure* workshop established by Marquis Carlo Ginori, in the early years of the Doccia factory in Sesto Fiorentino, north-west of the ancient city of Florence. The relevance of this investigation is to demonstrate an artistically important endeavour by Carlo Ginori outside of his maiolica and porcelain factory production. This matter was addressed in the author’s earlier paper, entitled ‘Marquis Carlo Ginori and the founding of the Doccia factory 1737-1757’, but in that paper it stated: ‘The author can find no evidence that any *pietre dure* pieces purporting to be of Doccia manufacture are known or extant, but there may well be some yet to be re-discovered’.

After further research, that statement has been found to be ill-informed. What follows is an attempt to correct the record, at least partially.

What is *pietre dure*?

Pietre dure (hard stones) is a technique in the decorative arts which involves the creation of mosaic pictures using a variety of mostly semi-precious stones cut and matched for the desired shapes and colours to build up pictures and patterns in these stones affixed to a stone base. This process is so carefully cut and the pieces so precisely fitted in a mosaic that the resulting panel or table top appears as a single picture with a polished surface. The most common forms of such works result in plaques and especially table tops called *commessi* (plural, from the Latin *committere*, meaning ‘to join’). These pieces at their best have been prized by royalty and aristocracy widely in Europe for several hundred years and continue to be keenly sought by those who can afford to purchase them worldwide today.

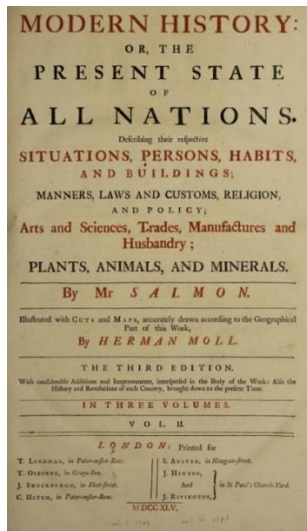
The manufacture of *pietre dure* at Doccia: early and recent quotations from the literature

The Bedfordshire-born historical and geographical writer Thomas Salmon (1679-1767) visited the Doccia factory in the early years of the factory and wrote his personal impressions of it in his substantial work entitled *The Present State of all nations, etc* [title abbreviated], published in English originally in 1744-45, (1) and thereafter in more detail with regard to Ginori and his Doccia factory in Volume XXI of his Italian language publication, published in Venice in 1757. (2)

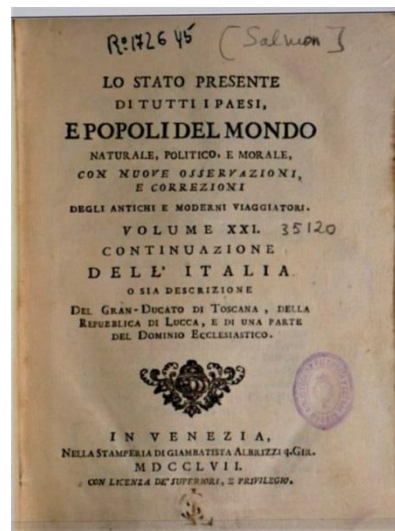
The following translation from the Italian by the author of this paper is taken from page 94 of Salmon Volume XXI (Venice, 1757):

*The workers for which all the described works are carried out are distributed in several workshops. There are the sculptors who model vases, flowers, and figures from life. And where the potter for the cups, plates and round vases. Where the designers and painters of the porcelain. Where others print the lands (le Terre ?), which are still manufactured there for the use of those of Faenza. And because the Marquis [Carlo Ginori] was keen to keep alive for his part the art of working with **pietre dure** introduced in Florence in the 16th century, we can see in another workshop, apart from various works for the aforementioned stones, bas-reliefs, plaques and snuffboxes, and in over two largish historical paintings brought to the table, also inlaid with*

pietre dure in which the vividness imitates that of a skilled brush, that at first sight they appear to be a real paintings: all works by Francesco Poggetti of Fiorentino who is the expert Master.¹



1. Thomas Salmon, London, 1744-45.



2. Thomas Salmon, Venice, 1757, Vol. XXI

Laura Casprini, writing in the catalogue for the exhibition in the Museo Richard-Ginori in 2006-2007, states [the author's translation from the Italian]:

In rooms adjacent to those of the Porcelain Manufactory, a laboratory for the processing of pietre dure was also set up on the orders of Marquis Carlo Ginori in 1745. The direction of this second undertaking was entrusted to the stonemason and porcelain fitter Francesco Poggetti, who supervised around seven craftsmen initially engaged in the creation of snuffboxes and other decorations, for example, seals, but later also in the execution of more demanding works, such as trays, boxes and table tops. With the death of Marquis Carlo, the adventure of working with pietre dure ended in Doccia. In 1761, the year following the final closure of the Colonnata factory, Francesco Poggetti reached Madrid, where King Charles III of Bourbon had set up the Buen Retiro Pietre Dure Laboratory and where, as early as 1754, another stonemason had been active, Florentine, Domenico Stecchi, coming from the much more famous Grand Ducal Gallery of Works.²

Extant pieces of *pietre dure* attributed to the Doccia workshop c.1744-1760

The celebrated art historian in the field of *pietre dure*, along with many other of the decorative arts, the Cuban-born Alvar González-Palacios (1936 -), has contributed much in the literature on this particular art form, especially where Doccia *pietre dure* is concerned.

In the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition in the Palazzo Pitti in Florence in 2006 entitled *Arte e Manifattura di corte a Firenze dal tramonto dei Medici all'Impero (1732-1815)*, González-Palacios contributed an important chapter on Doccia *pietre dure*.³ In his paper, González-Palacios goes into considerable detail of the Doccia *pietre dure* workshop, particularly the important role played by Francesco Poggetti, both in the establishment and development of the workshop between 1744 and 1760, when he left Florence for Madrid to serve under the King of Naples, Don Carlo of Bourbon, who had set up the Buen Retiro factory there. The death of Marquis Carlo Ginori in 1757 and Poggetti leaving the factory in 1760 saw the demise of the Doccia *pietre dure* workshop.

Extant *pietre dure* wares by the Doccia workshop are rare and have been widely recognised by attribution through both connoisseurship and archival documents, most significantly by González-Palacios, and the Opificio delle Pietre Dure in Florence, the foremost institute for *pietre dure* in the field.

Example 1) Table top (*commesso*) inlaid with *pietre dure* on a white background, c.1755.



3. Table top, 76 x 150 cm, made by Francesco Poggetti and other artisans in the porcelain factory of the Marquis Ginori in Doccia, Florence, Private collection.⁴

González-Palacios has studied this table top or *commesso* (3) in some detail, and revealingly indicates that the design with a white marble background is in contrast to the prevailing custom back to the origins of early Florentine *pietre dure* pieces dating to the 16th century, in which such a background would be black (4) rather than white. The white background is a significant characteristic of such pieces made in the Doccia workshop under Marquis Carlo Ginori.



4. Italian *pietre dure* table top, c.1650-75, 58 x 119 cm. ©Victoria and Albert Museum (LOAN:GILBERT.939-2008).

González-Palacios makes a detailed argument for his attribution of the subject table top in a descriptive note to the piece in the 2006 catalogue, in which he discusses the design of the *pietre dure* work as well as reference to archival documents including letters, which convey a convincing argument for his Ginori / Doccia attribution. This table top is most likely one of four produced by Poggetti and his staff on the commission by Frederick the Great, King of Prussia in the 1750s.⁵

Example 2) Table top (*commesso*) inlaid with *pietre dure* on a white background, 1750s.



5. Table top, 37 x 56 cm, attributed to the Doccia pietre dure workshop under Francesco Poggetti in the 1750s. ©Sotheby's London (auction held on 8 June 2005, Lot 1).⁶

This table top (5) is much smaller than the *commesso* in the Florentine private collection discussed above; however, there are striking resemblances in the *pietre dure* design of this piece to that of the larger example. The background marble is white, and the overall design is similar in several respects in the strapwork and foliage that appear to relate to the larger work. Although the shape of the piece differs with that of the larger example, there is no apparent reason to doubt that this *commesso* was indeed from the Doccia *pietre dure* workshop as catalogued by Sotheby's in 2005.

Example 3) A *commesso* of *pietre tenere* (soft stones), Africano marble and vitreous pastes, possibly from the Doccia *pietre dure* workshop prior to 1758.

Here (6) we are on less confident ground as to the attribution to the Ginori / Doccia *pietre dure* workshop, but the Sotheby's catalogue gives an exhaustive discussion of the work, in which the auction house gives an impressive catalogue note written by Dr Annamaria Giusti, former director of the Opificio delle Pietre Dure in Florence, an acknowledged expert particularly in the field of *pietre dure*. Dr Giusti does not suggest a probable Doccia origin for the work, but rather that such an origin is possible. Alvar González-Palacios was able to trace documentary evidence that the *commesso* was recorded in the inventories of the Ginori family in 1791.⁷ A more detailed provenance is to be found in the Sotheby's catalogue of 6 December 2006.



6. A commesso of *pietre tenere* (soft stones), *Africano* marble and vitreous pastes, 100.5 x 151 cm, possibly from the Doccia *pietre dure* workshop prior to 1758. © Sotheby's London, 6 December 2006, Lot 51⁸



7. Giovanni Mannozi, called Giovanni da San Giovanni (1592-1636), and entitled 'Pievano Arlotto playing a practical joke on some Huntsmen', 1629. ©National Trust (NT 108852)

Dr Giusti states in the Sotheby's catalogue entry that 'due to the large dimensions one can say that it is surely the largest figurative *commesso* known, although the word *commesso* is generally used to identify hard and soft stone inlaid works, while here we also notice the presence of vitreous pastes.'

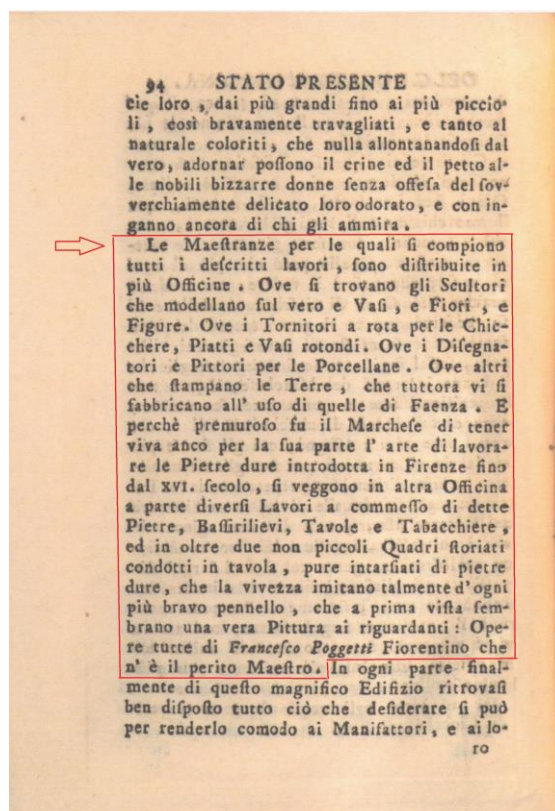
The subject matter of the *commesso* is of particular interest, in that it shows a remarkably faithful depiction of a painting of 1629 by Giovanni Mannozi, called Giovanni da San Giovanni (1592-1636), and entitled 'Pievano Arlotto playing a practical joke on some Huntsmen' or 'The Fable of the Piovano Arlotto'.⁽⁷⁾ The painting is in the collection of Viscount Scarsdale (Kedleston Hall, Derbyshire where it has been recorded since 1759). Fuller details of both the *commesso* and the painting may be found in the Sotheby's 2006 catalogue.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the objective of this Addendum to the author's previous paper, 'Marquis Carlo Ginori and the founding of the Doccia factory 1737-1757', is hopefully fulfilled by providing details of three examples of *commessi* that have been attributed, in the case of two *pietre dure commessi*, to being created in Marquis Carlo Ginori's Doccia *pietre dure* workshop in the fifteen or so short years of its existence, and a third, a *pietre tenere* substantial work, that suggests the possibility of so being. Although these techniques, *pietre dure* and *pietre tenere*, are outside the particular category of ceramics, the proven existence of the Ginori / Doccia *pietre dure* workshop emphatically highlights the extraordinary genius of its founder, who filled his life by not only serving at the highest level in the politics and public administration of his time, but also by his many other endeavours crammed into his relatively short life span of fifty-five years. In his founding of the Doccia factory producing both porcelain and maiolica of outstanding quality and artistic value, he maintains to this day the high regard in Italian art history that he rightly deserves.

NOTES

¹ Salmon, Thomas, *Lo stato presente di tutti i paesi e popoli del mondo naturale, politico e morale con nuove osservazioni e correzioni degli antichi, e moderni viaggiatori. Continuazione dell'Italia, o sia descrizione del Granducato di Toscana, della Repubblica di Lucca, e di una parte del dominio ecclesiastico - Volume XXI* (Venice: 1757), p.94. The original Italian text with the section that is translated into English in the body of this paper highlighted in red:



² Balleri, Rita, et al, *Album : Carlo Ginori : documenti e itinerari di un gentiluomo del secolo dei lumi* (Florence: Edizioni Polistampa, 2006), p.22, written by Laura Casprini.

In locali adiacenti a quelli della Manifattura delle Porcellane, fu allestito sempre per volontà del marchese Carlo Ginori, nell'anno 1745, un laboratorio per la lavorazione del commesso in pietre dure. La direzione di questa seconda impresa fu affidata al lapicida e montatore di porcellane Francesco Poggetti, che sovrintendeva circa sette artefici impegnati inizialmente nella realizzazione di tabacchiere ed altre galanterie, per esempio sigilli, ma in seguito anche nell'esecuzione di opere più impegnative, come vassoi, cassette e piani di tavoli. Con la morte del marchese Carlo si concluse, a Doccia, l'avventura della lavorazione delle pietre dure. Nel 1761, l'anno seguente alla definitiva chiusura dell'opificio di Colonnata, Francesco Poggetti raggiunse Madrid, dove il re Carlo III di Borbone aveva allestito il Laboratorio di Pietre Dure del Buen Retiro e dove, già dal 1754, era attivo un altro lapicida fiorentino, Domenico Stecchi, proveniente dalla ben più nota Galleria dei Lavori granducali.

³ González-Palacios, Alvar, 'La Manifattura Ginori di Pietre dure. 1745-1760' in *Arte e Manifattura di corte a Firenze dal tramonto dei Medici all'Impero (1732-1815)*, [Court art and manufacturing in Florence from the decline of the Medici to the Empire], edited by Annamaria Giusti (Livorno, sillabe s.r.l, 2006), pp.28-35.

⁴ González-Palacios, Alvar, *Las colecciones reales españolas de mosaicos y piedras duras* (Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, 2001), p.158.

⁵ Giusti (2006), Cat. 41, pp.106-107.

⁶ Sotheby's, *English and Continental Furniture - Part 1*, auction catalogue, London, 8 June 2005, Lot 1, pp.8-9.

⁷ González-Palacios in Giusti (2006), p.35.

⁸ Sotheby's London, *'Important Continental furniture and tapestries'*, 6 December 2006, Lot 51, pp. 82-85.

⁹ Sotheby's, (2006), Lot 51, p.82.