

A N T I C H I T Á
ALBERTO DI CASTRO



GIUSEPPE MAGGIOLINI
(Parabiago, 1738 – 1814)

Mechanical looking glass

1799 circa

Wood frame in walnut veneer with mahogany, maple, green-dyed maple and boxwood inlay,
after drawings by ANDREA APPIANI (Milan, 1754 – 1817)

167 (h) x 64 x 59 cm
65 ³/₄ (h) x 25 ¹/₄ x 23 ¹/₄ in

Signed centre: *Maggiolini*



Antichità Alberto Di Castro Srl
Piazza di Spagna, 5 – 00187 Roma
Tel. +39 06 6792269 – Fax +39 06 6787410
info@dicastro.com – www.dicastro.com

A N T I C H I T Á

ALBERTO DI CASTRO

Still acclaimed today for the beauty of his polychromatic wood marquetry, Giuseppe Maggiolini's production was deemed by his contemporaries to be nothing short of "paintings in wood". Such splendid works were the fortunate consequence of the artist's extraordinary mastery coupled with the fact that he held in his workshop designs and drawings by the best neo-classical Milanese artists. At his disposal were dozens of designs for ornamentations and figures, drawings portraying scenes inspired by the antiquities of Herculaneum, all by artists the calibre of Giuseppe Levati, Giocondo Albertoli, Agostino Gerli and Andrea Appiani. Held in collection among the artistic records of the City of Milan, today they bear witness to this successful collaboration. Awarded the title "Inlayer to Their Royal Highnesses" by the Archduke Ferdinand - son of the Empress Maria Theresa - for the beauty of his marquetry, Maggiolini was also famous in his lifetime for having experimented with and innovated the form and shape of that period's furniture as he drew on what was occurring outside Italy, in the Europe of the Enlightenment, in France and England. However, this aspect of his work was destined to be quickly forgotten. The success and diffusion of this new - I daresay avantgarde - typology and form was such that who had been its inventor was soon forgotten. The style immediately enjoyed widespread popularity, which in some instances continued until the turn of the new century. In one of his very few letters still in existence today, dated 11 June 1799, Maggiolini writes of a commission for an "English looking-glass" (Beretti, 1994, p. 146). The client to whom he writes is Paolo Andreani, an individual of great standing in the Lombardy of those years, famous for having both sponsored and piloted Agostino Gerli's 1784 hot air balloon modelled after the Montgolfier brothers' original French version. A rather eccentric and "fashionable" character in the Milan of the day, as well as elected fellow of the French Academy of Sciences, it is not surprising that Andreani should commission an ultra-modern furnishing such as the "English looking-glass".



Fig. 1: Giuseppe Maggiolini and collaborators
Olive branch in a triangular reserve. Pencil and pen,
wash on white paper, 126 x 205 mm.
Milan, Municipality of Milan's Civic Artistic
Collection, Drawings Cabinet, Fondo Maggiolini,
inv. A 180

A N T I C H I T Á

ALBERTO DI CASTRO

Held in the collection of Maggiolini's workshop drawings (fig. 1) (R.M. inv. A 180), a design for an inlay to be used in the 1799 commission depicts an olive branch in a triangular reserve along with an inscription that notes it was used for "the English looking-glass commissioned (by) Andreani". What this then-extremely modern innovation must have looked like can be known today thanks to the here-presented furnishing; which is not, however, the item executed in 1799 for Andreani, one that surely must have featured the olive branch in its inlay.



Fig. 2: Andrea Appiani (Milan, 1754 - 1817), *Altar and amphora*. Pencil, pen and wash on white paper, 225 X 331 mm. Milan, Municipality of Milan's Civic Artistic Collection, Drawings Cabinet, Fondo Maggiolini, inv. B 15.

detail

Equipped with mechanical intelligence - well concealed by the delicately veneered and beautifully ornamented splines - that allows the mirror to rise and fall, tilting to the needs of the user, it is a piece of furniture reduced to its essential elements. Similar to a modern household convenience, it is an excellent example of the "English taste" popular in the Milan of that era; not unlike the bronze "English taps" Pietro Verri bought in Rome in 1776 to install in the bathroom of his new apartment so as to have running water in his family villa. The refined restraint exercised in this then-modern piece does not in any manner compromise the exquisite decorative taste Maggiolini lavished on all his works, as the circular reserve on the back of the mirror splendidly illustrates.

A N T I C H I T Á

ALBERTO DI CASTRO

Here the expert mastery of the artist translates in polychromatic wood one of the most beautiful designs executed for him by Andrea Appiani - the drawing still held today in the workshop designs archive (fig. 2) (R.M. Inv. B 15). This same flaming fire altar embellished with an eagle and symbols of a mysterious sacrificial cult - the image inspired by Antiquity - was employed by Maggiolini in other furnishings executed throughout the 1790s for the Archducal court, such as the writing desk held at the Superintendence of Environmental and Architectural Heritage of Milan (Beretti, 1994, p. II 4 and ff.).

Precisely who commissioned this work is yet unknown. However, given the delicate array of wood employed for the inlay and the quality of the edging and bordering, dating is to be assigned to the last decade of the eighteenth century. In any event, the signature "Maggiolini" - engraved with a burin on the clod of earth on which the altar stands - attests to the fact that this was an important commission. Today, there remain very few original works by Maggiolini, rendering this piece even more prized.

Edited by Prof. Giuseppe Beretti