

A Pair Of Roman Gilt-Bronze Mounted Rosewood, Satinwood, Ebony and Maple Cabinets, Circa 1780, By Andrea Mimmi and Luigi e Giuseppe Valadier.

Provenance:

Museo Profano della Biblioteca Vaticana, Pope Pio VI Collections.

General Bertier than descents.

Wagram Prince, Sotheby's Paris, Lot.4, 29/04/2014.

Study: by Alvar Gonzales Palacios.

Height: 17,51 inc. (44,5 cm)

Width: 25¼ inc. (65cm)

Depth: 17¼ inc. (45,5 cm)

The Profane Museum, the original nucleus of the collections of profane antiquities in the future complex of the Vatican Museums, was created by Clement XIII (Rezzonico, 1758-1769) and enriched with further collections and furnishings under Pius VI (Braschi, 1775-1799).

The Museo Profano was organised under Clement XIII (Rezzonico, 1758-69) in a space that was created by closing off some arches overlooking the Cortile della Pigna. The walls and pavement were inlaid with a profusion of costly marbles, and the ceiling was frescoed also by Pozzi, with an allegory of the Spirit of Rome wresting some ancient relics from the hands of Time. Niches beside the entrances were designed to hold busts of the orators and philosophers of antiquity; today, they contain bronze heads of the emperors Augustus, Nero, and Septimius Severus, and of the consul Caelius Balbinus. Along the side are two large cabinets with marble shelves and doors of gilt glass. There were other elegant cabinets: one, of Indian Ficus wood, the gift of Cardinal Albani, was filled with medals; the other, lined in yellow Portuguese wood, was surmounted with metal and stone busts and statuettes. Mosaics with turquoise backgrounds, found at Herculaneum, were set above the cabinets.

Above the door in the Museo Profano is the coat of arms of Clement XIII, inscribed with the name of the pope and the date, 1767, when the museum was founded-the result of the efforts of Cardinal Albani, the passionate connoisseur and Vatican librarian, who was responsible for naming the renowned archaeologist J.J. Winckelmann as its first curator. Another inscription, in bronze, commemorates Pius VI, to whom we owe the appearance of the room as it is now. He had the old iron doors of the large cabinets replaced with the present ones, which bear his arms in gilt bronze, and he commissioned Andrea Mimmi to build four new cabinets, based on designs by Luigi Valadier, using precious woods that, originally, had been brought from Brazil to decorate the Sacristy of Saint Peter's. A signal accomplishment of Pius VI-one that gives the Museo Profano much of its present luster-was to put Valadier, a splendid silversmith, in charge of art. He had the

largest cameos framed in gold and silver, flanked by statuettes and colonnettes, and studded with gems, lesser cameos, gold medallions, and various friezes, combining the ancient and modern. They were set upon pedestals and bases of precious marbles. Smaller cameos were grouped in twos and threes on metal pedestals, with a correspondingly less sumptuous treatment.

Ivory carvings and rock crystal, previously in the Carpegna Collection, were incorporated into the doors of the large cabinets. Many of the ivories, in order to fit, were cut up and resectioned, making identification of the originals rather difficult.

Luigi Valadier was succeeded by his son Giuseppe, a well-know architect and the designer of several study cabinets for coins. It was his special task to mount the large Hellenistic cameo that had belonged to the Gonzaga and than to Queen Cristina of Sweden, and which Pius VI had bouth in 1794 from Prince Odescalchi for 20,000 scudi.

Unfortunately, most of these glorious objects were dispersed, together with the medals collection, when the Vatican Library was sacked by General Berthier and his officers during French occupation of Rome in 1797. Other treasures, such as the famous Albani medallions, were transferred to Paris our cabinets as well , under the terms of the infamous Treaty of Tolentino (1797)- never to return. The engravings commissioned by PiusVI from the Calcografia Camerale in 1784 are a pale reminder of the Museo Profano's original holdings; the 250 prints reproduce more than 585 objects, of which at least 200 are cameos with their special mounts.

Despite the greed of the invaders, many treasures escaped the pillaging because they were hidden or stored elsewhere. Remaining in the Museo Sacro were hard-stone and marble busts and reliefs, bronze statuettes, and, above all, those objects that were incorporated in the cabinet doors. Little else was returned after Napoleon's fall and its aftermath, so that the Museo Profano has not regained its former splendor. The Museo Sacro has, however, exapanded beyond the limits implied by its name, its collections encompassing objects and antiquities of a more varied character and origin.

Literature:

□ Gonzales-Palacios. "Gli armadi del Museo Profano" nel volume *Il Museo Profano, dale origini al tempo di Pio VI*, Edizione dei Musei Vaticani.

▮ Guido Cornini e Claudia Lega, *Preziose Antichità. Il Museo Profano al tempo di Pio VI*, Edizione Dei Musei Vaticani, 2013.

□ A. Gonzales Palacios, *Il Tempio Del gusto*, Milano, 1984, Tav XX, p.70;

□ A. Gonzales Palacios, *Il Gusto Dei Principi*, Milano, 2004, pp.323, 328.