

**An important North-Italian Royal Restoration white-lacquered and parcel-gilt bow-fronted chest of drawers after a design by Carlo Randoni (Turin 1755-1831) (Fig 1), attributed to Henri Thomas Peters (1792–1852) for Palazzo Tursi, Genoa, circa 1820–21, originally part of a pendant, its twin being now at Attingham Park, Shropshire.**

The moulded *Spanish Broccatello* marble top above a bow-fronted white-painted commode with two lower drawers beneath a drawer in the frieze with ormolu handles and keyhole escutcheons, flanked by cupboard doors, the whole decorated with stiff-leaf and beaded borders, foliate trails and scrolls, raised on leaf-wrapped turned legs.

Height: 35,43 in. (90 cm)

Wight: 48,81 in. (124 cm)

Depth: 22,44 in. (57 cm)

**Provenance:**

- Grimaldi Doria Tursi palace, Savoy Royal Residence in Genoa, 1820–21
- Anonymous European private collection

**Literature:**

- Biblioteca Civica Centrale di Torino, Manoscritto Bosio (for the original designs in pen and ink by Carlo Randoni, fig.1);
- Christopher Rowell & Wolf Burchard, '*Italian Furniture at Attingham Park*', *Journal of the Furniture History Society*, vol. LVI (2020), pp.107–176, esp. pp. 127–8, 137, and footnotes 78 & 79, figures 26 & 27;
- Martin Drury, '*Italian furniture in National Trust houses*', *Journal of the Furniture History Society*, vol. XX (1984), 38–44;
- Enrico Colle, *Il Mobile Impero in Italia, arredi e decorazioni d'interni dal 1800 al 1843*, Milan, 1998, pp. 260–61 (concerning a sofa, six chairs and two open armchairs of the same suite now in the Napoleonic residence in Elba island);
- Paolo Cornaglia, '*Giuseppe Battista Piacenza e Carlo Randoni*', in *I Reali Palazzi fra Torino e Genova: 1773–1831*, 2012, Turin, p.227 (with Randoni documents concerning the entire suite);
- Alvar Gonzalez Palacios, *Il Mobile in Liguria*, Genoa, 1996, p.323 (for a later related example still in the Royal Palace in Genoa).

In 1819 the Savoy Royal couple, Vittorio Emanuele I and Maria Teresa d'Asburgo Este, bought the Grimaldi-Doria Tursi Palace as their principal Genoese residence, now the townhall of the city. As first architect of the court, Carlo Randoni designed all the new furniture. Only four pieces with his original signed design survive, this demilune commode being one of them. The design in pen and ink is in a manuscript containing other designs by Randoni for the same series in the Biblioteca Civica Centrale of Turin (fig.1). The chest of drawers was originally part of a pendant, and its twin is now in Attingham Park, Shropshire (inv. no. NT 608156.1), even though with a later white-marble top, rather than with the original Spanish *broccatello* as the present piece and another rediscovered breakfront commode previously in our stock. The commodes were probably executed between 1819 and 1821 by the Genoese sculptor Giovan Battista Parodi and gilded by Agostino Laviosa. Wolf Burchard of the Metropolitan Museum of Art discovered that the third Baron of Berwick, William Noel-Hill, English Ambassador at the Savoy court, bought a large part of the Doria Tursi furnishings in 1833, including two armchairs, five chairs and seven stools from the same suite (identical to another set of eight that was also in our stock and another rediscovered pair still with us), which are now also in the collections of the National Trust at Attingham Park, Shropshire.

Surviving pieces of the same suite, previously in the Pisa collection until 1938, are a similar but less interesting pair of longer benches recently appeared on the London antiquarian market; a set of armchairs and sofas in the Napoleonic residence of Villa dei Mulini, Porto Ferrajo, Elba island; one sofa still in the Savoy Royal collections at Stupinigi castle, Museo dell'Ammobiliamento, Sala dei Cimeli Napoleonici, Turin; and another sofa in the Teatro la Fenice, Venice.

## **Carlo Randoni**

Born in Turin, son of the servant of the royal architect Benedetto Alfieri, Carlo Randoni was probably active in his youth in a building site by the architect Filippo Castelli, the Turin palace of the Valperga di Masino (c. 1780), before being officially appointed as a civil architect in the University of Turin on 17th May 1785. Collaborator of Giuseppe Battista Piacenza, he was commissioned to set up in the Neoclassical style some apartments of the Royal Palace of Turin, destined for the Dukes of Aosta. Also for the Aosta are the works in the Castle of Moncalieri and in the great Palace of Venaria Reale. Admiring Randoni's mastery, king Vittorio Amedeo III appointed him Court Architect.

Vittorio Emanuele I, when he was still Duca d'Aosta, appreciated Randoni's work, entrusting him with the preparation of the apartment on the second floor of the Castello di Rivoli. However, works were interrupted in 1798 with the arrival of the French and the expulsion of the Savoy.

Together with his colleague Piacenza, Randoni then entered in the service of the new regime, becoming National Architect in 1801. At the service of the Napoleonic regime, he took care of the urban layout of the city of Turin and, for the French Imperial government, worked again in the royal palaces. In the Napoleonic period he was in Parma as Inspector of the Civil List; he was appointed a member of the

Academy of Fine Arts of Parma; in December 1811 he participated with a theatre project in the Exhibition of art objects and industry of the Taro Department. In Parma he published a treatise on architectural ornaments (1813). Appointed for a very short time as professor of Architecture, he was definitively excluded from academic positions in 1816 and soon returned to Turin. Reinstated as Court architect after the return of the Savoy dynasty, from 1820 he designed the interiors of the Doria-Tursi palace in Genoa. In May 1821 he became a member of the Turin Academy of Sciences and in 1823 he delivered to the audience of fellow academicians his two observations on the perspective of the ancients. From 1824 he was a professor with a special clause of the newly reformed Academy of Fine Arts in Turin. He was also Captain of the Royal Corps of Civil Engineers and a member of the Royal Building Council. He died in Turin in 1831.



Fig.1 Carlo Randoni, *Design for our commode and for its pair in Attingham Park*, c. 1820–21, ink on paper, Biblioteca Civica Centrale di Torino, Manoscritto Bosio.

## Henri Peters (1792–1852) and our commode

When the twenty-five-year-old Peters arrived in Genoa from Windsor it was 1817. Unfortunately, we don't know much about the long journey he had to undertake. The first document attesting to the young cabinetmaker's presence in Liguria dates to 1824. In an announcement on the *Gazzetta di Genova* of 3 July 1824 Peters 'makes it his duty to thank many distinguished houses in Genoa, which have already favoured him for about seven years'.<sup>1</sup> It is likely that for the execution of the present commode the architect Carlo Randoni turned to Peters in these early years.

In fact, the collaboration of Peters to commissions related to the Savoy court start being documented around 1827. But the fact that the documents show Peter's activity for the court in an uninterrupted way from 1827 until 1848 lead us to believe that the

<sup>1</sup> 'Si fa dovere di ringraziare molteplici distinte case di Genova, che già da sette anni circa l'hanno favorito', *Gazzetta di Genova*, 3 July 1824, n.p.

cabinetmaker must have been known to the sovereigns already before then. Peters was involved primarily in the renovation of the Royal Palace at Genoa, with his production peaking in 1841 when, on the occasion of the wedding of Vittorio Emanuele II, Peters received many commissions for the furnishing of the newlyweds' apartments.

In the same period, between 1833 and 1840, Peters dedicated himself to the creation of some pieces for the Royal Palace of Turin and for the Castello di Pollenzo, but was above all involved in the renovations of the Castello di Racconigi, for which he created one of his masterpieces, the gigantic sculpted table for the dining room. He was also active in Liguria, creating several pieces for the splendid Villa Faraggiana in Albissola Marina, close to Genoa. The payments for this latter commission are dated 1845, even if the pieces delivered by Peters include a pair of commode very close to the present example although totally gilded, rather than presenting the combination of gold and white lacca. This suggests that the pieces of Villa Faraggiana must be earlier than the date of the payments (1845), being documented in Randoni's drawings for the pieces of the Royal Palace.

Other than an exquisite artist, Peters was a "political philosopher", preacher of a new and more just social order. He spent much of his life spreading his political and social vision through numerous writings, characterised by the same handwriting found on the wooden surface of the present commode, just below the brocatello marble top (fig.2). In this regard, Peters is documented as having met Giuseppe Mazzini in 1845, during the politician's sojourn in London between June and July. The two often met each other and Mazzini wrote in a letter to his mother,

I had lunch at Enrico's (Henri Peters) house together with other friends yesterday, and then yesterday we returned the lunch invitation to him and his wife. They are still uncertain of how long they will remain: Enrico thought he had completely settled his disputes in Oxford, but instead he told me yesterday that the government was appealing. We will see.



Fig.2 Here attributed to Henri Peters, handwritten inscription on the wooden top of the present commode, below the marble, reading 'Viva la luce di Cristo... stesse passando Mazzini ... ai popoli la via dell'umanità e dal tiranno ci furono tolti ... risaliamo l'odio contro...la Divina parola.....contro il '.

We believe that the young Mazzini, still a high school Genoese student when he published his first essay *L'amor patrio di Dante* and the present commode was being made, may not only have had elective affinities with the cabinetmaker, but also might have already known Peters in Genoa.

In some of the most powerful passages of his correspondence Peters writes, 'with my sincere words I try to fight despotism, barbarism, hypocrisy, injustice, and to raise on the ruins of these a temple to the Independence of Italy, to the freedom of peoples, to good common of nations'.<sup>2</sup> He concluded his essay *The dawn of Freedom, and the rights of man* with the following powerful words, 'Long live Religious and civil Freedom, long live the Italian Independence, Long live Carlo Alberto Constitutional King of Italy, once Queen of the World, and emporium of the fine arts, and so be it again'.<sup>3</sup>

The present demilune belongs to the first period of Peters' production, a production that almost exclusively included courtly furnishings. Restoration furniture is a manifesto of the reborn power of the Savoy family that returned on the throne following the Congress of Vienna, and of the reinvigorated aristocracy. These pieces are generally sumptuous, carved, lacquered and gilded, with massive and very solid shapes, created following the example of the classical grandeur of the Empire style, but free from the pedant archaeological taste of earlier years, decorated to achieve a powerful decorative effect. Although in this era eclecticism was rampant and very redundant, Peters almost always managed to maintain his typically English 'self-control', maintaining a graceful balance in both decoration and form, achieving an effect of harmony and precious elegance.

Only by critically examining the courtly, sculpted and gilded furnishings is it possible to verify a certain very slight stylistic gap between the production of the 1820s – which concerns us closely – and that of the 1840s. The Zerbino furniture for the Durazzo family, for example, is more neoclassical and more squared than that made for the audience room of the Royal Palace in Genoa, which instead is more plastic and enriched with actual sculptural motifs, rather than with mere mouldings. The wood most used by Peters is mahogany, or "acaju", an essence that is often used by English and French cabinetmakers also for the structure of the furniture (Peter's mother was French). The contracts with the Royal House for the supply of furnishings for the Racconigi Castle demand expressly pieces entirely made of mahogany wood, both for the internal structure and the veneers. Indeed, mahogany is a wood with very great qualities: hard, and therefore also easy to carve, little affected by woodworms, with an almost metallic resistance, and of a beautiful colour, with a warm, reddish-brown tone, which is acquired with the passage of time. Peters used the most valuable varieties, and uniquely in the history of all Italian furniture he also used it for the inside of the drawers, as in the case of the present demilune.

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<sup>2</sup> 'Cerco di combattere colle mie sincere parole il dispotismo, la barbarie, l'ipocrisia, l'ingiustizia, per innalzare sulle rovine di queste un tempio all'Indipendenza d'Italia, alla libertà dei popoli, al bene comune delle nazioni.'

<sup>3</sup> 'Viva la Libertà Religiosa e civile, viva l'Indipendenza Italiana, Evviva Carlo Alberto Re Costituzionale d'Italia, una volta Regina del Mondo, ed emporeo delle belle arti, e così sia nuovamente'.

# BURZIO.

The only documented courtly furniture by Peters from his first period that can be compared to our commode is to be found At Villa Durazzo dello Zerbino, in Genoa (the residence of one of the most prominent aristocratic families in town). It is a gueridon clearly derived from a design by Percier and Fontaine, which demonstrates the execution of furniture after a design by an architect, as in the case of our demilune designed by Randoni. Similarly, the so-called blue living room there contains pieces entirely made of carved and gilded wood, like the two commodes of Villa Faraggiana.