

A Venetian polychrome-painted japanned-leather four-leaf screen, the tooled leather front decorated with four painted chinoiserie scenes of courtly figures inhabiting a landscape with pagodas, palm trees, birds and fauna, the borders decorated with painted flowers. The painted florals elements attributed to Francesco Guardi (1712–93).

Venice, third quarter of the 18th century

Height: 76 in. (194,8 cm)

Width: 105,5 in. (268 cm, 67cm each)



Literature:

Giuseppe M. Pilo, *Francesco Guardi: I paliotti*, Florence, Electa, 1983.

The present screen is an important example of the Venetian production of *cuoridoro* – leather with gilded, tooled and painted decorations.

An example of this production and an important term of comparison for better understanding and historically placing the present screen is represented by a group of six pulpit falls in gilded and painted leather commissioned in 1771 by the Church of the Redentore in Venice (figs. 1–2).¹ These objects demonstrate the level of quality this production could reach by the late eighteenth century and the collaborative practice in *cuoridoro* workshops. The painted decorations on the Redentore screens were most probably realised by a professional painter, which Giuseppe M. Pilo identified with Francesco Guardi (*Francesco Guardi: I paliotti*, Florence, Electa, 1983) on the base of a preparatory drawing in the Correr Museum, Venice (cl. III, n. 7313v). The floral elements of those *paliotti* or pulpit falls present important similarities with those found on the present screen, especially in the quick, economic, but always vibrant brushwork and the use of thick impasto, and represent therefore an important term of comparison for dating, if not for attribution. Another related example, very similar to the pulpit falls of the Redentore, is yet another pulpit fall in the Koper Regional Museum in Capodistria, Slovenia. Also in that case, the floral

¹ They have been later dated to 1771 on the base of documents held in the Archivio d Stato di Venezia. The folder of 27 April 1771 contains a precise request of the Father Sacrestano of the Church of the Redentore for 'Parapetti di Altare di Cuoridoro N. 6' (Pulpit falls in gilded leather in the number of 6).

elements, attributed to Francesco Guardi, seem stylistically consistent with those found on our screen.

Fully secular in nature, the painted elements on the present leather screen are informed by a cosmopolitan taste for Chinoiserie. The fashion for images (and imaginations) of the far East spread among educated circles all over Europe from the early eighteenth century onwards, mediated by commercial contacts with the court of Peking, and manifested on artistic production at all levels. Superbly painted by an expert hand, the four scenes on the present screen represent some of the traits of Chinese culture most appealing to European audiences of the period, namely trade, tea drinking, religion, and court etiquette.



Fig. 1 One of six *paliotti* (pulpit falls) commissioned in 1771 for the Church of the Redentore, Venice, with the painted floral elements documented to Francesco Guardi.



Fig.2 A *paliotto* (pulpit fall) in the Koper Regional Museum, Capodistria, Slovenia, with the painted floral elements attributed to Francesco Guardi.

Venice has long been recognised as a major centre for the manufacturing and refinement of leather products in the early modern period. It is difficult to reconstruct the origin of such a practice in the city. If in Spain the decoration of leather was already well-developed by 711 – when Cordoba was the seat of a Caliphate, from which derived the term '*cordovano*' to describe the origin of these objects – Venice had continuous exchanges with the East and was thus in the position to obtain technical knowledge in a direct manner. It is important to stress that in Venice the quality of leather production reached such a level that these products were exported even to rival markets.

Venetian leather manufacturers stood out as, with time, they refined their techniques to the point of elevating themselves well above the rank of mere artisans, becoming comparable almost to fine artists. The first statute of skinnners and leather manufacturers is documented in Venice in 1271. In this important document, written in Latin, other than the general norms of ethical order on the structure of the guild-like organisation, are listed prescriptions of a technical nature: the kinds of leather to be employed and the materials for their refinement, as well as a first description of where the workshops were located: in the area surrounding the *Giudecca*.

Leather worked in the *scorzèr* in Venice was in large part destined to exportation, but it was used also to fuel local commercial activities, especially *caleghèri*, *zavatèri*, *bolzèri*, *vaginèri* and – more relevant for our purposes – for so-called *cuoridoro*, that is the production of painted leather for upholstery, book binding and wall hangings.

Cuoridoro masters were members of the painters' guild since at least the sixteenth century. The activity of these master artisans reached a peak in the seventeenth century, with up to 71 workshops documented in the same years, with a total annual revenue estimated at 100.000 ducats. The virtuosity of these craftsmen was such that in 1790, when there were only four workshops remaining, no less than 1000 panels of gilded leather were created for a Spanish commission. By the end of the 19th century there was only one artisan left.

Memory of such a florid artistic trade can still be grasped from Venetian toponymy: in the sottoportego and calle of the *Cuoridoro* and the bridge of the *Cuoridoro* (also known as *Ponte dei Barcaroli*) in the San Fantin neighbourhood, where several workshops must have been located.

The technique so-called *cuoridoro* or '*cuoi d'oro*' (gilded leather) flourished in Venice between the 15th and the 18th century. It consisted of realising panels of imprinted and painted leather. The leather was put in a bath, hammered, polished, cut and dried. The decorative design was impressed with a technique not too different from woodcut printmaking. The surface was marked with small iron or bronze tools, with chequered, herringbone, and other geometric designs combining straight and curved lines, as well as with figurative designs. The metal tools were heated and used to create a kind of blind stamp called *goffratura*, resulting into a sharp, polished, slightly darker sign impressed into the leather. The final effect was that of a haptic

chiaroscuro. The decoration designs were often appropriated from textiles: stylised fruits and flowers in the shape of bouquets, festoons and garlands, often combined with coat of arms, animals and/or putti, often times with motifs inspired by oriental shapes. The leather decorated in such a way was then coloured with lacca or other pigments, sometimes even oil paint, which exploded in a variety of chromatic tones in the eighteenth century.

The production of *cuoridoro* was supported by masters affiliated to the painters' guild (*Arte dei dipintori*) who, next to draughtsmen, illuminators, *targheri* and gilders, gathered under the protection of Saint Luke in the School built in Canareggio, next to the Church of Saint Sofia. The role of the *cuoridoro* masters in the guild of Saint Luke in Venice was such that their insigne features prominently on an eighteenth-century panel of the organisation (Fig. 3, centre right).



Fig.3 Panel with the insigne of the *Arte dei depentori*, eighteenth century, oil on panel, Venice, Museo Archeologico.