

A Sicilian coral inlaid and gilt copper octagonal devotional plaque *Capezzale* with Saint Francis, mounted in an enamel and gilt copper framing; the reverse engraved with Saint Francis surrounded by foliate scrolls.

Trapani, Late 17th century

Height: 19 $\frac{1}{3}$ in. (49 cm)

Width: 14 $\frac{1}{7}$ in. (36 cm)



Provenance :

Collection Luigi Koelliker

The Luigi Koelliker Studiolo; Sotheby's, London, 3 December 2008, lot 50. (85.250,00 £).
Hôtel Lambert, Une Collection Princièrre, Volume II: Kunstkammer; Sotheby's, Paris, 12 October 2022, lot 263.

Comparative Literature:

- E.Tartamella, *Corallo, Storia e Arte dal XV al XIX Secolo*, Maroda ed.2004, Tav.12 p.208; Tav.33 p.228.
- A. Daneu, *L'Arte Trapanese del Corallo*, Milan, 1964, TAV. XVI, XVII.
- M.C. Di Natale, *Il Corallo Trapanese nei secoli XVI e XVII*, Brescia, 2002, n.17, pp. 56-57.
- Museo Regionale Pepoli, *Coralli, Talismani Sacri e Profani*, Trapani, 1986, nos. 76 and 82.
- Museo di Capodimonte e Museo Pignatelli, *Civiltà del Seicento a Napoli*, Naples, 1985.
- *I grandi capolavori del corallo-I coralli di Trapani del XVII e XVIII secolo*, Milano, 2013, p.88.

This important, elaborate and unique piece is representative of the finest forms and compositions of the headboards, or *Capezzali*, of the Trapani school.

The octagonal form is slightly elongated and is articulated on different levels. The outer register consists of a hatched blue and white frame composed of eight segments, one for each side. It reproduces an ornamental theme very common among work produced in seventeenth-century Trapani, where coral and white enamel create an elegant bi-chromatic effect. Each portion of enamelled and gilded brass, terminating with cherub heads in coral, is surrounded by tendrils and plant volutes of the same material and stylised rosettes with a suspension loop to the top with a star motif. The other moulding orders consist of gilt copper with a 'retroincastro' decoration. The central octagonal gilded copper plate contains a full-relief coral sculpture of Saint Francis receiving the stigmata. The reverse is richly engraved with a floral motif framing a central roundel representing Saint Francis.

The present *capezzale* was made in Trapani, on the West coast of Sicily, a center renowned all over Europe from the 16th through to the 18th century for the manufacture of coral at very high levels of artistry. Famously expensive, these refined works of art were collected or exchanged as diplomatic gifts among European nobility. The so-called *Arte dei Corallari*

– i.e. guild of coral workers – was established in Trapani in 1628. After the insurrection of 1672, the skilled coral workers were dispersed to other Mediterranean centers.

The fascination with this precious material derived in part from its mythical origins, being coral believed to be a petrification of the blood that flowed from the head of the gorgon Medusa when she was slain by Perseus. Coral was esteemed both for its red color and unusual texture, and it was believed (as was already the case in antiquity) to have talismanic properties, warding off the 'evil eye'. Other than talismanic and medicinal qualities, coral was believed to have other qualities, such as the detection of poison in foods or the ability to foster fertility, making it highly valued. Like many other rare substances, it was much sought after during the Renaissance, being one of the materials favored for the fashioning of works of art for princely Kunstkammern that aimed to bring together all the marvels of the natural world.

Coral-work from Trapani is characterized by a combination of a gilt-copper ground with enamel embellishments. It was fashioned into a variety of items, spanning religious artifacts, jewelry, and decorative pieces, which skillfully integrate pieces of both natural and worked coral into their designs. Among liturgical items such as chalices and crucifixes, jewels, inkstands and small caskets, most common were the so-called *capezzali*, devotional plaques with religious figures set in engraved copper frames with a rich coral inlay and enamel decoration, as the present example.

The present object presents many characteristics of workmanship from this region. The gilded copper and coral surface of the pricked sticks is achieved by setting the pieces of carved coral into the metal using a technique called 'retroincastro'. This consists of inserting small pieces of polished coral into pre-punched holes in the metal, which have been created in order to conform exactly to the pieces of coral. The coral is then fixed using a mixture of pitch and wax, being finally sealed with strips of cloth.

The strapwork and acanthus-leaf enrichments radiating from the frames of Trapani *capezzali* are clearly inspired by contemporary ornamental prints from the great European centers, as is the finely executed engraved decoration found on the back of some plaques. The reverse of the present example is decorated not only with an engraved foliate design, found only in fine examples, but stands out for including also an engraved roundel with a devotional figure.

Condition Report:

The plaque is in overall good conditions, with minor dirt in some places, in particular to the enamelling of the frame. There are some minor losses to the enamel, consistent with age and the qualities of the material. Some coral ornaments may have been replaced. Minor losses to the central carving, mainly to the extremities of the foliage. There is a repair to the saint's proper right hand and to the foliage on which Saint Francis is standing. Some elements of the frame appear to have been reattached. Minor wear to the gilding in some places, especially behind the central figure.

The engraved foliate patterns and saint on the back of the relief are in excellent condition, with only minor wear to the surface of the gilt-copper.