THE ALESSANDRI PIETRE DURE TABLE

An Italian pietre dure and pietre tenere inlaid table top, probably to a design of Bernardino Buontalenti (1531-1608), Granducal Workshops, Florence, 1600 circa, on its baroque style carved and gilt-wood 1850s base in the manner of Giovanbattista Foggini with four lions on the corners joint by a stretcher with the Alessandri coat of arms, on a ebony English patent plinth on wheels normally used for these kind of center tables in Pitti and Uffizi in the end of XIX C.

The dark green top, Nero di Prato, incorporating few types of very fine hard stones including corals, lapis lazuli, cornelians mostly has various precious ancient marbles inlaid and more precisely: Alabastro cotognino, alabastro marino, alabastro dorato and alabastro fiorito, bianco, nero and giallo antico, lumachella bigia, breccia d'Aleppo, semesanto and broccatello di Spagna.

The top has been separated in two parts in the XVIIIc. for to create two consoles table tops and joint back with some restorations when the stand has been executed for it in the middle of XIX c.

The top:	The base:
Height: (6 cm)	Height: 39,37 in. (101 cm)
Wight: 53,14 in. (135 cm)	Wight: 59,05 in. (150 cm)
Depth: 42,12 in. (107cm)	Depth: 47,63 in. (121cm)

Provenance:
Famiglia degli Alessandri, Alessandri Palace, Florence.
European collection.
1824-1832 "Sbozzi degli inventari del palazzo di Firenze" where the table is mentioned in the chapel of the palace when divided in two table tops.(ASF,Archivio Alessandri, cassetta 63, fasc."minute d'inventari", cc. after n.257).

Study by Dr. Enrico Colle (Stibbert Museum Director in Florence):

In the center of the top there is a large polylobed tile of alabaster cotognino in turn inserted into an elaborate frame of gray lumachella with inserts of bianco e nero antico marble ending, at the ends, with two volutes of flowered alabaster surrounded by giallo antico. Around the aforementioned frame, inlaid, like the rest of the top, on a base of serpentinite, appear four inserts of alabastro marino and, at the corners, as many decorations with motifs of volutes in giallo antico marble, rosso antico and lapis lazuli.

Surround this central part with a refined frame decorated with cartouches of various shapes of which the four largest, placed in the center of each side, have inserted, within a giallo antico background, an alabastro marino tile, while the other eight folders, interspersed in pairs next to the aforementioned scrolls, they

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present a fragment of cotognino alabaster, decorated with a necklace inlaid with coral beads and lapis lazuli, framed by lumachella scrolls. Alongside the aforementioned alabaster tiles are small oval-shaped ovals. Finally, at the four corners there are as many shields of breccia d'Aleppo framed with broccatello di Spagna alternating with small inserts in carnelian and lapis lazuli.

The Marbles:

The top consists of some precious ancient marbles among those that were much sought after during the sixteenth and early seventeenths centuries, both to create sumptuous wall coverings and to create inlaid tables. Among the many varieties of ancient stones available to Roman and Tuscan artisans of the time, the author of our table chose:

Alabastro fiorito, a variety of such stone with an intense yellow background sometimes with pinkish shades and with variously shaped spots in multiple shades of yellow, brown and carnelian red. According to Raniero Gnoli this alabaster is probably to be identified with the marble of Hierapolis in Phrygia. Described by the ancients with admiration and richness of detail, it was often used in Roman times from the end of the Republic to the fourth century AD for all sorts of luxury artifacts;

Alabastro cotognino, with a pale yellow background with large opaque white areas, sometimes pink with a more or less sinuous undulating pattern, which was dug in antiquity in the Nile valley and is therefore also referred to as the Alabastro egiziano. Like all alabasters, in Roman times this particular type was mainly used to make small or medium-sized columns and artifacts such as vases, urns and statues;

Alabastro marino , probably coming from Algeria, which is a rather rare stone in Roman times which, due to its compactness and color (in fact it has an undulating background with gray and blue veins sometimes tending to green, with orange-red flames) was often used for the inlays of table tops starting from the sixteenth century;

Bianco e Rosso antico, also called "Marmor celticum", or d'Aquitaine, which is formed by an intense black background with large irregular and angular white spots. This type of marble, very precious, has been linked by many scholars to the "Celtic" or "d 'Aquitaine" marble mentioned by the writers of late antiquity. It was extracted from the quarries located near Aubert, in the French Pyrenees, and was used in monuments from the Justinian age. Its use in Roman times, however, had to be limited to columns of different sizes and to wall coverings so that during the eighteenth century there was some difficulty in obtaining samples;

Broccatello di Spagna, a stone with a golden yellow background and peacock-tinged nuances rich in shell fragments. Precisely because of the contrast of its

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colors, similar to the preciousness of a brocade, it was much appreciated by the Roman stonemasons who gave it the name of broccatello; semesanto, also called breccia di semesanto , is a particular variety of marble that has a pavonazzo-colored background tending to violet, rich in small thickly thickened oblong spots: these agglomerates are very small, generally whitish, sometimes alternated with other reddish but all disordered cemented and times in one direction. The name given to this stone by the Roman stonemasons derives from the fact that the small concretions had the appearance of some medicinal sugared almonds produced in Rome and called precisely "semesanto". The difficulty in working large slabs, due to its extreme brittleness, determined its limited use to the inlays of objects of furniture: starting from the late Renaissance, in fact, this breach was often chosen to create refined marble inlays;

Giallo antico marble, from Tunisia, was used in ancient Rome to decorate walls and floors. Later it was widely used during the Middle Ages by the marble workers who exploited its chromatic potentialities in the opus sectile;

Rosso antico, with its intense blood red color, owes its name to the Roman marble tradition. Found in the quarries of the Tenaro promontory in Greece, this marble was certainly known to the ancients since the end of the 2nd century BC. C. that they used to form decorative elements and furnishing objects;

Lumachella bigia, of unknown origin, is characterized by its gray background with marine fossil inclusions. According to Raniero Gnoli, only a few pieces are known used in the decorations of the Roman church of San Lorenzo fuori le mura;

Breccia d'Aleppo, from the name of the Greek locality from which it was extracted, this particular stone is presented in the form of a red cement rich in pale gray fragments and, to a lesser extent, bright yellow and coral pink. Aleppo breccia was mainly used in interior decoration since the Flavian age and in the 16th and 17th centuries;

Serpentinite, a dark green marble found in the Apennine quarries, also called "nero di Prato".

Comment:

The top has a rich inlaid decoration whose geometrical design evolves into ornate scrolls and mannerist-style cartoons arranged around a polylobed tile of alabaster cotognino. If the compositive scores used to compose the marble inlays of this particular and completely new table top can be traced back to the architectural decorations made in Rome shortly after the mid-sixteenth century - when Jacopo Vignola (1507-1573) before, and Giovanni Antonio Dosio (1603 - 1609) later, began to experiment with new and original versions of that opus sectile which had been the pride and admiration of the buildings of imperial Rome - their decorative

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redundancy is nevertheless characteristic of the Florentine decorations made between the end from the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth century. Also the bottom of serpentine, a particular type of dark green marble that is found in the Apennines, used to form the divisions between the various stones and which replaces here the white marble used by the Roman stonemasons in the sixteenth century, leads to consider this table the work of Florentine masters who used more precious stones such as lapis lazuli, carnelian and agate, which were the prerogative of the newly created Galleria dei lavori. Established by Ferdinand I, this manufacture had made use of important architects, including Bernardo Buontalenti engaged in various works for the Chapel of the Princes, for the Tribune of the Uffizi and to provide drawings for furniture, as we read in a document where it is specified that the artist had given the models for a "Galere lantern ... all carved with walnut and linden ... co balustrades masks" (ASF, GM 113, c. 105). It is precisely from his ornate patterns that the imaginative decorations of our plan may be depicted on the genre of those conceived by the architect, between 1593 and 1597, due to the inlays of the Cappella dei Principi walls, where we see the singular transformation of the elements geometric shapes in eccentrics decorated with scrolls and paper (Figs. 1-2).

On the other hand, the plan examined here falls stylistically into a group of similar works currently preserved in various museums and historical residences among which the tables of Palazzo Pitti (Fig. 3), the Museo del Prado (Fig. 4) and the castle of Racconigi (Fig. 5); the latter, later divided into two small plans for consoles, as was often the case with these geometrically designed works, seems to be the closest one to our example. In the Treasure of the Grand Dukes of Florence, instead, a plan is conserved described in the inventories of the Villa del Poggio Imperiale from 1624 (Colle, 1997, p. 109), where the refined interweaving of volutes that bind together the variegated marbles folders placed at the corners of central square and the wraps of the band joined by fake drapery would suggest a direct derivation from the Buontalentian motifs. To this specimen - together with another, always exhibited in the Treasure of the Grand Dukes and also mentioned in court inventories since 1624 (Colle, 1997, p. 110) - Alvar Gonzàlez - Palacios (2003, pp. 56-58) he approached a table in the Museo del Prado whose geometrising decorative themes led the scholar to think that it came from a Roman workshop rather than from a Florentine workshop. In the current state of research in this particular sector of Italian decorative arts we are not in fact able to determine exactly which of the two production centers this kind of marble salesmen can belong to. One can only hypothesize - given the more complex arrangement of the ornaments on the surface of the floor, whose bottom is a dark-colored stone, according to a custom that will be typical of seventeenth-century Florentine shop assistants, and the bright chromatic contrasts that we will find, to example, in the plan executed for Cardinal Grimani (Fig. 6) at the beginning of the seventeenth century (Asta sotheby's, London, December 2015, lot no. 201; Giusti 2018, pp. 124 -126) - that this furniture should be ascribed to the grand-ducal manufacture or to a shop linked to it and therefore influenced by the taste choices of artists who, like Buontalenti were then engaged in designing decorations for the Chapel of the Princes and, as in the case of

Bernardino Poccetti (1548 - 1612), for unspecified tables (Giusti, 1979, p. 304, n. 124.1).

In fact, in 1587 Ferdinando I, giving rise to the grand-ducal manufacture of semi-precious stones, did not entirely abandon the use of polychrome marbles which he had been able to appreciate during the years that saw him as a cardinal in Rome; as well as his brother Francesco I had cultivated, in addition to the passion for precious stones also that for the inlaid tables of archaeological marble arranged with abundance in the halls of the Medici residences (Giusti, 2018, pp. 121 - 124). The new way of "representing in marble committed together" the vast range of ornamental subjects designed for table tops to be used for furnishing palaces and noble palaces took shape in Florence, compared to Rome, thanks to the skill of marble masters in making the inlays in such a way that the salesmen all appeared to be made in one piece, leaving the composition free to expand at will, as can be seen also in the case of the plan examined here (Giusti, 2005, p. 64).

Browsing the administration papers of the newly established Pietre Dure Works Gallery, we find different accounts for the purchase of various types of mixed marbles, such as the "yellow incarnate", the "amandorellato", the "brecciated red", or breccias of various colors (ASF, GM 187, c. 16, November 1595).

The lively pictorial chromatism that is found in the marble inlays executed between the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and obtained thanks to the use of different qualities of stones, was the result of the great success that the ancient marbles had with the collectors of the time so much so as to induce the Tuscan scholar Agostino Del Riccio (Florence 1541 - 1598) to compile a Stone History (of which there is a transcription edited by Raniero Gnoli and Attilia Sironi). Here also the various marbles of our top appear, such as the black and white of Aquitaine, cited with the name of "Black and White Oriental", described as "black dense black with white veins, ... hard, not dark" and which for this took "luster very well" (Gnoli, Sironi 1996, p. 93); then follow the broccatello of Spain, "similar to the oriental broccatello", but "somewhat more melancholy, as seen in the ducal gallery, which in it there are more tables of an arm" (Gnoli, Sironi 1996, p. 125); the semesanto, which he called "Breccia Sagginata or Panicata" because of the "different and beautiful colors" sometimes "bright reds" and other "buii" and the rare conformation of its "white and gray" grains often mixed with other colors which, precisely , "So many grains of panic or wisdom" (Gnoli, Sironi 1996, p. 103); il rosso antico, considered by the scholar as the "most beautiful red marble" used in antiquity and subsequently used to form the marble inlays in numerous table tops, part of which are owned by "Mr. Cav. Niccolò Gaddi "and other" gentlemen in Florence "(Gnoli, Sironi 1996, p. 95); the breccia of Aleppo, known at the time of Del Riccio as the "Marble called Acqua di Mare" because it had in itself "different colors" and was much appreciated for forming table tops like those rounds made for "the Majesty of Philip King of Spain "and for the Florentine nobleman Lorenzo Sirigatti (Gnoli, Sironi 1996, p. 97); and finally the serpentine of Prato, with which the bottom of our plan was made and of which Del Riccio said that the Tuscan

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stonemasons were used to make "many small columns and tables" (Gnoli, Sironi 1996, p. 116).

Also in the execution of table tops, the historian informs us that in his time various qualities of alabaster were used, and of the one commonly known as cotognino Del Riccio, he said to have been, among all the marbles then known, the most "beautiful and dignified" stone and for this much appreciated for forming wall decorations and table tops, of which many were then visible in Florence, as well as in the "ducal palaces" and "in the house of the Gaddi", also "in the palaces and houses honored by the Florentine lords, who for brevity I will not say "(Gnoli, Sironi 1996, pp. 108 and 185). Among these we can list the Alessandri family, from which our furniture comes from a hereditary way. The Alessandri owe their origin to Alessandro and Bartolomeo di Niccolò degli Albizi, but in 1372 they gave up the name and the coat of arms of the house of origin to assume a new name, Alessandri precisely, and therefore a new coat of arms. Since then they have given the Florentine government twenty-one priori, eight gonfaloniers of justice and two senators during the period of the Medici principality. Subsequently the family developed into two branches descending from Niccolò di Ugo di Bartolomeo (1390 - 1464) and of which that of Niccolò di Francesco di Niccolò (1540 - 1602) became extinct in 1716 in the branch of the cousins descended from Giovanni di Cosimo di Giovanni (1669 - 1745), whose last descendant was Giovanni Maria Gaetano di Cosimo (1765 -1828), famous for having been a passionate connoisseur of the arts so much that he was appointed in 1799 by Grand Duke Ferdinand III of Lorraine president of the Academy of Fine Arts from Florence. During the reign of Etruria, Ludovico di Borbone elected him Senator of the Kingdom and in 1810 Napoleone Buonaparte gave him the title of Baron of the Empire. On the return of the Lorraines, in 1814, the Grand Duke, as a testimony of his great esteem for the Florentine nobleman, appointed him Councilor of State and Knight of the Grand Cross of the order of St. Joseph. At his death all the property, including the ancestral building of Borgo degli Albizi, passed to the son of one of his cousins, Cosimo di Gaetano Maria di Simone (1826 - 1887) and since then to his descendants to the present day.

Scrolling through the only inventory of the assets of this important Florentine family, drawn up between 1824 and 1832 and entitled "Schizzi del inventari del Palazzo di Firenze", we find summarily listed different furnishings, among which, in the chapel, "two tables with laying of magogon-stained wood with gilded relations and hard stone tops "(ASF, Archivio Alessandri, box 63, fasc." minutes of inventory ", cc. numbered, but after number 257). This would be our top which, in an unknown period, but probably towards the end of the 18th century, was cut to obtain two consoles. The two floors, superficially described as semi-precious stones by the anonymous extensor of the inventory, were reunited in a single specimen around the middle of the nineteenth century when the base was made of carved and gilded wood of neo-baroque taste, celebrating the consideration for the important top here reunited with 3D coat of arms of the Alessandri family with their earls crown in the central stretcher.

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It is not known when this top made its entrance into the Alessandri collection, which also had another table of semi-precious stones recently passed at the Sotheby's auction (London, 8 July 2015; Giusti 2018, p. 123). The Del Riccio, in fact, while asserting that in many Florentine palaces you could see inlaid floors of colored marbles and hard stones, it does not mention the families who owned such furnishings. It could therefore be assumed that it was Giovanni Maria degli Alessandri, by virtue of his passion for art and his closeness to the Florentine court, to purchase
these precious furnishings and to place them in his palace.

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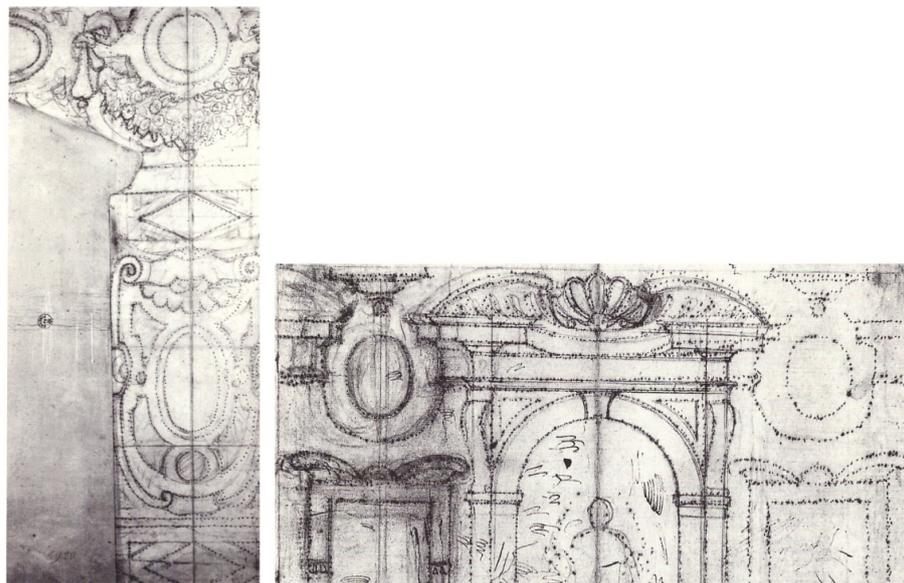
1-2. B. Buontalenti progetti per ornati architettonici
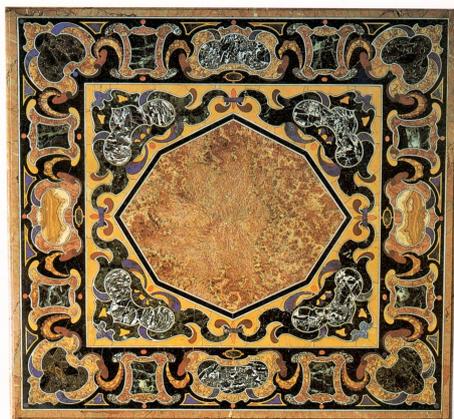
3. Piano di tavolo, fine del XVI secolo, Firenze Tesoro dei Granduchi

4. Piano di tavolo, post 1565, Madrid, Museo del Prado

5. Piano di tavolo (part.), fine del XVI secolo, Racconigi, Castello

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6. Piano di tavolo del Cardinale Grimani, inizi del XVII secolo and the Alessandri table.

Florence, October 2019, Enrico Colle