

The Viceroy of Sardinia Neoclassical Armchairs

A pair of Italian carved walnut and pastiglia cream and brown painted armchairs, by Francesco Bozelli after a design by Filippo Castelli, executed for Carlo Francesco Valperga, Count of Masino, Marquis of Caluso, for his residence of Castello di Masino. Each with a square tapering drop-in padded back within a molded frame, the top-rail surmounted by a flower motif between two crouching squirrels and classical foliage, the padded arms terminating in lion masks, above a bowed padded drop-in seat, the seat-rail carved with a vase motif, on fluted tapering legs carved with foliage and anthemions, upholstery in green and white design silk.

Francesco Bozelli, after a design by Filippo Castelli (ca. 1738–1820)
Turin, circa 1790

Height: 35,4 in. (90 cm)
Width: 26,3 in. (67 cm)
Depth: 24,8 in. (63 cm)

Provenance:

Castello di Masino, Caravino, Turin.
Private collection, UK.

Comparative Literature:

- R. Antonetto, *Il Mobile Piemontese nel Settecento*, vol. II, p. 159, no. 33 (Fig.2);
- V.Viale, *Exhibition of Piedmontese Baroque*, 1961, pl.178b (Fig.3).



Fig.2



Fig.3

A pair of almost identical chairs, although in a light green and white palette, was sold at Sotheby's London, Important Continental Furniture and Tapestries, 13 December 2000, lot 52 (£62,000).

Literature:

- **C. Mossetti**, *Decorazioni a pastiglia per il conte Valperga fra Masino e Torino; Francesco Bozelli e gli ornati «del più ricercato gusto... sull'idea e disegni... dati dal Sig Ingegnere Castelli»*, in *Genio e maestria. Mobili ed ebanisti alla corte sabauda tra Settecento e Ottocento*, catalogo della mostra (Reggia di Venaria, 16 Marzo – 15 Luglio 2018), Torino 2018, pp. 178-182;
- **E. Ballaira e S. Ghisotti**, *Il castello di Masino negli inventari storici*, in «Bollettino della Società Piemontese di Archeologia e Belle Arti», N.S. 46.1994(1995), pp. 109-134

The present pair of armchairs relates to a larger suite of furniture commissioned for Castello di Masino at Caravino, Turin, the family residence of Francesco Valperga (1727–1811), Viceroy of Sardinia (see Antonetto, p. 159). The pieces still in situ, at least 12 armchairs, a sofa and a baldaquin bed, were split between the Ambassadors' Room and the Three Windows Room (see Fig.1), which show similarly decorated doors.

The Valperga di Masino family was one of the oldest, wealthiest and most prestigious families of the Italian nobility. Their seat had been for ten centuries the Masino Castle, a medieval fortress turned into a princely residence, which was lavishly frescoed and richly furnished throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. The so-called *Madama Reale* apartments, the billiard room and the Chapel holding the ashes of Arduino d'Ivrea, King of Italy in the 11th century, attest to the family's opulent tastes.

Count Carlo Francesco Valperga di Masino (1727–1811) covered major political roles for the crown of Sardinia in the late eighteenth century: he was first *Ministro Plenipotenziario* for the Savoy Court in Portugal and later the Ambassador of the Kingdom of Sardinia in Spain. In 1780, he was appointed Viceroy of Sardinia, one of the highest appointments in the kingdom.

On the occasion of that major appointment, he not only redecorated the family's country residence of Castello di Masino, but also acquired from the Dukes of Broglia a palazzo located on via Arsenale and via Afieri in Turin as his city residence, and refurbished it lavishly in the then fashionable Louis XVI style. For both the country and city residence, furnishings were made with the finest materials and techniques, on designs often based on French models, following the taste popular at the Savoy court in the period. Whereas for the city palace no expenses were spared, for the Castello di Masino the Viceroy commissioned modern but simpler furniture, made with local, poorer materials: plaster tablets (*pastiglia*) replace the fine carving of the Turin master carvers, oil colors the more expensive veneers in exotic woods. The invention of the furnishings at Castello di Masino is due to the architect Filippo Castelli (ca. 1738–1820), designer and creator of ornaments, whilst their execution has to be credited to the cabinetmaker Francesco Bozelli, a carver linked to the most up-to-date Piedmontese aristocracy.

Pastiglia is an ancient technique where decorations in relief are moulded in plaster and applied to the most disparate surfaces. Pieces decorated in pastiglia are extremely rare, with the Castello di Masino holding the most conspicuous group of this production. Fixed furnishings, doors, commodes, trumeaux, consoles, chairs, armchairs are enriched by "plaque garnishes" – as they are defined in historical inventories – with motifs spanning winged sphinxes, cameos, flower vases, spirals inhabited by animals and fantastic creatures, following the most usual repertoires of fantastic decoration. In addition to the conspicuous nucleus of Masino, some examples in *pastiglia* can be found in the nearby Biella. In the Green Room of Palazzo La Marmora, a trumeau, a console and a fireplace are preserved, works also executed by the cabinetmaker Francesco Bozelli.

In front of pieces in *pastiglia*, we could speak of a poor production if we regarded the materials used: these are plaster mouldings, after all. The taste that characterizes these works, however, is extremely refined and well aware of international trends, with influences curiously coming more from the English than the Italians: the lightness of the decoration and richness of the figurative repertoire seem in fact to echo models as close as possible to Robert Adam's lesson. *It is perhaps no coincidence that among the numerous English engravings purchased by Carlo Francesco II Valperga, there is a series of nine plates from New Book of Pier-Frame's, oval's, gerandole's, table's etc., published in London in 1769 by Matthias Lock, a pupil of Robert Adam. The print collection is preserved in the castle archives still today.*

Conditions:

In overall good conditions. The armchairs are structurally sound and sturdy, showing scattered evidence of old woodworm, which does seem to be no longer active. Small losses to the pastiglia decoration, which do not detract from the integrity of the pieces, and some scattered evidence of re-touching, but largely original.