

A large Genoese gilt-bronze-mounted and wood-veneered bureau plat, the rectangular serpentine top inset with a tooled leather writing surface, the top resting onto a skirt with a central long frieze drawer flanked by four further short drawers mounted with flowers, foliage and scrolls cast escutcheons and, on the opposite side, five opposing simulated drawers, raised on cabriole legs terminating with gilt and chiseled bronze mounts in the shape of claw feet. The veneer of the short drawers and side skirts creating a quatrefoil motif, the four corners with chased gilt-bronze mounts with acanthus sprays, flowers and scrolls.



Execution here attributed by the so called "Genova-Milano" cabinetmaker, Milan circa 1760.

Height: 30,70 in. (78 cm)

Width: 72,83 in. (185 cm)

Depth: 35,03 in. (89 cm)

#### Provenance:

- Castel Castagneto Po, Turin.
- The Alberto Bruni Tedeschi Collection to benefit the Virginio Bruni Tedeschi Foundation: Furniture, Old Master Paintings and Works of Art from the Castle of Castagneto Po, near Turin, and from other French Residences. Sotheby's, London, 21 March 2007, lot 135.
- Private collection.

Commonly referred to as *diplomatique*, Genoese bureau plats as the present one imitate very closely Louis XV models. This bureau in particular has been inspired by French Régence models and stands out not only for its large size but also for its formal qualities: with two drawers flanking on each side a central one above the kneehole, the deep side skirts, and the presence of full-length drawers on both the long sides, rather than dummy drawers on the back. Its realization must be connected to an important commission with the patron's specific requirements regarding size and number of drawers. The monumental proportions of the desk may explain also the presence of the thicker-than-usual mounts, in this case made of finely chased gilt bronze and not of the more common gilt copper.

Although the use of materials (exotic woods like kingwood) and techniques (veneer creating quatrefoil motifs) would suggest a Genoese production, the fact that the carcass is made of poplar, and not only in pine wood, would also suggest that the present piece was made in Milan by master cabinetmakers who had trained, or had operated, in Genoa. The combination of a Milanese structure, the Genoese design and

finish makes like these extraordinary ormolu mounts makes this large bureau consistent with a group of fine furniture pieces attributed to this yet-unidentified Genoese master operating in Milan.

The most distinctive feature of Genoese veneered furniture is the quatrefoil motif, often with elaborate variations, originating from Anglo-Dutch oyster-veneers. A French touch was added with the use of superbly chased gilt-bronze mounts, locally produced, which represent the only ostentatious element on Genoese furniture, whose understated elegance is otherwise provided by slender curves, sabre legs and almost imperceptible *bombé* and serpentine shapes.

The geographical and commercial vicinity of Genoa to France, as well as the political links between France and the *Superba* throughout the 18th century, had a strong impact on the stylistic traits of Ligurian decorative arts of the period. As Genoa was a major port, the local cabinetmakers benefited from the imports of precious woods, such as kingwood, for the realization of commodes, occasional tables and bureaux, which were executed with a skill comparable to their French counterparts – all elements represented by the present piece to the highest degree of quality.

Following studio-essay by Lodovico Caumont Caimi:

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**A five-drawer bureau plat with a structure in poplar, veneered in *bois de violette*, with inlays in the shape of book-matched hearts, the top in leather, with mounts in chased and gilded bronze, second half of the eighteenth century. Here attributed to the "Genova-Milano" cabinetmaker.  
Cm 185 x 89 x 78**

**Provenance: Sotheby's, London, The Alberto Bruni Tedeschi Collection, 21 March 2007, lot 135.**

The design of this monumental piece derives from French models of the Regence period, an evolution of the *bureau plat* introduced by André-Charles Boulle between the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The use of woods for the veneer, with a quatrefoil motif with book-matched hearts, is instead clearly relatable to the Genoese production of the mid-eighteenth century, a synthesis between the French taste then dominant among local patrons and the English influence of so-called 'oyster veneers' of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century – mediated through the commercial contacts via sea and still influent on the decorative art production of the city well up to the Neoclassical period.

The systematic study and cataloguing of Genoese furniture appeared in the past decades allowed for the identification of a consistent group, always of very high quality, attributable to a cabinetmaker with very peculiar characteristics. The present bureau plat can now be rightly added to this group.

At present, it has not been possible to name this master cabinetmaker, yet. From an analysis of his production, however, we can gain important insights into his activity. It is unquestionable that the origin of this cabinetmaker was Genoese. This can be inferred by the taste and use of woods, as well as by his technical mastery, totally in line with a training in the Ligurian city.

This nonetheless, the careful examination of the pieces attributable to him reveals structural characteristics and shapes foreign to a Genoese production, but in line with a Lombard production of the finest quality: commodes with *bombe* shapes typical of Lombard *barocchetto*, *secretaires* with a base with a raised urn, and other models in burr walnut, as well as bed stands and other small pieces, which are not Genoese, but present a finish with veneers in woods typical of the Genoese tradition and technique.

On these bases, it is not difficult to put forward the hypothesis of a collaboration between a Genoese cabinetmaker and a Lombard carpenter who took care of the realisation of the supporting carcass of these pieces. This theory would be in line with the practice of the period where, within a workshop, the different tasks for the realisation of a piece would be divided among different individuals, each specialised in different technical aspects.

Some observations allow us to understand that this workshop was active in Lombardy, probably in Milan, and not in Genoa.

As mentioned above, the structure of all these pieces of furniture are of Lombard technical construction. Although the commodes are often with wooden tops, when they present a marble top, the marble used is always coming from quarries found in Lombardy, which are not found on Genoese pieces. The splendid bronze mounts often adorning these pieces, furthermore, are never after Genoese models – different in execution, chasing and gilding – but present characteristics and designs consistent with Milanese models found on the finest Lombard production of the third quarter of the eighteenth century, such as on early pieces by Giuseppe Maggiolini.

The presence of bronze mounts of a Neoclassical design on pieces of furniture still Louis XV in this group attests to the survival of the activity of this workshop at least well into the 1770s.

The theory of the place of production is availed also by the frequent presence of these 'Genoese' pieces in historic Lombard collections and by the existence of several pairs of commodes in the *barocchetto* taste, as we know that before the Neoclassical period commodes and little commodes were not produced in Genoa in pairs. This is evidence of a different practice of living and furnishing interiors among the Genoese upper classes of this historical period.

At present, this group counts some twenty or thirty pieces of the most varied kind, with unmistakeable characteristics. These are the subject of a study due to appear soon, in the hope that the name of their author can be ascertained before long.

Among the examples published in the past as of Genoese production, I would like to mention the splendid commode-secretaire discovered by Giuseppe Morazzoni (*Il Mobile Genovese*, 1962, n. 35–37, tavv. XX–XXI), and a commode of reduced proportions published by the present author (*L'Ebanisteria Genovese del '700*, 1995, n. 75, p. 128), which actually came from a historic Milanese family.

The bureau object of the present study, a unique example of its kind known to the present author, is to be considered among the most important pieces of this group, of great virtuoso execution, and with splendid gilt bronze mounts, most certainly related to a specific commission of the highest level of patronage.

Lodovico Caumont Caimi