

A set of four Italian walnut, carved and gilt wood and burin-finished ground (*bulinato*) armchairs, each with a tablet top-rail centred by a stylized foliate motif converging into an eight-point armorial star, surmounted by a double scrolled cresting centred by an anthemion; the padded back and seat upholstered in black cotton; the armrests carved in the shape of acanthus scrolls above a panelled seatrail applied with stylised foliate sprays; the angles with square panels applied with rosettes; on *à l'étrusque* rear legs and *à volutes* front legs; the backs ochre-painted. The seat rail of all armchairs is inscribed with an engraved number: I; X; XV; XVI.

Rome, 1820/25 circa

Each:

Height: 42½ in. (108 cm)

Width: 25½ in. (65 cm)

Depth: 24½ in. (62,5 cm)

Provenance:

Possibly Altieri family.

Viscount Wimborne and the Earl of Suffolk and Berkshire.

Comparative Literature:

- Enrico Colle, *il Mobile Neoclassico in Italia*, Electa 2005, p. 155.
- Alvar González-Palacios, *Arredi e ornamenti alla corte di Roma*, Milan, 2004; pp. 49 and 222–223.
- Alvar González-Palacios, *Il Tempio del Gusto: Roma e il Regno delle due Sicilie*, vol. II, Milan, 1986, p. 53, figs. 82–83.
- Denise Ledoux-Lebard, *Les Ebenistes du XIX siècle*, Paris, 1965, p. 629 (for a related French example by Wermer executed between 1816 and 1820 for the Tuileries Castle, exhibited in 1947 and 1951 at the Musée des Art Decoratives, Fig.4).
- A. Gonzales-Palacios, *Il Patrimonio del Quirinale, Gli Arredi Francesi*, Milan, 1996, pp. 204 and 210 (for related Roman console tables after a French design).

Probably part of a larger suite, this set of monumental armchairs can be related to a group of Roman Neoclassical furnishings realized for the Altieri family, either for their city Palace (Palazzo Altieri, Rome) or for their country residence, the Palazzo Santacroce-Altieri at Oriolo Romano, Viterbo. The furniture still in situ in these palaces, or documented to be coming from there, presents in fact the same recurring element of an eight-point star, which identifies the heraldic crest of the family.

In particular a chair today in Palazzo Altieri, Rome, published by Enrico Colle (op. cit., p. 155, Fig.1) presents a comparable element of an eight-point star carved on burin-engraved ground on the top centre backrests, as the present armchairs.

The eight-point star can be found on several elements realized for the Altieri residences over the centuries, spanning furnishings, doors, floors, architectural elements, frescoes, etc. The increasing practice of using this heraldic element on furniture can be documented among Altieri commissions already from the last quarter of the eighteenth century, with the renovations of Palazzo Santacroce-Altieri. The architect in charge of those renovations was Giuseppe Barberi (1746–1809), who realized a substantial group of drawings related to the project, today held at the Cooper Hewitt Museum, The Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC.

The sheets document a series of designs for furniture and interiors, some of which feature the star in prominent positions framed in a manner reminiscent of the present examples (Fig.2-3), although our armchairs would belong to the generation after the *Ancien Régime*, marrying French designs.

As a comparative example, we thought to consider also an important pair of Roman console tables identified by A. González-Palacios as the so-called Braschi tables. These equally monumental pieces present on the frontal and side bands carved eight-point stars comparable to those found on the present armchairs. Although González-Palacios tentatively associates the star to the Braschi coat of arms and names the tables after that aristocratic family on the base of their location in Palazzo Albergati Capacelli, there is in fact no documentary evidence that those tables were commissioned by a member of the Braschi family, nor that they came from any of their residences (and González-Palacios is fully conscious of such a tentative attribution, op. cit., 2004, p. 225). This nonetheless, in addition to the armorial star, the tables present a quality, execution and level of finish in the sculpted elements and the burin gilding ground comparable to the present armchairs, further availing a Roman provenance.

The present armchairs do not follow typically Roman models. Rather, they seem to be based on a design of certain French origin. The armchairs realized between 1816 and 1820 for the Tuileries Palace by J. J. Wermer (1791–1849) can be identified as the closest model that might have served as the inspiration for the present examples. The influence of French taste is, in fact, well documented in many Roman furnishings of the first quarter of the nineteenth century, such as those realized for the Quirinal Palace (Monte Cavallo) in the period (A. González-Palacios, op. cit., pp. 204 and 210, for console tables after a French design relatable to the present armchairs).

It must be mentioned that, between 1809 and 1814, Maria Anna of Saxony, wife of Palazzo Altieri, Prince of Oriolo, was maid of honor to the Empress Marie Louise, second wife of Napoleon Bonaparte. Such a close connection between the Altieris and the French élite may be seen as one of the channels through which French taste spread in Roman decorative arts of the period, including the present armchairs.

BURZIO.

Conditions:

In overall good conditions. Joints sound and sturdy. Old, minor marks and chips to the gilding, consistent with age, left as is in order not to alter the historic gilding that presents a nice patina, especially on the armrests.



Fig.1



Fig.2



Fig.3 (our armchairs)



Fig.4

