

An Italian Neoclassical carved, veneered and ebonized cherry wood day-bed.
Probably by Antonio Carnera after a design by Giuseppe Borsato (1770–1849)
Veneto, probably Padua, 1820–30

Height: 40,55 in. (103 cm)

Width: 34,64 in. (88 cm)

Depth: 78,74 in. (200 cm)

Provenance:

Private European Collection

Literature:

- E.Colle, *Il Mobile Impero in Italia, arredi e decorazioni d'interni dal 1800 al 1843*, Milan, 1998, pp. 235–39 and 305–15;
- Giuseppe Pavanello, *Disegni per i mobili dell'appartamento neoclassico di palazzo Papafava*, Trieste, 2012, pp. 117–26;
- Giuseppe Borsato, *Opera Ornamentale*, Milano, 1831.

The present suite represents an example of the very unique declination the Empire style took in the Veneto region in the early nineteenth century. The sober and rational design of German-Austrian inspiration blends with more formal solutions derived from Italian Neoclassicism, a combination characteristic of the production of Giuseppe Borsato. Only very few pieces of furniture designed by Giuseppe Borsato have survived, which makes this discovery all the more exciting. The present pieces can be ascribed to the renowned cabinetmaker because of important stylistic and structural similarities with pieces designed by him between 1817 and 1836 for several residences in the Veneto region, such as those realised for Palazzo Papafava in Padua and Palazzo Papadopoli in Venice.

Palazzo Papafava was extensively renovated on the occasion of the wedding of Alessandro Papafava and Luisa Boncompagni Ottoboni in 1817. The 'ornato' of the interiors (the decorative scheme of frescoes and stuccoes) was commissioned to Giuseppe Borsato (1770–1849), who had become a fashionable architect among the Veneto aristocracy after having decorated the interiors of the Procuratie Nuove in Venice under the rule of the Eugenio de Beauharnais (today's Museo Correr, Venice). Antonio Carnera and Gaetano Manzoni, on the other hand, were responsible for the furniture for the project. The two are unquestionably among the greatest cabinetmakers active in Neoclassical Padua, even though little is known about them. An old photograph of the Iliad room of Palazzo Papafava shows an armchair presenting the same sinuous shapes as the armchair from the present suite (fig.1). For the bedroom of the Papafavas, Carnera realised a chest of drawers presenting the same stylistic solutions as the present suite. Large surfaces veneered in plain wood are enriched by grooved details (Colle, op. cit. 1998, pp.310–11). The same grooves can be found as the recurrent motif in the pieces from the present suite, in the lower register of the bed, armchair and dormouse, as well as on the column. More in general, such a grooved motif is found as the recurrent feature in pieces produced in the Veneto region around the 1820s, such as a series of chairs

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and armchairs in the same ripe Neoclassical style (Colle, op. cit., 1998, pp.312–15, fig.2).



Fig.1.



Fig.2



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A decade or so later, the same team Borsato – Carnera worked on the decoration of the interiors of Palazzo Papadopoli in Venice using a similar combination of exuberant *ornato* and austere but exquisite furniture in dark woods. Although the furniture has been dispersed, contemporary descriptions of the interiors survive. Visiting the palace in 1836, Pietro Chevalier commented on the 'squisitezze ornamentali per cui in generale si vede adesso la moda correre a precipizio' (ornamental delights for which there is now a great fashion) and the 'spontanee grazie del gusto italiano' (spontaneous grace of the Italian style, Colle, op. cit., 1998, p.236, quoting P. Chevalier, *Di una giunta al Palazzo dei Signori Conti Papadopoli in Venezia*, Venice, 1836, p.18). Chevalier's words apply all too well to our pieces, which represent precisely the union of the grace of Italian shapes brought to the extreme by the fashion of those years.

As can be evidence by these two large commissions, Borsato was very popular among the elites of the Veneto, working on the decorations of several other palazzi, such as Palazzo Barozzi Emo Treves de Bonfili in Venice and Palazzo Gaudio in Padua. The sofa and a set of four chairs originally designed for Palazzo Gaudio remain in situ, now part of the collections of the Civiche Raccolte d'Arte of Padua (figs.3–4). Those pieces present the same sinuous shapes of our suite, for example the extreme curve of the sofa and the legs of the chair. Borsato's popularity was so great that many cabinetmakers active in Padua in the first half of the nineteenth century took inspiration from him. For the interiors of the new Caffè Pedrocchi, the designer and cabinetmaker Giuseppe Jappelli adapted the design of Borsato's *cattedra* for coffee tables surmounted by slabs of ancient marble (Colle, p.237).



Fig.3



Fig.4

It must be noted, in the end, that the side table in the shape of a column is supported by a sliding mechanism identical to the one in the famous 'cattedra' (lecturing table) designed by Giuseppe Borsato for Count Leopoldo Cicognara (fig.5). For its design and exquisite use of materials, the 'cattedra' is unanimously considered the cabinetmaker's masterpiece, and Borsato himself considered it so

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important that he included a representation of it in the frontispiece of his design book *Opera Ornamentale* (Milan, 1831). In both pieces the sliding mechanism is set in indents in the wooden base and allow the main piece – be it Cicognara’s chair or our column – to move back and forth. In both examples, furthermore, the mechanism seems to be motivated more by a demonstration of technical bravura on the part of the cabinetmaker, rather than by actual practicality.

These elements in the style and technical execution allow us to firmly locate the present suite in the Veneto context of the 1820s and 30s, most probably in Padua, the centre where most cases of furniture commission are recorded in those years (Colle, op. cit., 1998, pp.236–37). The use of such extreme shapes, large plain surfaces in fine woods enriched by grooved details and, most importantly, the sliding mechanism of the column convincingly suggest that the suite was realised by Giuseppe Borsato and Antonio Carnera (Colle, op. cit., 1998, pp.236–37).

Written confirmation of our attribution and a studio essay by Dr. Enrico Colle, Director of the Stibbert Museum, Florence, are available on application.



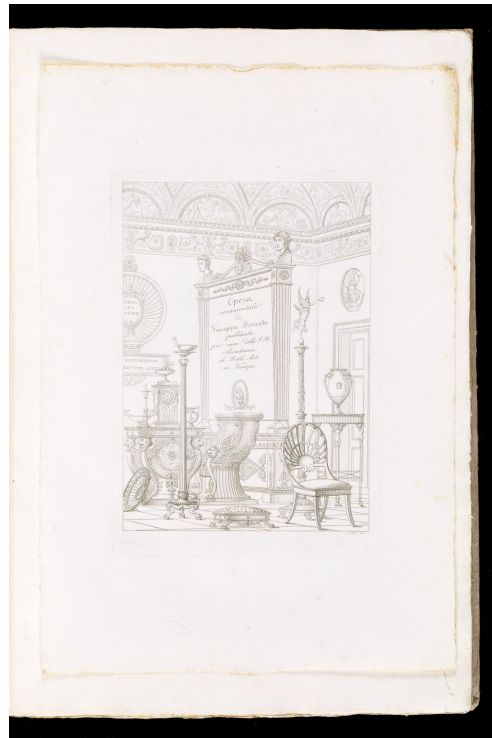
Fig.5 Giuseppe Borsato, *Cattedra of Leopoldo Cicognara*, Galleria dell' Accademia, Venice.

Giuseppe Borsato (Venice 1770–1849) was one of the main protagonists of Venetian Neoclassicism. Holder of the chair of Ornate at the Academy of Fine Arts in Venice from 1808 until his death and active also as a landscape painter, he is best known for his grandiose fresco decorations combining landscape, architecture and decorations inspired by the Antique, as well as the statuary of Antonio Canova. He was also a successful scenographer, designing stage decorations for the theatre,

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sumptuous ephemeral apparatuses for Imperial visits. He designed objects, furniture, decorations and interiors of both public and private buildings. Most notably, he worked extensively on the redecoration of the royal palaces in Venice and Stra, and executed numerous set designs for *La Fenice* in Venice. His taste and originality can be witnessed in a table in bronze, wood and Murano glass that he designed and Benedetto Barbaria and Bartolomeo Bongiovanni created, perhaps the most fascinating piece of furniture produced in Venice in the early nineteenth century.

Borsato's fame made him the official ornato artist at the court of Napoleonic first, and in Vienna later. He collected his best designs for furniture in the volume *Opera Ornamentale* of 1831, which had a decisive influence in the dissemination of the Empire style in the Veneto region. In addition to Venice, he left important testimonies also in Trieste, Treviso, Udine, Padua and Vicenza, embellishing the homes of rich Venetian aristocrats and bourgeois. He played a primary role in bringing the city of Venice and the Venetian mainland up to date with international trends of Neoclassicism and Empire.



Frontispiece of Giuseppe Borsato's *Opera Ornamentale* (Milan, 1831), Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute.