

Gueridon in *Pietre Dure*

Table top of various Sicilian jaspers, petrified wood, and *Nero del Belgio*, in a frame of chiselled silver, attributed to the Royal Pietre Dure Manufactory in Naples, early 19th century; on a slightly later stand of sculpted mahogany attributed to Enrico Tommaso Peters, Genoa, c. 1830.

Diam.: 32, 1/3 in. (83,5 cm)

Height: 30,7 in. (78 cm)

Studio essay by Dott. Enrico Colle, Stibbert Museum Director, Florence

The table top, enclosed in a frame of chiselled silver, is composed of a design of concentric circles including a double band of *Nero del Belgio*, two bands of petrified wood, a band of jasper with geometrical designs in petrified wood and, at centre, an inlaid eight-pointed star.

Given their chromatic variety enriched by the striations of conglomerates composing them, Sicilian jaspers and agates have always been sought after by stone workers both in Sicily and in the rest of Italy. Such semi-precious stones were found in erratic blocks of various sizes as well as in the beds of small rivers in many localities of the northern and eastern coast of Sicily, such as in Messina, Taormina, Catania and Palermo. These became centres for the refinement and exportation of such materials, where more and more sophisticated techniques for the cutting and polishing of stones were constantly being developed throughout the centuries. Sicilian artisans had frequent contacts with Lombard and Tuscan masons from as early on as the sixteenth century, and by the Baroque period this resulted in the elaboration of extremely sophisticated techniques that were largely used for the decoration of religious interiors.¹ In virtue of their polychromies, such jaspers and agates were sought after also by Roman stone masons and by the Grand Ducal Pietre Dure workshop in Florence in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as well as by the Royal Pietre Dure manufactory created in Naples by Charles of Bourbon in 1738, and active until the end of the Restoration.

Designed almost as a sample display of the various kinds of Sicilian jasper, this table top is a rare document of the activity of the Neapolitan manufactory between the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. It is based on a model ideated in 1804 by the then director of the Royal Manufactory Giovanni Mugnai for a pair of semi-circular console tables that were to be 'veneered in different kinds of hard stones in a decorative pattern as a mosaic and with fanciful *scherzi* of colourful

¹ C. Napoleone, 'L'impiego dei diaspri e delle agate di Sicilia dal XVI al XVII secolo', in M. C. Di Natale, *Splendori di Sicilia. Arti decorative dal Rinascimento al Barocco*, Milan, 2001, pp. 193-203.

stones' such as agate, amethyst, and petrified wood (fig.1).² These were actually delivered, and in 1844, under Ferdinand II, were united to create a singular, round table, today in the Reggia di Caserta.³

In such works, the Neapolitan taste was homologated with Neoclassical paradigms, privileging simpler designs where the materials – the rare stones, organised according to geometrical patterns – became the absolute protagonists. Different kind of furnishings were created using petrified wood, as well as the infinite chromatic potential offered by Sicilian jaspers. In 1807 a payment record, already mentioned by Alvar González-Palacios, refers to the cost necessary to 'veneer a table made of hard stones coming from Sicily'. The following year (1808) another letter addressed to the prime minister announces the completion 'in the Pietre Dure Manufactory of a table identical to the one just delivered, in the shape of a rectangle and made of a collection of stones of Sicily in 72 square pieces, each framed by Pietra Paragone from the Flanders'.⁴ This was followed by another table top, once again made entirely of Sicilian stones, made 'to join the others which are already in the Royal apartments' (fig. 2).⁵

A table top similar to the present one was exhibited by the Milan-based Galleria Bensi at the VI Biennale Internazionale dell'Antiquariato in Florence in 1969(fig.3). That table was supported by a stand in style Empire entirely of patinated bronze on a base veneered in mahogany and embellished with gilt bronze. The present table, on the other hand, is supported by a slightly later stand in Cuban mahogany finely carved, terminating in lion paws, probably made around 1830 by Enrico Maria Peters in Genoa.

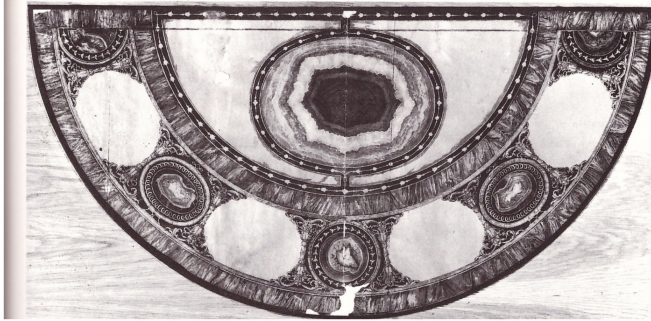
² 'Impellicciate di diverse specie di pietre dure composte di ornati a modo di mosaico e di belli scherzi di macchie di pietre.'

³ A. González-Palacios, in *Civiltà del '700 a Napoli 1734–1799*, 1979, pp. 185–86, n. 426.

⁴ *Mosaici e Pietre Dure. Mosaici a piccole tessere – Pietre dure a Parigi e a Napoli*, Milano 1981, pp. 68–69, 'terminata nel Laboratorio di pietre dure una tavola uguale all'ultima presentatale; di figura quadrilunga e composta di una collezione di pietre di Sicilia in numero di 72 pezzi quadri ed ognuna di esse con filettatura e fascia attorno di pietra paragone di Fiandre'.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 'unita alle altre simili che sono nei reali appartamenti'.

BURZIO.



1. G. Mugnai, *Design for a Pietre Dure table top*, c. 1804, Reggia di Caserta.



2. Royal Pietre Dure Manufactory, Naples, *Table top with Sicilian hard stones*, c. 1804, Reggia di Caserta.



3. Anonymous French or Neapolitan Royal cabinet maker and Laboratorio Reale delle Pietre dure Naples Early XIX C., *Gueridon with Sicilian jaspers*, present location unknown.

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