

The Mattias de Medici Blue Boys

A pair of Florentine Baroque polychrome lacca wood sculptures with glass eyes
Here attributed to Jacopo Maria Foggini (c.1620–1684)
Third quarter of the seventeenth Century

Height: 57 ½ in (146 cm)

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The present pair of sculptures was destined to hold lights, banners or spears. They are an example of a kind of furnishing popular in Italian palaces in the Baroque period. In particular, the liveries in cobalt blue and the feathers around the figures' waist, the very naturalistic rendition of the livery with fringed sleeves from which emerge rolled-up shirt sleeves, the boots in silvered mecca, and the base carved in imitation of rocks, are consistent with similar decorative objects found in Florentine court residences in the seventeenth century.



Since the first half of the seventeenth century, and well into the eighteenth, it was fashionable to decorate the interiors of royal and aristocratic palaces with carved figures placed along the walls of so-called 'appartamenti di parata' to hold candelabras. Such sumptuous interiors often became spaces to bring to life mythological fables staged according to criteria derived from theatre decoration, which involved the viewer in a game of illusions. Every boundary between real and fictional space was negated by the reflections of unexpected mirrors, carved figures supporting precious table-tops, and elaborate crystal chandeliers emerging from the frescoed ceilings, almost as if by a work of magic.

The passage from the sophisticated decorative inventions of Mannerism to more decidedly Baroque ones manifested in a very gradual way in the various states of the Italian peninsula, especially in the design of interiors and furnishings. These usually followed the tradition of the *Cinquecento* well up to the middle of the following century. Palazzo Pitti is a case in point. The inventories of the early seventeenth century list several pieces of furniture of Mannerist tradition, often with surfaces painted 'in the Indian style' (*all'indiana*), that is with ornamentations painted in gold on a dark background, inspired by Indian and Persian artefacts.¹ Among the different kinds of furniture mentioned in contemporary documents, we find large stools (*sgabelloni*) designed to support sculptures or lights. Around 1650, these were replaced by twisted columns, probably derived from drawings by Stefano della Bella or by the court 'guardarobiere' (chief of the household) Diacinto Maria Marmi. A

¹ E. Colle, *Il mobile barocco in Italia. Arredi e decorazioni d'interni dal 1600 al 1743*, Milano 2000, p.158, n. 34

payment record attests that in 1665 the wood seller Giovanni Ciachi delivered to the household 'four light holders carved and twisted', each resting onto a 'base carved with cartouches'.² Next to this kind of support, much more elaborate than the aforementioned stools, there were others representing putti or fantastical sea creatures, whose design can be attributed to Marmi himself, who had been at the service of the court in Florence since 1648. Marmi first introduced pieces of this kind in his drawings of interiors, particularly suited to diversify with elegance the sumptuous rooms.³

The 1637 inventory of Palazzo Pitti is the earliest description so far encountered of wood sculptures representing African boys supporting lights, a replacement of the sixteenth-century 'sgabelloni da lume'. In the first two rooms of the 'Appartamento dei Forestieri' (today's 'Appartamento degli Arazzi' or tapestry rooms) there were 'two moors in black wood carved in the round serving the function of light stools, with feet in a triangle and carved garlands, all painted and touched with gold, 3 braccia and 8'' tall'.⁴

The 1659 inventory of the possessions of Prince don Mattias de' Medici (1613–67) lists 'four naked moors in the guise of lights, gilded and carved, with arrows and bows 2 1/4 braccia tall'. These are followed by 'two richly clothed blue moors'.⁵ Probably part of the same series, the inventory lists a further 'two moors in the shape of lights carved and richly gilded with a blue and gold dress 2 1/6 braccia tall', as well as 'two little moors in the shape of lights carrying bows, painted in black and gilded, wearing a livery of white and blue cloth, with jewels and bracelets of fake pearls, 2 1/6 braccia tall'.⁶ These could be admired as late as 1669 in two rooms of the villa at Lapeggi, the country residence of don Mattias. Even if actively invested in his military career, the prince was in fact also a passionate art collector with a particular taste for rare and curious pieces, which he displayed with eclecticism in his country residence, often the site of masked balls and hunting parties.

The Grand-ducal inventories of the following years list several other examples of these unusual pieces. For example, in 1675, among the goods bequeathed by Prince Leopoldo de' Medici (1617–75), don Mattias's brother, we find mentioned 'two lights in the shape of two moors, half naked, with gilded robes, holding a garland and a

² 'Quattro torcieri intagliati e avvolti' su di un 'piede intagliato con cartocci', E. Colle, *I mobili di Palazzo Pitti. Il periodo dei Medici 1537–1737*, Firenze 1997, p. 250, n. 86.

³ E. Colle, op. cit. 1997, pp. 248–49, nos. 84–85.

⁴ 'Dua mori di legno nero di rilievo à termine à uso di sgabelloni da lume, con piedi a triangolo e festoni à mezzo intagliati e tutti tocchi e miniati d'oro alti B. 3 0/8', E. Colle, op. cit 1997, p. 246, n. 83.

⁵ 'Quattro mori nudi che fanno torcieri dorati e intagliati, con archi e faretra alti B.a duo e 1/4' and 'due mori che fanno torcieri vestiti intagliati e dorati ricchi con veste turchina', *Inventario della Guardaroba del Principe Don Mattias*, ASF, GM 703 c.25 e c. 32.

⁶ *Inventario di Lapeggi*; ASF GM 779 ter.

tray, carved and gilded'.⁷ The 1688 inventory of the furnishings of Palazzo Pitti lists 'four lights in wood, carved in the round, representing moors with a white sash, and partly gilded'.⁸ The Grand-duchess Vittoria della Rovere equally owned 'two wooden lights, carved and gilded, representing [...] a man and a woman, with a dolphin on the shoulder, whose tail supports the light [il candeliere], resting onto a gilded base'.⁹ Years later, in 1695, further attesting to the popularity enjoyed by such peculiar sculptures at the Medici court, the inventory of the villa at Poggio Imperiale lists 'two lights in wood representing two pages with a blue livery embroidered in gold, and breeches similar to a gilded redingote, partly striped, holding a cup with a hand, and with the other their feathered hat, resting onto bases of wood carved with plants and three cartouches, all gilded'.¹⁰ Among the possessions of Maria Luisa de' Medici, Elector Palatine (1667–1743), in the antechamber of her private apartments at Palazzo Pitti, figured 'four lights in wood representing a young moor, each two braccia in height, with their foot in a triangle holding in one hand some vines as a cornucopia and a gun striped on their back, with a belt of feathers around, all gilded'.¹¹

So far, it has not been possible to ascertain the authorship of such peculiar kind of sculptures. Archival documents mention, however, among the wood carvers active for the Medici court around the second half of the seventeenth century, Giacinto del Fantasia, who in 1688 delivered to Prince Ferdinando (1663–1713) 'a pair of lights in the shape of moors from the bust upward'.¹² In the same year, 1688, Michele Preser was paid for having completed two lights in the shape of 'a moor and mooress'.¹³

In light of this, it is most likely that the present blue boys were made in Florence by a skilled sculptor working for the Grand-dukes around the same period in which those belonging to don Mattias de' Medici were described (1659). Their naturalism, heightened by the life-like representation of eyes using coloured glass, the theatrical

⁷ 'Due torcieri di due mori mezzi nudi, con vesti dorate, con festone in mano con padella sopra intagliata e dorata', *Inventario di mobili e masserizie dell'eredità del Serenissimo e Signore Principe Cardinale Leopoldo di Toscana*, redatto il 14 novembre 1675; ASF, GM 1164, c. 78.

⁸ 'Quattro torcieri d'albero intagliati a termine che figurano mori con ciarpa bianca, e dorati in parte', ASF, GM 986, c. 73.

⁹ 'Due torcieri di legno intagliati e dorati, che rappresentano [...] maschio e femmina, con un delfino in spalla, che con la coda fa posare sopra il candelliere con base sotto il piede dorata', *Inventario 1689*; ASF, Depositeria Generale P A 1565, c. 20.

¹⁰ 'Due torcieri di legno che figurano due paggetti con giubbone turchino rabescato d'oro, e calzoni simili a brache dorati in parte a fette, che con una mano tengono una tazza, e con l'altra il cappello con penne, posano sopra basi di legno intagliate a fogliami con piedi di 3 cartocci e tutte dorate', *Inventario 1695*; ASF, GM 1088, c. 308.

¹¹ 'Quattro torcieri di legno rappresentano un moretto alti B. 2 in circa per ciascuno con piede a triangolo tengono in mano un viticcio ad uso di cornucopia circasso e armacollo dietro alle spalle e fascia attorno a forma di penne il tutto dorato', *Inventario generale dei mobili ... 1761*; ASF IRC 4675, c. 37.

¹² 'Un par di torcieri figurati mori da mezzo in su', E. Colle, op. cit. 1997, p. 280.

¹³ E. Colle, op. cit., 1997, p. 298.

pose, as if the figures were advancing towards the viewer, and the attention to every detail in the clothing, suggest the hand of a sculptor active around the middle of the century, probably Jacopo Maria Foggini (c.1620–1684), uncle of the more famous Giovan Battista Foggini (1652–1725). Jacopo Maria was active for the Medici court delivering above all carved woodwork destined to the embellishment of carriages.¹⁴ His production, however, is not limited to this kind of decorative works. He also made wooden sculptures that were praised by the Tuscan art connoisseur and historian Filippo Baldinucci (1624–96). These included devotional sculptures, some of which are still extant in churches both in Florence and in the surrounding countryside. Such sculptures are ‘modelled on sixteenth-century schemes, mediated by the lesson of Foggini’s master Antonio Novelli’.¹⁵

Foggini fully digested Novelli’s lesson. In September 1680, he was paid by the Grand-ducal household for the execution of ‘two lights with two figures, which are in Pradolino’.¹⁶ These have been identified by Alvar González Palacios with a couple of sculptures, entirely gilded, sold at the auction of the goods formerly in the possession of the Demidoff family.¹⁷ The 1748 inventory of Pradolino lists ‘two lights in poplar, all carved [...] in the shape of two figures in the round, life-sized, of a Turkish boy and a Turkish girl, sitting in various poses onto a base all carved and gilded’.¹⁸ These should be identified with those sculpted by Foggini, slightly lower than the *Blue Boys*, which are recorded to have remained in the Chapel in the park at Pradolino up to the sale of the entire property from the Grand-dukes to the Demidoffs.¹⁹

The present blue boys seem consistent with the spontaneous poses and the fine execution of the sculptures from Pradolino, down to details of both the anatomy and the clothing. This suggests that the present pair of sculptures are an example of Florentine wooden sculptures of great artistic level, whose genealogy could be traced back to the sgabelloni or stools of the first half of the seventeenth century and later evolved towards the style of the Baroque, and of which Jacopo Maria Foggini was one of the main interpreters. Let us conclude by mentioning that the spontaneous pose of the blue boys and the feather around their waist are stylistic elements that will be found again also in sculptures still extant in Palazzo Pitti (fig.3), probably created in second half of the seventeenth century, as well as in the couple, also a little

¹⁴ E. Colle, op. cit., 2000, p. 451.

¹⁵ ‘Modulate su schemi di memoria cinquecentesca, mediati probabilmente dalla lezione del maestro Antonio Novelli’, S. Bellesi, ‘Nuove acquisizioni alla scultura fiorentina dalla fine del Cinquecento al Settecento’, *Antichità Viva*, vols. 5–6, 1992, p. 42.

¹⁶ ‘Due torcieri con due figure che sono a Pradolino’.

¹⁷ G. González Palacios, *Il Tempio del Gusto. Le arti decorative in Italia fra classicismi e barocco. La Toscana e l’Italia settentrionale*, Milano 1986, p. 193 e ASF, Depositeria, 431, c. 109; E. Colle, *Gli inventari delle Corti*, Firenze 2004, p. 139.

¹⁸ ‘Due torcieri d’albero tutti lavorati d’intaglio [...] in due figure di rilievo al naturale d’un turchetto e una femmina che siedono in varie attitudini sopra un imbasamento tutto intagliato e scannellato e tutto dorato’, *Inventario dei mobili [...] 1748*; ASF, GM 1116, c. 24v.

¹⁹ *Inventario di tutti i mobili [...] 1822*, ASF, IRC 4944, c. 16.

bit lower of them, later indigenous American giltwood figures (fig.2) holding a painted terracotta Mexican Tonalà jar created in the same period for the Ginori family.²⁰



Fig 2 Palazzo Ginori, Firenze



Fig 3 Palazzo Pitti

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²⁰ E. Colle, *op. cit.*, 2000, p. 186.