

The 'Bruno of Cologne' Table

A unique console table of the Turinese *barocchetto*, the supporting structure in walnut and poplar, veneered in walnut, and richly inlaid in purplewood, rosewood, maplewood, and boxwood, finely engraved and tinted with burning sand.

Attributed to Pietro Piffetti (1701–Turin–1777).

Turin, 1750 circa.

Height: 32,67 in. (83 cm)
Width: 41,14 in. (104,5 cm)
Depth: 21 ¼ in. (55 cm)

Provenance:

Professor Francesco Curiale, Palermo.



Bibliography:

- G. Ferraris, *Pietro Piffetti e gli ebanisti a Torino 1670–1838*, edited by Alvar Gonzalez-Palacios with the collaboration of Roberto Valeriani, Umberto Allemandi, Turin, 1992, pp. 58–59, no. 21; pp. 60–61, no. 22, pp. 62–63, no. 23, pp. 66–67, no. 25, pp. 156–159, for furniture by Prinotto, but with interventions documented to Piffetti with comparable representations of Bruno of Cologne;
- R. Antonetto, *Minusieri ed Ebanisti del Piemonte: Storia e Immagini del Mobile Piemontese 1636–1844*, Daniela Piazza Editore, Turin, 1985, pp.263 and ff., nos. 374, 375, 376, pp.266–267, nos. 380, 381, 382 (here the figure represented has to be identified with Saint Bruno not Saint Charles), pp. 326, nos. 484, pp.332–333, 338–341;
- R. Antonetto, *Il mobile piemontese nel Settecento*, vol. I, Turin, 2010, pp. 84–85, 86–88, 116–118, 180–183, 243, 270;
- Daniëlle Kisluk-Grosheide, *How to read European decorative arts*, The Metropolitan museum of Art, New York, distributed by Yale University press, New Haven and London, 2023, pp. 44–45, 158. For an example of a piece of furniture very similar to the present and firmly documented to Pietro Piffetti in the same years, see inv.2020.371.
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/835302>.

Side table, probably meant to be used next to an altar in a private chapel. The moulded top richly inlaid with scrolls and four 'C's typical of Pietro Piffetti's repertoire, to be found two on the front corners and two on the sides of an elaborate

cartouche on the front. The cartouche representing a scene with Saint Bruno in a grotto, kneeling in prayer in front of a cross set in the rocks. In the background one can firmly identify the Charterhouse of Serra San Bruno, Calabria, where the saint retired to in the latter part of his life. The saint wears the cloth of the Carthusian order, his hands clasped in prayer, his head nimbused. The rear part of the top does not present elaborate inlays, but the rich veneer in walnut is framed by a fine thread in boxwood. It is possible that this part of the table top was used to support some objects.

The skirt on the front, below the top, is moulded and rounded, with rich inlaid scrolls mirroring those on the top, and with a large Piffetti's 'C' inlaid at centre, crowned by a floral garland and a hidden drawer. The side skirts complement the front one, with a drawer on each side, in addition to a fourth, secret one below the top. All the drawers are mounted without using poplar nails.

The top rests onto four moulded legs, also veneered, with three-dimensional scrolls typical of Piffetti's production, resting onto four finely shaped walnut horse hoofs. The locks are original, but the keyhole patches in gilt bronze, as well as the keys, are later.

With a walnut structure and veneered in a variety of walnut coming from Sardinia, with inlays in rosewood and purplewood, the present table is unique and testifies to the technical virtuosity of Pietro Piffetti. Compared to the production of his contemporaries, such as Luigi Prinotto, Pietro Piffetti's works stand out for their extravagant scrolling lines, which give the sense of continuous motion. Distinctive and particularly original in the present piece is the use of the plastic shapes and the inlays. Whether the scrolls on the legs spurt out into three-dimensional space, the inlaid shells on both the tabletop and the surrounding skirts create the effect of receding space in *trompe l'oeil*.

These two elements work together to create a playful effect of concave and convex typical of Piffetti's oeuvre. A distinctive motif of *barocchetto*, the shell is for Piffetti a recurring element, and in the present piece it appears repeatedly, taking centre stage on all the surfaces. The ingenious and playful effect created through the veins of the purplewood used for the veneer, framed by threads in inlaid boxwood, is also characteristic of Piffetti's production. On the front skirt these are used to draw attention to the central inlaid garland.

Although the present object is a unique example in its category, it beautifully exemplifies Pietro Piffetti's virtuosity. The ingenious use of shapes and refined selection of materials make of the present table a logical fit in Piffetti's production.

Pietro Piffetti (1701–1777), appointed Royal Cabinetmaker to the King of Sardinia in 1731

An iconic master cabinetmaker of the eighteenth century, Pietro Piffetti is generally recognised as one of the most important craftsmen of his time. The distinguished scholar of the decorative arts Alvar Gonzalez-Palacios defined him not only as the finest Italian cabinetmaker of the eighteenth century, but also as one of the greatest *virtuoso* of his trade that Europe ever saw. His work is characterised by an extraordinary fluidity of line, combined with unmatched technical ability and a generous employment of fine woods and exotic materials. All these elements can be found in the present piece.

Piffetti was born in Turin in 1701. The certain details about the first thirty years of his life are scattered. We know that he was the son of an innkeeper, that he trained in Turin probably in the workshop of the Venetian cabinetmaker active in the Savoy capital Lodovico Derossi, that he married in that city in 1722 with Lucia Burzio, daughter of the cabinetmaker Giuseppe, and that he was appointed an approved master in 1723. The first certain documents concerning Piffetti are dated 1730. A batch of bills held at the Archivio di Stato of Turin attest that in that year he was in Rome, where he reached a brother of his, also a cabinetmaker (*stipettaio*). Piffetti's Roma sojourn and his apprenticeship there in a workshop of a marked international spirit were with great probability encouraged by the Savoy Royal architect Filippo Juvarra (1678–1736), who is widely documented to have collaborated with Piffetti.

In 1731 he returned to his home town summoned by the King. In that year, Carlo Emanuele III created for him the title of Royal Cabinetmaker, a previously non-existent appointment. Piffetti was thus elevated above all the other craftsmen active in Turin at the time. His debut piece at court was simply spectacular: the furnishings for the so-called *Gabinetto per il Segreto Maneggio degli Affari di Stato* (private cabinet for the managing of State affairs), later transformed into the Toilette Cabinet of the Queen, realised by Piffetti after a design by the aforementioned Filippo Juvarra. In the following 45 years Piffetti is documented to have delivered 222 works for the Royal Household and an unspecified number of pieces for privates, through all of which he manifested his dazzling creative genius and his astonishing technical virtuosity, through the use of both shapes and decoration. He delivered works not only for the king and queen, but also for their firstborn the Duke of Savoy, the future Vittorio Amedeo III (1726–1796), for the royal princesses, among which stands out a trumeau for Maria Carolina of 1771, and for the king's youngest son, the Duke of Chiabrese, as well as for other members of the royal family and the local aristocracy. He produced not only self-standing pieces, but also whole interiors. The most notable example is perhaps the library today housed at the Quirinal Palace in Rome, but there were also entire chapels and prie-dieu, many of which feature Bruno of Cologne as an important iconographic element.

It is significant to notice that Pietro Piffetti often signed some of his works with the formula *sculpsit* next to his name. This suggests that he considered himself not only a simple cabinetmaker, but also a skilled engraver (the formula *sculpsit* in the

signature is in fact a consolidated standard among printmakers throughout the early modern period). It is very likely that he often used prints as models for his figurative inlays, as is probably the case also in the present example. Furthermore, two recently rediscovered prints bearing his signature show that he was active also as a printmaker. He was not merely a cabinetmaker, but *the* cabinetmaker, as eighteenth-century sources define him. He died in 1777 and was buried in the Turin Cathedral.

Today, many of his works are held at the Palazzina di Caccia at Stupinigi, at the Accorsi Foundation, at the Turin Royal Palace and Palazzo Madama. Pieces by this finest among the fine Italian cabinetmakers are some of the rarest pieces to be found on the market.

Bruno of Cologne and the Savoy Dynasty

Founder of the Carthusian monastic order, Saint Bruno is a saint of the eleventh century. He was born around 1030 in Cologne. The few extant documentary sources attest to a first small community of monks headed by him and a first monastery built in 1084 on the mountains above Grenoble. Some years later, Bruno moved to Rome upon invitation to act as a counsellor at the court of Pope Urban II. In late life, he retired to Calabria in order to dedicate himself to monastic life, founding another more important monastery under the protection of Rougier I in the town today named Serra San Bruno.

In the present table, in the scene within the cartouche at centre, it is possible to recognise in the background the aforementioned Charterhouse of Serra San Bruno, with the austere medieval church and the later towers of San Michele (fig.1). Although the print that served as the model for this part of the inlays has not yet been identified, the representation of the saint is coherent with his established iconography. He is represented kneeling in prayer in a rocky landscape wearing the cloth of his order. The sea in the distance may be either a picturesque addition or, more probably, a generalised reference to Southern Italy in the common imagination at the Savoy court of the mid-eighteenth century. The rocky landscape inhabited by the saint in the foreground, on the other hand, is a reference to his ascetical virtues and the austere lifestyle he practiced and commanded.

Even if the Carthusian order spread across Europe since the late Middle Ages, the cult of Saint Bruno was authorised only in the early sixteenth century by Pope Leone X, and extended to the Universal Church in the early seventeenth century, the period when representations of the Saint started to circulate more widely. A canvas by Giuseppe Ribera in the Certosa di San Martino, Naples, for example, presents the same iconographic elements as the inlay on the present table, spanning the grotto inhabited by the saint to the skull, a symbol of the fragility of life (figs.1–2). Furthermore, a series of majolica *albarelli* from Castelli at the Museo Nazionale di Reggio Calabria are decorated with scenes from the life of Saint Bruno, with one of them bearing a depiction with the same iconography as the present piece (fig.3).

Given that the Carthusian order originated on Savoy territory at the time of Humbert the White-handed – the legendary founder of the Savoy dynasty – Saint Bruno has traditionally been the object of particular devotion by that Royal House. Figurative inlays representing the Saint are in fact a recurrent element in sacred furniture created by Piffetti for the Savoy crown. This coincidence of iconographic themes and superb execution suggest that the present piece was commissioned by a patron close to, or directly connected with, the Savoy crown.



Fig.1 Dettaglio dell'intarsio del presente tavolino

Fig.2 Giuseppe de Ribera, *San Bruno Riceve la Regola*, 1643, olio su tela, Napoli, Museo e Certosa di San Martino.



Fig.3 Alberello, serie di tre, provenienti, presumibilmente, dalla Certosa bruniana di Serra S. Bruno (CZ). Attribuita a Francesco Antonio Saverio Grue. (Inv. N. 1909/9 del Museo Nazionale di Reggio Calabria). Manifattura Castelli degli Abruzzi, 1729-30.