

A pair of Italian Louis XVI white painted and gilt wood console tables with *Breccia di Vituliano* marble tops. Naples, Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, 1790s.

Inscribed underneath in *white paint* C 4387 and labelled 242/1183.

Height: 32 1/3 in. (83.5 cm)

Length: 50,39 in. (128 cm)

Depth: 20 in. (51 cm)

Provenance: Probably originally in a Bourbon royal palace, Naples

Comparative examples: *Commode á l'Anglaise* attributed to Claude-Charles Saunier almost certainly retailed by Dominique Daguerre and Etienne Lignereux, currently in our stock;

table with *breccia Medicea* top by Francesco Antonio Franzoni (active in Ferrara and Rome 1734–1818), Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum (no. 93.DA.18).

The present pair of console tables is an important decorative art example of the relationship between the French and the Neapolitan kingdom capitals. They are derived from French *consoles de desserte* (from the French *desservir*, or unset the table), pieces of furniture designed for a dining room and characterised by two or more shelves that could receive all the objects that would normally decorate a table for a banquet. Nevertheless, the present console tables appropriate merely the characteristic D-shape of a *console de desserte*, dispensing with the multiple shelves.

An inscription in *vernice bianca* underneath the tables reading C 4387 suggests, together with their quality, the materials employed and the unquestionably French inspiration, that these console tables might come from either the Royal Palace of Caserta near Naples. Some Royal family's archives present the initial of the relative Royal Palace (in this case C for either Caserta), followed by the inventory number. Such importance is further supported by the use of *breccia di Vituliano* for the tabletops. Also known as *breccia di Vituliano*, this particular kind of marble characterised by spectacular chunks of purple, red and white stone, excavated from roman times up to about 1800 in a quarry operated by the architects Luigi and Carlo Vanvitelli for the Neapolitan Royal Court, was one of the most important and rare marbles used in the interiors of the Royal Palace of Caserta, such as in the monumental entrance stairs, in the chapel and in the royal apartments.

The decoration of the present console tables is also closely related from a *commode a l'anglaise* attributed to Claude-Charles Saunier (1735–1807), currently with us, where the same decorative garlands and frieze are in ormolu rather than gilt wood (fig. 1–2). In appropriating the decoration, however, the present consoles operate a

substantial shift, abandoning the quintessentially French combination of mahogany and ormolu, and adopting instead the characteristically Southern-Italian combination of white lacca and gilt wood.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Some historical facts might help us to reconstruct the combination of events that led to such a close dialogue between French and Neapolitan decorative arts. In 1790, the King and Queen of Naples, Ferdinand IV (1751–1825) and Maria Carolina of Austria (1752–1814), joined other European monarchs in Frankfurt for the coronation of Leopold II (1747–92). On that occasion they were introduced to Dominique Daguerre (d. 1796) and his partner Lignereux, two Parisian *marchand-mercier* based in London and Paris who have also travelled to Frankfurt in order to sell some of his pieces and get new commissions. The King of Naples acquired on the spot a commode and a *secrètaire* by Adam Weisweiler (1744–1820) (now in New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, nos. 1977.1.12 and 1977.1.13) and commissioned a further *secrètaire* and a matching desk (respectively New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, no. 1977.1.14 and private collection), together with other pieces of furniture. Once in Naples, the King relied on Carlo Vanvitelli (1739–1821) in Caserta to redecorate large parts of this palace interiors in the French style in order also to match his fashionable acquisitions. In fact, a drawing by Daguerre in the Metropolitan Museum in New York shows remarkable similarities with the present pair of console tables (fig. 3).

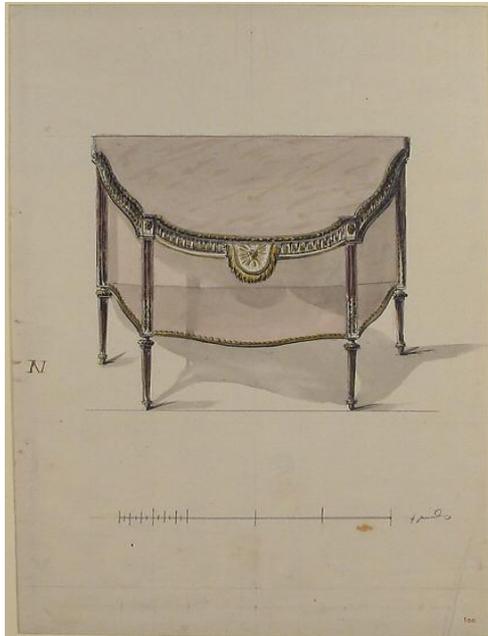


Fig. 3

It is also notable that Vanvitelli was commissioned to create replicas of French pieces of furniture and matching suites, the most notable examples being the bookcases still in the Caserta library. It is therefore likely that the present pair of console tables were made by, or after a design by, Carlo Vanvitelli to complete or match a suite of French pieces of furniture supplied to the Neapolitan court by Daguerre through the royal couple. Such a taste for French furniture and Neapolitan furniture in the French style can today be found recurrently in the Neapolitan Royal Palaces, the study of Ferdinand IV in Caserta and the adjacent library being the most famous and explicative examples.

Southern Italians have historically demonstrated a fascination for everything foreign, yet, because of their peculiarities, they hardly ever faithfully reproduced foreign models, decomposing, exaggerating and distorting them in order to fit their necessity and taste. Far from a slavish copy, the present console tables exquisitely represent such a unique attitude. Their shape and decoration are derived from French pieces of furniture with a very specific use, yet they are appropriated merely for their aesthetic qualities, losing any practical function, being declined in a local language of materials and colours to create something completely new.