

A highly important and very fine Italian mirror, with two-tone gilt carved limewood over a structure of poplar, probably by Giuseppe Maria Bonzanigo (Asti 1745–1820 Turin), Turin, Early 1770s.

Height: 64 in. (163 cm)
Width: 35 in. (89 cm)

Provenance: The Dr. Giuseppe Rossi, private collection, Turin since 1950s.

The present mirror is a fine example attesting to the subtle evolution of the Rococo stylistic language into that of Neoclassicism that interested the arts in Italy, and in Turin more in particular, in the early 1770s. The high quality of its woodcarvings suggests that this is the work of a skilled master carver active for the Savoy court in the years when Royal residences were being renovated according to the new stylistic trends inspired by the Antique, most probably Giuseppe Maria Bonzanigo.

The interest in French stylistic trends in Piedmont originally manifested in the interior decoration of Savoy royal residences under the reign of Carlo Emanuele III (1701–73). It continued under the rule of his son Vittorio Amedeo III (1726–96), who ascended to the throne in 1773. The dynastic links of the house of Savoy with the French and Spanish crowns and with the Dukes of Parma fostered the development of the Piedmontese court style into an international Neoclassicism. This found its full realisation in the 1780s with the renovation of several rooms in the Turin Royal Palace, the Stupinigi Castle and the palaces at Moncalieri, Venraria, Racconigi and Rivoli. During the last quarter of the eighteenth century this court style assumed a more defined identity, fully in line with the Louis XVI style, in the works of the architects Francesco Valeriano Dellala di Beinasco (1731–1803), Filippo Castelli (1738–c. 1820), Giuseppe Piacenza (1735–1818) and Carlo Randoni (1785–1831), the carver-decorators Ludovico Tesio (1731–82) and Leonardo Marini (fl. 1760–1806) and the master carver Giuseppe Maria Bonzanigo (1745–1820).

The first interiors in this new style can be documented in Piedmont in 1771, on the occasion of the wedding of Maria Giuseppina of Savoy, Vittorio Amedeo's eldest daughter, with Louis Xavier, Count de Provence (the future Louis XVIII). The wedding was celebrated in Palazzo Isnardi di Caraglio, seat of the Asinari di San Marzano family since 1770 and house of the French ambassador François Etienne, Duc de Choiseul. There we see for the first time ornaments in gilt wood in what can be recognised as an early Neoclassical style decorating overdoors and mantelpieces (fig. 1). These were designed by Filippo Castelli, and were beautifully harmonised with the Rococo stucco decorations by Benedetto Alfieri (1699–1767) and Giovan Battista Borra (1712–86). A collector of neoclassical architectural prints, Castelli appropriated the Parisian style reinterpreting it according to aesthetic canons matured from the Rococo, but not completely independent from it. This so-called 'grazia decorativa' (grace in decoration) can be fully witnessed in the aforementioned overdoors of Palazzo Isnardi, where medallions with allegorical figures, probably

carved by Giovanni Battista Bernero (1735–96), are framed by ample coils inspired by the Antique from which originate floral garlands that have much in common with those of the present mirror¹.

The upper part of the carving of the present mirror, crowned by two large coils, is very close to a similar piece datable precisely to 1770 (fig. 2).² Both these mirrors are outstanding for the virtuosity of their carvings, worthy of a great master carver, such as Bonzanigo. The present mirror in particular stands out for the naturalistic rendering of flower petals and garlands at the upper corners, which cleverly echo the coils at the base of undeniable Rococo inspiration. Such a composition seems to be derived by designs for mirror cymatia by Carlo Randoni (fig. 3).

Most importantly, the motif of intertwined ribbons found all around the frame of the present mirror could be found also in the window frames in the Duchess of Aosta's Apartment on the top floor of the Turin Royal Palace (fig.4). Those are documented as being made by Giuseppe Maria Bonzanigo some years later, in 1790.³



Fig. 1 Overdoor of Palazzo Isnardi di Caraglio

¹ P. San Martino, 'L'architettura ornata di Filippo Castelli: 1757 – 1798', *Bollettino della Società piemontese di archeologia e belle arti*, 1993, vol. XLV, pp.18–20.

² R. Antonetto, *Il mobile piemontese nel Settecento*, Turin, 2010, vol.II, p.196.

³ G. Ferraris, *Giuseppe Maria Bonzanigo*, Turin, 1991, pp.53, 79.



Fig. 2 Piedmontese school, mirror with carved and gilt wood frame, private collection.

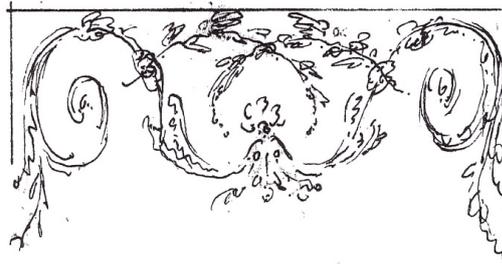


Fig. 3 Carlo Randoni, design for a mirror cymmtium.

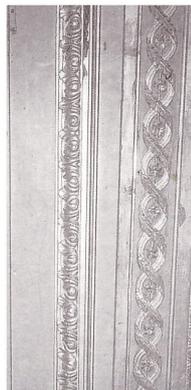


Fig. 4 Giuseppe Maria Bonzanigo, detail of the carvings in the Apartment of the Duchess of Aosta in the Turin Royal Palace.

Enrico Colle, Stibbert Museum director. Florence, May 2021

Giuseppe Maria Bonzanigo (1745-1820):

Bonzanigo, together with Piffetti and Maggiolini, is considered one of the most outstanding furniture makers and carvers of the late 18th century with his pieces inspired by the sculptural as well as the architectural disciplines.

Works attributed to Giuseppe Maria Bonzanigo have traditionally represented the best Italian neo-classical furniture ever sculpted. His work is characterized by the departure from the traditional Franco-Piedmontese School of furniture inlay and cabinet-making in favour of the more predominant use of carving, a technique which Bonzanigo took to a truly formal apotheosis especially in the works realised for the Royal family.

Born in Asti in 1745, first son of Giovanna Margherita Burzio, Giuseppe Maria Bonzanigo settled in Turin 1773. The following year he was elected to the Compagnia of San Luca. He worked for the Savoy Court for the next twenty years as a sculptor, wood-carver and cabinet-maker. In 1787, he was appointed official wood-carver to Victor Amadeus III, King of Savoy and remained in the position until the French invasion in 1796. In the accounts of the royal family, he is recorded as having supplied numerous stools, chairs, armchairs, benches, sofas, screens, beds and mirrors as well as many ornamental panel and chests of drawers for the Royal Palace in Turin and for the royal residences at Moncalieri, Rivoli, Stupinigi and Venaria.

His reputation grew in no small part due to the extraordinary quality of his wood carvings in light wood and ivory, the so-called '*microsculpture*', which were highly sought after. In 1815, after the fall of Napoleon and the return of the Savoy family to Italy, he was re-instated as royal sculptor. His justly deserved reputation was such that on his death in 1820, the *Gazetta Piemontese* wrote '*la bell'arte dell'intaglio ad altissimo grado di perfezione con quarant'anni di assidue cure...*'