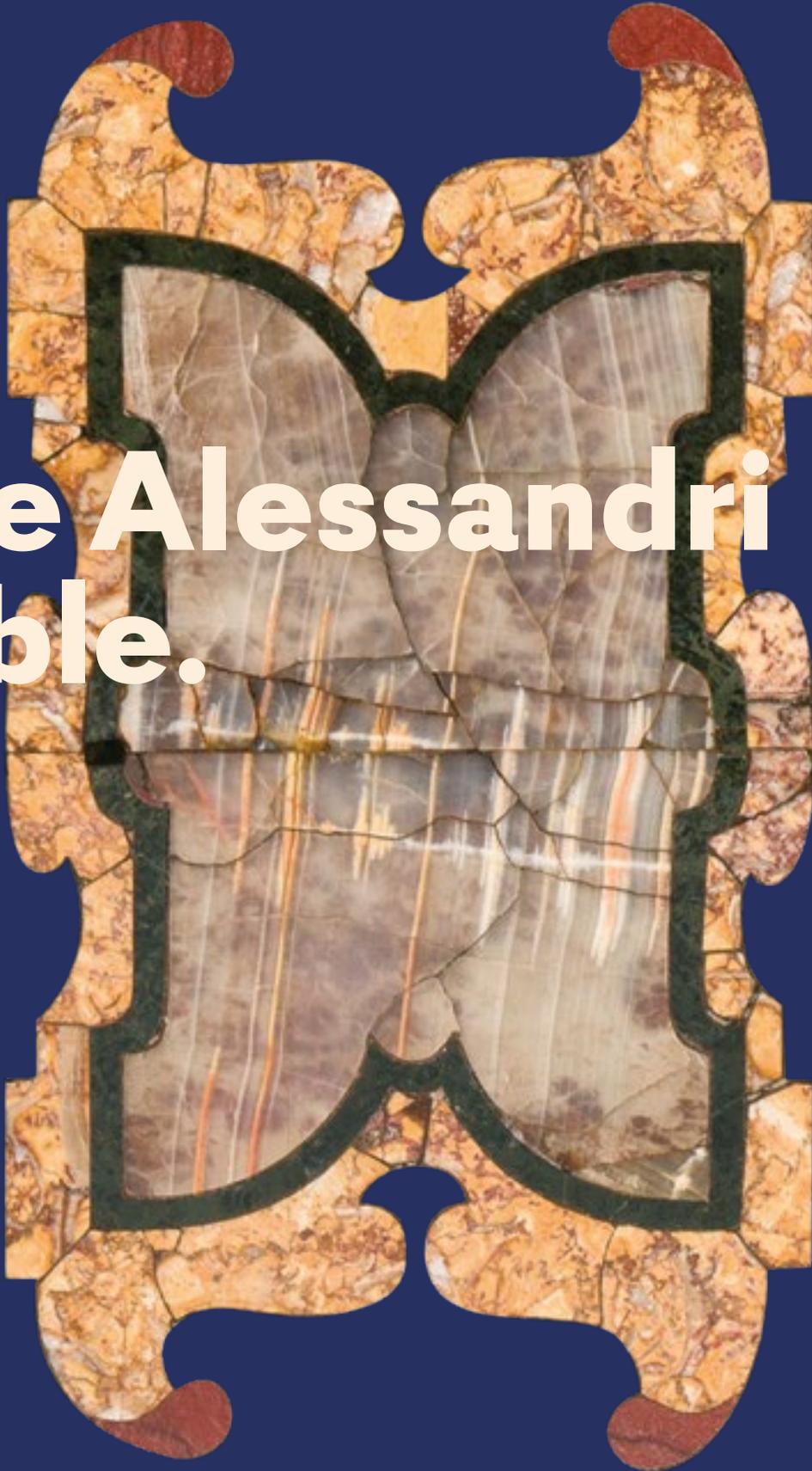


BURZIO.



² **The Alessandri
Table.**

B.



Another Florentine Pietra Dura Table...

This essay was written by Enrico Colle, director of the Stibbert Museum in Florence. Other than the inventories of the Alessandri family relating to the present piece, the thorough research he carried out in Florentine archives led to the discovery also of documents identifying with certainty the other pietra dura table recently acquired by an important public collection with the "tavolino di gioje" designed by Giorgio Vasari for Francis I* de Medici.

Laura and Luca Burzio.



The Alessandri Table.



The Alessandri Table.

Pietre dure and pietre tenere tabletop

<p>Granducal Workshops Florence, ca 1600.</p> <p>Probably designed by Bernardo Buontalenti (1531-1608)</p>	<p>PROVENANCE Famiglia degli Alessandri, Alessandri Palace, Florence. European collection. 1824-1832 "Sbozzi degli inventari del palazzo di Firenze" where the table is mentioned in the chapel of the palace when divided in two table tops. (ASF, Archivio Alessandri, cassetta 63, fasc. "minute d'inventari", cc. after n.257).</p>
<p>The top: Height: (6 cm) Wight: 53,14 in. (135 cm) Depth: 42,12 in. (107cm)</p> <p>The base: Height: 39,37 in. (101 cm) Wight: 59,05 in. (150 cm) Depth: 47,63 in. (121cm)</p>	<p>Dark green(nero di Prato)marble slab inlaid with various types of fine hardstones(pietre dure) including lapis lazuli, cornelians and corals and precious ancient marbles(pietre tenere)including Alabastro cotognino, alabastro marino, alabastro dorato and alabastro fiorito, bianco, nero and giallo antico, lumachella bigia, breccia d'Aleppo, semesanto and broccatello di Spagna.</p> <p>On its baroque style carved and gilt-wood 1850s base in the manner of Giovanbattista Foggini with four lions on the corners joint by a stretcher with Alessandri family coat of arms.</p>

The present table top consists of a support of serpentinite inlaid with a rich variety of marbles and pietre dure. The central tile of quince alabaster is inserted in an elaborate frame of grey fire marble, enriched by tiles of bianco e nero antico and, on the short sides, coils in pink alabaster. This composition is further embellished by four tiles of marine alabaster and, in the corners, by four floral decorations including giallo antico, rosso antico and lapis lazuli. This is surrounded by a refined frame consisting of an elegant variety of cartouches. The four largest ones are placed each at the centre of the four sides and consist of a giallo antico frame containing a marine alabaster tile. The eight remaining cartouches, each placed on the sides of the aforementioned larger ones, consist of tiles of quince alabaster inlaid with a decoration imitating a pearl necklace in cornelian and lapis lazuli, framed in fire marble. On the long sides, the central cartouches are flanked by ovals in semesanto. The four corners are decorated each by a shield-shaped tile of breccia di Aleppo framed by broccatello di Spagna surrounded by small inlays in cornelian and lapis lazuli.

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One of four carved and giltwood rampant lions in the corners of the baroque style stand executed in Florence around 1850 in the manner of Giovan Battista Foggini with Alessandri family coat of arms.

The Marbles.

The present table top contains precious marbles, some of which were among the most sought after varieties during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These costly stones were used, other than for the creation of inlaid table tops, also for decorating full rooms. Of the many kinds of marble available to Tuscan and Roman craftsmen of the period, the present table includes:

Pink Alabaster
a variety of alabaster characterised by a

background of an intense yellow colour, sometimes with pinkish shades, and by variously shaped striations in multiple shades of yellow, brown and carnelian red. According to Raniero Gnoli, this alabaster is probably to be identified with the marble of Hierapolis in Phrygia. Described by the ancients with admiration and richness of detail, it was often used in Roman times from the end of the Republic to the fourth century AD for all sorts of luxury artefacts.

Quince Alabaster
characterised by a pale yellow background with large white opaque areas, sometimes with a pink tone, and by a more or less sinuous undulating pattern, this kind of stone was originally sourced in the Nile valley and is therefore also referred to as Egyptian alabaster. Like all alabasters, in Roman times it was mainly used to make small or medium-sized columns and artefacts such as vases, urns and statues.

Marine Alabaster:
probably coming from Algeria, this was a rather rare stone in Roman times. Due to its compactness and colour – it is characterised by an undulating background with grey and blue veins, occasionally tending towards green, with orange-red flames – was often used for the inlays of table tops from the sixteenth century onwards.

Bianco e Nero Antico
also known as *Marmor Caelticum* or *d'Aquitaine*, it is characterised by

an intense black background with large irregular and angular white striations. This very precious kind of marble has been identified by many scholars with the "Celtic" or "d'Aquitaine" marble mentioned by writers of late antiquity. It was extracted from the quarries located near Aubert, in the French Pyrenees, and was used in monuments from the Justinian age. Its use in Roman times, however, must have been limited to columns and wall coverings, as during the eighteenth century there was some difficulty in obtaining samples of it.

Broccatello di Spagna a stone with a golden yellow background and peacock-tinged nuances rich in shell fragments. Because of the contrast of its colours, similar in effect to precious brocade, it was much

appreciated by Roman stonemasons.

Semesanto also called *Breccia di Semesanto*, it is a particular variety of marble characterised by a porphyry-coloured background, rich in small thick oblong spots. These, generally whitish in colour, can sometimes be found alternated with other reddish dots, but are always cemented in a random manner, and only very rarely do they appear all in one direction. Roman stonemasons named it after a local dessert called "semesanto", in which almonds look like the grains of marble. The difficulty in working large slabs of this stone, due to its extreme brittleness, resulted in its use being limited to the decoration of fine furniture: starting from the late Renaissance, this stone was often chosen to create refined marble inlays.

Giallo antico from Tunisia, it was used in ancient Rome for floor and parietal decorations. It remained in vogue during the Middle Ages, when it was widely employed, due to its chromatic potentials, in the *opus sectile*.

Rosso antico found in the quarries of the Tenaro promontory in Greece, this marble was certainly known to the ancients since the end of the second century BC, when it was used for both architectural decorations and pieces of furniture.

Grey Fire Marble of unknown origin, this is characterized by a grey background with fragments of marine fossils. According to Raniero Gnoli, only a few pieces are known to have been used in the decorations of the Roman church of San Lorenzo Fuori le Mura.

Breccia d'Aleppo named after the Greek town where it was extracted, this particular stone looks like a red cement rich in pale grey fragments and, to a lesser extent, bright yellow and coral pink ones. It was mainly used in interior decoration since the Flavian age and in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Serpentinite a dark green marble found in quarries on the Apennine, also known as *Nero di Prato*.

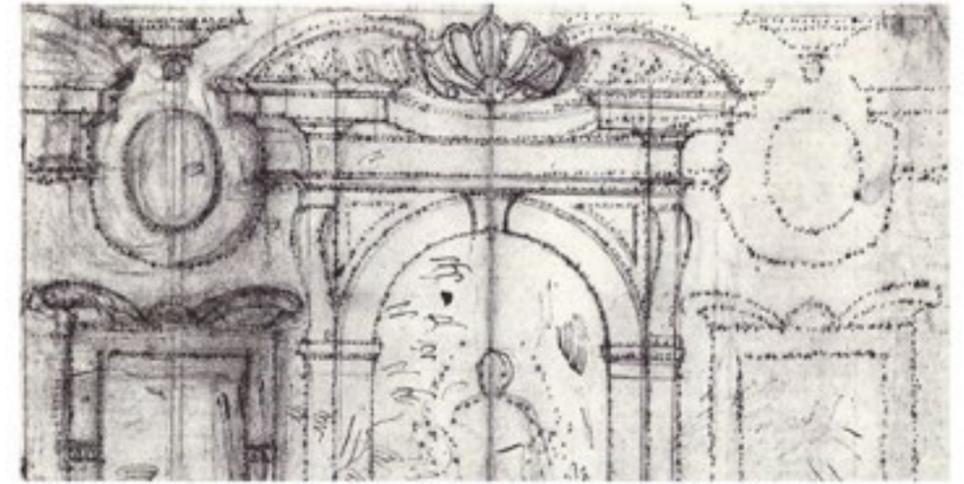
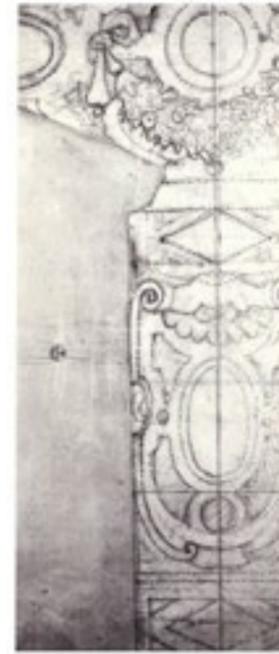




Comment.

The table top presents a rich inlaid decoration characterised by geometrical designs and ornate cartouches, decisively Mannerist in style, evolving around the central tile of quince alabaster. Some of the elements of this original design might at first seem to belong to that stylistic language, partly indebted to architectural decorations, developed in Rome shortly after the mid-sixteenth century, when Jacopo Vignola (1507–1573) before, and Giovanni Antonio Dosio (1603–1609) later, began to experiment with *opus sectile*, a technique that had been hugely admired when found in Imperial Roman buildings. Yet, the general character of its design is typically Florentine and has much in common with decorations made in that city between the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century. An element proving the Florentine origin of this piece is the support of serpentinite, a particular type of dark green marble found on the Apennines. Once inlaid, it is this green stone that forms the frame of the decorations and not white marble, which in the sixteenth century was more commonly used by Roman stonemasons. Florentine masters were also known for employing more precious stones, such as lapis lazuli, carnelian and agate, which were the prerogative of the newly created *Galleria dei Lavori*. Established by Ferdinand I, this manufacture counted among its collaborators many distinguished architects, such as Bernardo Buontalenti (1531–1608). Buontalenti worked at the Medici court providing designs for the Princes Chapel, the Tribune at the Uffizi and also furniture. A contemporary document attests that Buontalenti had provided, for example, models for a “Galley lantern [...] of walnut and linden entirely carved [...] with protruding masks” (ASF, GM 113, c. 105). The design of the present table is closely related to Buontalenti’s ornato models, and presents particular similarities with designs devised by the architect between 1593 and 1597 for the inlaid parietal decorations of the Princes Chapel, which are also characterised by peculiar geometric patterns evolving into coils and cartouches (Figs. 1–2).

Furthermore, the present table top can be compared on stylistic grounds with similar pieces in the collections of museums and historic mansions, such as Palazzo Pitti (Fig. 3), the Museo del Prado (Fig. 4) and the Racconigi castle, not far from Turin (Fig. 5). The inlaid *pietra dura* table at Racconigi, which at one point in its history was broken to create two smaller console tables, as was often done with tables with such geometric patterns, seems to be the closest in style to our piece. The Treasury of the Grand Dukes of Florence, on the other hand, holds a table top listed already in the 1624 inventories of Villa del Poggio Imperiale (Colle, 1997, p. 109) whose refined motifs of intertwining coils framing the tiles at the corners of the central square, as well as the cartouches of the outer frame linked by drapery-like inlays seem to be directly derived from Buontalenti’s designs. This table, together with another one also in the collections of the Treasury in Florence and also mentioned in the 1624 inventory (Colle, 1997, p. 110), was associated by Alvar González-Palacios (2003, pp. 56–58) with a table in the Museo del Prado. Because of its decorative patterns, the Madrid table was believed by González-Palacios to have been produced in a Roman, rather Florentine, workshop. Unfortunately, the current status of scholarship on such an area of Italian decorative arts does not allow us to distinguish with much clarity between these two production centres. Given the more sophisticated organisation of the design, however, the use of a dark marble as support, which was to become a characteristic of Florentine *pietra dura* tables throughout the seventeenth century, as well as the bright chromatic juxtapositions, which are to be found also in the table executed by the Florence manufacture for Cardinal Grimani (sold at Sotheby’s, December 2015, lot no. 201; Giusti 2018, pp. 124–26), it is likely that the present piece is a product of either the Grand Ducal manufacture or a workshop closely related to it and therefore influenced by the stylistic choices championed



1-2. B. Buontalenti
progetti per ornati
architettonici

by artists like Buontalenti who were involved in the decorations of the Princes Chapel. For example, Bernardino Poccetti (1548–1612) is recorded to have designed several tables (Giusti, 1979, p. 304, n. 124.1).

Ferdinand I founded the manufacture of *pietre dure* in 1587, informed by a taste for polychrome marbles he had acquired when in Rome as a cardinal. Likewise, his brother Francesco I cultivated a passion for both precious stones and tables inlaid with antique marbles, which he accumulated in great numbers in the various Medici residences (Giusti, 2018, pp. 121–24). The new fashion for using “marbles inlaid together” (“*marmi commessi insieme*”) to create table tops meant to decorate aristocratic mansions quickly took hold in Florence, as opposed to Rome, due to the ability of local craftsmen to inlay the stones with such precision so as to give the impression of a single, solid surface, as can be evidenced also by the present table (Giusti, 2005, p. 64).

Analysing the bills of the newly established *Galleria dei Lavori* in *Pietre Dure* it is possible to find many receipts for several varieties of marbles, such as *incarnato giallo*, *amandorellato*, *rosso brecciato* and *breccia* of many colours (ASF, GM 187, c. 16, November 1595). The lively chromatic juxtapositions characterising stone inlays dating from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century can be considered a direct consequence of the popularity of antique marbles among contemporary collectors. It must be remembered that in those years the amateur Agostino del Riccio (1541–98) wrote his *Istoria delle Pietre*, a treatise on stones (recently transcribed by Raniero Gnoli and Attilia Sironi). In it, he mentions many of the marble varieties employed for the present table, such as *bianco e nero antico*, which he called “*bianco e nero orientale*” and described as “a dense, moorish black [stone] covered in a dense net of white veins [...] very compact, but not hard to model”, which allows for “a most wonderful polish” (Gnoli, Sironi 1996, p. 93). This description is followed by *broccatello di Spagna*, compared to *Oriental broccatello*, but deemed more ‘melancholic’ (“*malinconico*”) “as can be seen in the ducal galleries, which contain many tables of one *braccio* [in length]” (Gnoli, Sironi, 1996, p. 125). *Semesanto* is called *breccia sagginata o panicata* due to its “varied and beautiful colours spanning bright and dark reds, and characterised by unique agglomerations of white and grey grains, often intermixed with other colours, which

resemble precisely the grains of saggine (millet)” (Gnoli, Sironi, 1996, p. 103). Rosso antico is considered the “most beautiful red marble” used in antiquity and subsequently used in the inlays of so many table tops, some of which belong to Signor Cavaliere Niccolò Gaddi and “other gentlemen in Florence” (Gnoli, Sironi 1996, p. 95). Breccia di Aleppo, known at the time as *Acqua di Mare* or seawater because of it containing “different colours”, was much in vogue for the realisation of table tops, “like the round ones made for His Majesty Philip King of Spain and for the Florentine nobleman Lorenzo Sirigatti” (Gnoli, Sironi 1996, p. 97). In his treatise, del Riccio also mentions serpentinite of Prato, the same marble used in the present table as a support, saying that Tuscan stonemasons made use of it to make “many small columns and tables” (Gnoli, Sironi 1996, p. 116). Del Riccio goes on to say that in his lifetime tables were made above all of alabaster. Of the different varieties, he considered quince alabaster to be the most beautiful and noble (“bella e degna”) of all the marbles known to men and for this reason it was used for parietal decorations and table tops, many of which could be seen in Florence in the ducal residences, the palace of the Gaddi family, but also “in the distinguished houses of Florentine lords, whose names I will not mention here to be concise” (Gnoli, Sironi, 1996, pp. 108; 185). Among them, we can count the Alessandri family, from whom the present table comes by descent.

The Alessandri family originated from Alessandro and Bartolomeo di Niccolò degli Albizi, who in 1372 renounced to their name and titles to assume a new one, Alessandri, together with a new coat of arms. Since then, the family counted twenty-one priori, eight gonfalonieri of justice and two senators serving under the Medici. Subsequently the family split into two branches descending one from Niccolò di Ugo di Bartolomeo (1390–1464) and the other from Niccolò di Francesco di Niccolò (1540–1602). This later branch became extinct in 1716, with its titles and fortunes being inherited by the branch descending from Giovanni di Cosimo di Giovanni (1669–1745). The last descendant of this branch of the Alessandri family was Giovanni Maria Gaetano di Cosimo (1765–1828), famous for having been a passionate patron of the arts. In 1799, he was appointed president of the Academy of Fine Arts

of Florence by Grand Duke Ferdinand III of Lorraine. During the reign of Etruria, Ludovico di Borbone raised him to the role of Senator. In 1810, Napoleon gave him the title of Baron of the Empire. On the return of the Lorraine, in 1814, the Grand Duke, as a demonstration of his great esteem, appointed him Councillor of State and Knight of the Grand Cross of the order of Saint Joseph. After Giovanni’s death, his worldly belongings, including the ancestral Palazzo of Borgo degli Albizi, passed on to the son of one of his cousins, Cosimo di Gaetano Maria di Simone (1826–1887) and since then to his descendants to the present day.

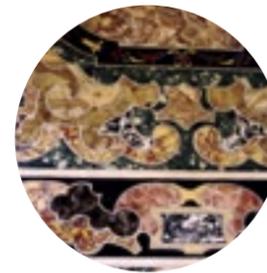
The only inventory of the collections belonging to this important Florentine family was compiled between 1824 and 1832 and is entitled *Sbozzi degli Inventari del Palazzo di Firenze (Drafts of the Inventory of the Palace at Florence)*. It lists several pieces of furniture, among which figure in the chapel “two tables with magogon-coloured wooden stands with gilded ornaments and pietra dura tops” (“due tavole con posare di legno tinto magogon con rapporti dorati e piani di pietra dura”, ASF, Archivio Alessandri, box 63, “minute d’inventari”, cc. unnumbered, but after no. 257). This entry most likely refers to the present table, which at an unknown point, probably in the late eighteenth century, was broken in half in order to obtain two console tables. It was restored to its original condition only in the mid-nineteenth century, when the present stand of carved and gilded wood was also made, probably using earlier components. The monumental stand, in line with decorative furniture produced in Florence in the early 1700s, takes the shape of ample coils supporting four heraldic lions. A large mask placed at centre, where the crosspieces meet, supports two large sheep heads sharing a crown. These can be read as a reference to the Alessandri coat of arms, which in turn references the family’s original profession of wool merchants, as well as the two brothers who founded the dynasty. Unfortunately, at present it is not possible to assess when the table entered the Alessandri collection. The family owned at least another pietra dura table, which was recently sold at auction (Sotheby’s, London, 8 July 2015; Giusti, 2018, p. 123). It might be argued, however, that these precious pieces were acquired for the family palace by Giovanni degli Alessandri, who was a fervent art patron and very close to the court in Florence.



3. Piano di tavolo, fine del XVI secolo, Firenze Tesoro dei Granduchi



4. Piano di tavolo, post 1565, Madrid, Museo del Prado



5. Piano di tavolo (part.), fine del XVI secolo, Racconigi, Castello



6. Piano di tavolo del Cardinale Grimani, inizi del XVII secolo

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