

Anonimo Veneziano

Japanned Furniture and the rise of Rococo in Venice

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Abstract

In the first part of the eighteenth century Venice witnessed the rise of the Rococo. Furniture evolved parallel with this fashion, acquiring new features and proportions. At the same time, japanned furniture, originating from the interest in the exotic and the orient, within few decades came to enjoy an extraordinary popularity. This essay intends to analyse the evolution of Venetian japanned furniture during the establishment of the Rococo. In doing so, the dissertation will not only focus on the evolution of furniture-design itself, but will set it against its social and cultural context. Indeed, I will also try to explore the relations existing between japanned furniture, the concept of Rococo and the Venetian society.

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Introduction

The exhibition aims to explore the evolution of japanned furniture during the rise and the establishment of Rococo style in the city of Venice. By the eighteenth century Venice, the *Serenissima*, had long been a powerful state, the home of a highly sophisticated society and a centre of an internationally renowned artistic production. When, from the 1720s, the city began to embrace the dawning Rococo fashion, this new, frivolous, way of living was so profoundly assimilated that in Italy Rococo is still now often identified with the interpretation that Venice produced of it.

Whereas Baroque had been the age of the great architectural and sculptural commissions, Rococo taste brought an unprecedented interest in the decorative arts. Following the French trend for smaller rooms and for *conversation galante*, the Venetians adopted a more relaxed, informal life-style; Baroque grandiosity was replaced by a love for details and intimate elegance. The passion for luxury items and this new attention paid to interiors were the main reasons for the sharp rise in furniture commissions. Thanks to a consistently increasing demand and to a very strict guild organisation, within few decades Venice became one of the most productive centres of furniture in Europe¹. Japanned furniture in particular, found in all the rich Venetian houses, enjoyed so much popularity that it became indissolubly linked to the idea of Rococo itself.

It has been argued that despite its elegance of forms and colours, Venetian japanned furniture is often characterised by defective craftsmanship². Unquestionably, in many cases, this remark is true, and while the appearance of the pieces may be appealing, their workmanship is often poor. However, paradoxically, this difference might also be regarded as one of the reasons for its glamour. Indeed, in a certain way, this incongruity reflects the culture in which japanned furniture was made. In the eighteenth century Venice was a great open-air stage where reality had blurred frontiers, where people wore masks disguising themselves and where, during the carnival, foreigners gathered from all Europe to abandon their identity. It was a city that was still believed to be a great empire, but one that in reality was irreversibly heading towards its definitive end.

So the study of japanned furniture can also become a method of analysing the society that produced it. The exhibition therefore, not only wants to survey the evolution that led to the establishment of Rococo furniture, but it also intends to explore to what extent japanned furniture expressed the social, cultural changes of Venetian world.

Definitions of Rococo and Barocchetto

The collection covers a period of some forty years in which furniture-design moved away from the late Baroque tradition to adopt the gradually lighter, more sinuous forms that eventually led to the Rococo. In order to understand this development it is necessary to define the meaning of the word Rococo. In France, where the style originated in the first decade of the eighteenth century, contemporaries did not use this term, but called it *style moderne* or *nouvelle manière*, being aware of its difference from the past³. The name 'Rococo' was created in France during the last decades of the eighteenth century to describe, with depreciative meaning, the style in vogue at the court of Louis XV, regarded as being characterised by frivolity and whimsicality. The term 'Rococo' is likely to derive from *rocaille*, a type of ornament based on shell and rockwork originally adopted in the sixteenth century and in great fashion during the first part of the eighteenth century.

By the nineteenth century, in Italy, Rococo was associated with the Baroque and negatively considered as '*il superlativo del bizzarro, l'eccesso del ridicolo*'⁴. Indeed, until the twentieth century Rococo was not to be considered as an independent style, but merely as a languid continuation of Baroque. In the dissertation the term Rococo will be used to describe a particular style with clear characteristics, based on the combination of fluid, organic form and decoration. A style that, originating from the general changes occurring in Venice from the 1720s, found its definitive structure around the middle of the century.

In the past several Italian scholars have often called it Barocchetto – which literally means 'little Baroque'⁵. However, in the text Barocchetto will not be intended

as synonymous for Rococo, but it will refer to those transitional pieces, which have moved away from Baroque and present features that will become typical of Rococo, but which are not yet fully Rococo⁶. Thus, Barocchetto can be compared to roughly contemporary styles like the French *Regence* or Queen Anne and George I, with which it shares several characteristics.

Organisation of the text

The text will be divided in three main sections, each of which will treat a specific subject.

The first part will explore the social and economic situation of Venice during the eighteenth century and will examine the relationship between these factors and the demand for luxury items. In particular, attention will be paid to the evolution of interior decoration and to the trend for smaller rooms that occurred during the first part of the eighteenth century.

The second section of the dissertation will explore the changes that occurred in furniture-design between the 1720s and the 1760s. In order to understand more clearly their evolution, single typologies of furniture will be studied individually. Although most pieces discussed will be japanned, there will be veneered and solid items as well, to offer a more comprehensive analysis of Venetian furniture.

The third chapter will focus on Venetian japanning itself, not only setting it into a broader European context, but also dealing with some typically Venetian peculiarities. In particular, the origins of Venetian japanning will also be linked to the traditional art of varnishing. The majority of this section will explore the different styles and phases of japanned decoration, relating them to the development of furniture and society.

1- Life in Venice

Social, Political and Economical situations

In the eighteenth century the city entered the final phase of a gradual, general decadence that had begun in the first decades of the sixteenth century⁷. This crisis, which did not leave any hope for the future, affected almost every category of Venetian society.

The first, fundamental, problem that Venice had to face was the shift of trade away from the Mediterranean Sea. After the development of the oceanic routes, the Mediterranean stopped being the centre of Western world and Venice lost its commercial supremacy⁸. This fact was a tremendous blow to a society that had entirely founded its wealth on trade since the eleventh century. In addition, Venetian dominance in the Mediterranean Sea was seriously undermined by the rise of the Ottoman Empire⁹. The Turks, who had gradually taken control of the eastern part of the Mediterranean, created a barrier to commerce with the Middle East. Over two hundred years Venice carried out an exhausting series of wars against the Ottomans that irremediably impoverished its economy. When hostilities ended in 1718 with the peace of Passarowitz, Venice had lost forever its role as an international power.

Furthermore, Venetian oligarchy persisted in a strictly conservative, blinkered policy that did not support the economical improvements occurring on the *terra ferma*, the mainland territories conquered during the past centuries¹⁰. These critical situations must have been among the causes for nobles' indifference to public affairs.

After the peace of Passarowitz, Venice did not face any significant war until 1797, when the city was invaded by the French and lost its independence forever. During this span of time patricians started to spend the immense wealth that had accumulated over the centuries on an endless series of parties, masquerades and gambling games. This pleasant and carefree life was possible thanks also to the international role still played by the city. In fact, despite not being politically powerful

anymore, it was still an active and lively centre that attracted artists and nobles from all around Europe.

Without doubt, Venetian society suffered from moral decadence. In all Europe, the city became famous – or better notorious – for its *ridotti*, public gambling-houses where people wasted their money and fortunes. The emblem of Venetian night-life was the *Ridotto Grande*, shut down by authorities in 1774 after having been immortalised by Francesco Guardi in his famous painting. Obviously, few people could afford such an expensive life. In fact, although in the city there were many aristocratic families, all registered in the *Libro d'Oro*, most of them were relatively poor¹¹. Along with the small percentage of rich patricians, there were rich citizens, such as lawyers and doctors, who were enrolled in the *Libro d'Argento* and allowed to hold public positions.

Paradoxically, some negative aspects of Venetian society, such as frivolity, superficiality and love for luxury, stimulated art production¹². Indeed, the same people who went to the *ridotti* and organised lustful parties then vied with each other in patronising artists and ordering lavish furniture for their palaces and apartments¹³.

The evolution of the interiors

In the second quarter of the eighteenth century, Venice absorbed the fashion for more informal, less grandiose interiors that was spreading throughout Europe from France. This trend was based upon a new concept of life, characterised by more relaxed etiquette and concept of elegance. Thus, moving their preference away from the cold magnificence of large salons and *porteghi** Venetian nobles sought the comfort and intimacy of little parlours, *boudoirs* and conversation rooms. A few *palazzi* also underwent partial modifications in which mezzanines were added, in accordance with the mode for *le conversation galante*¹⁴. In the conversation room, whose walls were often covered with damask wall-hangings and sometimes with *boiseries**, the owner entertained a small group of friends playing cards, drinking hot chocolate and *ciacolando* (gossiping).

However, it is necessary to point out two facts. First, *porteghi* were not abandoned altogether and, as in the past, continued to be used for important parties. Secondly, the habit of living in mezzanines was not new at all. Indeed, they had been used since earlier periods, as the salons of the *piano nobile** were practically impossible to heat during winter¹⁵. The real novelty originated from the attention given to their decor and furnishings, which became sophisticated and elegant for the first time¹⁶.

Nevertheless, the most representative interior of the eighteenth century was the *casin*, which epitomised the Venetian love of intimacy and sophisticated elegance. Private *casini*, corresponding to the French *petit maisons*, were tiny apartments of four or five rooms used for holding little masked parties, gambling and making conversation. They were furnished and decorated in details, with stuccoed and frescoed ceilings. Unlike great salons, often furnished with pieces still much related to Baroque, *casini* and mezzanines were the ideal interiors for the rise of Rococo spirit and style. This was true especially from around the 1740s, when they started to be equipped with suites of japanned furniture designed appositely to match the decorative scheme of the wall-hangings and the frescoed ceilings, in order to create a perfect harmony of colour, proportion and form.

2 – The furniture

Hand in hand with the development of interiors, furniture underwent a general process in which it moved away from the Baroque rigidity of forms to adopt a more delicate appearance. As we shall see, foreign styles often played an influential part in the evolution of furniture, since they provided Venetian craftsmen with new ideas that would then be elaborated and modified. It is interesting to note that throughout the period considered Venetian furniture showed influence of English design. Probably, the origin of this ascendancy was the prosperous trades with England that Venice had enjoyed since the second part of the seventeenth century. The activities of Joseph Smith, great art collector and connoisseur, who was English consul in Venice from 1740 to 1760, should not even be disregarded. Indeed, his palace in *calle del Dragan* soon became a meeting-point for artists and aristocrats, who had the chance to admire there the latest and finest pieces of English furniture¹⁷.

Unfortunately the lack of pattern-books¹⁸, and the usual mix of new and old features make it difficult to establish a precise chronology of these developments. Moreover, the pieces were never stamped so that the makers have remained completely anonymous. This was probably due to the particular guild-organisation in force in the city. Indeed, in Venice, furniture was not designed by cabinet-makers, who would eventually supervise all the stages of its construction. On the contrary, every piece was the result of a coral process in which different artisans took part, each working independently in his workshop.

Seat furniture

Chairs were one of the typologies of furniture that underwent the most changes during the first half of the eighteenth century. The inspiration for these came from foreign countries, particularly, from England and the Netherlands, rather than from France. From the 1720s designs resembling typical Queen Anne side chairs, with a high

back centred by a vase-shaped splat, became increasingly popular. This composition, vaguely based on Chinese furniture, had previously been taken by the English from the Dutch.

As a result, bobbin-turned legs were replaced by cabriole legs*, which, thanks to Venetian love of curves, remained well in favour until the 1770s. Parallel with the evolution of legs, feet also went through some changes, as hoof* and pad feet* started to be adopted along with the traditional scroll feet*. The most relevant consequence of the adoption of the cabriole leg was the drop in popularity of stretchers, whose use, had died out completely only by mid eighteenth century¹⁹. X-shaped stretchers in particular continued to be employed in the *poltrone da parata*, throne-chairs used by the *doge* and the major prelates during processions; in several ways they perpetuated the Baroque tradition (see comparative material, fig.1)²⁰. A gilt black-japanned side chair of 1720-1730 (see cat. no.1) shows how Venetian examples could look similar to English models. However, even if the piece resembles English chairs quite closely, some details such as the presence of four cabriole legs are totally Venetian. In general Venetian seat furniture can also be recognised by the modifications of the back, which resulted from the Venetians' love of curves (see comparative material, fig.2).

The differences with English furniture increased steadily moving towards the middle of the century, when, in line with Rococo style, the shapes of the backs became more assorted and complicated, often enriched by gilt carved shells, C-scrolls and *rocaille*. A pair of mid-eighteenth century walnut armchairs of are a good example of Rococo Venetian seat furniture (see comparative material, fig.3). Their sinuous shape, with undulating back and four cabriole legs, represent well the fluidity of forms often associated to the idea of Rococo. The taste for the organic is also evident in the splat* carving and in shells on the centre of the top* and the seat-rail*.

During the 1750s the most typical Venetian motif for chair-backs developed: it consisted of a vertical splat delicately interlaced to create the shape of an '8'. The collection includes a red and yellow japanned armchair exhibiting this kind of decoration (see cat. no.13). The overall appearance of the piece is particularly delicate, thanks to its small size and curvilinear shape, characterised by its curved back, out-splayed arms and cabriole legs. The Rococo passion for nature is well expressed by the foliate carving and

the painted bouquets of flowers covering the whole surface of the object. The '8' pattern became a peculiarity of Venetian seat furniture, not only used for backs, but also for seat-rails and aprons*. This can be seen on a white-japanned chair of the 1750s that also displays a characteristic caned seat (see comparative material, fig.4). Caning, which had been introduced to Venice in the last decades of the earlier century, became a much-appreciated alternative to upholstery during the eighteenth century, especially for dining chairs and settees²¹.

From the middle of the eighteenth century, chairs based on designs from the three editions of Chippendale's *Gentleman and Cabinet-maker's Director* started to circulate in increasing quantity. They were appreciated particularly for the grace of their interlaced backs (see cat. no.14).

Settees substantially followed the evolution of chairs and, apart from their length, resembled them closely, with curved lines and similar carving. *Divani da portego*, placed against the walls of large salons, had open backs with interlaced vertical splats and one long serpentine top-rail (see comparative material, fig.5). They had padded or caned seats and, depending on their length, six, eight or even ten cabriole legs.

Bureau-cabinets

Despite being a foreign typology, bureau-cabinets, both veneered and japanned, became the most important piece of furniture of Venetian interiors, appearing in large and in more intimate rooms²². Probably some of their popularity depended on the fact that they were multifunctional, and could be used for displaying, writing and storing.

Bureau-cabinets started to be produced during the very first decades of the eighteenth century, after some examples had been imported from England and the Netherlands through trade (see comparative material, figg.6-7). Their structure substantially followed English models: a cabinet above a slope-fronted writing-box and a three-tiered chest-of-drawers. Almost invariably the door panels of the upper section

consisted of mirrors that would reflect the light of the candles placed on slides coming out of the corpus²³.

The bureau-type was not new in Venetian furniture-design and it can also be linked to the evolution of the *canterano*, a chest-of-drawers with a falling upper secretaire-drawer, popular during the seventeenth century (see comparative material, fig.8)²⁴. However, the superimposition of two upright corpuses did not have precedents in Venetian furniture-design and this came from Northern models²⁵.

The first examples reflected a strong English influence as they imitated rather faithfully Queen Anne and Early Georgian styles, with simple straight front and sides. Pieces were often surmounted by double bonnet or broken arched pediments*, and presented bun* or bracket feet* (see comparative material, fig.9). Also the gilt black-japanned bureau-cabinet displayed in the exhibition (cat. no.3), made around 1725-30, shows traces of English influence. In fact its architectural appearance, with a broken arched pediment and pilasters on the upper corpus, can be seen in several English pieces. Nonetheless, some of its characteristics are entirely Venetian, like the blackamoors' head-shaped feet.

From the fourth decade of the century the variety of bureau-cabinets increased considerably and so did their difference from original models. Foreign and traditional features were elaborated and mixed according with the new taste for curves in order to create entirely unique works. An impressive walnut-veneered bureau-cabinet of the 1730s, now in the Ca'Rezzonico museum, exemplifies the changes that were occurring (see comparative material, fig.10). While its architectural decoration, consisting of tapering pilasters on the corners and on each side, echoes some Baroque works, the curved sides, the shaped mirror plaque, and the carving on the pediment are already looking towards the Rococo²⁶.

Indeed, due to the Rococo passion for curves and fluid forms, these characteristics came very into fashion also during the 1750s and the 1760s, as several examples demonstrate (see comparative material, fig.11). The trend for sinuosity is well represented by a japanned bureau-cabinet of roughly 1750 that has together with a serpentine pediment and front, also serpentine sides (see cat. no.6).

Chests-of-drawers

While bureau-cabinets reflected English and Dutch influence, chests-of-drawers took their inspiration from France. However, until c.1730 several pieces still exhibited the rigidity of earlier times, showing substantial resemblances to late seventeenth century examples. They usually had plain sides and serpentine front with three or four drawers. Only in the second quarter of the century did chests-of-drawers acquire more fluid lines, displaying serpentine front and curved sides, which probably became serpentine in the 1740s. At the same time, when the first japanned examples appeared, they started to acquire the central role in suites of furniture, often in pendant with two other smaller chests-of-drawers and a large mirror to place above.

In the 1750s chests-of-drawers evolved into their definitive aspect, which would then remain in fashion until the 1770s. Following the Rococo preference for the curvilinear, they generally presented *bombé* front and sides, with relatively short cabriole legs and a serpentine apron underlining their sinuous shape. Although veneered chest-of-drawers were produced as well (see comparative material, fig.12), japanned examples were more in sympathy with Rococo style and interiors, thanks to their delicate pastel colours and lively gilt carving (see comparative material, fig.13).

The collection has on display a japanned chest-of-drawers that stands out as representative of its typology during the height of Rococo (cat. no.10). Even if its inspiration might have been the French *bombé* form, its proportions are so extreme that the object could never be considered as French²⁷. The piece has an almost theatrical appearance, with an exaggerated balloon-like silhouette emphasised by the use of cabriole legs and by a pierced serpentine apron. The gilt carved decoration, typical of japanned chests-of-drawers, is in place of the metal mounts, which are totally absent. *Rocaille* and shells run along the *sans traverse** drawers creating cartouches within which sprays of polychrome flowers underline the asymmetry of the composition.

Tables

Centre-tables enjoyed great popularity throughout the period considered, often used as part of japanned or gilt ensembles. During the first half of the century their size and proportions became gradually smaller. In several respects their evolution was similar to that of chairs. Stretchers remained in use, but examples without stretchers progressively increased. The exhibition includes a centre-table from a set also comprising the armchair presented as cat. no.13 and made around 1760 (see cat. no.12). Due to its delicate and miniature aspect, the piece represents well the evolution that tables had been through. The foliage carving and the painted floral decoration on the cabriole legs and serpentine apron reflect the decoration of the armchair in the same ensemble.

Generally, tables like the one on show were not used for dining, but simply for displaying objects such as tea sets and gloves during the *conversation* and the small parties organised for a few guests. Indeed, large dining tables still consisted of rough pieces of wood totally covered with drapes.

Trespoli or *giridoni* (Venetian versions of French *guéridons*) were practically ubiquitous in Venetian interiors of the eighteenth century. *Trespoli* came into fashion during the second quarter of the eighteenth century and remained in demand throughout the century. All the surviving examples present standard features: a shaped circular or triangular top above a curved scroll-like support on three scroll legs. They were of solid walnut, carved and often gilded or japanned (see comparative material, figg.14-5 and cat no.4). Light and tiny, *trespoli* were easily portable and their graceful appearance reflected the femininity of contemporary society. As it is possible to see in numerous canvases by Pietro Longhi, *guéridons* were used, most of the times by ladies, for placing small items such as chocolate cups, coffee-pots, masks and toilette mirrors (see comparative material, fig.16).

Consoles, which had been introduced in the second half of the seventeenth century²⁸, increased their role as part of an interior, used both in bigger and smaller salons. Pieces were usually gilt or japanned, en suite with a mirror placed above. Owing

to their show-function, consoles often had an imposing appearance, and several examples continued to present elaborate sculptural carving (see comparative material, fig.17). However, from *circa* 1740, following the general fashion for more delicate forms, many works became more slender, with narrow cabriole legs and without stretchers (see comparative material, figg.18-9). A type of console in great demand during the middle of the century was the so-called console *a goccia*, which was hung to the wall and displayed legs that did not touch the floor (see comparative material, fig.20).

3 – Japanning

The European situation

Venetian japanning* originated from the general interest in oriental culture and goods that spread all over Europe from the 1660s²⁹. Lacquer wares in particular were among the most appreciated Chinese and Japanese items imported into Europe. Oriental lacquer is a substance obtained from the sap of the *Rhus vernicifera* (*ch'i* in Chinese and *urushi* in Japanese), a sumach tree that grows only in East Asia³⁰. The process for making lacquer is extremely laborious and it necessitates particular humidity and light conditions³¹. The complexity of the method can be better appreciated once it is understood that some pieces would take as long as thirty years of work to be completed³². Once dried, lacquer creates a durable and completely impermeable coat, characterised by extreme brilliance and sheen.

Europeans started to import lacquer wares in the late sixteenth century, after the Portuguese had established their footholds in East Asia. In the years to come they would gradually be superseded by the Dutch and the English, who took over trade with the Orient thanks to their East India Companies – founded respectively in 1600 and in 1602³³. Europeans called lacquered works after the names of the intermediate ports where their ships were loaded with the precious material. Consequently, terms such as Coromandel and Bantam work were adopted despite being inaccurate and confusing³⁴. These items, often screens, reached Venice as well, where they arrived through English and Dutch merchants.

Although lacquered wares were appreciated and sought-after, the craze for them did not really take off until the 1660s, when the first *lackcabinetts* appeared – the earliest was at Rosemborg Castle, near Copenhagen³⁵. From that point onwards the demand for lacquer wares rocketed and its supply soon turned out to be insufficient, due in part to the closure of Japanese ports to Europeans from 1639.

This led Europeans to attempt to reproduce lacquer themselves, starting a series of efforts that would never really be completely successful due to the lack of original ingredients and to the difficulty of the method³⁶. The technique of lacquer was analysed with precision only in the last decade of the seventeenth century, thanks to the studies made by Father Filippo Bonanni. He then published his fundamental *Trattato sopra la vernice detta comunemente lacca* in 1720³⁷.

However, lacquer was impossible to achieve and so scholars began to look for valid alternatives, writing treatises and recipes in order to imitate it. Due to the influence that English furniture had on Venetian taste, John Stalker and George Parker's *A treatise of Japanning and Varnishing* of 1688 should be mentioned here.

Peculiarities of Venetian japanning

Although Venetian japanned furniture is considered to be part of a European trend, two characteristics made its genesis and development unique.

- First, it is necessary to bear in mind the great tradition of Venetian varnishing, which substantially anticipated that superimposition of layers of canvas, gesso, tempera and varnish on panel that would then be the structure of japanning³⁸. This practice, developed by Venetian artisans during the Middle Ages, was taken from Byzantine artists, who used to cover wooden icons with *gommalacca* – shellac – for protective reasons³⁹. In Venice varnished furniture was in use as early as the thirteenth century. Indeed, according to a document of 1238, wooden items like *cassoni* and shields were required by law to be *inverniçciati* (varnished)⁴⁰. In the meanwhile, the traditional links with Persia and Syria gave Venetian artists the chance to admire the art of damascening and of bookbinding. Thus, from the late fifteenth century, Venetian artisans began to decorate and varnish title pages and bindings of books in a style much influenced by Persian arabesque⁴¹.

Therefore, when chinoiserie fashion began, varnishing was not new at all in Venice. While in other countries people looked for alternatives to the unachievable

oriental lacquer, Venetian craftsmen simply continued to use their traditional methods⁴². The application of varnish to all sorts of furniture, and the adoption of a new 'Chinese' style, were the only real innovations⁴³.

Not by chance, the artisans in charge of painting and varnishing furniture were the *depentori*, who belonged to an old-established *fragia* (guild), founded in the thirteenth century⁴⁴. They were never called japanners or lacquerers, but simply *depentori alla chinese*, as the Venetians were aware of their links with their tradition. The lack of novelty was confirmed by the composition of Venetian japanning. Indeed, its main ingredient was sandarac*, a resin already used in Hellenistic times. In Venice sandarac had been known since the Middle Ages and, in all probability, it must be identified with the varnish mentioned in the document of 1283 introduced above⁴⁵. Cennino Cennini speaks about it in his *Trattato dell'Arte*⁴⁶ and so does Father Coronelli, cosmographer of Venice in the late seventeenth century, who used this substance for coating his famous globes⁴⁷. Father Bonanni describes sandarac as an ideal substitute for the ingredients of oriental lacquer⁴⁸.

- The existence of a strict guild-organisation since the Middle Ages was the second important peculiarity that enabled the development of a very distinct artistic form. In fact, as said above, in Venice furniture was not designed by cabinet-makers. Consequently, the individual categories of craftsmen involved had the chance to work rather freely, according to purchaser's desire. Thus, the role of *depentori* became essential, since they alone decided the final appearance of the work. *Depentori* worked on pieces only in the final stage of their manufacture, after they had been gessoed and polished. Nevertheless, that moment was crucial. Indeed, in the elegant small-scale Rococo Venetian interiors, where every single item was conceived as part of a whole, their art became the link between furniture and interior decoration.

Chinoiserie subjects

Venetian *depentori* developed and executed oriental subjects over a period of almost a hundred years, producing a very characteristic and individual style that should not be compared to its source of inspiration. The East simply became an ideal subject for giving vent to creativity and imagination. The memories of Marco Polo's adventures and the enthusiastic accounts that the Jesuits brought back from Asia provided the Venetians with the basis for their personal interpretation of Cathay. Moreover, when the fashion for japanned furniture and for 'Chinese' style began in the second part of the seventeenth century, Venice did not – and could not – have direct relations with the Far East. This does not mean that in the city there were not oriental sources to look at. In fact, even if there is not any information about import of Chinese lacquer wares, it is likely that a few pieces reached Venice thanks to the trade with the French⁴⁹, the Dutch and the English. In addition, Chinese porcelain wares were relatively widely available, as they had been sent to Venice from Egypt since the fifteenth century⁵⁰.

Phases of chinoiserie

1. Most pieces produced between *circa* 1720 and 1740 reflected a rather strong oriental ascendancy. Scenes were often in low-relief decoration, with gilded *pastiglia** against a black, red or dark green background, imitating the effect of Japanese *taka-maki*. Subjects usually resembled the Japanese and Chinese: overlapping parallel planes portraying mandarins in oriental landscapes with pagodas, flowers and birds. Following oriental compositions, several works presented scenes that covered their entire surface. It is interesting to notice that, probably, these characteristics were not only taken from Chinese pieces, but also from English ones – surely more easily available than the oriental. This double similarity originated because at that time English furniture still presented decoration-schemes based on Stalker and Parkers' designs, themselves much dependent on the Chinese⁵¹. The closeness to English examples should be interpreted as part of the general influence that Early Georgian furniture was exerting on Venetian taste in the second quarter of the century. It is not coincidental that the overall appearance of

most pieces with this type of decoration also exhibited other relevant English features as well.

Nevertheless, even during this stage chinoiserie subjects were often combined with ornaments typical of the Venetian tradition that made them substantially different from the eastern and the English models. The exhibition includes a corner-cupboard of *circa* 1725-35 that demonstrates this point well (see cat. no.2). The simple outline of the piece, consisting of two sections, one sitting on the other, resembles some George I or early George II examples, as do the bracket feet and the arched pediment. In addition, the gilded oriental scenes that cover the door panels remind of Stalker and Parkers' designs. However, the cornice is covered with intricate foliage reminiscent of Persian arabesques and of Venetian bookbinding ornamentation of earlier centuries (see comparative material, fig.21).

2. Around 1740 some important changes occurred as *depentori* started to set oriental figures in landscapes swarming with references to contemporary Venetian society. The result was the creation of a unique caricature-like Asian-Venetian world in which very free interpretations of the original models increased steadily to create more and more remarkable compositions. This combination of European and Eastern features reflected a general tendency that was also characterising other artistic fields such as porcelain wares and painting, which interestingly offered japanning relevant inspiration throughout the eighteenth century. Apart from the diffusion of ideas and the importance that painting had, this was probably also due to the fact that japanned furniture frequently had to match the decoration of the frescoed rooms in which it was placed. This trend began roughly in 1740, when patricians began to commission entire ensembles of japanned furniture for the small salons of their palaces and their *casini*. The decorative subject of those suites was often related to the trend of chinoiserie, so that entire rooms *à la Chinese* were created.

The exhibition displays a chest-of-drawers and a *guéridon* from the so-called *Sala delle lacche verdi*, ordered by the Calbo-Crotta family for their palace on the Canal Grande during the 1740s (see cat. no.5 and cat. no.4). The suite, which is the earliest complete surviving example of its type, consists of thirty japanned items, also provided with curtain-cornices and wall-hanging fillets.

The serpentine chest-of-drawers presents a lavish decoration in gilded *pastiglia* on green background. The two front-drawers, *sans traverse*, are depicted with a single scene framed by a gilt carved rectangular cartouche. Smaller cartouches are on the corners and the sides of the piece. Although, at first sight, the subjects portrayed might look totally oriental, there are some unmistakably Venetian peculiarities. It is, for instance, possible to identify the building on the upper drawer as a church, while the child depicted on the lower one is playing with a toy popular in Venice during the eighteenth century⁵². Similarly, in one of the lateral cartouches a man is using a parasol that reminds us of the one used by the *doge* in public parades⁵³. The animated decoration reveals some affinities with Rococo in its liveliness and asymmetrical composition. However, despite the gay scenes and the profusion of *rocaille* carving, the piece is still heavy and sturdy in its proportions, with an imposing shape that belongs far more to the Barocchetto than to the Rococo.

3. In the 1750s the representation of chinoiserie subjects evolved according to the principles of the fully developed Rococo. Undoubtedly, there were profound similarities between the whole idea of chinoiserie and the Rococo. Indeed, both depended on the asymmetrical, abstract and curvilinear⁵⁴. In addition, the mysterious and the exotic were an excellent means of achieving that sense of theatricality so appreciated by the Venetians – as the pseudo-oriental naval parade organised by the Republic for Augustus the Strong in 1716 had previously demonstrated (see comparative material, fig.22)⁵⁵.

It is not coincidental that Chinoiserie subjects became among the most popular themes in Venetian theatre and opera⁵⁶. The first ‘Chinese’ play was Pietro Chiari’s *La schiava cinese*, represented during the Carnival of 1752. Obviously, Chiari’s personal interpretation of the Orient was far from reality, with rituals and practices that had little in common with Chinese society⁵⁷. Yet, it was perfectly representative of the cultural background that witnessed the manufacture of japanned furniture in the 1750s and the 1760s.

Following the trend for softer colours, the decorative-scheme of japanned furniture became brighter, characterised by pale green, yellow and blue backgrounds, in line with the pastel tones of *casini*. *Depentori* stopped working almost exclusively in

raised *pastiglia*, and scenes were often painted in polychromy within intricate *rocaille* and floral ornaments (see comparative material fig.23).

In these years, exotic topics were more and more frequently used for *boiserie* and panelling decoration as well. The exhibition displays a japanned door of around 1760 that is indicative of this trend and exemplifies many of the changes that the chinoiserie style had gone through in the 1750s (see cat. no.7). The work is painted on both sides with two oriental scenes in raised gilded *pastiglia* within carved cartouches, surrounded by sprays of polychrome flowers. Here, *turquerie* and chinoiserie are mixed together in an elegant and remarkable way. As if in a dream, pagoda-like churches and opium-smokers with bizarre hats emerge from the waters of a lagoon that must be identified as Venetian. The composition shows some of the characteristics that the Venetians probably considered as essential features of oriental scenes. For example, the long opium-pipe was to be seen not only in other japanned works (see comparative material, fig.24), but also in paintings like Antonio Guardi's *The Garden of the Serraglio* of 1740-5 (see comparative materials, fig.25).

The romantic vision of Cathay visible on the cat. no.7, permeated many other Venetian works of art made in the same period. The most notable example is provided by Gian Domenico Tiepolo's frescoes in the Foresteria of the Villa Valmarana at Vicenza, executed around 1757. This series, in which pagodas resemble Venetian bell-towers and people wear hats made from enormous bird-feathers, stem from a similar idealised understanding of China (see comparative material, fig.26)⁵⁸. Cathay had become a fantastic nowhere place to escape to, corresponding to Arcadia, which, not by chance, was another favourite theme.

Other figurative themes and *Lacca povera*

From *circa* 1740 other figurative subjects began to be used along with the oriental for the decoration of japanned furniture. These were often scenes of pastoral life that took inspiration from the themes of the *fête champêtre* and the *fête galante*, genres that had been developed in Venice by painters such as Giuseppe Zais and Francesco

Zuccarelli. Moreover, from roughly 1730 prints of the work of Watteau and Lancret started to be available in the city, soon becoming good sources of inspiration. Despite obvious formal differences, the *fête champêtre* shared some similarities with the concept of chinoiserie, since they were both representations of a timeless idealised world as opposed to reality. Despite being the most popular, the *fête champêtre* was not the only subject portrayed. Indeed, several pieces presented views of contemporary cities similar to the *vedute*, while others were depicted with ancient ruins reminiscent of the *capricci* (see comparative material, fig.27).

One interesting point is that the majority of the furniture and furnishings decorated with figurative themes was japanned with *lacca povera* (also called *arte povera* and *lacca contrafacta*), a particular technique developed in the city during the first decades of the eighteenth century. This method, simple and quick, consisted in cutting and pasting prints to the surface of the piece, which had previously been gessoed and polished. The prints were usually applied already coloured, so that the artisan only needed to add a few details before covering the objects with layers of sandarac. The prints were coloured by the *miniadori*, a category belonging to the guild of *depentori* specialised in this task⁵⁹.

Although there were a few important printing-houses, such as those of Giuseppe Wagner and of Teodorico Viero, the most famous company was the firm of the Remondinis, formerly in Bassano del Grappa, who moved to Venice from mid-eighteenth century⁶⁰. Even if *lacca povera* enjoyed its heyday in the period from the 1740s to the 1760s, it was popular throughout the eighteenth century⁶¹. Its extraordinary diffusion was possible also thanks to its low price, which made it affordable to a vast number of people. The standard of quality, as the term '*povera*' may suggest, was relatively modest and the precision of its decoration was on a lower level than that of original japanning. Moreover, objects made with this method deteriorated rapidly with age, since prints tended to come off easily from the surface⁶².

For these reasons, furniture japanned with *lacca povera* was usually not found in the sophisticated interiors of the palaces on the Canal Grande. However, the rich demonstrated their appreciation for this type of japanning as well, since a few pieces were commissioned for the villas and the country-houses that they had on the mainland.

Despite being naive, some examples achieved a remarkable effect thanks to their lively and colourful decoration. That is the case of a polychrome bureau-cabinet of the 1740s, the only non-Venetian piece included in the exhibition (see cat. no.8). In fact, its style and construction are more related to Lombardy, from where the object was brought to Venice to be japanned. Almost every part of its surface is covered with little caricature-like scenes inspired from different sources such as *vedute*, *capricci* and *fête galante*. The variety is such that there are also images of exotic animals like elephants and giraffes, in order to add even more 'colour'. As with other japanned pieces, the highly picturesque result makes up for the lack of precision in the decoration, so that at a first sight, the observer does not notice the dwarf-like proportions of the figures and the low quality of some of the details. Although the ornamentation is animated and asymmetric, the scenes are framed by mouldings that make the composition appear substantially balanced.

Lacca povera was not only applied to furniture, but also to a great range of furnishings and small items like trays, toilette-sets and glove boxes. The exhibition displays a typical toilette set of the 1750s, comprising eight pieces painted en suite (cat. no.9). Like the bureau-cabinet, the objects are literally overwhelmed with decoration. In particular, the toilet-piece presents a series of dynamic rural scenes populated by contemporary ladies and gentlemen within gilded foliate cartouches. Bouquets of polychrome flowers and gilt shells enliven the composition, while the sinuous outline of the piece is perfectly in line with the Rococo love of fluid organic forms. The set reflects the importance that women's everyday rituals had acquired during the middle of the eighteenth century. Therefore, even without considering their shape and decoration, the function of the items themselves is perfectly representative of the femininity and the intimacy often associated to Rococo taste and life.

Floral decoration

Floral ornament had been used for decorating Venetian furniture earlier than the eighteenth century. During the seventeenth century in particular the demand for this motif rose steadily and, due also to Dutch influence, flowers and foliage began to be

represented more and more naturalistically (see comparative material, fig.28). Therefore, it can not be surprising that as soon as the trend for japanned furniture took off, flowers were included in its decoration-scheme. This was also due to the fact that floral patterns had great importance in the ornamentation of original oriental furniture as well. The fact that practically all the objects included in the exhibition present some floral motifs is the proof of their popularity throughout the time considered.

From *circa* 1750, however, in parallel with the definitive establishment of Rococo, a very distinct type of decoration only based on painted polychrome flowers, gilt carved shells and *rocaille* came into great fashion. The variety of flowers depicted was particularly wide, including single buds, sprays and bouquets of different species⁶³. Their colours were usually bright, reds, oranges and blues, while the backgrounds had softer tones, such as pale green and yellow. In a certain way, floral and *rocaille* decoration shared analogies with the theme of the *fête champêtre*, as they reflected a similar passion for nature. Nature was also expressed through the serpentine forms of the furniture, which harmonised with the swirling bunches of flowers and the organic *rocaille* carving.

The chest-of-drawers in the Ca'Rezzonico museum already discussed (see cat. no.10), is probably the best example of this combination of two and three-dimensional decoration. The gilt *rocaille* around the drawers and the gushing out shell-like handles enhance the organic shape of the piece, which in itself reminds of an opening bud.

Another work particularly interesting for the balance achieved between form and ornament is an armchair made around 1760, now in the Fondazione Querini-Stampalia (see cat. no.11). Here, the curvilinear silhouette is underlined by painted flowers and foliage that germinate from the legs of the piece and then grow over its arms and its open back. The parallel between carved and painted ornament is also visible considering the top-rail, on which painted petals mirror the gilt carved *rocaille*. As has been said, this kind of decoration coincided with the definitive development of Rococo. It matched completely the idea of furniture as organic material and fluid composition.

Conclusion

Having analysed the changes that occurred to Venetian japanned furniture in its various forms, its evolution is now clearer. In fact it has been possible to see how furniture gradually moved towards a more and more delicate, organic appearance, acquiring increasing fluidity. It has also been shown how this transformation affected both the form and the decoration, which were two complementary sides of the work.

As has been shown, the link between furniture and Rococo society in general was very strong and significant. Indeed, its great popularity reflected the passion for the curvilinear, the exotic and colours that pervaded Venice during the eighteenth century. In addition, its proportions, sometimes small and yet at other times theatrical and exaggerated, perfectly reveal the spirit of the Venetians, who lived in a city where the intimate parties in the *casini* coexisted with the great public naval parades.

To sum up, it can be asserted that japanned furniture was one of the most characteristic and representative artistic expressions of the Rococo. In Venice, Rococo furniture remained in fashion longer than in any other Italian state and the Neo-classical style, never really appreciated, only appeared after 1780. When, finally, the city adopted the masculine Neo-classical lines, japanned pieces continued to be popular, even though the particular decoration was no longer appropriate to the new Neo-classical forms. Japanning itself had exhausted its artistic strength and was dying. Venice was to follow soon.

Appendix

The process of Venetian japanning⁶⁴

The method consisted in applying a series of layers of different materials on a wooden surface. The wood used for the furniture was almost always *cirmolo* (*Pinus cembra*), a species of Alpine fir easily available in the area of Cadore, chosen because it is extremely easy to carve and is also resistant to the temperature changes. Only chairs were made of a different wood, usually walnut.

First, linen gauze was glued to the surface and then covered with a thin layer of glue and gesso to make it homogenous and non-porous. This composition was allowed to dry and then polished until it was perfectly smooth.

The work of the *depentore* only started at this stage, when he first painted the background in even colours and then, over it, the figurative and floral decoration with tempera colours.

In a third phase the carved details of the piece such as rocaille and shells were gilded. Although by law the *doradori* were in charge of this task, the *depentori* very often broke the guild-rules and gilded the object themselves.

Finally, the surface was covered with varnish – sandarac. The blocks of sandarac were first reduced to powder and then dissolved into a solvent until the substance acquired honey-like consistence. Thereafter as many as eighteenth coats were applied to the piece. Furniture that has been varnished with sandarac can easily be recognised because in ageing this substance dries up and consequently a very fine *craquelè* appears on the surface.

Catalogue

Cat.no.1

A VENETIAN BLACK AND GILT-JAPANNED SIDE CHAIR

Circa 1725-30.

Milan, Private collection.

This chair is part of a set of nine, each decorated with similar oriental scenes¹. The design of the piece is based on Anglo-Dutch seat furniture of the first quarter of the eighteenth century, as the high back with vase-shaped splat and the cabriole legs indicate. The lack of stretchers and the presence of four cabriole legs suggest that the object was probably made at a relatively late date, approximately around 1730.

Although the subjects of the decoration are inspired by Chinese and Japanese life, part of the splat and the stiles display trellis-work and arabesques foliage that relate to Persian and Venetian ornamentation.

Literature:

S. Levy, Lacche veneziane settecentesche, op. cit., vol.I.

¹ For the decoration of the other pieces see: S. Levy, Lacche veneziane settecentesche, 2 vols., Milano, 1967, vol.I, Tav.10-1.



Cat.no.1

Cat.no.2

A VENETIAN BLACK AND GILT-JAPANNED CORNER-CUPBOARD

Circa 1725-35.

Details of dimensions not available.

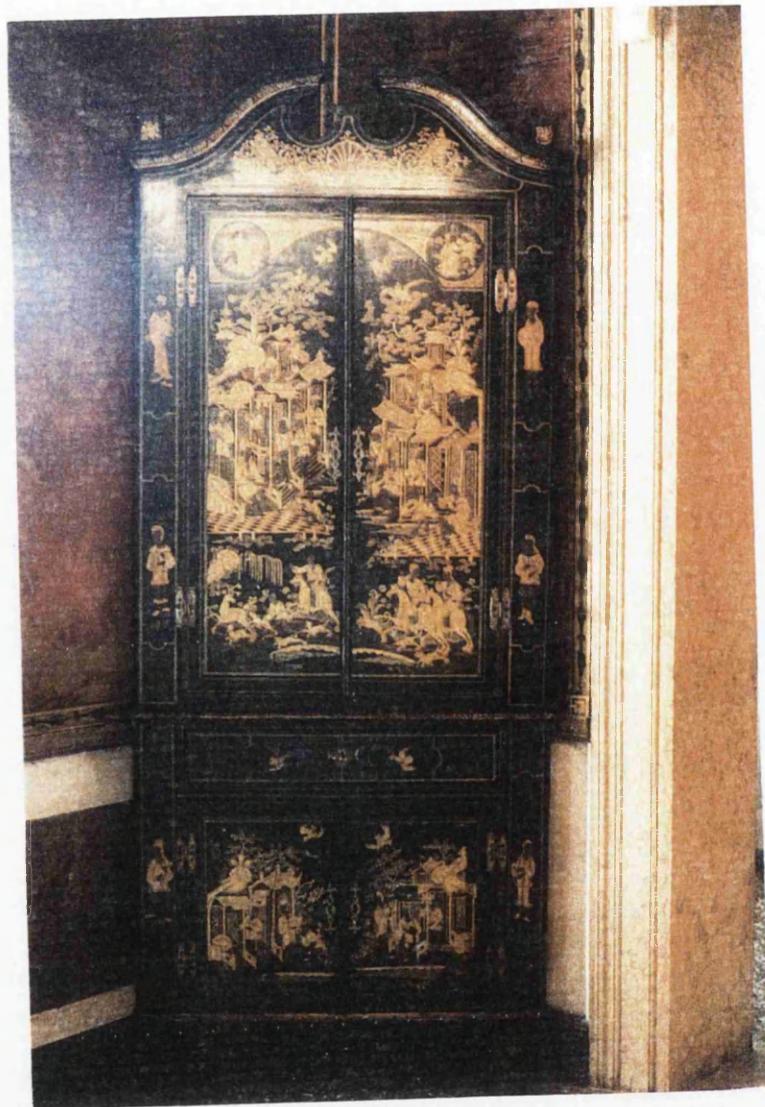
Venice, Fondazione Querini-Stampalia, Stanza del Salotto Rosso.

This corner-cupboard is part of the bequest that Giovanni Querini-Stampalia made to the city of Venice in 1869. The strong affinities with English examples of 1725-30, as shown by the broken arched pediment and the bracket feet, suggest the piece must have been made around this time. The simple, straight lines are other evidences that help set the date of the object between the third and the fourth decade of the century.

Although this is one of the few surviving corner-cupboards nowadays on view in a museum, from the second quarter of the eighteenth century this typology was greatly in demand and it was found in many Venetian households.

Literature:

A. González-Palacios, Il mobile nei secoli, op. cit., vol.II, fig.19, p.17.



Cat.no.2

Cat.no.3

A VENETIAN BLACK AND GILT-JAPANNED BUREAU-CABINET

Circa 1725-30.

215 cm. high, 98 cm. wide, 57 cm. deep.

Milan, Civiche Raccolte d'Arte Applicata, Inv.nos.347.

The dating of this bureau-cabinet, one of a pair, is controversial. Alberici considers that it still related to the earlier examples and so place its construction in the first quarter of the eighteenth century. On the other hand, the curators of the Civiche Raccolte regard the piece as having been made in the middle of the century, probably basing their opinion on the date that González-Palacios has attributed to some other works with a similar decoration¹. Yet they both agree about the strong Anglo-Dutch influence that the object displays. This is especially evident in the broken front and straight sides of the lower corpus and in the architectural appearance of the upper one, characterised by broken arched pediment and pilasters framing the door panel.

This relevant Northern connection is a good reason for dating this bureau-cabinet to the first decades of the century, when the similarities between Venetian and English pieces were more intense. Moreover, the japanned decoration in gilded *pastiglia* against a black background suggests a date earlier than the 1750s. In fact, dark colours would not match the soft tones of Venetian interiors during the height of the Rococo. The blackamoor's head-shaped-feet, rare in bureau-cabinets but reminiscent of the supports of several cassoni of the seventeenth century², are another feature that contributes to set this work within the end of the third decade of the century. The anthropomorphic feet also echo the popular wooden figures of elegantly dressed kneeling moors used as stands in rich Venetian households during the eighteenth century³.

¹ E. Colle, Musei d'Arti Applicate. Mobili e intagli lignei, Milano, 1996, p.88.

² C. Alberici, Il Mobile Veneto, Milano, 1980 p.212.

³ H. Huth, Lacquer of the West. The history of a craft and an industry.1550-1950, Chicago & London, 1971, p.54.

Literature:

S. Levy, Lacche veneziane settecentesche, op. cit., vol.I, Tav.149.

C. Alberici, Il Mobile Veneto, op. cit., figg.288-9, pp.212-3.

E. Colle, Musei d'Arti Applicate. Mobili e intagli lignei, op. cit., fig.87, p.88.

G. Morazzoni, Il mobile veneziano del'700, op. cit., vol.II, Tav.CDXI.

H. Huth, Lacquer of the West. The history of a craft and an industry.1550-1950, op. cit., fig.107.



Cat.no.3

Cat.no.4

A VENETIAN GREEN AND GILT-JAPANNED GUÉRIDON

Venice, *circa* 1745-50

84 cm. high, 43 cm. wide, 27 cm. deep.

Venice, Ca'Rezzonico, Sala delle Lacche Verdi.

This piece comes from a set of japanned furniture ordered by the Calbo-Crotta family for their Palazzo agli Scalzi around 1750. The ensemble consists of three other guéridons, twelve armchairs, two chests-of-drawers (one is on view as cat. no.5), three mirrors, wall hanging fillets and five curtain-cornices. The set was acquired by the Musei Civici Veneziani in 1902 and it has been on view in Ca'Rezzonico since 1936¹. The original hand-painted silk wall hanging and covering are now in the Tessilteca di Palazzo Mocenigo².

The object displays a standard structure, common to other many pieces. However, its extremely high quality is testified by the bold decoration in gilded *pastiglia* and by the presence of a marble top, particularly rare in such a small-sized item.

Exhibited:

'Lacche veneziane del settecento', Ca'Rezzonico, Venezia, 1938.

Literature:

E. Baccheschi, Mobili laccati del settecento veneziano, op. cit., p.68.

A. Disertori, M. Griffo, A. Griseri, A.M. Necchi Disertori, A. Ponte, Il Mobile del Settecento, op. cit., p.14.

S. Levy, Lacche veneziane settecentesche, vol.I, Tav.235-6.

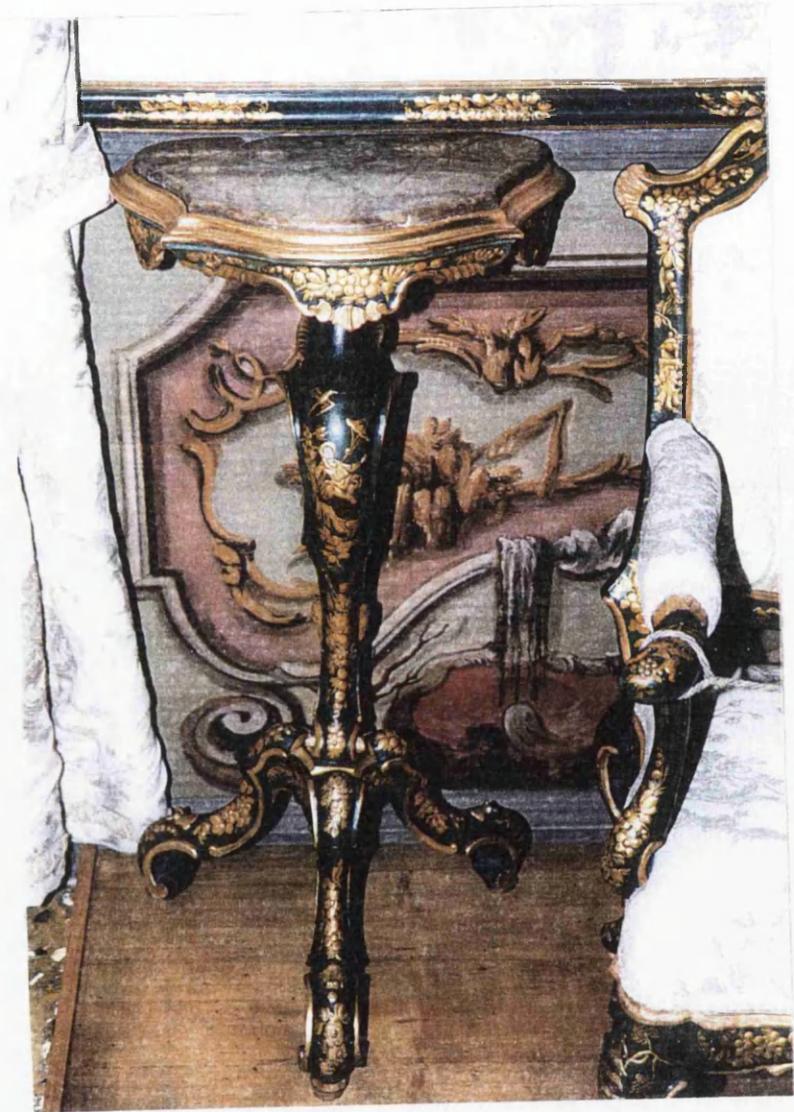
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P. Molmenti, La storia di Venezia nella vita privata, op. cit., p.354.

G. Morazzoni, Il mobile veneziano del'700, vol.II, Tavv.CDXIV-CDXV

¹ F. Pedrocchi, '700 Veneziano. Capolavori da Ca'Rezzonico, Venezia, 1998, p. 113.

² *Idem*, '700 Veneziano. Capolavori da Ca'Rezzonico, p. 113.



Cat.no.4

Cat.no.5

A VENETIAN GREEN GILT-JAPANNED CHEST-OF-DRAWERS

Circa 1745-50.

89 cm. high, 139 cm. wide, 62 cm. deep.

Venice, Ca'Rezzonico, Sala delle Lacche Verdi.

This chest-of-drawers is one of a pair included in the ensemble commissioned by the Calbo-Crotta family around 1745-50 (for its provenance see cat. no.4). The piece is a perfect example of the Barocchetto style, as is demonstrated by its front and sides, serpentine but not yet *bombé*. Similarly, the evolution towards Rococo is represented well by the presence of cabriole legs below the bulky corpus. Following the Venetian tradition, the precious shaped rectangular marble top is set into a concave wooden moulding. The height of the piece coincides with that of most Venetian chests-of-drawers, since they were designed in order to correspond to the height of the dado area on the wall. The lack of metal mounts is not surprising, as Venetian japanned examples were never mounted, but had all the details carved and gilded. This can be seen, here in the escutcheons and the rocaille border running along the apron.

On the other hand, the two *sans traverse* drawers are a relatively rare feature and their presence is to be linked to the japanned decoration of the front, consisting of a single uninterrupted scene. In keeping with the overall design of the object, the colour-scheme of the japanning is still related to the Barocchetto and is characterised by gilded *pastiglia* on a monochrome green background. However, the remarkable thickness of the japanning and the great amount of gilded ornament are signs of very high quality that make the piece particularly impressive.

Literature

A. Alberici, Il Mobile Veneto, op. cit., fig.360, p.247.

E. Baccheschi, Mobili laccati del settecento veneziano, op. cit., p.89.

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- S. Levy, Lacche veneziane settecentesche, op. cit., vol.I, Tav.62-3.
- G. Lorenzetti, Ca'Rezzonico, op. cit., Tav.LXVI, fig.145.
- G. Mariacher, Il mobile barocco veneziano, op. cit., fig. 87, p.56.
- G. Morazzoni, Mobili laccati veneziani, op. cit., vol.II, Tav.XIII-XIV.
- A. Rispoli-Fabris, L'arte della lacca, op. cit., fig.128-9, pp.144-5.
- A.V. Vaccari, Dentro il mobile, op. cit., figg.134, 152, pp.212, 238.



Cat.no.5

Cat.no.6

A BLUE AND WHITE JAPANNED BUREAU-CABINET

Circa 1750.

Details of dimensions not available.

Milan, Private collection.

This piece displays some qualities that were in demand around 1750, such as the serpentine pediment, front and sides. Even this it can already be found in some Queen Anne English examples, the shaped mirror plaque set in the cornice became a Venetian characteristic, particularly in favour during the 1750s and the 1760s.

The presence of the bun feet, instead of suggesting an earlier date, testifies to the Venetian reluctance to abandon some old features that had already gone out of fashion in several other parts of Europe. Indeed, they can also be seen in several other Rococo bureau-cabinets of the mid-eighteenth century (see comparative material, fig.13).

Probably the most unusual aspect of this piece is its japanned decoration. In fact, although chinoiserie scenes were common subjects, the colour-scheme shown here, consisting of white figures against a very pale blue background, is extremely difficult to be found in other examples.

Literature:

A. Disertori, M. Griffo, A. Griseri, A.M. Necchi Disertori, A. Ponte, Il Mobile del Settecento, op. cit., p.54.

S. Levy, Lacche veneziane settecentesche, op. cit., vol.I, Tav.168-9.



Cat.no.6

Cat.no.7

A VENETIAN POLYCHROME AND GILT-JAPANNED DOOR

1750s.

262 cm. high, 110 cm. wide.

Venice, Ca'Rezzonico, Sala degli Arazzi.

This work is unique, as it is the only surviving example of japanned furnishing still *in situ*. Originally it was one of a pair commissioned by the Rezzonico family in the late 1750s. The other door has been split into two halves, one of which is now on show in the Art Institute of Chicago¹. The doors remained together in Ca'Rezzonico until the first decade of the twentieth century, when they were sold and dismembered. The cat.no.7 was returned to the palace from the Gallerie dell'Accademia in 1936, when the Ca'Rezzonico museum was established. Since that date it has always been on display².

Owing to the remarkable quality of the composition, the design of the piece has traditionally been attributed to Gian Battista Tiepolo. This erroneous opinion originated from the fact that Tiepolo was painting a fresco series in the Rezzonico Palace at the time when the door was installed. However, even if the door can not be attributed to such a great artist, its decoration is notable for the extraordinary level of the details and for the polychrome floral patterns.

Exhibited:

'Lacche veneziane del settecento', Venice, 1938, cat.no.320.

Literature:

A. Disertori, M. Griffo, A. Griseri, A.M. Necchi Disertori, A. Ponte, Il Mobile del Settecento, op. cit., p.263.

A. González-Palacios, Il mobile nei secoli, op. cit., vol.II, fig.46, p.34.

¹ H. Huth, Lacquer of the West. The History of an Art and an Industry. 1550-1950, Chicago & London, 1971, p.56.

² F. Pedrocchi, G. Romanelli, Ca'Rezzonico, Milano, 1986, p.33.

- H. Honour, Chinoiserie. The Vision of Cathay, op. cit., pl.77.
- S. Levy, Lacche veneziane settecentesche, op. cit., vol.II, Tav.331-7.
- G. Lorenzetti, Lacche veneziane del settecento, op. cit., figg.138-40, Tav.LXIX-LXX.
- G. Mariacher, Il mobile barocco veneziano, op. cit., fig. 23, p.27.
- G. Morazzoni, Il mobile veneziano del'700, op. cit., Tav.VI-VIII.
- E. Noe, 'Rezzonicorum Cineres. Ricerche sulla collezione Rezzonico', Riviste dell'Istituto di Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte, loc. cit., fig.31, p.215.
- F. Pedrocco, G. Romanelli, Ca'Rezzonico, op. cit., p.28.
- A. Rispoli-Fabris, L'arte della lacca, op. cit., figg.134-5, pp.149-50.



Side A



Side B

Cat.no.7

Cat.no.8

A NORTHERN ITALIAN *LACCA POVERA* JAPPANED BUREAU-CABINET

Lombardy, 1740s.

246 cm. high, 196 cm. wide, 57 cm. deep.

Milan, Civiche Raccolte d'Arte Applicata, Inv. no.355.

Although this bureau-cabinet was japanned in Venice, several of its features reveal that it was made in Lombardy. First, apart from the colourful *lacca povera* scenes, the object exhibits a restrained structure that is not shared by many contemporary Venetian examples. Indeed, following the Lombard fashion, only the front of the lower corpus is serpentine, while the sides are straight. Also the turned feet and the particular shape of the broken arched pediment are difficult to find in Venetian bureau-cabinets, whereas they are frequent in the Lombard¹. In addition, the very good quality of the craftsmanship and of the joinery are other indications that suggest it must have been made in Lombardy rather than in Venice².

The iconography of the scenes portrayed is quite complicated, as it combines elements taken from Watteau, Lancret and Pater with mythological themes and views of ancient ruins³. The *lacca povera* japanning can easily be identified thanks to the raised contours of the prints, visible on some parts of the surface. The colourful decoration and the presence of minute printed details in the figures are other good evidence that show the use of this particular technique.

Literature:

E. Colle, Musei d'Arti Applicate. Mobili e intagli lignei, op. cit., pp.86-7.

S. Levy, Lacche veneziane settecentesche, op. cit., vol.I, tav.139-48.

¹ E. Colli, Musei d'Arti Applicate. Mobili e intagli lignei, Milano, 1996, p.86.

² *Idem*, Musei d'Arti Applicate. Mobili e intagli lignei, p.86.

³ *Idem*, Musei d'Arti Applicate. Mobili e intagli lignei, p.88.



Cat.no.8

Cat.no.9

A VENETIAN *LACCA POVERA* JAPANNED TOILETTE SET

1750s.

Bassano del Grappa, Private Collection.

Around the middle of the eighteenth century ensembles for the toilette ritual were often decorated en suite with matching colours and ornaments. This set includes a dressing-mirror, two candlelights, two rounded square boxes with detachable lids, two trays and one small container.

The dressing-mirror has a standard structure that consists of a looking-glass with cartouche frame, two sinuous twisting posts and a lower section with falling-drawer and two opening doors. The same characteristics are to be seen in several other examples of mid-eighteenth century. Levy has published a toilette-piece that only differs in its monochrome painted ornament¹.

The vivacity of the scenes portrayed and the polychrome decoration are peculiarities of pieces japanned with *lacca povera*. Besides being in line with the Rococo, the golden rocaille and foliate borders, are also used for hiding the edges of the prints glued to the surface.

Literature:

S. Levy, Lacche veneziane settecentesche, op. cit., vol.II, Tav.286-8.



Cat.no.9

¹ See: S. Levy, Lacche veneziane settecentesche, 2 vols., Milano 1967, vol.II, Tav.289.

Cat.no.10

A VENETIAN POLYCHROMY AND GILT-JAPPANED CHEST-OF-DRAWERS

Circa 1755-60.

Details of dimensions not available.

Venice, Ca'Rezzonico, Sala del Parlatorio.

This chest-of-drawers is part of a set of furniture comprising two small bedchamber commodes, a large mirror, ten armchairs, three curtain-cornices and wall hanging fillets. Even if the *bombé* shape of its front and its sides is a classic trait of Rococo chests-of-drawers, very few other pieces display similarly exaggerated proportions. Despite being *sans traverse*, the drawers are framed by gilt *rocaille* that creates two independent scenes in which there are painted sprays of flowers. The presence of a hinged door on either side of the corpus is quite peculiar and not to be found in many other contemporary examples. The high-quality carving that decorates the entire object is especially remarkable in details such as the scallop-like handles and the pierced apron. The slightly greenish colour of the piece is due to the use of sandarac as varnish, which changes into a green shade with ageing.

Literature:

A. Gonzàlez-Palacios, Il mobile nei secoli, op. cit., vol.II, fig.37, p.30.

S. Levy, Lacche veneziane settecentesche, op. cit., vol.I., Tav.64-5.

G. Lorenzetti, Ca'Rezzonico, op. cit., fig.140, Tav.LXV.

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G. Morazzoni, Mobili veneziani laccati, op. cit., vol.I, Tav.XXVIII.

N. Riley (ed.), World Furniture, op. cit., p.88.

A. Rispoli-Fabris, L'arte della lacca, op. cit., fig.139, p.154.



Cat.no.10

Cat.no.11

A VENETIAN POLYCHROMY AND GILT-JAPANNED ARMCHAIR

1750s.

Venice, Fondazione Querini-Stampalia, Camera da Letto.

This armchair is part of a set of seven that was included in Giovanni Querini-Stampalia's bequest of 1869. The ensemble is reputed to have been commissioned by Andrea Querini, who lived in the palace during the middle of the eighteenth century and was patron of eminent artists such as Carlo Goldoni and Pietro Longhi.

The serpentine apron, the four cabriole legs and the sinuous serpentine line of the arms were recurring elements in Rococo seat furniture. These features can be seen in two other japanned examples published by Levy for example (see comparative material, figg.29-30). Despite being of a lower quality, these armchairs also exhibit similar shell and *rocaille* gilded carving. The japanned decoration of the piece consists of violet flowers and foliage on pale green background.

The carved splat, inspired by English models, is very similar to the one presented in a rare drawing dated '1766' (see comparative material, fig.31). However, the back-frame and the overall design of the object catalogued are different from the one in the sketch, which is more rigid and already looking towards the transitional style.

Exhibited:

'Lacche veneziane del settecento', Venezia, 1938. (Tav.XXIX and XXXII).

Literature:

S. Levy, 1967, Lacche veneziane settecentesche, op. cit., vol.I, Tav.4.

A. Disertori, M. Griffo, A. Griseri, A.M. Necchi Disertori, A. Ponte, Il Mobile del Settecento, op. cit., p.42.

G. Mariacher, Il mobile barocco veneziano, op. cit., fig.71, p.48.



Cat.no.11

Cat.no.12

A VENETIAN RED AND YELLOW JAPANNED CENTRE-TABLE

Circa 1760.

Details of dimensions not available.

Venice, Ca'Rezzonico, Sala del Longhi.

This centre table comes from an ensemble commissioned by the Calbo-Crotta family and on view in the Ca'Rezzonico museum since 1936. The set, still complete, also includes two consoles, a mirror to place over a mantelpiece, a settee, twelve armchairs (one is exhibited as cat. no.13), six curtain-cornices and wall hanging fillets.

The high level of the piece is testified by the marble top, set into a wooden frame to lighten the effect. Its quality can also be appreciated by observing the crisp foliage and shell-carving on the serpentine apron and on the slender cabriole legs, which exhibit details picked out in red against the yellow background.

Literature:

C. Alberici, Il Mobile Veneto, op. cit., fig.366, p.251.

S. Levy, Lacche veneziane settecentesche, op. cit., vol.I, Tav.198.

G. Mariacher, Il mobile barocco veneziano, op. cit., fig.29, p.29.



Cat.no.12

Cat.no.13

A VENETIAN RED AND YELLOW JAPANED ARMCHAIR

Circa 1760.

Venice, Ca'Rezzonico, Sala del Longhi.

This armchair is one of the twelve that are part of the furniture commission that also included cat.no.12. The curved back with splat interlaced to create an '8' is to be found in several other examples of mid-eighteenth century seat furniture, used both for dining-chairs and for armchairs. The curved arms reflect the changes in dress-fashion, as they were made to allow ladies to sit comfortably in their very wide skirts. The use of a squab cushion on the upholstered seat was a popular characteristic of the Venetian armchair and, again, it displays the concern with comfort often associated with the Rococo.

Carving embellishes the majority of the piece: the splat displays C-scrolls and shells, while, the serpentine seat-rail is centred by foliage. Similarly, the knees of the cabriole legs and the feet are decorated with acanthus leaves.

The fact that the japanned floral ornament is also applied to the verso of the back of the armchair indicates that it was not designed to be simply placed against the wall. In fact, the object was part of a set conceived for conversation and so constantly moved around the room.

Exhibited:

'Lacche veneziane del settecento', Venice, 1938.

Literature:

C. Alberici, Il Mobile Veneto, op. cit., figg.365-6, pp.250-1.

A. González-Palacios, Il mobile nei secoli, op. cit., fig.40, p.31.

S. Levy, Lacche veneziane settecentesche, op. cit., vol.I, Tav.3.

G. Mariacher, Il mobile barocco veneziano, op. cit., fig.29, p.29.

G. Morazzoni, Il mobile veneto del'700, op. cit., vol.I, Tav.CXXXIII.

A.V. Vaccari, Dentro il mobile, op. cit., fig.50, p.72.



Cat.no.13

Cat.no.14

A VENETIAN GREEN AND GILT-JAPANNED ARMCHAIR

Circa 1765.

Venice, Ca'Rezzonico, Sala Mondo Nuovo.

This armchair shows inspiration from the designs published in Thomas Chippendale's *The Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Director*. In particular, its open back with interlaced vertical splat displays similarities with the designs of plate XVI in the third edition of the *Director* (1762) (see comparative material, fig.32). A Venetian walnut armchair with a very similar back is on view in the Civiche Raccolte d'Arte Applicata in Milan (see comparative material, fig.33)¹.

The serpentine silhouette of the arms with scroll terminals was a typical feature of Venetian seat furniture during the Rococo². Indeed, this characteristic can be found in many other examples, such as in the cat. no.13. The four cabriole legs are another trait that link this armchair to the Venetian style, whereas the ball-and-claw feet are a reference to English furniture.

Literature:

A.V. Vaccari, Dentro il mobile, op. cit., fig. 49, p.73.

¹ E. Colle, Musei d'Arti Applicate. Mobili e intagli lignei, Milano, 1996, p.269.

² A.V. Vaccari, Dentro il mobile, Vicenza, 1992, p.73.



Cat.no.14

Plates

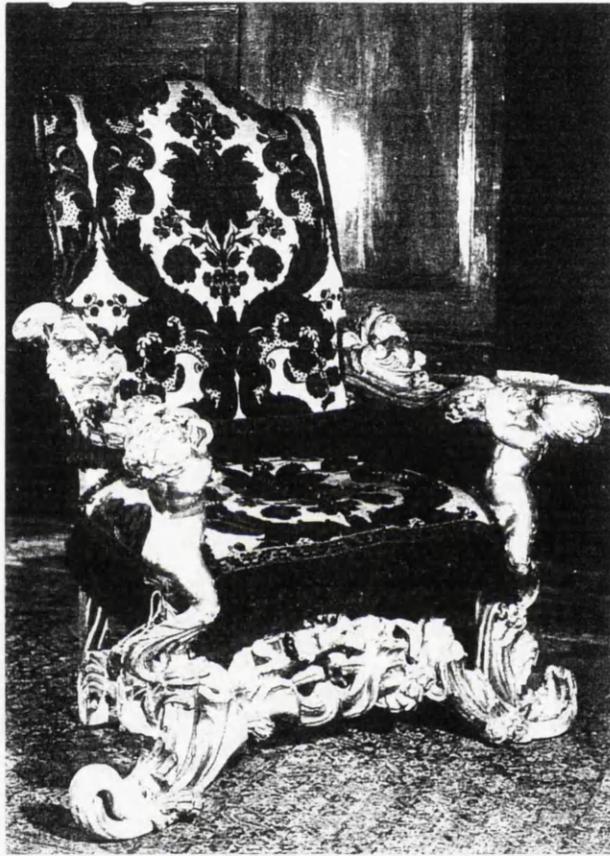


Fig.1

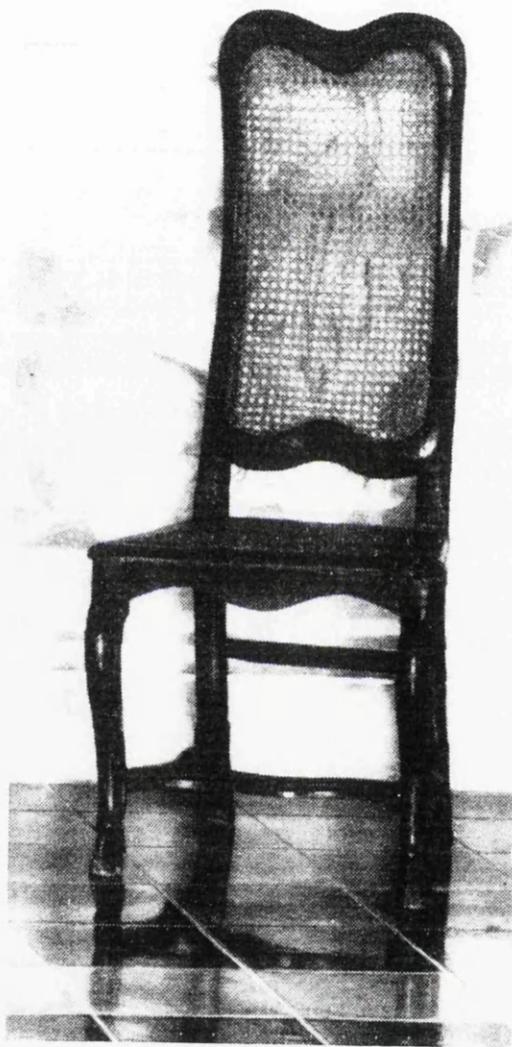


Fig.2

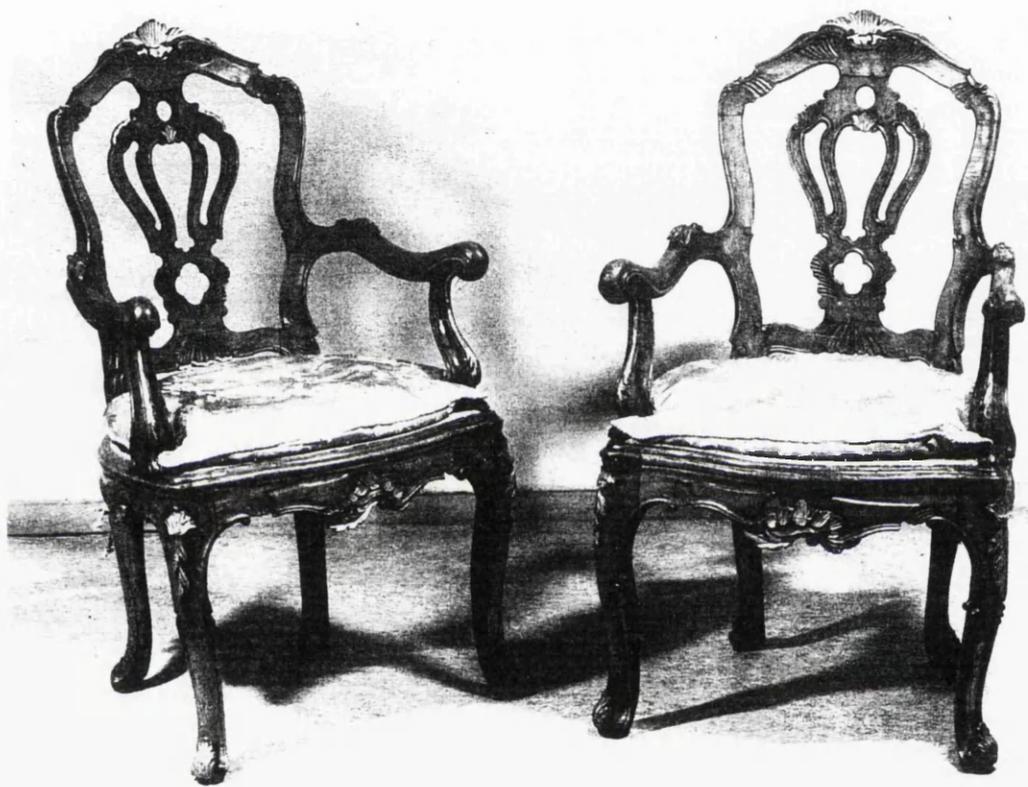


Fig.3



Fig.4

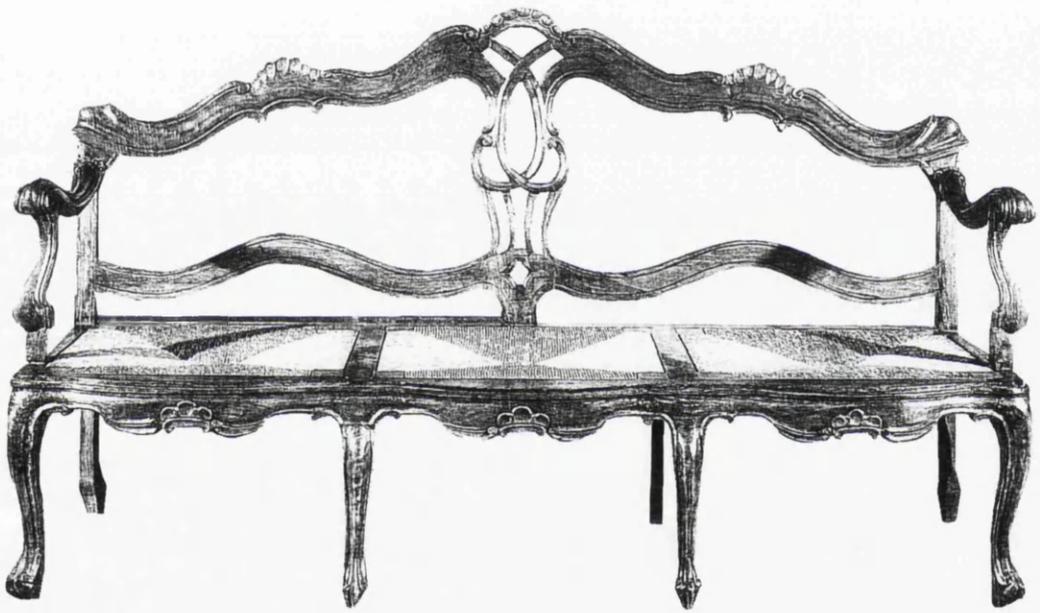


Fig.5



Fig.6



Fig.7



Fig.8



Fig.9



Fig.10



Fig.11



Fig.12



Fig.13



Fig.14



Fig.15



Fig.16



Fig.17



Fig.18



Fig.19



Fig.20

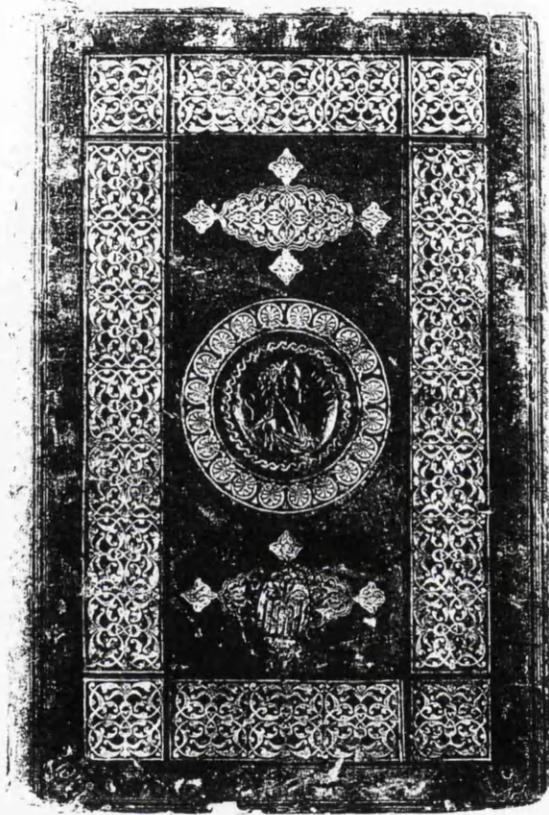


Fig.21

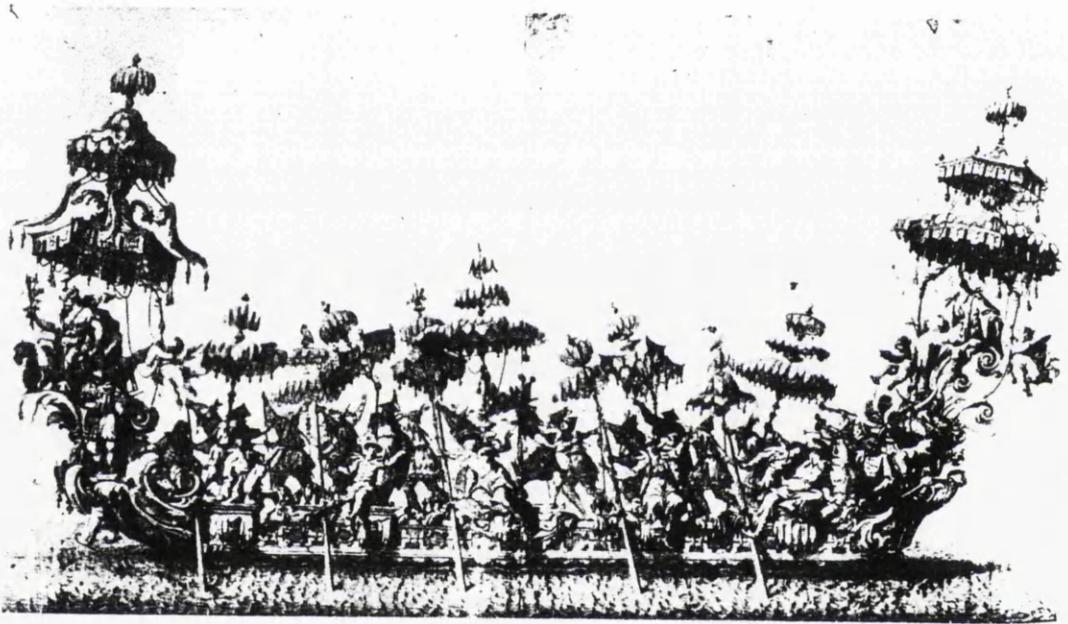


Fig.22



Fig.23

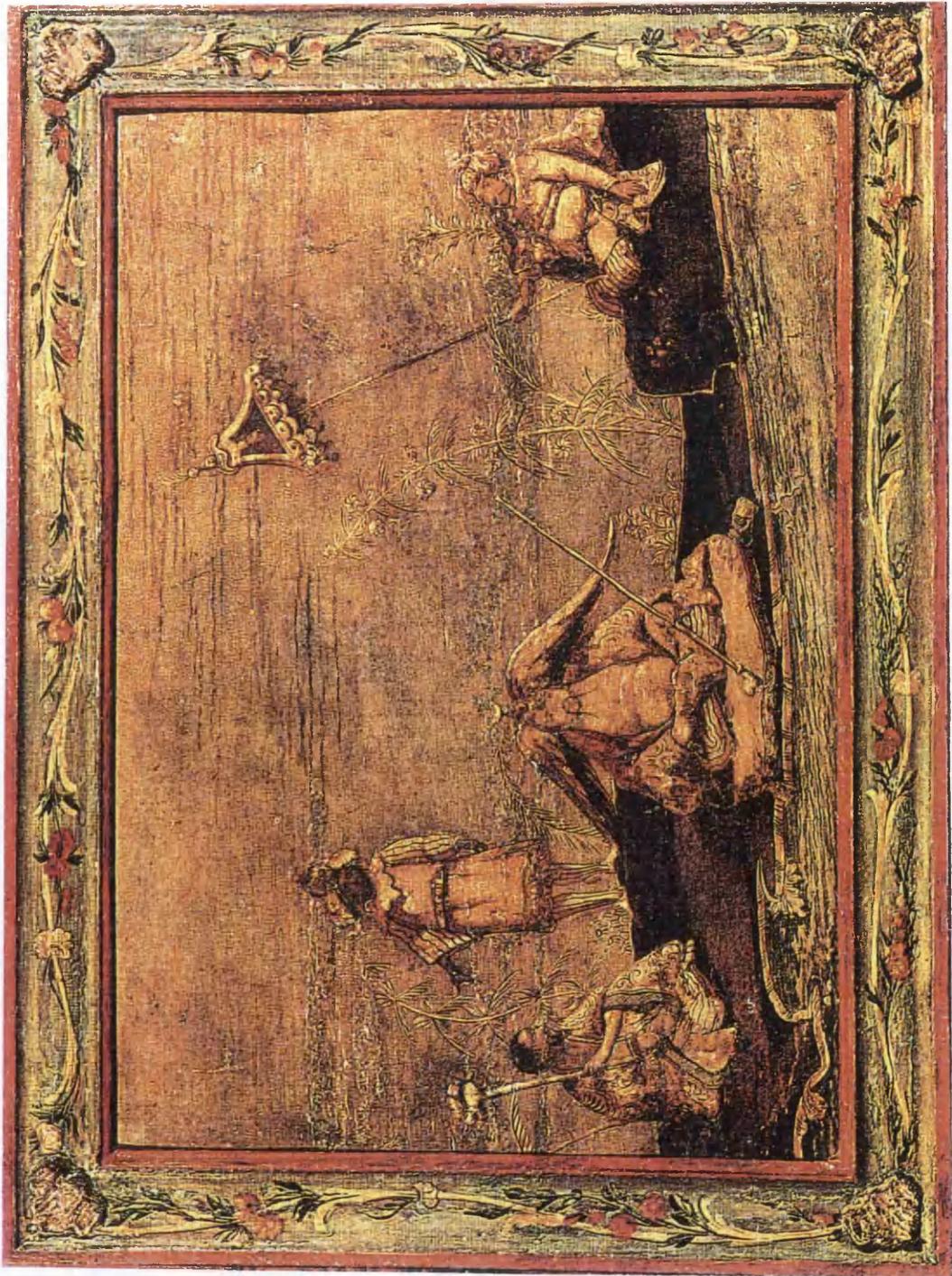


Fig.24

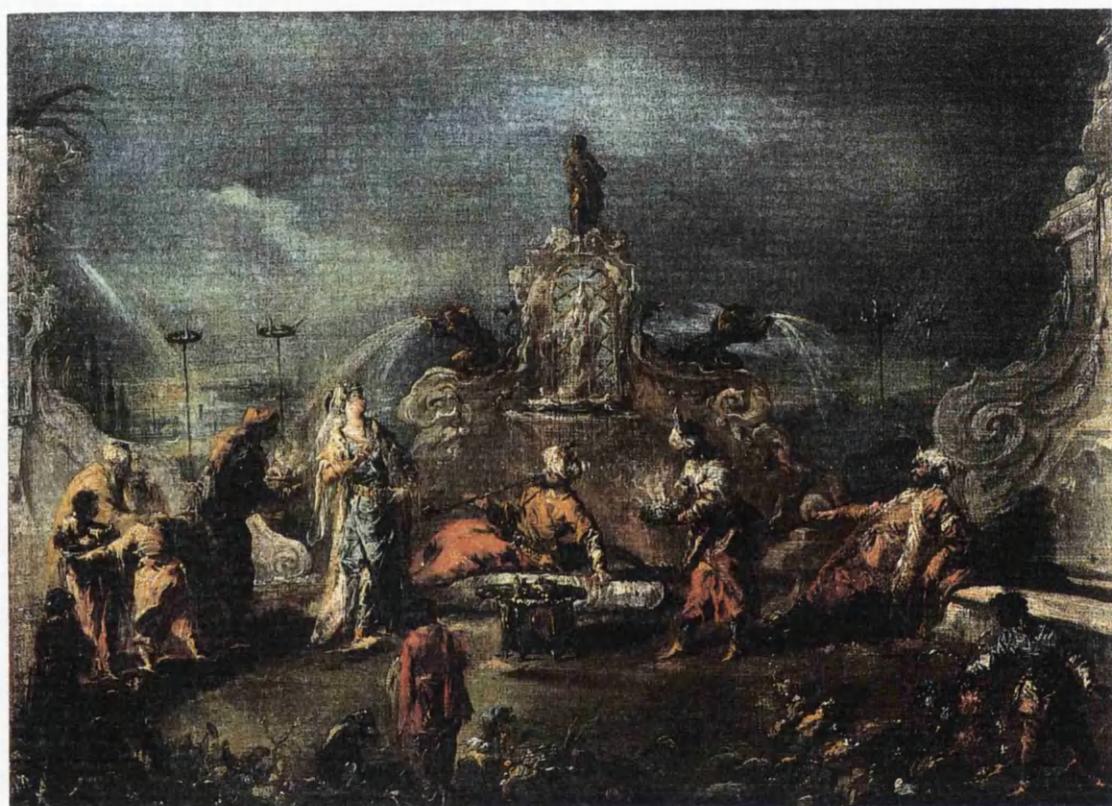


Fig.25

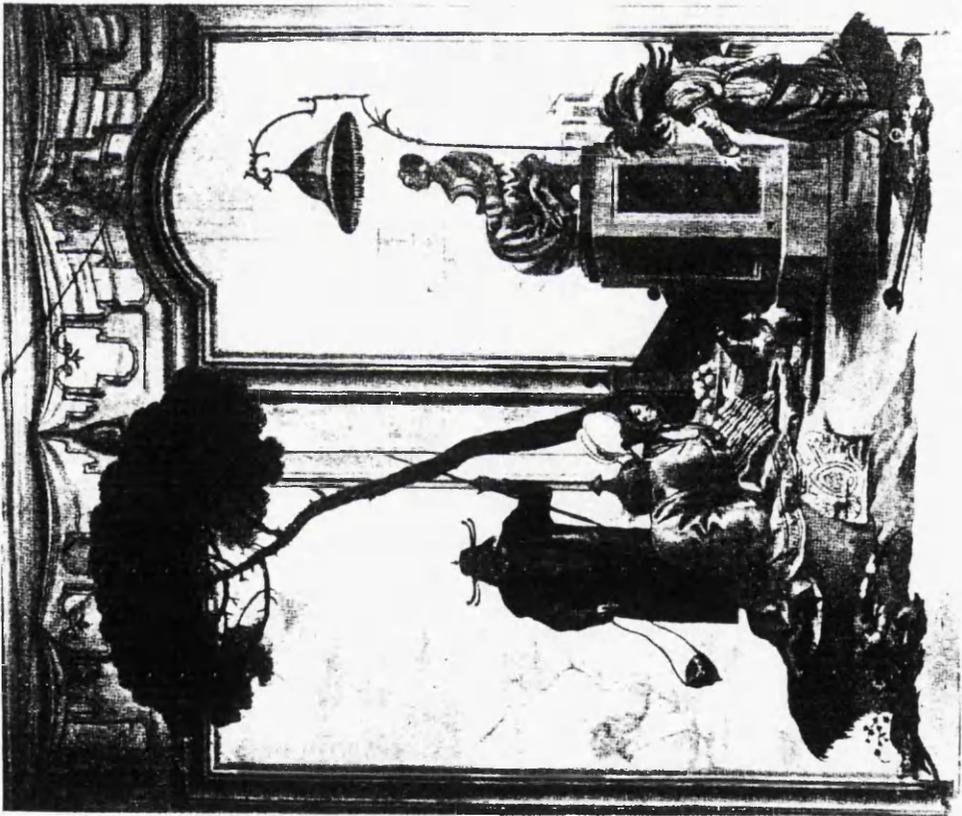
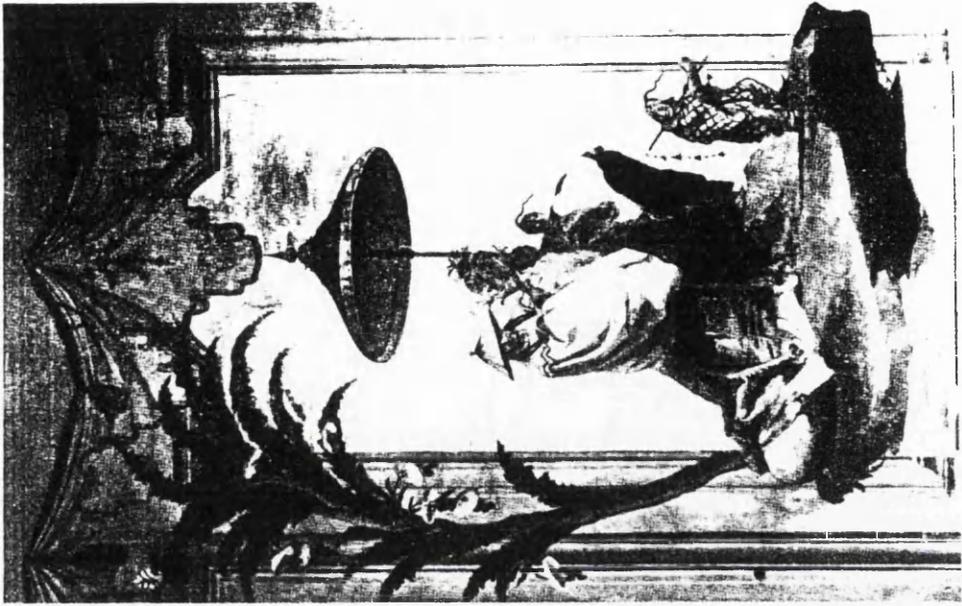


Fig.26

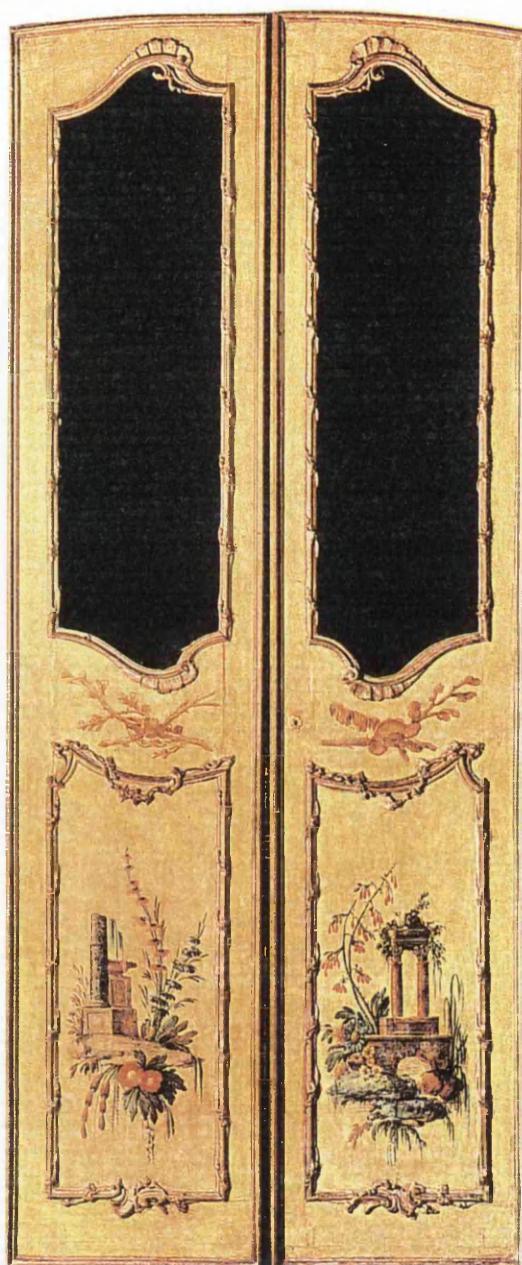


Fig.27

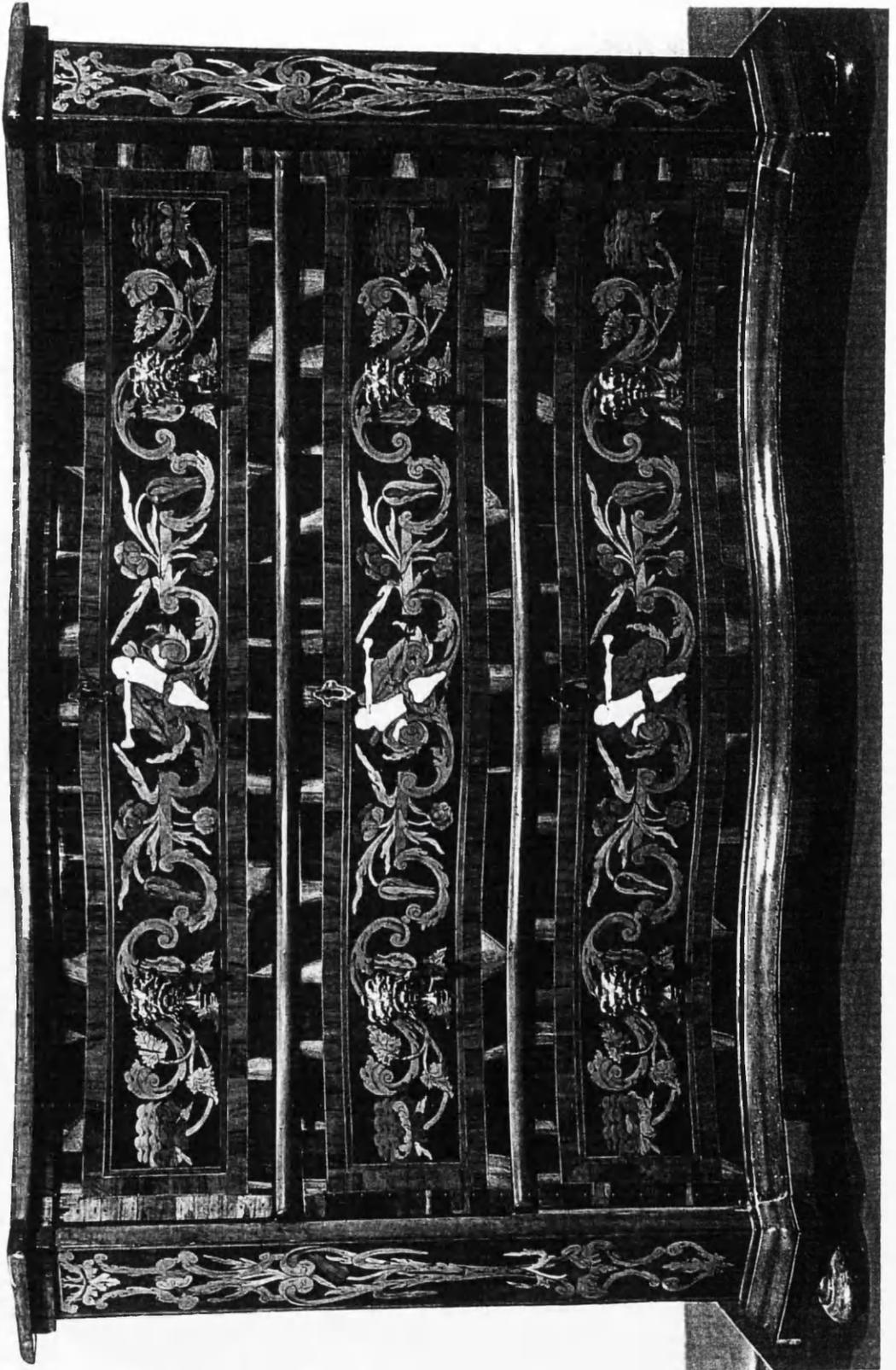


Fig.28

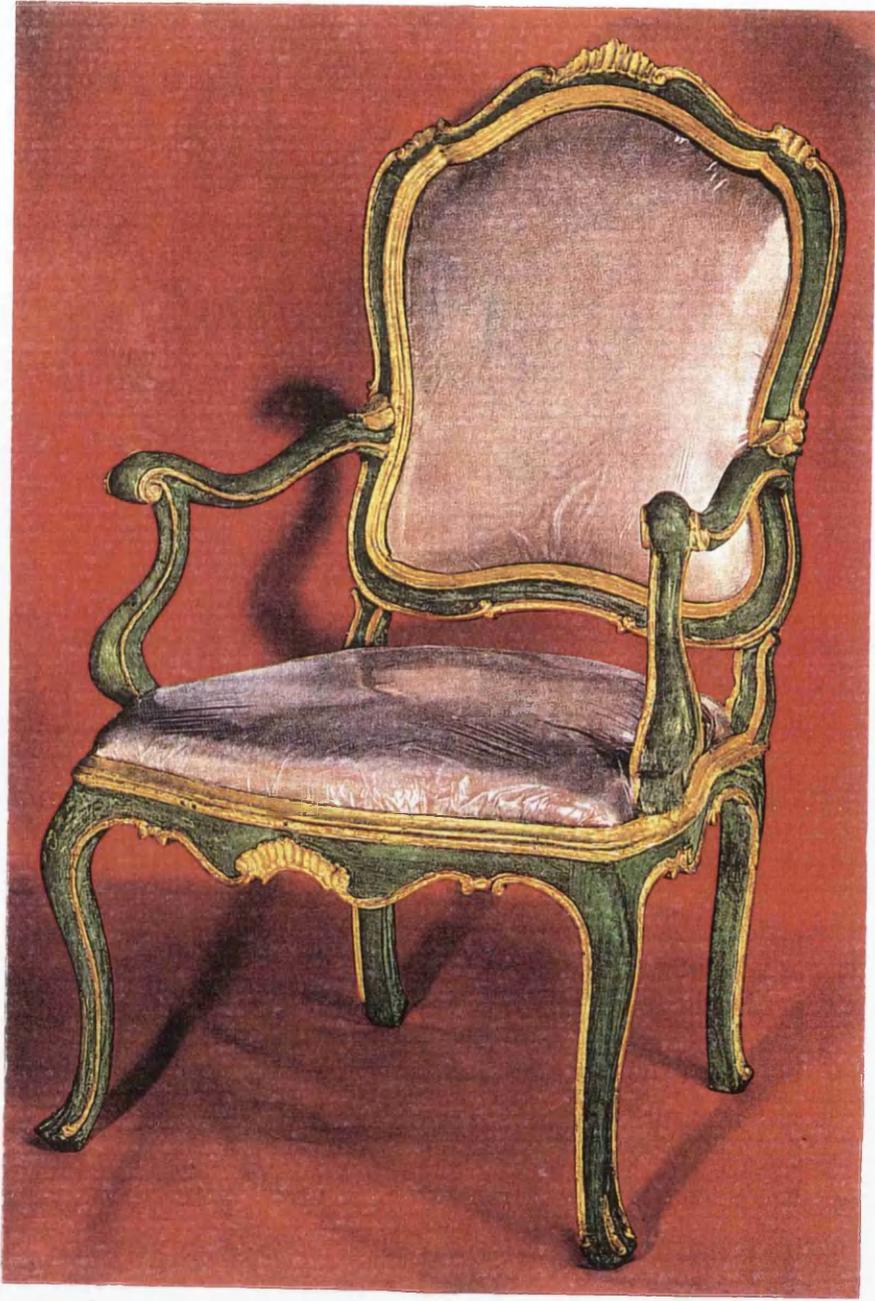


Fig.29

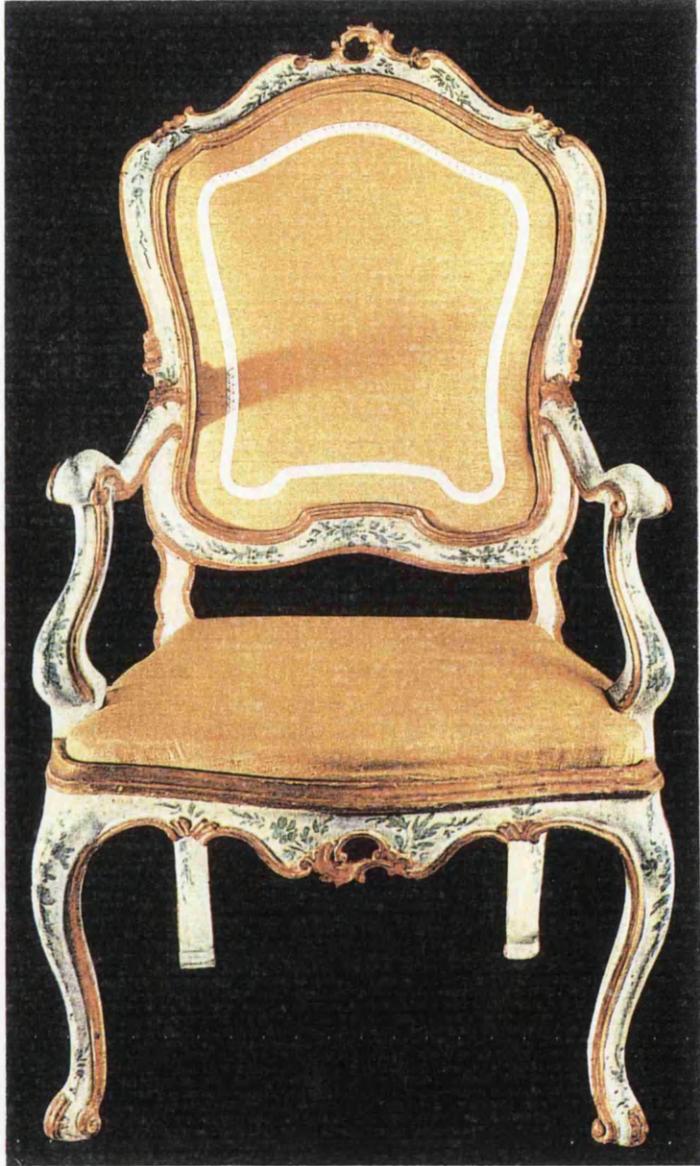


Fig.30

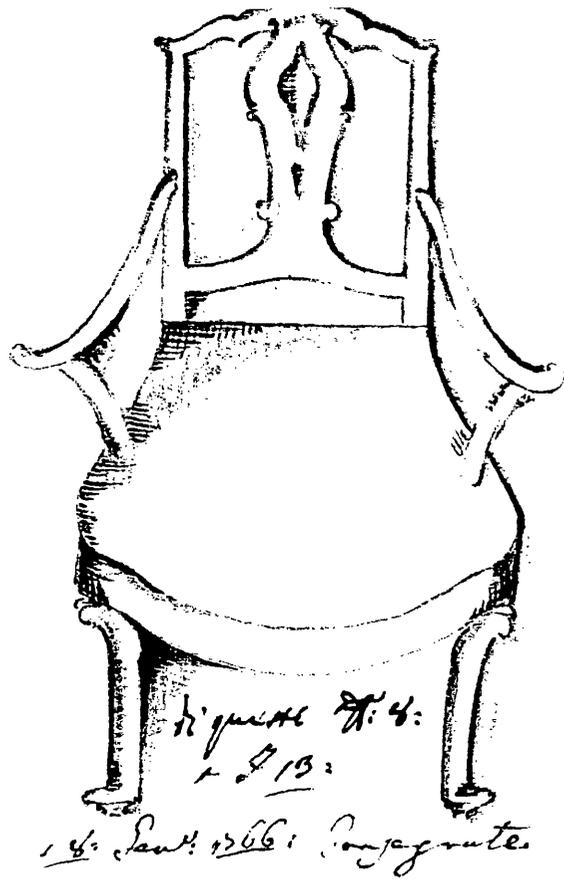


Fig.31

Backs of Chairs.

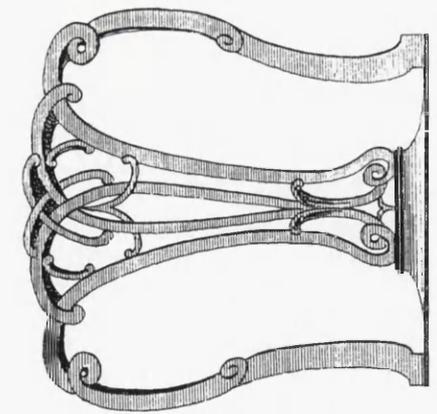
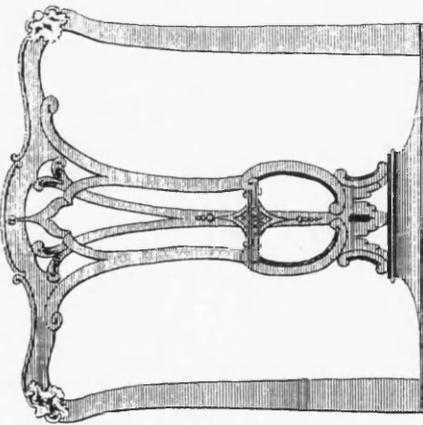
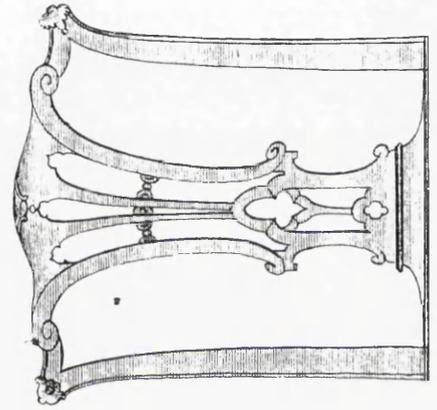
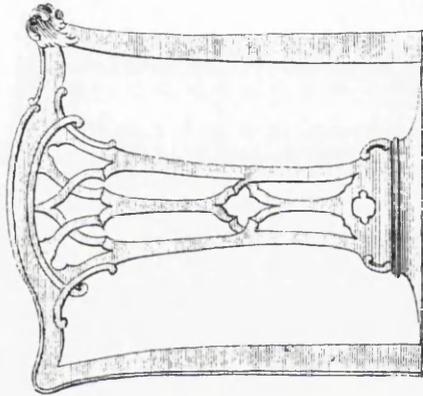
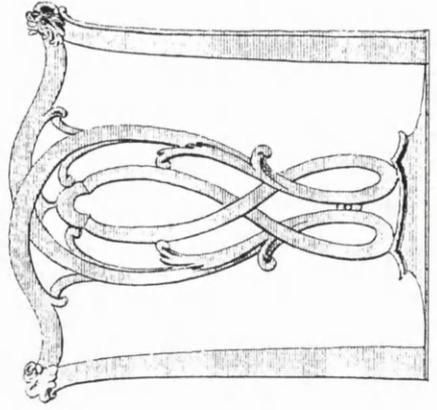
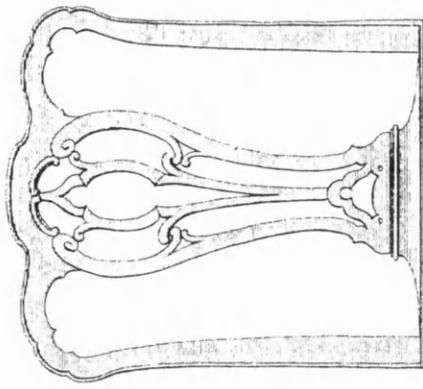


Fig.32



Fig.33

Glossary⁶⁵

Apron: shaped skirt running beneath the seat-rail of a chair or the corpus of case furniture.

Boiserie: wooden panels used for covering interiors.

Bombé: a piece of furniture that displays a double-curved serpentine shape.

Bracket foot: foot that extends from each side of a corner to a centre point at the base.

Bun foot: squashed, round foot often used for case furniture.

Cabriole leg: a curving 'S' shaped leg.

Cornice: projecting moulding at the top of case furniture.

Club foot: a rounded foot that resembles a golf club.

Gilding: decorative coating that consists in applying gold leaves, or gold powder, onto a prepared surface.

Hoof foot: a foot in the shape of animal's hoof.

Japanning: Western method of varnishing that attempted to imitate oriental lacquer. See the appendix for the description of the technique.

Pad foot: a club foot raised on a disk.

Pastiglia: a compound of gesso and glue used as base-ground in japanning, but also applied as raised decoration.

Pediment: architectural gable surmounting a cornice.

Portego (pl. **Porteghi**): long salons running from the front to the rear of Venetian palaces.

Sandarac: a type of varnish obtained from the *Tetraclinis articulata*, a species of tree present in North Africa.

Sans traverse: drawers that are not divided by any rail, but appear as a single continuous surface.

Scroll foot: support terminating in a scroll.

Seat-rail: horizontal framework below the seat of a chair, uniting the top ends of the legs.

Splat: central upright of an open chair-back.

Stile: a constructive upright of seat or storing furniture.

Stretchers: horizontal rails uniting and reinforcing the legs of chairs, tables, etc..

Top-rail: the uppermost horizontal rail on a chair-back.

Veneering: a technique that consists in gluing thin layers of precious and attractive woods onto a carcass of cheaper wood.

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- ¹ C. Alberici, Il Mobile Veneto, Milano, 1980, p.191.
- ² H. Honour, Chinoiserie. The Vision of Cathay, London, 1961, p.120.
The History of Furniture, London, 1976, p.114.
- G. Mariacher, Il mobile barocco veneziano, Novara, 1970, p.8.
- ³ A. Disertori, M. Griffo, A. Griseri, A.M. Necchi Disertori, A. Ponte, Il Mobile del Settecento, Novara, 1988, p.4.
- ⁴ *Idem*, Il Mobile del Settecento, p.4.
The definition is provided by Milizia in his '*Dizionario delle Belle Arti e del Disegno*', published in 1787.
- ⁵ A.V. Vaccari, Dentro il mobile, Vicenza, 1992, p.61.
- ⁶ *Idem*, Dentro il mobile, p.65.
- ⁷ C. Alberici, Il Mobile Veneto, op. cit., 1980, p.7.
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- ⁹ *Idem*, La vita a Venezia nel XVIII secolo, p.39.
- ¹⁰ *Idem*, La vita a Venezia nel XVIII secolo, p.48-9.
- ¹¹ *Idem*, La vita a Venezia nel XVIII secolo, p.86.
- ¹² G. Mariacher, Il mobile barocco veneziano, op. cit., p.3.
- ¹³ *Idem*, Il mobile barocco veneziano, p.3.
- ¹⁴ A. Ravà, 'Appartamenti e arredi veneziani del Settecento. Il mezzanino del Palazzo Vendramin ai Carmini', Dedalo, vol. III, 1921, pp.730-8, esp. pp.731-2.
- ¹⁵ H. Honour, 'Italy', World Furniture, ed. by H. Hayward, London, 1965, pp.154-9, esp. p.154.
- ¹⁶ *Idem*, 'Italy', World Furniture, p.154.
- A. Disertori, M. Griffo, A. Griseri, A.M. Necchi Disertori, A. Ponte, Il Mobile del Settecento, op. cit., p.6.
- ¹⁷ M. Agnellini, E. Baccheschi, Mobili Italiani del Settecento, Milano, 1990, p.9.
- ¹⁸ H. Honour, 'Italy', World Furniture, op. cit., p.159.
- ¹⁹ C. Alberici, Il Mobile Veneto, op. cit., p.247.
- ²⁰ N. Riley (ed.), World Furniture, London, 1980, p.87.
- ²¹ C. Alberici, Il Mobile veneto, op. cit., pp.134, 141.

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- ²² Gonzàlez-Palacios, Il mobile nei secoli, 10 vols., Milano, 1969, vol. II, p.23.
- ²³ In fact, in Italian the bureau-cabinet is still called *trumeau*, French word meaning 'mirror'.
- ²⁴ G.Morazzoni, Il mobile veneziano del'700, 2 vols., Milano, 1927, vol.I, p..37.
- ²⁵ H. Huth, Lacquer of the West. The history of a craft and an industry. 1550-1950, Chicago & London, 1971, p.54.
- ²⁶ A.V. Vaccari, Dentro il mobile, op. cit., p.62.
- ²⁷ The History of furniture, op. cit., p.114.
- ²⁸ C. Alberici, Il Mobile Veneto, op. cit., p.141.
- ²⁹ O. Impey, Chinoiserie. The impact of Oriental style on Western Art and Decoration, London-Melbourne-Toronto, 1977, p.115.
- ³⁰ *Idem*, Chinoiserie. The impact of Oriental style on Western Art and Decoration, p.114.
- ³¹ A.V. Vaccari, Dentro il mobile, op. cit., p.213.
- ³² *Idem*, Dentro il mobile, p.213.
- ³³ The dates of their establishments are taken from:
A. Rispoli-Fabris, L'arte della lacca, Milano, p.110.
- ³⁴ *Eadem*, L'arte della lacca, p.110.
- ³⁵ D. Jacobson, 'Chinoiserie', Encyclopedia of Interior Design, ed. by J. Banham, 2 vols., London & Chicago, 1997, vol.I, pp.263-9, esp. p.265.
- ³⁶ A comprehensive survey of European attempts to reproduce and imitate lacquer is provided by Rispoli-Fabris. See: A. Fabris, L'arte della lacca, op. cit., pp.112-115.
- ³⁷ H. Huth, Lacquer of the West. The history of a craft and an industry 1550-1950, op. cit., p.22.
- ³⁸ A. Rispoli-Fabris, L'arte della lacca, op. cit., p.144.
- ³⁹ *Eadem*, L'arte della lacca, p.144.
- ⁴⁰ C. Alberici, Il Mobile Veneto, op. cit., p.187.
- ⁴¹ P. Thornton, Form & Decoration: innovation in the decorative arts. 1470-1870, London, 1998, p.31.
- ⁴² C. Alberici, Il Mobile Veneto, op. cit., p.187.
- ⁴³ *Eadem*, Il Mobile Veneto, p.187.
- ⁴⁴ In fact, beyond any doubt the guild must have been founded before 1271, since in that year the *Giusticheri Vecchi*, a corporate body that supervised crafts, ordered its reorganisation. See: A. Rispoli-Fabris, L'arte della lacca, op. cit., p.143.

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- ⁴⁵ C. Alberici, Il Mobile Veneto, op. cit., p.187.
- ⁴⁶ A. Rispoli-Fabris, L'arte della lacca, op. cit., p.16.
- ⁴⁷ C. Alberici, Il Mobile Veneto, op. cit., p.187.
- ⁴⁸ A. Rispoli-Fabris, L'arte della lacca, op. cit., p.16.
- ⁴⁹ *Eadem*, L'arte della lacca, p.143.
- ⁵⁰ C. Alberici, Il Mobile Veneto, op. cit., p.188.
- ⁵¹ A. Rispoli-Fabris, L'arte della lacca, op. cit., p.123.
- ⁵² G. Morazzoni, Mobili veneziani laccati, 2 vols., Milano, 1955 (vol.I), 1958 (vol.II), vol.I, p.30.
- ⁵³ *Idem*, Mobili veneziani laccati, vol.I, p.30.
- ⁵⁴ C. Riding, 'Rococo', Encyclopedia of Interior Design, op. cit., vol.II, pp.1169-77, esp. p.1072.
- ⁵⁵ H. Honour, Chinoiserie. The vision of Cathay, op. cit., p.118.
- ⁵⁶ *Idem*, Chinoiserie. The vision of Cathay, p.120.
- ⁵⁷ *Idem*, Chinoiserie. The vision of Cathay, p.119.
- ⁵⁸ *Idem*, Chinoiserie. The vision of Cathay, p.122.
- ⁵⁹ A.V. Vaccari, Dentro il mobile, op. cit., p.217.
- ⁶⁰ *Idem*, Dentro il mobile, p.217.
- ⁶¹ C. Alberici, Il mobile Veneto, op. cit., p.189.
- ⁶² A.V. Vaccari, Dentro il mobile, op. cit., p.217.
- ⁶³ G. Morazzoni, Mobili veneziani laccati, op. cit., vol. I, p.34.
- ⁶⁴ The description of the technique is adapted from:
C. Alberici, Il mobile Veneto, op. cit., pp.187-8.
And:
A.V. Vaccari, Dentro il mobile, op. cit., p.216.

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