



*Il fascino dell'antico nelle placchette in  
bronzo della Collezione Cagnola*

Supplement to an Oct. 2017 exhibition of  
plaquettes at the Villa Cagnola library

by Michael Riddick

# A selection of plaquettes from the Villa Cagnola: Their Function and Meaning

## THE PLAQUETTE

Plaquettes are small metal reliefs, typically cast in bronze, which belong to the category of Renaissance sculpture. The academic study of plaquettes did not develop until the 1860s during which time the term "plaquette" was invented by the French scholar Eugene Piot. Most early scholars of plaquettes resided in France, Germany and Britain<sup>1</sup> although knowledgeable Italian dealers like Stefano Bardini were at the forefront of encouraging Europe's supply and interest in them through their sale to museums and collectors.

Before their categorization, plaquettes were referred to as *piastre*, *medaglietti* and *rilievi*.<sup>2</sup> Their function as small reliefs was varied during the Renaissance. Plaquettes permeated fashion, were incorporated with utilitarian desktop objects, used as objects of devotion, as decorations for the arms trade, employed in book-binding and were also revered simply as objects-of-virtue. Their reproductive nature also allowed them to serve as models of reference for various artistic tradecrafts like architecture, sculpture, painting and manuscript illumination.<sup>3</sup> As will be discussed, the eight plaquettes featured in the present exhibition touch upon these varied applications and uses.

The Italian appreciation of plaquettes by Renaissance high-society is evinced by the sculptor Moderno (Galeazzo Mondella) whose prolific activity of specializing in small reliefs indicates their appeal during the last part of the Quattrocento and beginning of the Cinquecento.<sup>4</sup> The earlier origin of the plaquette, with its genesis in the 1430s, is due to the influence of Donatello and his circle



Fig. 01: Framed display forming part of the Cagnola family collection (Villa Cagnola, Gazzada)

of collaborators who experimented with the serial nature of devotional reliefs in bronze.<sup>5</sup> In Rome, Filarete likewise experimented with small devotional and secular reliefs in bronze, contributing also to their early development.<sup>6,7</sup>

It is the assembly of these small disparate reliefs into collected groups that eventually became the impetus for plaquettes as an art historical category. One of the earliest known collected group of plaquettes was formed in the first decades of the 16th century near Padua at the Castello di Cataio, which by descent, now forms part of the modern

day Kunsthistorisches collection in Vienna, Austria. Similarly, the *Munich Kunstkammer*, completed in 1578, also included a small group of plaquettes. An early collector of plaquettes was Erasmus of Rotterdam who acquired several in Italy during his travels there in 1506-09 which now form part of the *Amerbach Kabinett* at the Historisches Museum in Basel.<sup>8</sup> The earliest significant group of collected plaquettes in which specific examples are identifiable through descriptive entries are those assembled by John Tradescant the Elder during the late 16th and early 17th century, now forming part of the Ashmolean Museum collections.<sup>9</sup>

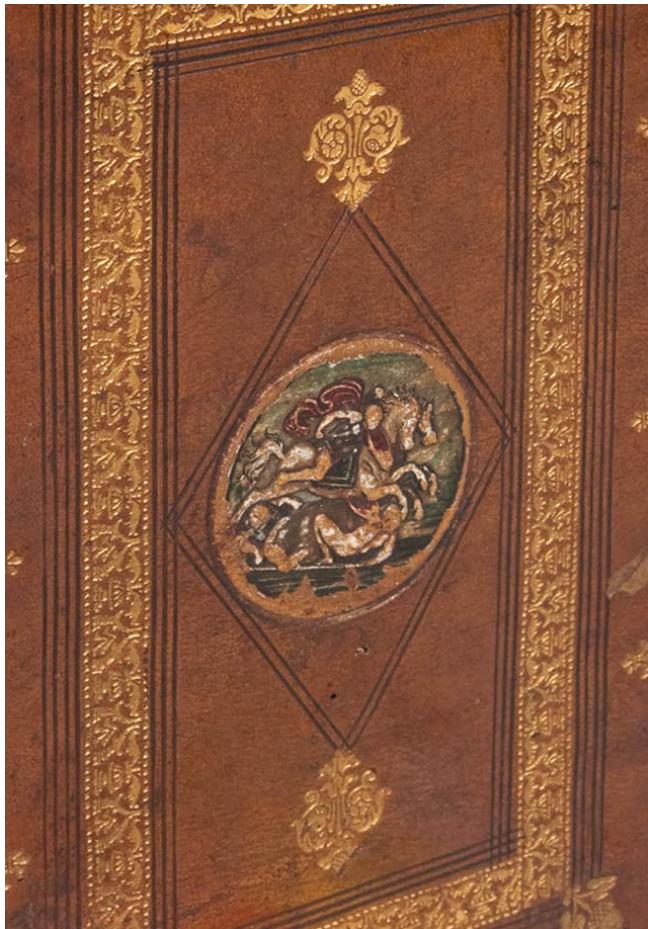


Fig. 02: A blind-stamped impression of Moderno's *Battle Scene* plaque on a Milanese binding, ca. 1510-16, formerly in the library of Jean Grolier (Newberry Library, Chicago)

As humanism spread across Europe so too did an interest in the plaquette. Over the centuries other royals, nobles and men of erudition and curiosity assembled groups of plaquettes which would later comprise the bulk of various collections found today in museums. In the taste of other enterprising nobles of the late 19th century, the Cagnola family also formed a pleasing group of plaquettes which today reside at the Villa Cagnola (Fig. 01).

### THE KINSHIP BETWEEN PLAQUETTES, BOOKS AND THE INDUSTRY OF PRINTING

Of interest to the present exhibit are the selection of Renaissance books in the Cagnola library which offer a window into Italy's cultural milieu of the period and its classical revival of the antique past. These books elaborate the wisdom of the ancients, cloaked in moral allegories and mythological accounts. It is from these themes, so often revitalized in other media like painting, poetry and free-standing sculpture, that the low-relief, miniature yet tactile beauty of plaquettes are equally expressed.

Books and plaquettes share an infrequent but fascinating connection with the incorporation of their designs on late 15th century and early-to-mid 16th century Italian book bindings. For example, a cast of the *Apotheosis of Scipio* by Valerio Belli, represented by one example in the Cagnola collection, is also known by a singular example at the Civic Museum of Vicenza which has been cast in reverse, used as a matrix for blind-stamping the plaquette's design on the leather binding of books. Several of Belli's plaquettes were used for book bindings, such as those in the library of the *Escorial*, on books belonging to the Spanish Ambassador Diego Hurtado de Mendoza, published in Venice during the early 1540s.<sup>10</sup>

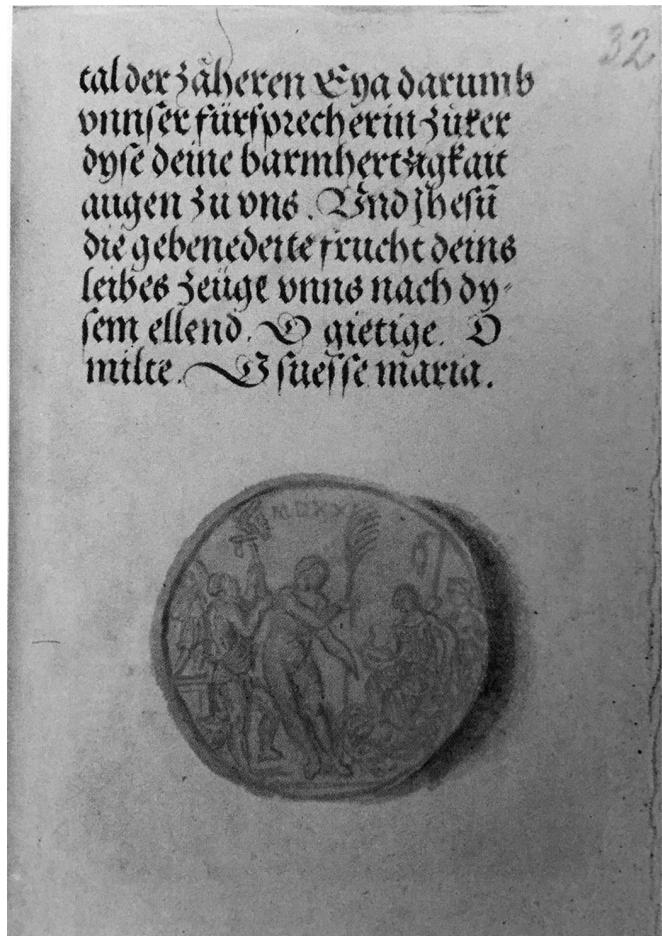
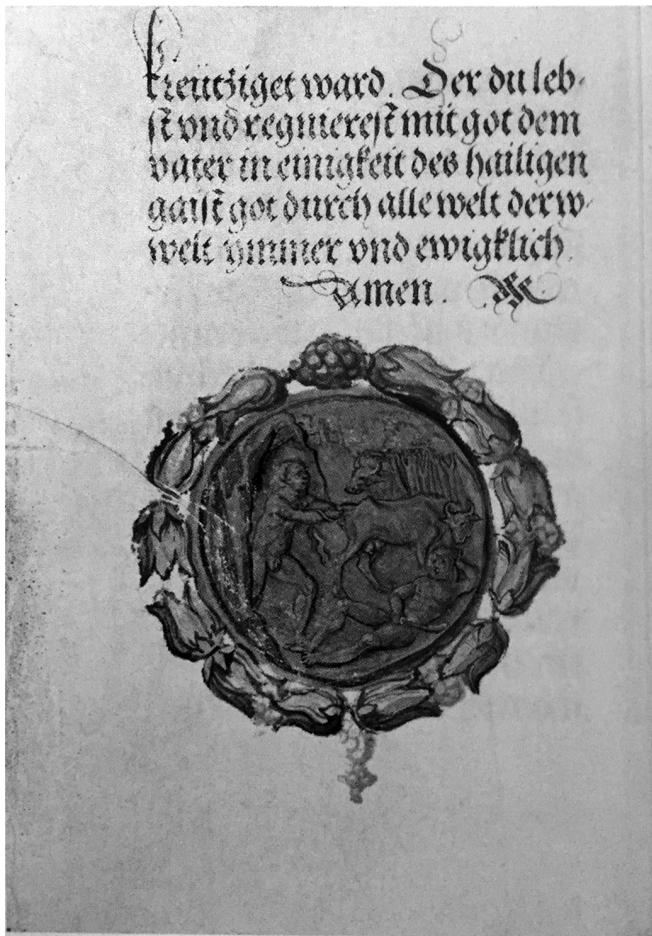


Fig. 03: Illuminations reproducing plaquettes of Moderno's *Cacus Stealing the Oxen of Hercules* (left) and the Master IO.F.F.'s *Triumph of Prudence* (right) by Narziss Renner, Augsburg, 1521, for the prayer book of Matthaus Schwarz

Two other plaquettes represented by examples in this exhibit have also been reproduced on Milanese bindings commissioned by Jean Grolier between 1510-16. The *Sacrifice of Marcus Curtius* by the Master IO.F.F., for example, appears along with his *Horatius Cocles Defending the Bridge*, blind-stamped onto a leather binding of Aristotle's *Opera Gracce* published in Venice in 1498 (British Library). Another book from Grolier's library, a 1504 Venetian edition of John Philoponus' 6th century *Commentary on Aristotle's Posterior Analytics* features Moderno's *Battle Scene* (Fig. 02).<sup>11</sup> Plaquettes in applique-

form, sometimes cast in finer metals like gold and silver, were also occasionally used for the ornamentation of bindings.

Prior to their feature on bindings, plaquettes cast from antique or contemporary hardstones (or derivative plaster impressions thereof) earlier served as models for the illumination of manuscript borders celebrating the classical past.<sup>12</sup> However, later well circulated plaquettes also inspired illuminators such as Narziss Renner in Augsburg, responsible for the 1521 prayer book of Matthaus



Fig. 04: A woodcut featured in Francesco Colonna's *Hynperotomachi Poliphili* (published in Venice, 1499)

Schwarz<sup>13</sup> who reproduced two plaquettes also represented by examples in the present exhibit: Moderno's *Cacus Stealing the Oxen of Hercules* and IO.F.F.'s *Triumph of Prudence* (Fig. 03).

Though infrequent, plaquettes have also served as models for images intended for books, for example Doug Lewis notes a full-page woodcut featured in Francesco Colonna's *Hynperotomachi Poliphili* (Venice, 1499) (Fig. 04) was probably based upon the *Sacrifice of Marcus Curtius* by the Master IO.F.F.<sup>14</sup>



Fig. 05: A woodcut by Lucas Cranach the Elder, ca. 1506, depicting the *Sacrifice of Marcus Curtius* (MET), based upon the Master IO.F.F.'s plaquette of the same subject

Individual prints have certainly been based upon plaquette designs, as the same aforementioned plaquette inspired a slightly later woodcut by Lucas Cranach the Elder, ca. 1506 (Fig. 05). In contrast, woodcuts and engravings have also occasionally served as models for some plaquette makers, especially North of the Alps.

Also of note is the influence of humanistic literature on the clever and occasionally genius designs of plaquette artists. Their compositions indicate these artists were as cultured as the educated patrons they served. For example, Francesco Rossi comments on the assured familiarity of the

*Master of the Orpheus Legend* with the humanist literature of the period, pointing to a possible familiarity with the work of Angelo Poliziano at the Medici court.<sup>15</sup> John Spencer interestingly proposed Moderno's series of reliefs involving the struggles of Hercules and Cacus were not a simple reproduction of antique myth but were rather an interpretive allegory of fortitude inspired by antique and early Christian commentaries on Virgil's *Aenid*.<sup>16</sup> Lewis notes that Moderno may have had access to humanists from the Ferrarese court like Antonio Tebaldeo and Laura Brenzoni Schioppo by way of his brother Girolamo.<sup>17</sup> The avant-garde designs of IO.F.F. indicate a rich and complex knowledge of the literature from the period. Most recently, Lewis has pointed out that IO.F.F.'s *Sacrifice of Marcus Curtius* is a Christianized depiction of the myth possibly inspired by an episode from the *Gesta Romanorum*.<sup>18</sup>

## THE PLAQUETTE IN OTHER MEDIA

Plaquettes also served as models for other forms of two-dimensional art, especially those tied to the minor arts. Two examples concerning plaquettes in the present exhibit are a niello reproducing Moderno's *Cacus Stealing the Oxen of Hercules*<sup>19</sup> (Fig. 06) and another which adapts IO.F.F.'s *Triumph of Prudence*.<sup>20</sup>

With their origin in sculpture, plaquettes also came to influence other works of the genre, especially in relief. For example, Moderno's *Cacus Stealing the Oxen of Hercules* found a certain favor in the region of Blois, France where it is reproduced in stone on the city's main Chateau, ca. 1515-24 and also nearby in Orléans on an oak door, ca. 1520-30, where it is intricately carved on the left-register of its tympanum (Fig. 07).<sup>21 22 23</sup>



Fig. 06: A late 15th century niello plate after Moderno's *Cacus Stealing the Oxen of Hercules* (British Museum)

Of noteworthy import is the scarce plaquette of *Mars, Venus and Cupid at the Forge of Vulcan*<sup>24</sup> by the Master of the *Orpheus Legend*, an example of which is presented in the current exhibition. The plaquette was likely executed in the same period as a large and masterful silver and gold gilt bronze roundel of the same subject, attributed to Gian Marco Cavalli in Mantua and one of the most significant sculptural works of Mantua discovered in recent years (Fig. 08). The presence of an unusually winged Venus in the scene may suggest a common source, possibly literary, for both reliefs or perhaps the influence of one artist's work upon the other which remains possibile considering Cavalli was himself involved in the execution of small reliefs as a goldsmith and medal-maker.<sup>25</sup>

Another example for the translation of plaquettes into sculpture is Cristoforo di Geremia's *Sacrifice to Cupid*, represented by a rare example in this exhibit,<sup>26</sup> which



Fig. 07: Detail of the tympanum of an oak door, ca. 1520-30 from Orléans, France (Victoria & Albert Museum, Inv. 674-1895) reproducing Moderno's *Cacus Stealing the Oxen of Hercules*

served as the model for a motif depicted on a marble relief by Giovanni Antonio Amadeo executed between 1478-80 for the tabernacle of the Virgin at the Milan Cathedral (Fig. 09).

The *Sacrifice to Cupid* represents one of the earliest uses of small relief on utilitarian objects of the Renaissance, serving as the lid to a classicized oil lamp, one of which survives intact at the Victoria & Albert Museum (Fig. 10).<sup>27</sup> These lamps were so convincing in their design and decorative program that the early 17th century antiquarians Paul Petau and Fortunatus Scacchus believed them to be authentic ancient Roman lamps.<sup>28</sup>

In the round, a sculpted *Chimera* in the form of an inkwell and candlestick by Severo da Ravenna (Fig. 11), incorporates a sword pommel depicting Moderno's *Battle*



Fig. 08: A silvered and gilt bronze roundel of *Mars, Venus and Cupid at the Forge of Vulcan*, attributed to Marco Gian Cavalli, Mantuan, ca. 1480-90s (private collection)

*Scene* plaque while a satyr-adorned perfume burner attributed to Desiderio da Firenze features Moderno's *Cacus Stealing the Oxen of Hercules* on its base (Fig. 12). While not the exclusive work of Moderno himself, these functional sculptures exemplify the way in which small reliefs could posthumously be appropriated with other dynamic works-of-art.

It was also common for later workshops, perhaps often provincial ones, to appropriate or plagiarize circulating plaque reliefs for use on other objects. One example is an independent side-panel for a desk casket at the Palazzo Madama, crudely reproducing Belli's *Apotheosis of Scipio* or another reproducing the Orpheus Master's *Mars, Venus and Cupid at the Forge of Vulcan*, redacted from its circular format for use on a casket panel probably forming one side of a sand-box (Fig. 13).



Fig. 09: Detail of a marble relief depicting a candelabrum by Giovanni Antonio Amadeo, 1478-80, for the tabernacle of the Virgin at the Milan Cathedral, reproducing Cristoforo di Geremia's *Sacrifice to Cupid*

Of final note is the incorporation of plaquettes on sword hilts. All of the major plaquette artists: Moderno, IO.F.F. and Riccio, were involved in producing plaquettes for the arms industry. Chief among them was IO.F.F. whose output probably also included the creation of the pommels as well. The influence of his work carried over into other facets of the trade where one can observe Bolognese sword sheaths and damascened or engraved blades reproducing scenes characteristic of IO.F.F.'s style or in some cases reproducing his designs. For example, an Emilian short-sword, ca. 1480-1500 at the Museo Bardini (Florence) features IO.F.F.'s *Triumph of Prudence* engraved on its blade.<sup>29</sup>

Although it is a later aftercast, the rare example<sup>30</sup> of IO.F.F.'s *Sacrifice of Marcus Curtius* featured in this exhibit is the only known surviving example of the relief displayed in its original context as a sword pommel. The pommel



Fig. 10: An oil lamp attributed to Cristoforo di Geremia, Mantua or Rome, ca. 1470s, featuring his plaque relief of a *Sacrifice to Cupid* (Victoria & Albert Museum)

represents a type intended for IO.F.F.'s "shield shaped" plaquettes which Mario Scalini has noted was probably a pommel more practical in its functionality for battle than IO.F.F.'s other pommels intended for dress swords.

A pommel-type like the one featured here on the Cagnola example is eloquently reproduced in Amico Friulano del Dosso's *Portrait of a Man*, ca. 1515-20 (cover image).

- Michael Riddick (August, 2017)



Fig. 11: Detail of the foot of a *Chimera* attributed to Severo da Ravenna, Paduan, ca. 1500, featuring an example of Moderno's *Battle Scene* (Bode Museum, Inv. 1943)



Fig. 13: Detail of an early 16th century bronze panel, probably for a sandbox, reproducing the Master of the Orpheus Legend's *Mars, Venus and Cupid at the Forge of Vulcan* (far-left register) (Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence)



Fig. 12: An engraving attributed to Nicolas Dorigny, ca. 1720 (British Museum), of a perfume burner formerly in the Earl of Oxford's collection and now at the Rijksmuseum, probably by Desiderio da Firenze, Paduan, ca. 1530-40. An example of Moderno's *Cacus Stealing the Oxen of Hercules* is incorporated on its base.

# Endnotes

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- 1 John Pope-Hennessey (1989): The Study of Italian Plaquettes. Vol. 22 *Studies in the History of Art. Italian Plaquettes*. National Gallery of Art, Washington DC., pp. 19-32
- 2 Dora Thornton and Luke Syson (2004): *Objects of Virtue: Art in Renaissance Italy*. British Museum, London. p. 117
- 3 Marika Leino (2013): *Fashion, Devotion and Contemplation. The Status and Functions of Italian Renaissance Plaquettes*. Peter Lang, Bern, Switzerland.
- 4 Doug Lewis (1989): The Plaquettes of "Moderno" and His Followers. Vol. 22 *Studies in the History of Art. Italian Plaquettes*. National Gallery of Art, Washington DC., pp. 105-41
- 5 Doug Lewis (2001). Rehabilitating a Fallen Athlete: Evidence for a Date of 1453-54 in the Veneto for the Bust of a Platonic Youth by Donatello. *Studies in the History of Art*, No. 62. National Gallery of Art. Yale University Press.
- 6 Pietro Cannata (1989): Le Placchette del Filarete. Vol. 22 *Studies in the History of Art. Italian Plaquettes*. National Gallery of Art, Washington DC., pp. 35-52
- 7 Of related note is Filarete's often overlooked contribution to the genesis of the Renaissance medal, possibly even preceding Pisanello, to whom the medal's invention is presently ascribed. See Robert Glass (2015): Filarete and the Invention of the Renaissance Medal. *The Medal*, No. 66. Trustees of the British Museum, UK., pp. 26-37.
- 8 Doug Lewis (2008): Collectors of Renaissance Reliefs: Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536) and Baron Boissel de Monville (1763-1832). Collecting Sculpture in Early Modern Europe, *Studies in the History of Art* 70, *Symposium Papers XLVII*. National Gallery of Art, Washington DC., pp. 128-43
- 9 Jeremy Warren (2014): *Medieval and Renaissance Sculpture in the Ashmolean Museum*, Vol. 3: *Plaquettes*. Ashmolean Museum Publications, UK.
- 10 Davide Banzato, Maria Beltramini and Davide Gasparotto (2000): *Placchette, bronzetti e cristalli incisi dei Musei Civici di Vicenza. Secoli XV-XVIII*. Regione Siciliana, Verona.
- 11 Anthony Hobson (2012): *Humanists and Bookbinders. The Origins and Diffusion of Humanistic Bookbinding, 1459-1559*. Cambridge University Press, UK.
- 12 M. Leino (2013), *op. cit.* (note 3), pp. 68-80
- 13 J. Warren (2014), *op. cit.* (note 9), pp. 762-77
- 14 Doug Lewis (2017), No. 157, entry for NGA Inv. 1957.14.478 (unpublished manuscript, accessed August 2017, with thanks to Anne Halpern, Department of Curatorial Records and Files): *Systematic Catalogue of the Collections, Renaissance Plaquettes*. National Gallery of Art, Washington DC. Trustees of the National Gallery of Art
- 15 Francesco Rossi (2011): *La Collezione Mario Scaglia - Placchette, Vols. I-III*. Lubrina Editore, Bergamo. pp. 93-94
- 16 John Spencer (1969): Two Bronze Plaquettes by Moderno. *Allen Memorial Art Museum Bulletin* 27:1, pp. 2-11
- 17 D. Lewis (1989), *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 111
- 18 D. Lewis (2017), *op. cit.* (note 14)
- 19 British Museum Inv. 1845-8-25-96
- 20 For the latter, see D. Lewis (2017), *op. cit.* (note 14)
- 21 Bertrand Bergbauer (2006): *Images in Relief. La Collection de Plaquettes du Musee National de la Renaissance*. Editions de la Reunion des musees nationaux, Paris, France. pp. 27-29
- 22 The door is in the Victoria & Albert Museum, Inv. 674-1895
- 23 It is to be wondered if one catalyst for the diffusion of Moderno's designs in France may have been due to his presumed sojourn there, ca. 1513-15, with his pupil Matteo del Nassaro. For a history of Moderno's career see D. Lewis (1989), *op. cit.* (note 4), pp. 105-06
- 24 Inclusive of the Cagnola example, only 6 casts of the Orpheus Master's *Mars, Venus and Cupid at the Forge of Vulcan* have been published or cited and one of this group was destroyed in WWII, leaving only 5 known surviving examples.
- 25 The correspondences between the Orpheus Master's plaque and the large roundel by Cavalli were brought to the present author's attention by Eleonora Luciano (private communication, October 2015).
- 26 Inclusive of the Cagnola example, only 16-17 casts of Cristoforo di Geremia's *Sacrifice to Cupid* have been published or cited (census based on the collected data of Doug Lewis and the present author). For Lewis' census see D. Lewis (2017), No. 90, entry for NGA Inv. 1957.14.344 (unpublished manuscript, accessed August 2017, with thanks to Anne Halpern, Department of Curatorial Records and Files): *Systematic Catalogue of the Collections, Renaissance Plaquettes*. National Gallery of Art, Washington DC. Trustees of the National Gallery of Art
- 27 Victoria & Albert Museum, Inv. M.674-1910
- 28 Anthony Radcliffe (1989): Two Early Romano-Mantuan Plaquettes. Vol. 22 *Studies in the History of Art. Italian Plaquettes*. National Gallery of Art, Washington DC., pp. 93-103
- 29 Christopher Fulton (1989): The Master IO.F.F. and the Function of Plaquettes. Vol. 22 *Studies in the History of Art. Italian Plaquettes*. National Gallery of Art, Washington DC., pp. 143-62
- 30 Inclusive of the Cagnola example, only 22 casts of IO.F.F.'s *Sacrifice of Marcus Curtius* have been published or cited (census based on the collected data of Doug Lewis and the present author). For Lewis' census see D. Lewis (2017), *op. cit.* (note 14)