

THE PAXES OF GIOVANNI BATTISTA PANZERI AND HIS WORKSHOP

by Michael Riddick



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Fig. 01: Parade armor for Archduke Ferdinand II by Giovanni Battista Panzeri and Marco Antonio Fava, 1559 (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria)

As concerns the subject of small Renaissance relief-work in metal, frequently categorized under the art historical genre of “plaquettes,” a minor outlier in this field-of-study are examples prepared in steel using the repoussé and embossing technique with its surface highlighted in damascened gold and silver rather than the more typical feature of gilding.

Unlike softer metals, like silver or thin sheets of copper, the metals most frequently used for repoussé and embossing; hammering a relief into hard steel was a labor of endurance and craftsmanship like none other.¹

The territory of this art reached its zenith in Milan, Italy, whose skilled craftsmen, adept in the creation of damascened steel armor and weapons, was uniquely celebrated and in high-demand all throughout 16th century Europe.² In 1559 the Milanese workshop of Giovanni Battista Panzeri produced the elaborate parade armor of Archduke Ferdinand II of Tyrol, now preserved at the Kunsthistorisches Museum,



Fig. 02: Travelling devotional altar, damascened steel with reverse-painted crystals probably by Giovanni Battista Panzeri, his workshop, and Agostino Decio, ca. 1574 (Victoria & Albert Museum, London, UK)

Fig. 03: Damascened steel reliquary altar by Giovanni Battista Panzeri and workshop (El Escorial, Spain)



and today considered the pinnacle of artistry and craftsmanship in the history of armor making (Fig. 01).

Although chiefly celebrated for their production in the arms trade, these skilled Milanese craftsmen also less commonly made exquisite furniture, especially small cabinets, desks and other precious utilitarian objects tailored to the tastes of wealthy patrons desiring one-of-a-kind masterworks epitomizing luxury. In particular,

two artists appear to have almost exclusively capitalized on this market: Giovanni Battista Panzeri, already noted, and Giovanni Antonio Polacini, who both, at-times, collaborated with one another in business.³ To offer perspective on the exclusivity of the commodities they produced, a tabernacle commissioned by Ferdinand II, from Giovan Antonio Polacini and the damascener Marco Antonio Fava in 1576, was completed at the price of 2,000 florins, nearly the cost of a private Renaissance palace!⁴

The outlier objects produced by these Milanese armorers were frequently embellished by wooden frameworks beset with low-relief, elaborate gold-and-silver damascened steel scenes of mythology, allegory, and tales of Marcus Curtius, being subjects frequently preferred by patrons of arms and armor. Additional embellishments, such as small statuary in fine metals, were also occasionally incorporated, like those made by Giuseppe de Vico which feature on an elaborate cabinet also at the Kunsthistorisches (Inv. Kunstkammer 879).



Fig. 04: Damascened steel plaque or pax relief of *Christ Raised from the Tomb*, probably workshop of Giovanni Battista Panzeri, ca. 1570 (Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence, Italy)

Especially scarce to this eccentric genre were the production of devotional objects featuring religious subject matter. One travelling devotional altar, in the form of a façade featuring *God the Father* in an arched tympanum with angels flanking variably throughout its design, is known by two identical examples, including one whose traveling case is dated 1574 (Fig. 02).⁵ Other examples include a remarkable tabernacle clock, dated 1579, incorporating large damascened statuettes of *Moses* and *David* in the Wernher collection,⁶ and what is arguably the masterpiece of the genre: a reliquary tabernacle in the form of a church, made for Spain's *El Escorial*, kept in its Monastery of San Lorenzo (Fig. 03). On stylistic grounds these creations may be reasonably placed with Panzeri and his workshop. Notably, Giovan Paolo Lomazzo, in 1587, praised the *El Escorial* tabernacle in his poem celebrating Panzeri's ingenuity and skill.⁷

Another work of this kind, already noted, was Polacini's tabernacle commissioned by Ferdinand II for the Parish Church of St. Oswald in Seefeld, Austria, dismantled and dispersed during the 19th century.⁸

A few further examples of this genre, portraying religious subject matter, include outliers that are fragments of former complete objects-of-art. Of note are a frame, perhaps once featuring a mirror or a relief, surmounted by the *Risen Christ* with flanking angels in niches at the Petit Palais in Paris,⁹ a plaque depicting the *Holy Family* at the Museo Poldi-Pezzoli, a plaque-relief in a private UK collection which would have probably formed

one of the interior panels for a tabernacle,¹⁰ and four plaquettes featuring scenes of *Christ being raised from the tomb by angels*, known by examples at the Museo Nazionale del Bargello (Fig. 04),¹¹ one formerly with Frédéric Spitzer,¹² a crude applique at the Metropolitan Museum of Art¹³ and an example formerly in the collection of



Fig. 05: Damascened steel plaquette or pax relief of *Christ Raised from the Tomb* with a tympanum of *God the Father*, probably workshop of Giovanni Battista Panzeri, ca. 1570 (private collection)

Edmond Bonnaffée (Fig. 05).¹⁴ The latter was first discussed in context of its relationship to Milanese damascened cabinets and desks by Louvre curator, Albert Jacquemart, in his posthumously published “*A History of Furniture*,” in 1876.¹⁵ Notably, this example is accompanied also by a tympanum plaquette of *God the Father*, suggesting both it and the central relief were once set into a pax frame. Similarly, the Bargello, MET and Spitzer collection reliefs would have also been intended for probable use on paxes. Their original frames are either lost or were never completed.

Notably, one complete pax of this kind survives fully preserved at the Museo Poldi-Pezzoli in Milan (Fig. 06).¹⁶ The pax is comprised of various plates, prepared separately and inclusive of a free-form tympanum, similar to the Bonnaffée example, which surmounts the top of its frame. Interestingly, the frame is unlike those common to other paxes of Milanese origin from the mid-to-late 16th century. Its style, although influenced by Classical forms, is specifically borrowed from paxes popularly produced in Spain during this period, such as those made by Francisco Becerril,¹⁷ Juan da Horna el Joven,¹⁸ and their followers. Particularly characteristic are the protruding three-dimensional bases and upper-frieze, supported by cast columns fully in-the-round. While similar features are observed on some contemporary Lombard paxes, the distinct Spanish style is observed in the heightened base and general austerity of the design, lacking the pomp-and-flare observed on other related Lombard paxes.

The distinct character of the Poldi-Pezzoli pax exemplifies the Spanish influences occurring in Milan during the period in which Spain managed the political affairs of the city.¹⁹ The pax, and others potentially like it, may have been prepared intentionally this way to meet the contemporary tastes of patrons from Spain who may have resided in Milan. It is evident Panzeri had patrons in Spain, not only in the export of weapons and armor, but also on account of the tabernacle for *El Escorial* and one example of the travelling



Fig. 06: Damascened steel pax depicting *Christ Raised from the Tomb*, here attributed to Giovanni Battista Panzeri and workshop, ca. 1560 (Museo Poldi-Pezzoli, Milan, Italy)

house altar whose patron appears to have been the Delgado family of Spain.²⁰

The relief scene of the Poldi-Pezzoli pax is very close to the embossing style of Panzeri and may be the only pax referenced in surviving documents concerning the genre. In late 1557 and early 1558 Panzeri continued a business partnership with the damascener, Marco Antonio Fava, intending to pool their credits, debts and inventory.²¹ In 1560 this collaboration was renewed for another three years, providing an inventory of objects in their workshop, notably inclusive of a “small pax,” just started, at the posh price of 200 lire.²²

It is notable all five surviving pax reliefs feature the same motif of *Christ raised from the tomb by angels*, suggesting a shared model was circulated among the few craftsman dedicated to this art and suggestive of an origin in a single workshop or through the close-knit business channel generally fostered between Panzeri and Polacini. The varying sculptural quality and damascened technique among the reliefs infers the employ of different workshop assistants. Documents mention the occasional outsourcing of embossing and damascening to a minority of skilled craftsman like the damasceners Gerolamo Gatti and the “Flemish Master Giovanni,” or the wood-carver, Anselmo del Conte,²³ and while Panzeri is practically the exclusive producer of devotional-themed objects-of-this-type, on account of style it is unlikely he worked directly on these reliefs with exception of the Poldi-Pezzoli example.



Fig. 07: Damascened steel plaquettes attributed to Giovanni Battista Panzeri and workshop, ca. 1570, set into a later 19th century replacement cabinet (Museo Poldi-Pezzoli, Milan, Italy)

Stylistically, the Bonnaffée example is almost certainly by the same embosser responsible for a cabinet at the Museo Poldi-Pezzoli,²⁴ judged ca. 1570, and conjectured to be from Panzeri's workshop (Fig. 07). Two replacement reliefs and its wood housing are from the 19th century, with the cabinet made in 1865 by Giuseppe Speluzzi but its original plaquettes feature the same low-profile relief figures, similar damascening

style, and a dependency on heavily-chased and engraved afterwork. There is also a preference for uneven, thick, short strokes to delineate ground and a preferred articulation of faces in three-quarter perspective with simplistically realized faces (Fig. 08). These characteristics also share idiosyncrasies with an embosser and chaser in Panzeri's workshop who may have been involved in the production of the relief plates depicting



Fig. 08: Details from the Poldi-Pezzoli cabinet (fig. 07) (left-and-right); detail of pax (fig. 05) (center), probably an assistant in the workshop of Giovanni Battista Panzeri, ca. 1570.

biblical scenes along the exterior of the *El Escorial* tabernacle. The interior reliefs of the tabernacle are by a more able hand, possibly Panzeri himself, with some assistance, while the exterior panels may be the work of one or more workshop assistants. Two of these assistants were possibly the master of the Bonnaffée example and a second, more-talented hand, responsible for the Bargello plaque, whose delineation of vegetation and foliage, and a preference for featuring faces-in-profile, is similarly adept when compared against several of the *El Escorial* reliefs.

The technique of embossing and damascening steel was an intensively laborious task. In addition to the precious materials involved, the labor involved made this an expensive object-genre. Steel would be heated and cooled, in this case, also blackened, and worked in repoussé. This was a challenging process while the damascening was equally demanding with the careful carving and chasing of hatched channels into the steel followed by the hammering of precious inlay gold or silver into the cavities without use of adhesive,

a method called overlay damascening. The rarity of these plaquettes is attested to by the short window-of-time in which they were ably produced by experts in their trade, a period between 1554-81.²⁵

Note: The present article is a general recapitulation of Silvio Leydi's footnote 31 in his 2016 article concerning this artistic genre (see our endnote 3 for reference). We add here only our observations of the Spanish influence upon Panzeri's pax design and our stylistic hypotheses that theoretically delineates the workmanship of certain craftsmen in his workshop. With thanks to Leydi for his provision of resources which helped contribute to this article.

Endnotes

- 1 For a discussion on embossed and repoussé steel-work, see Donald J. La Rocca (2017): *How to Read European Armor*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY.
- 2 Silvio Leydi (1998): Milan and the Arms Industry in the Sixteenth Century. *Heroic Armor of the Italian Renaissance: Filippo Negroli and His Contemporaries*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY, pp. 25-35.
- 3 Silvio Leydi (2016): Mobili milanesi in acciaio e metalli preziosi nell'età del Manierismo. *Fatto in Italia. Dal Medioevo al Made in Italy*. Silvana Editoriale, Turin, pp. 121-37.
- 4 Silvio Leydi (2019): Due altari gemelli in acciaio del secondo cinquecento Milanese. *Nuovi Studi*, no. 24, pp. 79-91.
- 5 The two altars are located at the Victoria & Albert Museum, Inv. M.54-1930; and in a private collection (Eve auction house, 19 Dec 2019, Lot 717).
- 6 Located at Ranger's House, London, UK.
- 7 Giovanni Paolo Lamazzo (1587): *Rime di Gio. Paolo Lomazi milanese pittore diuise in sette libri : nelle quali ad imitatione de i Grotteschi vsati da' pittori, ha cantato le lodi di Dio & de le cose sacre, di prencipi, di signori, & huomini letterati, di pittori, scoltori, & architetti : et poi studiosamente senza alcun certo ordine, e legge accoppiato insieme vari & diuersi concetti tolti da filosofi, historici, poeti, & da altri scrittori : dove si viene a dimostrare la diversità de gli studi, inclinationi, costumi, & capricci de gli huomini di qualunque stato & professione ; et però intitolate grotteschi, non solo deletteuoli per la varietà de le inuentioni, mà vtili ancora per la moralità che vi si contiene : con la vita del auttore descritta da lui stesso in rime sciolte*. Paolo Gottardo Pontio, Milan, p. 132.
- 8 S. Leydi (2019): *op.cit.* (note 4).
- 9 Petit Palais, Paris.
- 10 The relief features an *Entombment* scene and was formerly in the Johan Willem Frederiks collection. See Morton and Eden auction, London, 18 April 2002, Lot 575. The style of this relief relates favorably with the manner of embossed figures observed on three published panels from the, now dismantled, St. Oswald tabernacle by Polacini. It could be wondered if this plaque-relief was once part of the presumed relief program for its interior or exterior doors. For images of the St. Oswald panels see Michael Riddick (2020): *An Adoration and Lamentation of Iberian-Italian origin*. Renbronze.com.
- 11 Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Inv. 739.
- 12 *Catalogue des objets d'art et de haute curiosité antiques, du moyen-âge & de la renaissance, composant l'importante et précieuse Collection Spitzer, 16 Juin 1893, Vol. II*, no. 2538.
- 13 Metropolitan Museum of Art, Inv. Inv. 29.158.425.
- 14 Before Bonnaffée, these plaquettes were formerly at *Château de Chambord*, probably dispersed with other furniture and treasures in 1792, following the French Revolution.
- 15 See p. 327.
- 16 Museo Poldi-Pezzoli, Inv. Oreficerie 223.
- 17 For example, compare against his paxes at *El Escorial* or in Zaragoza and its region.
- 18 For example, compare against a pax at the Petit Palais, Paris, Inv. ODUT1271.
- 19 For a discussion on the cross-pollination of artistic ideas between Spain and Italy during the 16th century see Kelley Helmstutler Di Dio and Tommaso Mozzati (eds.) (2020): *Artistic Circulation between Early Modern Spain and Italy*. Routledge, UK.
- 20 S. Leydi (2016): *op. cit.* (note 3).
- 21 S. Leydi (2016): *op. cit.* (note 3) see footnote 21.
- 22 S. Leydi (2016): *op. cit.* (note 3) see footnote 32.
- 23 Leydi suggests this worker could be the "Master Anselmo" frequently cited in documents pertaining to Panzeri's workshop, which seems quite probable. See S. Leydi (2016): *op. cit.* (note 3), see footnote 32.
- 24 Museo Poldi-Pezzoli, Inv. Inv. 415.
- 25 S. Leydi (2016): *op. cit.* (note 3).