



IDENTIFYING A RELIEF SCENE BY
CRISTOFORO FOPPA, CALLED CARADOSSO

by Michael Riddick

Identifying a relief scene by Cristoforo Foppa, called Caradosso

A bronze plaquette attributed to Cristoforo Foppa (called Caradosso), depicting a maritime scene, is known in square and circular variants (fig. 01). As Leo Planiscig has suggested, the prototype was probably originally intended for a desktop object, such as an inkwell,¹ and quite probably

destined for a patron's *studiolo*. The circular versions are a later iteration of the relief, evident by the added striated exergue not present on the original square casts of the plaquette, although the square variants appear to truncate the cliff shown along the left edge of the circular casts. The widespread



Fig. 01 – Circular bronze plaquette, here identified as a scene of *Pearl Fishing*, attributed to Caradosso (left; Museo Nazional di Ravenna); square bronze plaquette, here identified as a scene of *Pearl Fishing*, attributed to Caradosso (right; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC)



Fig. 02 – *Scarabattolo* by Domenico Remps, ca. 1690s, oil on shaped canvas (Museo dell'Opificio delle Pietre Dure, Florence)

circulation of these plaquettes is proposed by the quantity of surviving casts in various public and private collections and is further indication of their prized appreciation from the end of the 15th century into the early 16th century.

Uniquely, however, this composition is one of the least understood in the genre of plaquette

scholarship. The subject has confounded scholars to the point of simply delegating its description to a “Maritime Scene.”²

However, it is confounding that such an evidently popular plaquette has not gathered a proper interpretation, due certainly to a lack of understanding its original context within the epoch of Renaissance aristocratic culture.



Fig. 03 – *Pearl Fishers* by Alessandro Allori, ca. 1570-72, oil on slate (Palazzo Vecchio, Florence)

The typical methodology for interpreting the meaning of plaquettes does not seem to apply, as Beltrand Jestaz amply notes, the relief is unique in that its scene is naturalistic, bearing no historical, mythological or religious pretext.³

Nonetheless, this has not kept scholars from proposing some interesting suggestions like Giuseppe and Fiorenza-Vannel Toderi who contemplated the possibility it could relate somehow to the voyage of Ulysses,⁴ in spite of the scene remaining inconsistent with any specific component of that story. Alternatively, Jestaz, in observing the possible reflection of the moon on the water within the relief, contemplated if it might represent a scene of the moon's influence on men and their work in the nautical world.⁵ Most recently Francesco Rossi has suggested it could represent a scene of the *Calling of the Apostles*—being both narrative and symbolic—and making an interesting comparison with a painting of the *Miraculous Draft of Fishes* by the Swabian painter Konrad Witz.⁶ This latter theory has been the most creatively interpretive idea, however, the present author here suggests the scene possibly represents the act of pearl fishing.

Such scenes were later painted in the 16th century for the *studios* of collectors and their curiosity cabinets, such as the Grand Dukes of Tuscany. The 16th century collecting of bronze plaquettes were certainly an addition to such cabinets and *studios*. For example, the collection of Basilius Amerbach kept in the Historisches Museum in Basel⁷ or the early Munich *Kunstkammer*.⁸

Domenico Remps' *trompe-l'oeil* painting, *Scarabattolo*, provides a pictorial example of how plaquettes would have been displayed in later cabinets of the Baroque era (fig. 02)⁹ and cabinets and studios of the late 15th and 16th century were known to include bronze medals, plaquettes and statuettes.¹⁰

Caradosso's scene of pearl fishing would have been the perfect visual anecdote for displaying alongside a set of precious pearls in the environment of a curiosity cabinet or *studio* and also impetus for the continual aftercasting of his invention in bronze for highborn Renaissance collectors.

An exemplary though fanciful depiction of pearl fishing is observed in Alessandro Allori's painting of 1570-72 made for the private *studio* of Francesco I de' Medici

at the Palazzo Vecchio (fig. 03).¹¹ In this representation we can observe a cliff-like scene in which the protagonists are in various states of dress and other characters in their boats lean over to scour the waves for treasures. As Jestaz amply observed, the moon is reflected on the water in Caradosso's relief and this

could indicate the twilight time in which pearl fishing would have been most productive, if not indicating a hunting diver. On the relief we observe also in the foreground a sitter with his basket, uniquely of the string-net variety that would have been employed by 16th century harvesters.¹² In the distant

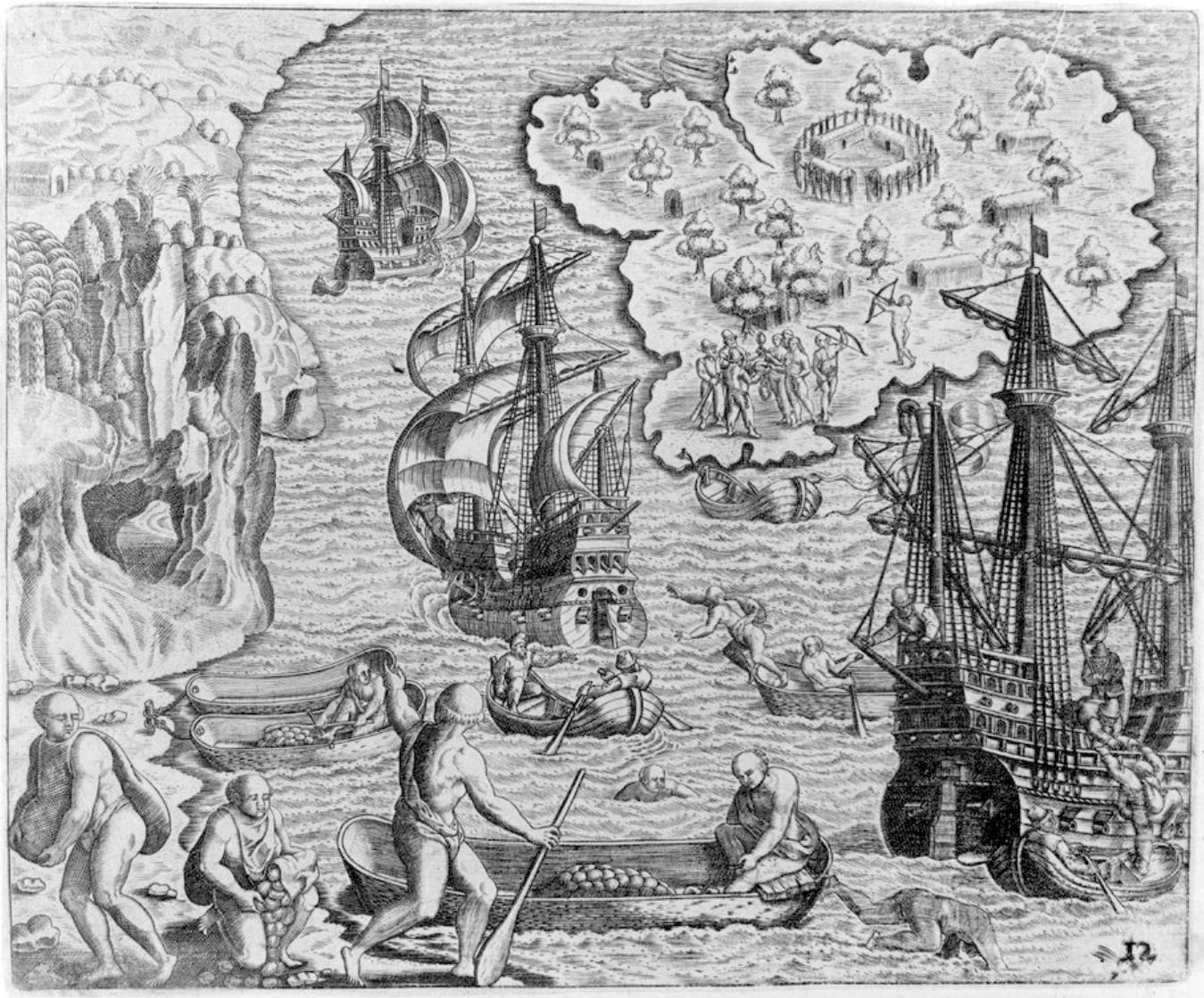


Fig. 04 – *The Island of Pearls* by Theodor de Bry, 1594, engraving after Girolamo Benzoni

background is observed the feature of a small triton, considered in antiquity as guardian of precious sea-borne treasures.

Other early pictorial examples of pearl fishing are known of the period, such as an analogous representation, more practical than fanciful, observed in a woodcut featured in Girolamo Benzoni's *Historia del mondo nuovo*, published in Venice in 1565—reinterpreted by Theodor de Bry in 1594 (fig. 04)—and another much cruder depiction, albeit analogous in its portrayal of flanking cliffs, featured on a woodcut in Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés' *Historia general de las Indias* of 1535.¹³ Following Allori's fantastic treatment of the subject is Jacopo Zucchi who would subsequently paint his *Coral Fishery* composition for Francesco's brother, Cardinal Ferdinando de' Medici's *studiolo* at the Palazzo Firenze.¹⁴

The only lacking item securing this proposed theory on the subject of Caradosso's plaque is the inexplicable lack of any depiction of sea-borne items like corals, exotic shells, oysters or clams. However, such items were yet absent in the aforenoted early woodcuts and

if we consider that the original artwork could have been carved in mother-of-pearl, such a representation would be implied inherently by its medium.

This idea is not far from probability when considering Teseo Ambrogio's edification of Caradosso's knowledge of 'all kinds of pearls.'¹⁵ Ambrogio continually praised Caradosso's talents as a gem engraver and it would remain within reason that he could have executed carved pearls or have worked mother-of-pearl in relief as was already tradition in other North European territories, for example. Mother-of-pearl was already a feature in the work of Caradosso's contemporary, Galeazzo Mondella (called Moderno) who incorporated *nielled* mother-of-pearl on his most precious paxes and even incorporated four pearls, now lost, on a pax he probably executed for the Gonzaga family and preserved today in the treasury of Mantua Cathedral.^{16 17}

If the attribution of this relief to Caradosso remains accepted, his clever execution of such a composition in mother-of-pearl, would not only exemplify his own Italianized approach to an art already practiced in Northern

territories, but also one emphasizing the creative union between nature's most precious creations and that of the precious art of the goldsmith.¹⁸

We can imagine if this relief, engraved in mother-of-pearl, was originally one of several scenes decorating the walls of an elaborate inkwell, and framed in silver, it would be no wonder such a precious object would gain the immediate interest and esteem of the collecting class of patrons of its era. We are already aware of the memory of Caradosso's magnificent mythology-themed inkwell that prompted Cardinal Giovanni d'Aragona to offer 1,500 gold pieces for it, and we can assume the relief depicting *Pearl Fishing* equally formed another of the 'splendid and well known,' artworks lauded by Ambrogio Leone of Caradosso's creativity.¹⁹

One possible work is that of an additional inkwell Caradosso offered to Isabella d'Este in July of 1505.²⁰ Isabella's collecting interests was a lifelong passion²¹ and the noblewoman had previously considered a vase made by Caradosso for inclusion in her *studiolo*.²² In the previous year he had assisted Isabella in

smaller commissions involving the setting of stones for jewelry, for example, and Isabella, an enthusiast of pearls—as evinced in her suggested portraits and descriptions of her jewelry—would be a probable candidate for the receipt or commission of such an artwork during the first part of the 16th century.²³ If reasonable, this could shift the dating of Caradosso's relief perhaps to circa 1504.

In plaque scholarship it is already reasoned that the present relief could not have formed part of the program for the prized inkwell described by Leone, presumably made during the 1480s, and is thus delegated to a later date in Caradosso's career. In particular, Rossi has suggested the 1490s due to the figure on the right of the relief whose effigy appears to be borrowed from a character featured on the relief program for the terracotta stringcourse frieze along the portal of Palazzo Stanga in Cremona, realized during first part of the 1490s.²⁴

The subject matter of the Cremona frieze was derived from ancient Roman sarcophagi known in Lombardy during the late 15th century whose motifs were further circulated

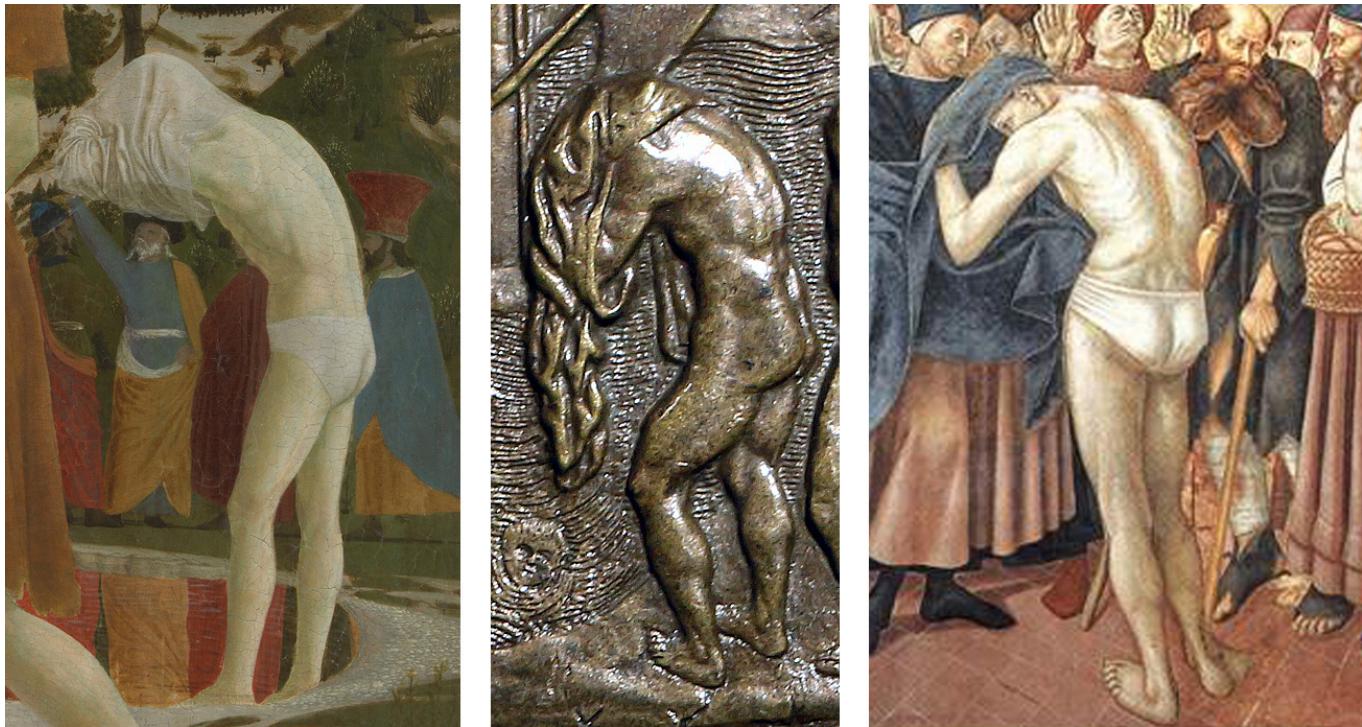


Fig. 05 – Detail of the *Baptism of Christ* by Piero della Francesca, ca. 1448-50, tempera on panel (left; National Gallery, London); detail of a circular bronze plaquette, here identified as a scene of *Pearl Fishing*, attributed to Caradosso (center; Museo Nazional di Ravenna); detail of *The Reception of Pilgrims and Distribution of Alms* by Domenico di Bartolo, ca. 1441-42, fresco painting (right; Ospedale di Santa Maria Nuova)

through prints and drawings. In one instance, a motif was derived from a scene on a medal by Antico, notwithstanding the tondos whose effigies were similarly borrowed from Renaissance medals and ancient coins.²⁵ It's within reason that the present plaquette may yet be an early invention, having either inspired the figure on this frieze program or alternatively, could have employed the same model already in circulation during this period.

Pietro Cannata has also pointed out that the central figure of the plaquette appears to reference the neophyte in the background of Piero della Francesca's *Baptism of Christ*, ca. 1448-50, executed for the Tuscan Monastery of Sansepolcro (fig. 05, left). However, the present author observes a slightly earlier fresco painting by Domenico di Bartolo at the hospital of Santa Maria Nuova in Siena that reproduces a similar motif (fig. 05, right).²⁶ It is to be wondered if the two painters could have been familiar with the same motif,

circulated through drawings and sketches during the 1440s. It would appear Caradosso more likely borrowed from the Siena painting, evident in the articulate positioning of the protagonist's feet in the composition.

However, this begs to question whether Caradosso could have been familiar with this artwork as he is not documented as having traveled to Siena. It's possible he could have encountered a sketch of the subject as indicated by its possible circulation. However, the essence of Caradosso's relief also seems to convey a potentially superficial awareness of the later fresco cycle at the Piccolomini Library in Sienna, commissioned by Cardinal Francesco Piccolomini Todeschini from the Pinturicchio workshop in 1502 and completed in 1508. It is to be wondered if Caradosso might have been aware of this project during its undertaking. Although he is chiefly in Rome during this period, his whereabouts are not ascertained in 1506 and Caradosso certainly knew Todeschini, a prolific antiquarian, during the 1490s.²⁷

Concerning a possible awareness of the hospital Santa Maria Nuovo frescos, we

may note that in the Spring of 1490, upon returning to Milan from Hungary, it was recommended Caradosso travel to Siena to negotiate with Francesco di Giorgio on behalf of the authorities at the Duomo di Milano but the mission was instead taken up by Antonio da Giassiati and Caradosso instead traveled to Venice to buy gems for Ludovico Sforza.²⁸ This initial suggestion to visit Siena may have been stimulus for a possible future journey to that city. For example, Caradosso's activity is untraced also between 1490-92 and from May 1493 through the end of 1494.



Fig. 06 – *A Fishing Scene*, anonymous, Rome 2nd-3rd cent., sardonyx cameo (Hermitage Museum, inv. 12435)

In addition to possible influences from Siena it is also worth mentioning that Caradosso's expertise in antiquities and gems could have influenced his depiction of this plaquette. For example, scenes of fishing on ancient cameos could have also served as a possible reference point for him (fig. 06).

In sum, the author hopes the theory presented here may assist in reconsidering the meaning of this otherwise mysterious plaquette while also enriching our knowledge of the creative inventiveness of one of the Italian Renaissance's most celebrated specialists of precious objects.

Endnotes

- 1 Leo Planiscig (1919): *Die Estensische Kunstsammlung: Katalog, mit den Abbildungen sämtlicher Stücke* (Wien, Austria: Anton Schroll & Co., pp. 184-85, no. 383.
- 2 Émile Molinier (1886): *Les Bronzes de la Renaissance. Les plaquettes*. Paris, vol. I, pp. 105-07, no. 153; Antonio Filangieri di Candia (1899): *Le Placchette del Museo Nazionale di Napoli in Le Gallerie Nazionali Italiane*, IV, p. 226, no. 51; George Francis Hill (1911): Classical influences in the Catalog Medal in *The Burlington Magazine*, XCV, 191, p. 563; Ernst Bange (1922): *Die Italienischen Bronzen der Renaissance und des Barock, Zweiter Teil: Reliefs und Plaketten*. Berlin and Leipzig, p. 86, no. 622; Wilhelm Bode (1922): *Die Italienischen Bronzen der Renaissance und des Barock, Zweiter Teil: Reliefs und Plaketten*. Berlin- Leipzig, p. 145; John Pope-Hennessy (1965): *Renaissance Bronzes from the Samuel H. Kress Collection. Reliefs, Plaquettes, Statuettes, utensils and mortars*. London, pp. 18-19, nos. 50, 51; Franco Panvini Rosati (1968): *Medaglie e Placchette italiane dal Rinascimento al XVIII secolo*, catalogo della mostra, Roma, p. 68, no. 6; Francesco Rossi (1974): *Placchette. Sec. XV-XIX*. Vicenza, p. 13, no. 19; Manfred Leithe-Jasper (1976): *Bronzestatuetten, Plaketten und Gerät der italienischen Renaissance in Italienische Kleimpastiken, Zeichnungen und Musik der Renaissance, Waffen des 16. Und 17. Jahrhunderts*, catalog, Wien, no. 237; Francesco Rossi (1984): *Rassegna della placchetta artistica dal XV al XVII secolo*, catalog for "6 Triennale Italiana della Medaglia d'arte," Udine, p. 246, no. 95; Luciana Martini (1985): *Piccoli bronzi e placchette del Museo Nazionale di Ravenna*. Ravenna, pp. 173-74, no. 51; John Pope-Hennessy (1989): The Study of Italian Plaquettes in *Studies in the History of Art. Italian Plaquettes*, Vol. 22. National Gallery of Art, Washington DC., pp. 19-34; and Luciana Arbace (1996): *Le placchette: rinascimentali tra simbologia e memoria in La Collezione Farnese*. Le Arti decorative, catalog, Napoli, pp. 225-26, no. 7.45.
- 3 Beltrand Jestaz (1997): *Catalogo del Museo Civico di Belluno, III, Le placchette e I piccolo bronzi. Le sculture. Cornuda*, pp. 39-40, no. 13.
- 4 Giuseppe and Fiorenza-Vannel Toderi (1996): *Placchette Secoli XV-XVIII nel Museo Nazionale del Bargello*. Firenze, p. 56, nos. 92-93.
- 5 B. Jestaz (1997): *op. cit.* (note 3).
- 6 Francesco Rossi (2011): *La Collezione Mario Scaglia – Placchette, Vols. I-III*. Lubrina Editore, Bergamo, pp. 145-47, no. IV.11.
- 7 Douglas Lewis (2008): Mantova e la produzione di placchette nel XV secolo, in *Placchette e rilievi di bronzo nell'età di Mantegna*. Skira, pp. 3-16.
- 8 Dorothea Diemer, et al (2008): *Die Münchner Kunstkammer, 3 vols. I and II: Katalog; III: Aufsätze und Anhänge*, Munich.
- 9 Jeremy Warren (2014): A note on the display of plaquettes in Medieval and Renaissance Sculpture in the Ashmolean Museum, vol. 3, *Plaquettes*. London, pp. 760-67.
- 10 Laurie Fusco and Gino Corti (2006). *Lorenzo de' Medici: Collector and Antiquarian*. Cambridge University Press.
- 11 Federico Giannini and Ilaria Baratta (2022): *Jacopo Zucchi's The Kingdom of Amphitrite: a private painting featuring the cardinal's mistress*. Finestresull'Arte online. Finestresull'Arte.info (accessed May 2022). See also Michel Hochmann (ed.; 1999): *Villa Medici: a Cardinal's Dream. Collections and Artists of Ferdinando de' Medici*, exhibition catalog (Rome, Villa Medici, November 18, 1999 to March 5, 2000), De Luca Editori d'Arte.
- 12 Mónica Domínguez-Torres (2014): Pearl Fishing in the Caribbean in *African Diaspora in The Cultures of Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States*. University of Delaware Press, pp. 73-82.
- 13 See fol. 61r on an example of this book in the Rare Book and Special Collections Division of the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
- 14 F. Giannini and I. Baratta (2022): *op. cit.* (note 11). See also Edmond Pillsbury (1980): The Cabinet Paintings of Jacopo Zucchi: their Meaning and Function in *Monuments et mémoires de la Fondation Eugène Piot*, 63, pp.187-226.
- 15 Teseo Ambrogio degli Albonesi (1539): *Introductio in Chaldaicam linguam, Syriacam, atque Aermenicam et decem alias linguas*. Pavia.
- 16 Michael Riddick (2020): *Galeazzo Mondella's original Entombment*. Renbronze.com (accessed May 2023) and Paola Venturelli (2012): *La 'Pace del Moderno' del Museo Diocesano Francesco Gonzaga di Mantova*. OADI – Osservatorio per le Arti Decorative in Italia. DOI: 10.7431/RIV06042012.
- 17 It is also worth noting here two plaquettes, attributed by Francesco Rossi to the eponymous Master of the Cartouches, whose reliefs, to the present author's observation—on account of their style—suggest master models conceived originally in mother-of-pearl. For a discussion of this Master see F. Rossi (2011): *op. cit.* (note 6), pp. 153-54, no. IV.16.
- 18 Dona Dirlam, Elise Misiorowski and Sally Thomas (1985): Pearl Fashion through the Ages in *Gems and Gemology Journal, Summer 1985*, Gemological Institute of America, pp. 63-78.
- 19 Ambrogio Leone (1525): *De Nobilitate Rerum*. Venezia, chapter XLI.
- 20 Clifford Brown and Sally Hickson (1997): Caradosso Foppa (ca. 1452-1526/27) in *Arte Lombarda*, no. 119, pp. 9-39.
- 21 Marina Belozerskaya (2005): *Luxury Arts of the Renaissance*. J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, see pp. 47-49.
- 22 C. Brown and S. Hickson (1997): *op. cit.* (note 20).
- 23 Christine Shaw (2019): *Isabella d'Este: A Renaissance Princess*. Routledge Historical Biographies.
- 24 Francesco Rossi (2006): *Placchette e rilievi di bronzo nell'età del Mantegna, Mantova e Milano*. Milan, Italy: Skira, p. 78, no. 64.

Endnotes (con't)

25 Jessica Gritti (2008): Tradizione dell'antico a Cremona. Le terrecotte decorative del Palazzo Stanga Trecco in *Arte Lombarda*. Istituto per la Storia dell'Arte Lombarda, pp. 3-15.

26 Pietro Cannata (1982): *Rilievi e placchette del XV al XVIII secolo, Roma. Museo di Palazzo Venezia*. Roma, pp. 70-71, no. 25.

27 In 1495, Caradosso had reported to his patron, Ludovico Maria Sforza, il Moro, duke of Milan, on some antiquities of possible interest to him, including some nice items in Todeschini's possession.
Eugene Müntz (1882): Le musée du Capitole et les autres collections romaines in *Revue Archéologique*, p.32.

28 C. Brown and S. Hickson (1997): *op. cit.* (note 20).