FRANCESCO SIBILIO AND THE REUSE OF ANCIENT ROMAN GLASS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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In the last 20 years a number of 19th-century tabletops inlaid with a veneer of reworked fragments of ancient mosaic glass, at times combined with coloured marbles, have appeared on the art market. Six of the nine known published pieces (see Appendix at the end of this paper) may be assigned to the Roman marble craftsman and merchant Francesco Sibilio. Surprising little is known, however, about the life and work of this great master who was active in Rome during the second quarter of the 19th century. The only study devoted to Sibilio's work is a short article written by Alvar Gonzalez-Palacios in Casa Vogue Antiques in March 1991 that was subsequently reprinted with fewer illustrations in 1997.

Francesco Sibilio was a Roman marble craftsman (marmista) and dealer of antiquities, possibly even a maestro in the Reverenda Fabbrica di San Pietro. He catered to the fashion for collecting specimen marbles, semiprecious and hard stones, which were mounted in cabinets or inlaid into marble tabletops. These tabletops with geometric designs were a speciality of Roman workshops, probably due in part to the plentiful supply of interesting archaeological marbles as well as wealthy potential customers visiting the city while on the Grand Tour. Sibilio also produced objects made of semi-precious stones like two skillfully carved columns 0.3m high in malachite and lapis lazuli, inspired by those of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius, which he signed and dated 1833 (Gonzalez-Palacios 1991, 84, illus.).

The golden age for the study and collection of specimen marbles was the first half of the 19th century (Gioni 1971, 81–3). The English archaeologist and traveller, Edward Dodwell (d. Rome 1832), formed an important collection of ancient and modern marbles that was bequeathed to the Università della Sapienza by his widow. Dodwell personally knew the three foremost dealers and collectors of the day: Faustino Corsi and two brothers, Tommaso and Francesco Belli. Tommaso also left his collection to the Sapienza and it is from the manuscript tickets for individual marbles from these two collections that we find Francesco Sibilio being frequently mentioned as their supplier. When Francesco Belli eventually sold his collection together with a catalogue to Count Stefano Karolyi he named three stones specifically after Sibilio. The first, Granito Mischio di Sibilio (Belli 1842, no. 10), was known from a column fragment acquired by the 'valente petraio Signor Francesco Sibilio' from the river bank by the Porto di Traiano, from which he made 'un grand lagrimitario, ed una bella tazza con manichi di oltre 3 palmi di diametro.' The next was, Porfidi Bigio di Sibilio (ibid, no. 63), of which 'il Sig. Francesco Sibilio ne possiede un frammento di colonna proveniente da alcuni scavi fatti nel 1838 presso la basilica di S. Paolo' and lastly, Lumaclle Rossa di Sibilio (ibid, no. 286).

Francesco Sibilio himself collected a variety of antiquities not just marbles – the Vatican, for example, acquired his collection of over 400 ancient coins. As the first known craftsman who combined fragments of ancient glass with specimen marbles he must either have collected or had access to collections of such fragments. Certainly during the 19th century large collections of fragmentary ancient glass were formed by both European and American collectors (cf. Sagui 1998 for pieces in the Gorga Collection in Rome). According to David Grose (1989, 243–4) the vast majority of those in the Toledo Museum of Art collected by Charles Coleman may be traced back to antiquity dealers in Rome. These dealers acquired them locally and enhanced their market value by repolishing their surfaces before wrapping them in cardboard mounts with gilded edges like precious gems and cameos. Other fragments were repolished and mounted in gold and used in jewellery or set into smaller marble objects like paperweights (J. Racanello, pers. comm.). Bracelets were especially popular, like the example illustrated in COLOUR PLATE 133 and another with nine rectangular sections flanked by hemispherical sections at both ends set with ancient mosaic glass that appeared on the BBC Antiques Roadshow in 1998 and was later sold at Phillips (1999, lot 18).

In the Victoria and Albert Museum among a collection of 1152 ancient glass fragments, purchased from F. Turchi in Rome in 1885 for a total of £317. 16s. 4d., are two mosaic glass disks. These are c. 57mm in diameter, and are also made from reworked fragments of ancient mosaic glass and set onto clear glass backs (R. Liefkes, pers. comm.). It is unclear whether they were made as furniture inlays or as souvenirs of ancient glass in their own right.

All the mosaic glass fragments in these tabletops are of ancient manufacture, mostly dating to the 1st century BC/1st century AD. Some of them come from flat glass plaques or inlays often made in imitation of more costly marbles and banded semi-precious stones like porphyry or agate respectively. Other fragments, however, come from cast vessels, mostly bowls or dishes some of which had strongly curved walls. In the case of the vessel fragments it has not been possible to determine whether they have been gently reheated and pressed flat and then, once cold, cut into the desired shape as alluded to in a contemporary catalogue description of the tabletop now in The Corning Museum of Glass (COLOUR PLATE 132; App. no. 7; Governo Pontificio 1867, 107, no. 94). Alternatively, as ancient cast
mosaic glass is generally quite thick it is possible that the fragments were ground flat, shaped and polished rather than being reheated. Close examination of the guéridon (COLOUR PLATES 130, 131; App. no. 6) has revealed that all the fragments were arranged in a circular metal tray that had previously been lined with a metallic foil. This would have had the effect of reflecting light back through the glass and so enhance its bright colours. At the present time it has not been possible to ascertain whether this method was also used for some or all of the marble examples. In the case of the bracelet illustrated in COLOUR PLATE 133 only the outer surface has been ground flat and polished; the side nearest the skin was left untouched and several of the fragments still bear traces of iridescence and light surface pitting.

There are two tabletops signed by Francesco Sibilio (App. nos 1 and 2) and dated 1823 and 1824 respectively. From stylistic comparisons etc, I believe it is possible to assign a further four pieces to his workshop (App. nos 3–6). For example, the central stylized six-pointed star filled with ancient mosaic glass against a background of glass verde antica (see COLOUR PLATE 129; App. no. 3) occurs on the tabletop dated 1824 (App. no. 2) and also on two of the unsigned tabletops (App. nos 3 and 4). In the case of App. no. 4, the mosaic glass is not contained within a thin band of contrasting opaque glass. The fifth example has a mask of a Gorgon in its centre surrounded by a wide band of mosaic glass. According to the Semenzato catalogue (1987, lot 169) this piece is signed by Sibilio and dated 1824 although this was not recorded by Christie’s (1987, 123) and the signature is not visible in any of the illustrations. The outer bands with geometric motifs in monochrome glass on this tabletop, however, are almost identical to those on App. nos 2–4, while the circular band of mosaic glass with fragments arranged into two discernible rings also occurs on the guéridon (COLOUR PLATE 131, FIG. 1; App. no. 6).

The guéridon (App. no. 6) is more unusual in that only the roundel was probably made in Rome. Research by Johannes von Auersperg (pers. comm.) has revealed that the gilt-wood stand was most probably commissioned from a south-German workshop in the second quarter of the 19th century. The F-H-C monogram on the socle indicates that this piece was made originally for Friedrich, Prince of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen and his consort, Princess Caroline Amélie, née Princess von Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, possibly for the occasion of their wedding in January 1839.

While the previous six pieces may be assigned to the workshop of Francesco Sibilio, Giovanni Rossignani, a maestri in the Reverenda Fabbrica di San Pietro in Rome, is credited with the production of a tabletop now in The Corning Museum of Glass (COLOUR PLATE 132; App. no. 7). Rossignani’s name appears at the head of the description of the tabletop in the catalogue of objects sent by the Vatican to the Paris International Exhibition of 1867 (Governo Pontificio 1867, 107, no. 94). The catalogue entry describes that the aim of this table was to display an exceptional collection of ancient glass fragments that had been subjected to ‘the test of fire to level and smooth them’. They were then arranged into stars and concentric rows together with fragments of graduated ‘ancient Etruscan’ glass that imitates rare yellow marble, giallo antico (ibid.). It would appear that this tabletop is the only published example attributable to Rossignani. The last two (App. nos 8 and 9) are of unknown manufacture and date, although an attribution to the third quarter of the 19th century seems justified. They were, however, almost certainly made in the same workshop, as they are identical except for the guilloché border and lozenge motif that appears on App. no. 9.

It is hoped that as more examples of these tabletops and other works of art by Francesco Sibilio and Giovanni Rossignani come to light it will be possible to ascertain more about the life of these two craftsmen and the relationship they had with the antiques trade and the manufacturers of other ‘Grand Tour souvenirs’ that utilized fragments of ancient glass.

**APPENDIX OF TABLETOPS INLAID WITH FRAGMENTS OF ANCIENT MOSAIC GLASS**

The following appendix of nine tabletops and guéridons has been arranged in chronological order and according to probable manufacturer.

1 Specimen marble tabletop signed and dated by Francesco Sibilio, 1823

Circular tabletop made from porphyry, serpentine and monochrome opaque glass. In the central circle a parcel-gilt hexagon with curved sides and a star formed from thin intersecting black and red strap work, surrounded by four concentric bands of porphyry and serpentine filled with 72 radiating rays of contrasting marble or glass, in a porter border that bears the dated signature ‘F. Sibilio 1823’.

Diam: 640mm

Provenance: Christie’s 1994, lot 244; Christie’s 1999a, lot 87 (unsold); Christie’s 1999b, lot 128 (unsold); Christie’s 2000, lot 267
Fakes, Imitations and Reuse

Literature: Gonzalez-Palacios 1991, 86, fig. on p. 85; ibid. 1997, 98, fig. 50

2 Marble tabletop inlaid with ancient glass signed and dated by Francesco Sibillo, 1824

Circular white marble tabletop inlaid in the centre with a five-petalled motif within a rope-twist ring and a stylized six-pointed star filled with a garland of assorted ancient mosaic glass fragments all against a background of glass verde antica. Outside this are two bands of brightly coloured red, blue and yellow glass arranged in a classical wave and a geometric pattern and, finally, a band of ancient mosaic glass verde antica sandwiched between two white marble bands, the inner of which is inscribed ‘F. Sibillo 1824’.

Diam: c. 850mm

Literature: Gonzalez-Palacios 1991, 86, figs on p. 86; ibid. 1997, 98, fig. 51

3 Marble tabletop inlaid with ancient glass in a star motif (COLOUR PLATE 129)

Circular white marble tabletop inlaid in the centre with a Romano-Egyptian inlay fragment surrounded by three thin rings composed of another Romano-Egyptian inlay with a wave pattern, red porphyry, and reticelli glass. A wider band composed of verde antica marble fragments outlined in opaque turquoise glass follows this. The same turquoise glass is also used to outline a six-pointed star filled with a garland of assorted ancient mosaic glass fragments against a background of glass verde antica. Outside this are three bands of brightly coloured yellow, red and blue monochrome glass arranged in geometric patterns and finally, a band of ancient glass verde antica sandwiched between two off-white marble bands.

Attributed to Francesco Sibillo, Rome, c. 1825
Diam: 850mm

Provenance: Edric Van Vredenburgh Ltd, London

4 Marble tabletop inlaid with ancient glass in a star motif

Circular white marble tabletop inlaid with ancient polychrome mosaic and monochrome glass. A band of ancient green glass verde antica surrounds two formed of opaque yellow, orange, blue and red glass in geometric patterns and separated by a thin rope-twist ring in opaque white and brown. In the middle a stylized six-pointed star filled with a garland of ancient mosaic against a background of glass verde antica and in the centre within a thin gilt band, glass verde antica and red porphyry and a Romano-Egyptian glass rosette inlay.

Attributed to Francesco Sibillo, Rome, c. 1825
Diam: 830mm

Provenance: Christie’s 1992, lot 143

5 Marble and ancient glass tabletop with Medusa bust

Circular tabletop with in the centre a mask of a Gorgon, probably Medusa, set against an opaque sky-blue background, the hair and wings with incised feather detailing, the two snakes tied under her chin formed from ancient glass imitating verde antica. This is surrounded by a wide circular band composed of ancient mosaic glass fragments arranged in two rings and then two further bands of brightly coloured yellow, orange, blue, green and red glass arranged in geometric patterns and finally, a band of dark brown marble sandwiched between two of white.

Attributed to Francesco Sibillo, Rome, c. 1825
Diam: 675mm

Provenance: Christie’s 1987, lot 123; Semenzato 1987, lot 169; Mansour Gallery, London

6 Guéridon with a top veneered with ancient mosaic glass (COLOUR PLATES 130, 131, FIG. 1)

The circular top is mounted in a gilt-bronze frame with two concentric outer rings made up of 57 fragments of glass imitating verde antica and 15 of porfido rosso respectively. The central ring comprises almost 100 fragments that fall into three main groups: Romano-Egyptian inlays mainly concentrated in the centre, each cut and arranged to form a mirror image; reticelli and striped mosaic vessel fragments and lastly, composite mosaic glass fragments (see FIG. 1 for pattern). The roundel supported on a gilt-wood column with acanthus-leaf decoration resting on three seated putti made of gilded plaster and set on a tripod base with bronze castors. The monopodium base with three rectangular panels decorated with the monogram ‘F-H-C’ in ligature surmounted by a royal crown.

The inlaid top attributed to Francesco Sibillo, Rome, c. 1825, and the gilt-wood stand to a south-German workshop, c. 1839
Ht: 925mm; diam: 282mm

Provenance: collection of the Princes von Hohenzollern-Hechingen; Rainer Zeit, London

7 Marble tabletop inlaid with ancient glass by Giovanni Rossignani, c. 1866 (COLOUR PLATE 132)

Circular white marble tabletop inlaid with c. 1200 pieces of ancient glass with a sun-burst in the centre containing a Romano-Egyptian mosaic inlay in the middle and a radiating pattern of 40 triangles of ancient mosaic glass fragments alternating with graduated monochrome opaque yellow pieces arranged in seven rings, within a border of octagonal reserves filled with opaque turquoise stars on alternate opaque yellow and red grounds and against a background of ancient amber-coloured and white mosaic glass. Split into two pieces, repaired and rebacked with a separate piece of marble.

Diam: 760mm

Provenance: Sheppard and Cooper Ltd, London; Christie’s 1991, lot 300; Hadji Baba Ancient Art, London; The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, New York, inv. no. 97.3.10

Exhibited: Paris, International Exhibition, 1867

Literature: Governo Pontificio 1867, 107, no. 94; Gonzalez-Palacios 1991, 86, fig. on p. 87; Whitehouse 2000, 24, no. 16

8 Marble and ancient glass tabletop with vase motifs

Guéridon with a white marble circular top inlaid with ancient polychrome mosaic glass and set on its original wooden stand with a baluster stem and tripod foot surmounted by three gilded sphinxes. The top with eight classical vases of diverse forms arranged around an octagon within a circle all composed of ancient polychrome mosaic glass within an octagon.
9 Marble and ancient glass tabletop with vase motifs

White marble circular top with a guilloche border and four classical vases alternating with lozenge motifs centred around an octagon, all filled with fragments of ancient mosaic glass, mounted on a later gilt-bronze stand with legs in the form of bamboo, joined by stretchers.

Probably Rome, mid-19th century
Ht: 460mm; diam: 520mm
Provenance: Sotheby’s 1996, lot 248

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