



67. Water pot. London, 1604–05. Silver, cast, chased, engraved and gilded, 64 cm. high. (Kremlin Museums, Moscow; exh. Gilbert Collection, London).

by weight rather than numbers, the difference would be far greater. This material has been known to English readers since the publication in 1909 of E. Alfred Jones's *Old Plate of the Emperor of Russia*. But it is only by seeing it in the flesh that one can form a proper idea of its astonishing scale: livery pots familiar at 14 or 15 inches high are here 20 inches; cups that one might expect to be 12 or 16 inches high are 20 or 22 inches and far more massive as a result (Fig. 66). Other, larger, categories of objects that do not survive at all elsewhere, such as chained 'flagons' and vast water pots (Fig. 67) 25 inches high, are unique; the largest piece in the exhibition, a powerfully modelled heraldic leopard of 1600, stands 37 inches high and weighs 1,000 ounces. This is English sculpture as dramatic as any, designed to inspire awe as much by its form as by its bullion value.

Similar in one way though these objects are to the offerings from Hungary and Dresden, there is an important difference. For there is a rugged robustness to these English objects that is in marked contrast to the refined workmanship of many of the objects gracing the buffets and treasuries of the other collections. One senses that they were meant to be seen from afar, *en masse*, rather than to be scrutinised at close quarters. Perhaps their Russian recipients perceived this robust quality as well, because many seem to bear the marks of generations of benevolent abuse. The surface and gilding have an untouched authenticity that contrasts refreshingly with the over-cleaned or restored objects one so often sees in English collections. But in other ways their condition is often poor. Many of the cups no longer have their covers; others no longer have their finials or other details of applied ornament.

This is not the first time in recent years that such an offering has been seen in London; in 1991 a smaller selection of seventeen of the

pieces now at Somerset House was shown at Sotheby's. However, the current display includes thirty-four pieces and gives a much fuller impression of the range and scale of the collection. It is supported by a beautifully produced and informative catalogue,² about which there are only two real complaints. The first is that it fails to grasp the opportunity of publishing, perhaps as an appendix, the other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English pieces in the collection: a total of fifty-two pieces were illustrated by Jones in 1909 and a similar number (virtually all the same) by Charles Oman in his *The English Silver at the Kremlin* (1961); the rest remains largely unpublished. The second is that the catalogue entries do not always acknowledge the work of previous scholars. In particular, much of Oman's important research is ignored.

The trustees of the Gilbert Collection are to be congratulated on presenting this series of exhibitions, which might otherwise not have come to London at all. The Gilbert Collection was always intended to be a platform for such exhibitions. But the relationship between the host and its guests has become so weighted in favour of the latter that the Collection itself has been virtually abandoned. At present there are no fewer than three loan exhibitions on view, while Arthur Gilbert's own collection has largely disappeared: almost all the silver is put away, a strangely haphazard selection of mosaics remains, while only the gold boxes survive unscathed. Meanwhile one room stands empty. There is no question that the layout of the collection needed to be reconsidered after the death of the donor in 2001, but the present piecemeal arrangements are a betrayal of the spirit in which the gift was accepted.

¹ The latter was reviewed by the present writer in this Magazine, 147 (2005), pp. 628–29.

² Catalogue: *Britannia & Muscovy: English Silver at the Court of the Tsars*. Edited by Olga Dmitrieva and Natalya Abramova. 304 pp. incl. 212 col. pls. + 3 b. & w. ills. (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2006), £50/\$85 (HB). ISBN 0-300-11678-0.

At home in Renaissance Italy

London

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THE PIONEERING EXHIBITION *At Home in Renaissance Italy* at the **Victoria and Albert Museum, London** (to 7th January), seeks to provide visitors with a synthetic view of the variety of objects that filled the interiors of the principal rooms of the *palazzi* of Florence and Venice. The exhibition and its accompanying book are the result of a collaborative research project developed over the past three years, involving an interdisciplinary group of scholars whose innovative findings underpin this socio-anthropological analysis of the grand domestic interior in Italy, 1400–1600.

The aim of the curators, Marta Ajmar-Wollheim and Flora Dennis, and their research team has been to go beyond the formulation of

the palace interiors provided by scholars and collectors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, in permanent collections such as those of the Museo Horne in Florence and the Ca' d'Oro in Venice, and offer a more accurate approach, even if it raises new problems. The general layout of the exhibition focuses on a ritual sequence of rooms that leads from the public *sala* (the main reception space) through the *camera* (bed chamber) to the most intimate space of the *studiolo* (predominantly, but not exclusively, a male preserve). This tripartite division is in turn split geographically, contrasting the Florentine palace to the Venetian, while a series of thematic sections cross these boundaries to address the material objects that gave form to diverse social practices within the home (playing games, making music, dining, etc.). The chronological confines of the 'Renaissance' are broadly set in the show, the selected objects dating from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, although little distinction is made between these two periods. Consequently, an inadvertent contrast is set up between the Tuscan and the Venetian rooms, since the former contain fifteenth-century material, while the latter's display dates largely from the sixteenth century. Thus the marvelously reunited pair of portraits by Paolo Veronese of Iseppo da Porto and Livia da Porto Thiene (cat. nos. 4 and 5), which introduce the exhibition, show the visitor the sumptuous aristocratic Venetian social and aesthetic ideal in contrast to the austere, republican style of the Florentine Antonio Rossellino's portrait-bust of Giovanni Cellini displayed opposite, dating from the fifteenth-century (no. 13). This is somewhat misleading, as sixteenth-century Florentine portraits are much closer to their Venetian counterparts, reflecting the evolution of the values and aspirations of the merchant class.

Lineage or ancestry – *casa* or *casata* in Italian – is a dominant theme in all the objects on display, whether in portraiture or the display of family coats of arms, or both. Just as heraldic symbols increasingly appear on palace façades from the fifteenth century onwards, so did they on tableware, lamps and furniture, which were all proudly emblazoned. Such marking of objects bound them to their owners, investing each item with a status that was an extension of the physical body of the individual so that home, house and lineage truly coincided in the *casa*. In fact, as the final room in the exhibition shows, varying grades of social status were determined by the degree to which family and property were intertwined. The astoundingly well-preserved Guicciardini–Salviati intarsia table (no. 110; Fig. 68), given to the historian and Florentine ambassador Francesco Guicciardini by the Bolognese monastery of S. Michele al Bosco, is still kept in the family home – a sure indication of unbroken lineage. The table stands in stark contrast to Vincenzo Campi's depiction of peasants moving house at the end of the summer, their tenuous identities based on their possessions stacked on the backs of pack animals (no. 263). In between, neither aristocrats nor



68. Octagonal table with the arms of the Guicciardini and Salviati families of Florence, by Fra Damiano da Bergamo from a design attributed to Giacomo Vignola. Bologna, 1530s. Veneered and painted walnut, 82.5 by 139 cm. (Private collection; exh. Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

peasants, Lorenzo Lotto depicts a family, not using a complex allegory as he typically did, but instead a representation of professional lineage, that of the established doctor Agostino della Torre. The physician is depicted showing off the medical texts and prescriptions that attest to his well-established clientele and reputation, with his son and heir peering over his shoulder (no.232). The home is not presented in this image, but rather the doctor's status acquired through his career and professional lineage, an aspect that is largely overlooked elsewhere in the exhibition.

Della Torre's portrait is set in his place of work, a very different environment to the refined study of the *pater familias*, represented here in the partial reconstruction of Piero de' Medici's *studiolo* with the beautiful coffered barrel-vault decorated with astrological roundels by Luca della Robbia (no.216), selected cameos from Lorenzo de' Medici's collection and illuminated manuscripts. Here, more clearly than elsewhere in the exhibition, the hierarchies of luxury are made explicit as the heart of the home preserves its most treasured possessions. Piero's study was consciously fashioned as a place for the display of wealth and erudition, while Filarete's description of it conveys the tactile as well as intellectual pleasures derived from handling the objects it contained; its contents in 1492 were valued at 60,866 florins, considerably more than the palace itself. As Giovanni Rucellai's well-known saying reveals, property and progeny were defining qualities of lineage, and thus childbirth, an event central to the dynastic process, is given due prominence in the exhibition. An unusual set of wafering irons (used to make wafers or waffles), embossed with the parents' arms and details of the newborn child (no.150), is displayed close

to Pontormo's beautiful birth bowl (a *tafferia da parto*) from the Uffizi, which was designed to hold fruit presented to the mother (no.160; Fig.69). Zacharias, struck dumb, writes the name of his son, while a group of attendant women – some haloed, others not – attend to Elizabeth and the future Baptist, one of them bearing an enigmatic object that looks remarkably like the wafering irons that might have announced the birth of Zacharias's son had he been born in Renaissance Italy.

In fact the role of paintings in the show has been carefully considered, and each seems to have been selected with attention to contextual and methodological issues. Thus Giovanni Bellini's *Madonna of the pomegranate* (no.30) is displayed in the reconstruction of the Venetian palace's *portego*, suggesting the rising status accorded to his paintings and those of Netherlandish masters in the cinquecento, so that the devotional purpose of the image is secondary to its role as a collectable item. Sofonisba Anguissola's portrayal of her sisters playing chess (no.41) suggests that cerebral games were socially acceptable pastimes for women, while its juxtaposition to a Turkish table-carpet and chess set bring the objects in the display cabinets to life. Filippino Lippi's *Double portrait* (no.141) from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, perhaps a visual record of betrothal, precedes a sequence of material objects that articulates the complex negotiations that led to marriage. That perhaps the greatest financial onus of marriage was the woman's dowry, often brought to the groom's home in a *cassone*, makes it all the more surprising that not one elaborately painted chest was chosen for the show. On the other hand, the two *spalliere* (bench-backs) that recently entered the V & A's collection (nos.111 and 112) are on view in the Tuscan

camera, although their positioning some 2.5 metres up the wall is a matter of debate.

A few words need to be said about the installation. Considerable thought has gone into the conception of indicating discrete spaces by wall-less metal frames and white lines traced on the black floor, with the intention of suggesting the various individual rooms, while leaving the limelight to the objects on display. Nevertheless, it is the Tuscan *camera* with its coffered ceiling photographically recreated and the Medici *studiolo* with its barrel vault – the rooms that are given the clearest spatial definition – that work best. Although the accompanying book pays some attention to architecture and to the palace as a building type, the limited treatment of the architectural setting underplays an interesting discovery implicit in the show: while the architectural exterior and interior detailing in stone and wood – such as door-frames, decorative cornices, fireplaces and the Tuscan *acquaio* – so clearly define the *all'antica* setting of elite Renaissance living, many of the objects seem not to conform to this classicising agenda, which was only really explicit in the inner sanctum of the *studiolo*.

The ambitious scope of an exhibition of this sort leaves many questions unsolved; that they have been asked at all opens the field to debates that in Renaissance studies have previously been largely confined to the context of courtly, public or ecclesiastical patronage. In this respect, the beautifully produced book (which includes a summary catalogue listing, while images and texts are keyed to the exhibition display) is the major result of the 'At Home' project.¹ The publication offers a critical re-evaluation of a topic that has been largely overlooked since the early 1900s, when scholars such as Attilio Schiaparelli proposed the study of domestic interiors, in part as an attempt to stem the tide of the art market that was stripping Italian homes to fill museums such as the V & A. Although it is common to state that catalogues outlast exhibitions, in this case the publication lends sound scholarly support to the show and allows the



69. *The naming of St John the Baptist*, by Jacopo Carucci called il Pontormo. c.1525. Panel, 59 cm. diameter. (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence; exh. Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

reader to enter into the complex arguments summarily dealt with in the exhibition.

At one level the book aims to be a reference tool, providing brief essays that examine specific types of objects, many of which were new products made available to a growing phalanx of consumers: *cassoni*, birth trays, lutes or even the small bronzes that became a must for the *studiolo*. As the contributions on wood furniture show, however, the objects presented have previously been remarkably little studied, as is perhaps best exemplified by the 'Davanzati bed' in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, shown recently to be of nineteenth- to early twentieth-century production, imitating furniture in Renaissance paintings. These useful 'case study' objects are presented in relation to specific locations or themes addressed in the essays by a team of specialists.

The book opens with discussions of the house as a whole, with specific attention to Florence and Venice, although the rest of the book is far more inclusive in its definition of Italy. The sociological and ritual practices that were performed around the objects on display are the subject of the central three sections of the book, while this 'material culture' is set within the narrower confines of a consideration of 'art and objects' in the final section, which confronts the complex question of hierarchies of value. It is, of course well-established that tapestries or other luxury products were far more expensive to produce than paintings, but such facts are explored and nuanced. How paintings – religious or secular – came to acquire status through their attribution and location within the context of collecting is one such question considered in some detail. Exotic articles, particularly in the Venetian home, are shown to have had such high economic and symbolic value that the production of locally produced imitations sprang up; Turkish-style leather shields made in Venice for the members of the governing elite are but one of many examples discussed. Quite a different case is that of silver, pewter and other luxury metalware; as the exhibition shows, such objects were highly valued but survive in small numbers because the metals were frequently reworked in later periods. Here, the testimony of archaeological finds is essential, as the Mugnai hoard of pewter bowls and other objects show (no.107).

It is a credit to the scholars who contributed to the exhibition and its catalogue that they have opened up such a rich field. The interdisciplinary nature of their approach is refreshing, providing many new answers and posing even more new questions. The book should continue to inform and provoke for some time to come, testifying to the great benefits of a consideration of the V & A collection in a wider context.

¹ Catalogue: *At Home in Renaissance Italy*. Edited by Marta Ajmat-Wollheim and Flora Dennis, with a summary catalogue edited by Elizabeth Miller. 420 pp. incl. 310 col. ill. + 27 b. & w. ill. V & A Publications, London, 2006), £45 (HB). ISBN 1-0185177-488-2; £24.99 (PB). ISBN 1-85177-489-0.

Holbein

Basel; London

by MARK EVANS, *Victoria and Albert Museum, London*

ALTHOUGH CONCEIVED SEPARATELY, the exhibitions *Hans Holbein the Younger: The Basel Years* at the **Kunstmuseum, Basel** (closed 2nd July), and *Holbein in England* at **Tate Britain, London** (to 7th January), were largely complementary. Both have links with academic dissertations: Susan Foister's Ph.D. thesis of 1981, published in revised form in 2004 as *Holbein and England*, and Jochen Sander's *Habilitation* of 2003, which appeared in 2005 as *Hans Holbein. Tafelmaler in Basel 1515–1532*. The Basel show covered a longer period and was larger in scale, with over two hundred works filling eleven rooms. The London display of 165 exhibits occupies nine rooms.

The layout of the Basel exhibition was broadly chronological. It began by confronting the painter's grisaille organ shutters of

1525–28 from Basel Cathedral and their preparatory studies with his father's similarly monumental *Death of the Virgin* of 1501 for the Dominican church in Frankfurt, and a series of the latter's striking silverpoint portraits. The next space compared early works by Hans with those of his short-lived elder brother, Ambrosius, and included Hans's enlarged copy of Lucas van Leyden's engraved *Ecce Homo* (cat. no.1), the brothers' marginal pen drawings in a printed copy of Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* (nos.8–21), and their amusing signboard of 1516 advertising a writing school (no.22). Ambrosius's 1518 *Portrait of a young man* (no.37) from St Petersburg utilises a repertory of antique decorative forms that is similar to the one used in the dashing likeness of the youthful Lucerne councillor Benedict von Hertenstein (no.30), which Hans painted the previous year. The Mantegnesque relief of a triumphal procession behind von Hertenstein alludes to his service as a mercenary captain and provided a cue for the grisaille drawings on display in the following room.



70. *Portrait of the artist's family*, by Hans Holbein the Younger. c.1528–29. Paper, cut out around the contours of the figures and glued to a panel, 77 by 64 cm. (Exh. Kunstmuseum, Basel).