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Tabletops made of ancient mosaics from the 18th to the 20th century: alternative mosaics conservation.

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HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

In 1752 Cardinal Alessandro Furietti published his great *De Musivis*, the most important book about ancient mosaics, written after his discoveries in Tivoli. Furietti himself writes, in a letter on the 21st of November 1739: «D'altri musaici antichi, che servivano da pavimento, ho ritrovato io la maniera di farne de' Tavolini in forma tale, che paiono fatta da principio per un tal uso. Questa mia invenzione, a cui niuno de' nostri Antiquari v'aveva pensato, ha eccitato il prurito di tutti di cercare i Musaici colorati, dopo che ne hanno mandati tanti a male. Avrò almeno fatto questo beneficio al pubblico, che ritrovandosene, si cavino con diligenza» (FIG. 1).

He reports about his new invention: tabletops made of ancient mosaics. He says that no one before him ever thought about anything similar and that this new method can prevent many mosaics from destruction; Furietti thinks that using mosaics as tabletops is an innovative way of conservation for ancient mosaics.

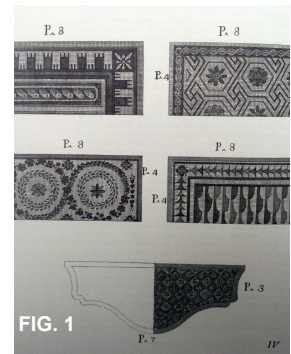


EXECUTION

At the same time, these new objects gain high economic value and become fashionable: antique dealers and antiquarians are now interested not only in *emblemata* to use as "pictures", but also in polychrome frames and repetitive patterns to use as tabletops.

This kind of tables spread in Italy in the 18th century, especially among rich collectors who are interested in rich material and worthy antiquities. Their diffusion is also connected to a very plain execution technique:

1. tops can be composed by many pieces of ancient mosaics or by one piece of ancient mosaic inserted into a bigger, modern thick marble or stone sheet;
2. when all the decorative parts are composed, the top is cleaned and polished with lead and wax.



EXAMPLES FROM THE 18TH CENTURY

Pieces of ancient mosaics enter, in this way, in private upper class collections and are somehow preserved from disappearing, even if they lose all their connection with the original architecture. There are two important examples for the 18th century.

FIG. 2 - The great tabletop of pink alabaster donated to Cardinal Albani to the Elector of Saxony and now in the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen of Dresden. Furietti chose part of the mosaic frame of the *emblemata* of the Doves, inserted it in a big alabaster sheet and created a magnificent table to donate to Cardinal Albani. Here it is possible to see how ancient mosaics used to be mixed with modern stones.

FIG. 3 - The best examples of tabletops made by different part of ancient mosaics are the two big tables gave as a gift by Furietti to Pope Benedict the 14th. Their tops are composed by a central, geometric mosaic from Villa Adriana and a mosaic frame in black and white tesserae. They stand on bronze structures made in the 18th century by the sculptor Francesco Gardoni.



DIFFUSION

These tables are maybe the richest, but not the only ones, even because mosaics tabletops become very common in the second half of the 18th century. In the *Notizie storiche antiquarie* the author Francesco Bulgarelli says: «Nel 1773 il più volte nominato de Angelis scavò il resto di pavimento di musaico [...] e ne caricò venti carretti, venduti per tavolini».

The Furietti invention keeps on spreading. In the 19th century not only mosaics, but also sheets of ancient marbles are used to make tabletops. There are some important information in this sense among private letters written by count Girolamo Egido di Velo to his sister Isabella in Vicenza. In 1824 di Velo discovered the great mosaics with athletes in the Baths of Caracalla in Rome and many other antiquities from the same site: in his letter to the sister, he sometimes writes about making «tavoli di rara bellezza» from marble sheets and he even talks to *sectilia* tabletops owned by Thorvaldsen.

This means that even minor collectors in the 19th century can have tabletops made of ancient materials: they become smaller, but keep being fashionable objects for house furniture, as much as nice gifts among rich people.

NEW TASTES AND PLACES

FIG. 4 - The best example is the small, round table from Vatican Museums, donated to Pope Gregory the 16th by the Bishop of Algeri. The tabletop is made by marble crustae from the early Christian Basilica of Hippo Regius. The polychrome, geometric decoration is surrounded by a circular porphyritic frame and the dedication in bronze letters on white marble.

It is very important to notice that, from the second half of the 19th century, there are many mosaics from North-African archaeological sites used as tabletops. This may be connected not only to the great number of new missions and explorations led in North-Africa in that period, but also to the strongest protective laws for archaeological heritage in Italy between 1820 and 1939. In this way, antiquarians and antique dealers have to focus on different areas and sites. Little tabletops of ancient North-African mosaics can be also seen as "exotic" objects and connected to the taste of the 19th and 20th century.

FIG. 5 - An example in this sense is the little round table stored at the Castello d'Alberis Museum in Genoa. Its top is made of an ancient mosaic from Carthage and it was brought to Italy by the Captain Enrico Alberto d'Alberis at the beginning of the 20th century. The mosaic (a polychrome flower in the middle of a plait frame) has lost its architectural connections but gained a new meaning due to its style and its provenience.

We are now very far from the magnificent tables for rich collectors in the 18th century and it means that this kind of mosaics conservation technique can be seen as a long lasting fashion, due to its versatility and its ability to adapt to cultural and taste changing.

