Sabine Eiche: THE SFORZA ANTIQUITIES: TWO WILLS AND A COLLECTION

The Sforza of Pesaro (1445-1512) built up a library ranked by Vespasiano da Bisticci as second only to that of Federico da Montefeltro; ¹ they owned paintings by Rogier van der Weyden, Mantegna and Perugino, among others; and they collected antiquities that were of a quality to arouse the acquisitive instincts of Isabella d'Este. Only a handful of works is believed to have survived, and history has

not been generous in remembering the rest.2

A full inquiry into the Sforza's collections must grapple with several problems, of which an elucidation of the contents is necessarily the first and most basic; it is also, given the surviving documentation, the least perplexing to resolve. The questions, when, and by which member of the family the objects were amassed, have rarely been asked; ³ the evidence accumulated to date is meagre, and before answers can be attempted further research must be done on the individuals and their interests. Finally, the subsequent fate of the Sforza collections, and the possibility that more items, as yet unidentified, are preserved in public or private museums, is a tantalizing, if obscure, problem.

In this note I shall consider just one part of the Sforza patrimony, the classical art, and shall restrict myself to a preliminary definition of the collection. Recently interest in the Sforza antiques was revived as a result of studies on Isabella d'Este's collecting habits, but the new and fascinating information that came to light was not always accurately communicated. I shall take this

opportunity to make some corrections, and to add newly discovered evidence.

Seventeen documents have been found to date regarding the collection. They span a decade and a half, from 1500, when Cesare Borgia invaded Pesaro, at that time ruled by Giovanni Sforza, to 1515, when Giovanni's brother, Galeazzo, died. Although an assault by Borgia had been imminent for months, his armies did not reach Pesaro until October. According to a contemporary source, Sforza had already shipped tuta la sua roba to safety in January of 1500; what was left behind in the palace was inventoried on 20 October, over a week after Giovanni had fled, consigning his remaining possessions to the care of Donato di Stefano da Cotignola, his seneschal.



1 Pesaro, Palazzo Ducale (Foto: KIF).

The inventory includes a list of Sforza's books and paintings, assorted household goods and furniture, as well as some precious objects. That it does not account for the entire contents of the palace is confirmed by the superscription: Inventario de una parte de le robbe del Ill.mo S.re Joan Sforza. While the books and paintings have been published, the rest of the inventory has been ignored. Yet it is not entirely without interest. Above all it gives a general idea of how the Sforza stocked and furnished their house; it refers to three decorated portières, one with a representation of Samson (Uno usciale de sanson afigurato); it provides the information that the paintings had been wrapped up in a cover of red leather for transport (Una coperta de curame rosso dove sono involti tucti li retracti); it mentions 84 medals, a chess game, and dice; and, listed between bed linens and wall hangings, it includes two works of art: Una nostra donna ala grecha indorata, most likely a painted icon, and Una testa de neron de marmo, almost certainly a classical sculpture.

This, to the best of my knowledge, is the earliest mention of an antique in Sforza's possession. Although it is isolated in the inventory, the marble head probably was not the only ancient piece he owned at that time. From the reference in a letter of 6 October 1501, we learn that Giovanni had given two teste di marmo to Isabella d'Este. The date of the gift is not indicated, but it could have been towards the end of 1500, when Giovanni, after brief stays in Bologna, Ravenna and Venice, had sought refuge at the court of Mantua, home of his first wife, Maddalena Gonzaga (d. 1490). Given his precarious situation, and his prevailing concern to secure money and support for the recapture of Pesaro, in which he did not succeed until September 1503, it is unlikely that during this period Giovanni would have had either the inclination or funds for buying antiques. We can reasonably argue, therefore, that the two teste di marmo were already in his collection in 1500, along with the head of Nero; indeed one of them may have been that very same portrait.

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The documents are silent with regard to the antiques in the years 1502-09. On 24 July 1510 Giovanni drew up his will, a lengthy section of which consists of instructions to Galeazzo for the guardianship of Giovanni's heir, the infant Costanzo II.¹² Towards the end of the testament, he disposes

of some of his worldly goods in the following manner: 13

Item che tutte le mie Medaglie, et antiquità, et lo ametista, quale ha madonna mia Consorte [Ginevra Tiepolo] cum la testa dell'Adriano, et uno Horioletto de argento, qual fu di Monsignor Ascanio, et mi donò il Vescovo di Pesaro, siano poste in un Armario in S. Francesco con due chiavi, una delle quali tenga le mio Fratello, l'altra il Guardiano di detta Chiesa, et che mai possino essere vendute, ne alienate, ne fatto Contratto alcuno, ma tenute ad perpetuam rei memoriam, per mostrare ad persone digne, che anderanno innanti et indreto.

Giovanni passed away three days later, and Costanzo outlived his father by only two years. Since no provisions had been made in the will for the eventual premature death of the heir, Galeazzo, in

August 1512, assumed the rule of Pesaro.

Within a few months of Costanzo's death, however, Pope Julius II had reclaimed Pesaro for the Church, and appointed his nephew, Francesco Maria della Rovere, Duke of Urbino, as *signore*. Sforza departed on 2 November 1512, 14 and after a brief term, 1513-14, as governor of Cremona, came to live in Milan, at the court of his cousin, Massimiliano Sforza. Late in March 1515 he was wounded by a shot, which led to his death on 14 April.

In his will¹⁵, drawn up on 23 March, Galeazzo named the Duke of Milan as one of his heirs, with

the following bequest: 16

Item legavi, et lego, et iure legato relinquo prelibato Illustrissimo D. D. Duci Milani D. Maximiliano quasdam malias, lorichas et bellica ornamenta, ac certas medalias, ac etiam quasdam antiquitates marmoreas de quibus presentis D. Mattheus Capitaneus est informatus, et sigilla duo magna Illustrium predecessorum meorum.

Evidently Galeazzo had had no scruples in ignoring the dispositions made by Giovanni: instead of depositing the medals and antiquities in S. Francesco, Pesaro, he took them along to Lombardy. Isabella d'Este had news of Galeazzo's condition from Giovanni Gonzaga, and responded with a missive as swift as it was businesslike. 17 Barely masking her greed with grief at Galeazzo's fate, and clearly not yet familiar with the terms of his will, she asked Gonzaga to make sure that her bid for the Sforza antiques took precedence over all others. Her letter confirms that the collection was indeed that which formerly had belonged to Galeazzo's brother, a collection that Isabella must have known well, for she recounted to Gonzaga that Giovanni si delectava tenere antiquità et che ne havea parechie de bella ... et fra le altre cose belle, intendessimo che l'havea alcune teste di bronzo. Similar instructions to ensure her prior claim were sent to Lorenzo Strozzi, the Ferrarese ambassador to Milan, who moreover happened to be one of the executors of Galeazzo's will. 18

In subsequent letters between Isabella and her contacts we find references to Galeazzo's bequest to the Duke of Milan, and to Massimiliano's willingness to donate the antiques to Isabella.¹⁹ The gesture was not an insignificant one, given that the value of the collection had been estimated at

rooo scudi.²⁰ Strozzi noted that among the objects was una testa de Adriano, which Ludovico Gonzaga once had tried to purchase from Giovanni Sforza for 400 ducats.²¹ The head is presumed to have been a piece of sculpture,²² an identification that can now be disputed on the basis of the newly discovered evidence. Is it not likely, rather, to have been one and the same with the carved gem, lo ametista, quale ha mia Consorte cum la testa dell'Adriano, mentioned in Giovanni's will? The value of 400 ducats attributed to Hadrian's portrait ought to clinch the matter, for up to the beginning of the 16th century such an elevated price is more likely to have been fetched by an ancient jewel than by a sculpture.²³

The classical works of art designated for Massimiliano, some of which were in Milan, others in Cremona, were only a part of the whole collection.²⁴ Lorenzo Strozzi informed Isabella that Galeazzo had had other pieces, which were to be sold in order to raise money for some of the provisions made to his servants and dependents.²⁵ The amounts specified by Galeazzo in his will totalled 2400 ducats,²⁶ though we do not know what portion of that sum was to derive from the sale of his antiques. Isabella tried to acquire these latter items as well, but it is uncertain if her attempts met with success.²⁷ In any case, at the end of May 1515 she finally received her shipment, and was able

to express herself satisfied.28

The Sforza collection of antiquities, or a part of them, arrived in Mantua packed in two cases, ²⁸ a hint for us of at least the scale of the pieces, if not the extent of the collection. Already in Giovanni's will we had a clue to their general dimensions: if all his antiquities and medals were to have been stored in a cupboard, we can conclude that they were relatively small objects, the sculptures probably no bigger than life-size heads and busts. In fact, the only pieces of statuary

specified in the documents are bronze and marble heads.

The hard facts now established concerning the Sforza collection can be summarized as follows: the bulk was made up of small pieces; it included a valuable amethyst carved with the head of Hadrian; the whole collection would have fit into a cupboard or cabinet; Giovanni set such a high premium on his medals and classical art that he wanted them preserved as a monument (to himself or his family?), to be shown for ever afterwards to important visitors; and this monument was

to be placed in the church of S. Francesco.

The facts, however, do not explain the peculiarity of some of Giovanni's testamentary dispositions. Why, for instance, did he give such precise instructions regarding the antiques and medals, but omit all mention of the library and paintings? It is reasonable to assume that when Giovanni returned to Pesaro, in the fall of 1503, he brought back to the palace all of the possessions that had been put into safe storage during Borgia's occupation. If he did not mention the books and paintings in his will in 1510, it may be because he no longer had them. They were back in the palace in 1514, however, when Francesco Maria della Rovere was signore of Pesaro.³⁰ Had they been confiscated by the Duke of Urbino? And if so, when and why? The answer to this question probably would also solve the enigma of Galeazzo's appropriation of only one of the Sforza collections.³¹

Finally, what led Giovanni to want to deposit the antiques and medals, ad perpetuam rei memoriam, in the church of S. Francesco, rather than in his palace? Did he sense that the end of the Sforza dynasty was near, and hope that they would have a better chance of survival enshrined within ecclesiastical walls than in secular surroundings? As it was, fate reduced Giovanni's wished

for perpetuity to a mere five years.



2 Coin with the portrait of Giovanni Sforza. Florence, Museo Archeologico (Foto: KIF).

NOTES

(Bibl. Oliv.: Pesaro, Biblioteca Oliveriana)

1 Vespasiano da Bisticci, Le vite, ed. Greco, vol. I, Florence 1970, p. 423.

² For a discussion of surviving manuscripts and paintings see S. Eiche, Alessandro Sforza and Pesaro: A Study in Urbanism and Architectural History, diss. Princeton University, 1982, pp.130, 370-371 n. 167, 372 n. 174, 144-146, 376 n. 190.

³ For an attempt to distinguish Alessandro Sforza's manuscripts in the library from those later added

by Costanzo and Giovanni, see Eiche (n. 2), pp. 132-139.

⁴ C. M. Brown, 'Lo insaciabile desiderio nostro de cose antique': new documents on Isabella d'Este's collection of antiquities, in: Cultural Aspects of the Renaissance. Essays in Honour of Paul Oskar Kristeller, ed. *Clough*, Manchester 1976, pp. 324-353, 497; *idem*, The Grotta of Isabella d'Este, in: Gazette des Beaux-Arts, vol. 89, 1977, pp. 155-171; vol. 91, 1978, pp. 72-82.

⁵ B. Feliciangeli, Sull'acquisto di Pesaro fatto da Cesare Borgia, Camerino 1900, esp. pp. 42 ff.

⁶ M. Sanuto, I diarii, vol. 3, Venice 1880, col. 86. See also E. Alvisi, Cesare Borgia duca di Romagna, Imola 1878, p. 86.

⁷ Bibl. Oliv. 387, cc. 29-31v; see Appendix.

- ⁸ A. Vernarecci, La libreria di Giovanni Sforza signore di Pesaro, in: Archivio storico per l'Umbria e le Marche, vol. 3, 1886, pp. 501-523. Nb. that in Vernarecci's transcription there are numerous errors and omissions.
- ⁹ This painting may have been a copy of either the 9th century image of the Virgin in the Cappella Paolina, S. Maria Maggiore, Rome, or of the 13th century one in the Cappella Maggiore, S. Maria del Popolo, Rome, copies of both of which Alessandro Sforza commissioned in the 1460s from Melozzo da Forlì and Antoniazzo Romano. For a brief discussion and bibliography, see *Eiche* (n. 2), pp. 146-147, 376-377 n. 193.

10 It disproves Brown's statement that "the inventory says nothing, however, about any Greco-Roman statuary" (n. 4, 1978, p. 78). Brown also incorrectly maintains that Giovanni Sforza had "bequeathed his collection to his brother Galeazzo when Cesare Borgia occupied the city in October of

1500 " (loc. cit.).

¹¹ See U. Rossi, I medaglisti del Rinascimento alla corte di Mantova, in: Rivista italiana di numismatica, vol. 1, 1888, p. 35 n. 3.

12 I have not found the original; a later copy is in the ASF, Urbino, Cl. III, Filza 37, cc. 37-42. ¹³ ASF, Urbino, Cl. III, Filza 37, c. 39-39v. The section continues: Item lasso ad Madonna mia Consorte oltra la dote sua, uno tarasso (?) cum una perla da pede grossa et un diamante sopra, con

due Collanette d'oro, quale epsa ha in mano.

Item ad Isabella mia Figliola lascio, che quando harà anni 16 volendosi maritare, che Galeazzo mio Fratello la possa maritare, et darli per sua dote ducati 3 [mila] in tante possessioni, et gli dono una Confettera de argento, et una Taccettina con due Manichi cum quello oro, et moneta che gli è drento, non si volendo maritare detta Isabella ma farsi Monaca, gli lascio ducati mille, acciò lei possa assettarsi, et farsi qualche bella stanza per l'habitare suo, et quello li parerà, et li lasso un Anellino d'oro cum l'Arma nostra, quale ha Galeazzo mio Fratello in mano.

Interesting, too, are Giovanni's specifications regarding his burial, which include the request of

a tombstone by Tullio Lombardi:

El Corpo mio voglio sia messo ad S. Giovanni Battista inante allo Altare grande dal canto di sopra appresso lo sgabello dell'Altare, et che el si compra da li Fra o di S. Giovanni Battista o de Santo Francesco uno lavello di quelli adoperano a lavar i panni, nel quale voglio sia posto el corpo mio, et de sopra coperto di quello si potrà, finche si faccia far' una preta per coperchio a Venezia da M.ro Tullio figlio di M.ro Petro Lombardo, su la quale lasso al nostro Baraccaglia, che gli faccia qualche bello motto digno di memoria (c. 39).

¹⁴ Bibl. Oliv. 382, c. 36 v.

¹⁵ I have found three later copies: ASF, Urbino, Cl. III, Filza 37, cc. 44-46 v, and Filza 38, cc. 208-

209 v; Bibl. Oliv. 376, vol. VII, cc. 162-169.

¹⁶ ASF, Urbino, Cl. III, Filza 38, c. 209 v. Mattheus Capitaneus was one of the executors of the will (c. 208 v). His full name and title were Matteo Mario de Bussetto capitano Iustities Mediolane; see C. Santoro, Gli offici del Comune di Milano e del dominio Visconteo-Sforzesco (1216-1515), Milan 1968, p. 421.

¹⁷ AS Mantua, Busta 2996, Copialettere libro 31, c. 82, 31 March 1515; published by Brown (n. 4, 1976), p. 338, doc. IX.

¹⁸ Isabella mentioned in the above-cited letter that she was writing also to Strozzi. For Lorenzo Strozzi as one of the executors of Galeazzo's will, see ASF, Urbino, Cl. III, Filza 38, c. 208 v.

¹⁹ AS Mantua, Busta 1641, letters dated 5, 8, 10 April 1515; and Busta 2996, Copialettere libro 31, cc. 85 v-86, dated 11 April 1515; published by *Brown* (n. 4, 1976), pp. 339-341, docs. XI, XII, XXI and XIV. Nb. that Brown's doc. XXI, dated 10 August 1515, which he ascribes to a Ludovico Strozzi, is to be dated 10 April (although the calligraphy is difficult, the abbreviation for the month can be deciphered as ap not ag), and ascribed to Lorenzo Strozzi.

²⁰ AS Mantua, Busta 1641, letter dated 16 April 1515; published by *Brown* (n. 4, 1976), p. 340,

²¹ AS Mantua, Busta 1641, letter dated 10 April 1515; published, with incorrect date and author,

by Brown (n. 4, 1976), p. 341, doc. XXI.

 22 Brown (n. 4, 1976), p. 335.
 23 For the high prices of gems in the Renaissance see N. Dacos, La fortuna delle gemme medicee nel Rinascimento, in: Il tesoro di Lorenzo il Magnifico, vol. I, Florence 1972, p. 135. For gems with portraits being called simply teste see the inventory of Isabella d'Este's Grotta, as published by A. Luzio, Isabella d'Este e il sacco di Roma, in: Archivio storico lombardo, vol. 10, 1908, p. 414. Relevant to the point I want to make here is Condivi's account of Michelangelo's Sleeping Cupid, which was passed off as an antique and sold for 200 ducats, in other words for half the amount offered for the Hadrian portrait; see A. Condivi, Vita di Michelangelo, ed. Maraini, Florence 1927, pp. 25-26. Furthermore, in 1506, Mantegna sold Isabella his bust of Faustina for only 100 ducats. A useful discussion of the relative prices of ancient gems and sculptures during the Renaissance can be found in J. Alsop, The Rare Art Traditions, New York 1982, pp. 395-410.

24 AS Mantua, Busta 1641, letter dated 13 May 1515; published by Brown (n. 4, 1976), p. 341,

doc. XVIII. ²⁵ AS Mantua, Busta 2996, Copialettere libro 31, c. 96; published by Brown (n. 4, 1976), p. 340,

doc. XVII.

26 ASF, Urbino, Cl. III, Filza 38, cc. 208-209.

²⁷ See note 25 above.

²⁸ AS Mantua, Busta 2996, Copialettere libro 32, c. 5, dated 29 May 1515; published by Brown (n. 4, 1976), p. 341, doc. XX. ²⁹ See note 28 above.

³⁰ Proof that the library and paintings were in Pesaro in 1514 is provided by the contemporary report recording their destruction in a fire that raged through a part of the palace in December of that year; see A. Vernarecci, L'incendio della libreria di Giovanni Sforza, in: Archivio storico

per l'Umbria e le Marche, vol. 3, 1886, pp. 790-791.

31 In connection with this, I should point out that the Duke and Duchess, while keen patrons of first-rate artists such as Titian, and recent inheritors of Federico da Montefeltro's library, did not collect antiquities with anything approaching the fervour of some of their contemporaries.

APPENDIX

Bibl. Oliv. Ms. 387, cc. 29-31v.

Inventario de una parte de le robbe del Ill.mo S.re Joan Sforza: Consignate doppoy la partita de sua .S. per M.ro Joanni Miliani et Bernardino de Bindo soprastanti ecc: a Donato de Stephano da Cotignola: Agente del p.to Ill.mo S.r: sub die XXa oct. 1500 etc. Die 20 oct. 1500

Inventario de alchune robbe del Ill.mo S. Joan Sforza, che non erano incassate etc.

Primo: Vintun lecti de piuma

Vintitre Cavezali Cinque lecti di piuma Quatro Cavezali Duy matarazi Uno matarazo Duy cavezali Octo Guanzaleti

Octe Coperte da muli ala divisa

Duy Capellenari: un grande et un picholo indorato

Un Tapeto grande da Tavola Quatro piatelli grandi de stagno Un piatellecto picholo de stagno Cinque scudellini de stagno Quatro scudelle de stagno Duy Quadri de stagno Quatro Candelleri

Una bacina lavorata ala damaschina

Una bacina de ottone grande

Una bacele con il pie lavorato a fogliamo

Una Caldara mezana Due sechie da pozo grande

Una Caza de ramo Un altro lecto Duy Cavezali Una murata

Tri panni grandi de razo

Septe schiavine

Duy Coperte da muli ala divisa

Un altra murata

Un panno picholo de razo Un Tapeto picholo novo fino

Due altre murate

Un panno de razo da lecto Duy Tapeti mezani da Tavola Una murata usata

Uno usciale de sanson afigurato Uno usciale a figure novo grosso Duy usciale a verdur' novi

Una spallera grande nova a verdura Sey Tapeti picholi: tri novi: et tri usi Un Tapeto rosso da Tavola

Due Coperte de lana bianche una nova: et laltra usa

Quatre Coperte de Tela bianche tra use et nove

Una Cortina de Tela azurra depinta a

Una ceperana de Veluto nero da mula Vintiotto lenzoli da famiglia tra subtili e grossi

Una spada da duy mano restituì m.ro Angelo

Sey lenzoli grossi

Un par de Cavedoni grandissimi Un altro par de Cavedoni mezani Un altro par de Cavedoni picholi con spiritelle de orto' da Capo Un par de Capertoni mezani con le maze de fer da capo Un mantile grosso da famiglia Un mantile de renso picholo Quatro pezi de renso tra picholi e grandi Tre Tovaglie grosse da famiglia Un par de Cavedoni grossi e gran' con le maze de fer da Capo Una forcha de ferro Una Testa de neron' de marmo Uno Capedoni Duy Candelleri de ferro Duy Coperte ala Sforzesca da muli Una Nostra donna ala grecha indorata Tri Cussini de Veluti Crimisini Una Valisia de Curame Un Cofonetto ala anticha indorato Un molinello Un bochalecto de octon' Uno mazo de Candelecte benedette Peze de pelle maschareze octe Un sacho de fornimento da stalla Due schianine use: reporto ala aphro Un altro pezo de mascharazo Tri lecti Duy Cavezali Una schiavina Un altra Coperta ala divisa Un altro panno de razo Una Coperta de lana Vechia Un par de lenzoli Un mantile de renso picholo Duy Coperte ala divisa

Robbe minute

Primo: Una capsa de abeto
Una capsa longa et stretta
Una capsetta
Una capsettina
Una capsetta lunga da tener Cera
Due careghe de brochato doro
Una caregha de veluto pavonazo
Due careghe da donne de coperte di brochato doro
Una caregha da donna de brochato doro
Una caregha da donna de brochato doro

Due forzine Una paletta; et un par de mugliette In Un forzero da Credenza, dentro le cose infrascripte viz. Cinque lenzoli subtili Duy mantili grandi renso Quatro guarda mantili de renso Septe foderete de renso Duy Guanzaliti de bambasina Un capello de Tafta negro con bandelle Un Tapeto picholo Un palio de altare con due Tovaglie Due para de calze tagliate da Ragazi Una coperta de curame rosso dove sonno involti tucti li retracti Item Un sacho dentro scripture del p.to Ill.mo S. consignate per Sr. Berradino Item Medaglie nº 84 cio è octanta quatro de piombo tra pichole e grande: et altre cosette: cio è una bissa de piombo et certi pezi de porta Item Uno Tavoleto da Schachi et dadi Duy spederi grandi Un Candeler de ferro Duy altri spederi grandi Un par de Cavedoni grandi Un par picholi Una capsecta co' fornimente de Zoanea: et octe Cortelli dentro Un spelo Cavati del salotto de sotto et Carichati su le Carette Forzeri et Capse de robbe amagliate nº 25 nº 19 Balle de lecti et Matarazi nº 23 Forzeri et capse de libri nº 18

Una caregha de veluto crimisino guasta Una caregha de curame rosso Cinque para et mezo de cavedoni tra picholi et grandi Duy candeler gran' da tener torce de ferro Una forcha de ferro da fuocho Una balla de bacile et caldara de ramo Una balla de maschareze con il fornimento da Cavalli