

OADI

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Antonella Capitanio

Leather as temporary furniture*

«Per honorare el mio felice parto, prego Vostra Celsitudine che me voglia servire del suo appartamento de coramo d' oro per coprire una camera».

It was May 17th 1500 when Isabella Gonzaga asked her father, Ercole I d'Este, to lend her a gilt leather-hanging set to adorn a reception-room for the celebration of her first son's birth: borrowing hangings for special ceremonies was quite usual at the time, and just when Francesco Gonzaga had married Isabella on February 12th 1490 his brother in law Guidubaldo di Montefeltro lent him the famous Troy stories tapestry together with «più vasi d'ariento grandi [...] per ornare la credenza»¹. But Isabella's request is particularly meaningful since it proves that also leather-hangings were used as temporary furniture sought-after for display, and at that time available at the court of Ferrara but not in Mantua.

This last point is further documented by a 1495 order of leather-hangings requested by Isabella from Mantua and made in Ferrara «secondo disegno»².

To celebrate with extreme magnificence the birth of her son the duchess clearly thought that only her father's leather-hangings could secure incomparable pomp: and the set was evidently very precious since at first Ercole didn't send it all to his daughter, but just a coverlet so that she had to ask again as we know from a letter to Alessandro Pincaro, where she wrote: «Noi scrivessimo a lo Illustrissimo Signore Nostro Padre che ce volesse prestare lo apparamento da coprire una camera de li soi corami dorati, ma solum ni è stata mandata la trabaca da letto che non è al nostro disegno. Di nuovo scrivemmo a Hieronimo Ziliolo che ce mandi tutte le coltrine da coprire una camera integra»³. No description of this gilt leather-hanging survives, but it must have been a marvel, if we consider that for a leather horse-armour given as present to Teofilo Calcagnini, Ercole had asked Cosmè Tura in 1465 to complete with painting the work made by «Pietro dalle guaine», the first gilt-leather craftsman documented in Ferrara⁴. Yet on May 1501, when Isabella was about to give birth again, she renewed the request to her father for the same leather-hanging «per coprire tutta una camera»⁵: this fact tells us that the

Duchess considered her father's gilt-leather set as an ephemeral interior decoration, and that at the court of Ferrara it was not on permanent use, otherwise it would not be acceptable to move it from there.

To obtain the best gilt leather-hangings seems to have been one of Isabella's constant preoccupations and also an item of conversation with her sister-in-law and good friend Elisabetta Gonzaga, as we can see in a later letter she wrote to her agent in Genova, revoking a buying order of gilt leather from Spain:

«Circha li curami sappiati che pochi giorni fanno essendo nui sopra tale materia in ragionamento con la Ill.ma Signora Duchessa di Urbino, nostra cognata et sorella [...] fossimo da Sua Ecc.a exhortate a fornirmi di essi in Roma, perché più presti gli havessimo là et tanto bene come in Hispagna proprio serissimo servite per ritrovarse gli alcuni spagnoli che in questi mestieri lavorano benissimo»⁶.

It was evidently a kind of high luxury display, not surprisingly already documented at the court of Jean the Berry, as we know from the inventory after his death⁷, where in his Bourges castle are registered sizeable numbers of leather panels – «rouge», «vermeil» or «fauve», and «ouvré de divers ouvrages» – several with the Aragon and Castile coats of arms, so obviously coming from Spain, where, as is well known, the art of leather first flourished in Europe⁸.

In Italy the first very impressive description of a room with embossed leather-hangings is to be found in Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici 1498 inventory, that registered in his «camera terrena» (ground floor room) «Trenta braccia di cuoi facti in Spagna e lavorati con hopere d'orpelle alla brochato, e quali sono comissi in tellari di lignamo con cornice depincta, et sono apicate per adornamento di sopra alle spalliere d'intorno alle mura de ditta camara»⁹: i.e. panels tooled to simulate cloth of gold, fixed on wooden stretchers and framed, so easy to move and hang up elsewhere. The magnificence of this apparel is reflected in its estimated value, 180 liras, while Botticelli's Primavera – «apicata sopra il lettuzzo» (hanging above the day bed) in the same room – was valued only 100 lire¹⁰.

Giuseppe Campori, the nineteenth-century erudite scholar from Modena, who was the first to devote an essay to the Este family's leather-hangings based on serious archival research, asserts that this kind of apparel was «ornamento esclusivo dei palazzi dei principi e dei signori, e gareggiarono cogli arazzi, anzi nel XVI secolo prevalsero ai medesimi»¹¹. His statement is only partly true: certainly «cuoridoro» – as they were called in Venice where their production grew up considerably¹² – became fashionable during the sixteenth-century, sought-after by eminent people such as the French Queen Catherine de' Medici¹³, yet I believe that at that time their use was not alternative to tapestries but in turn with them, as I'll try to prove.

The appearance of early Emilian leather-hangings can still be seen in Bologna in the basilica of San Petronio, though the surviving example is not a room

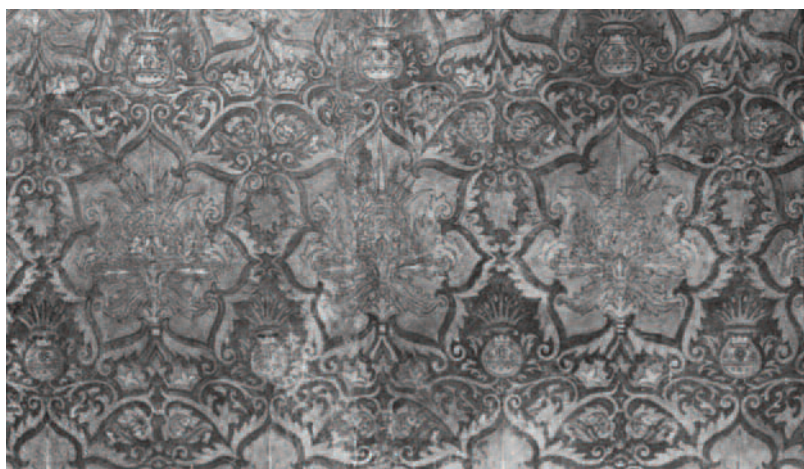


Fig. 1. Paliotto (particolare), Bologna, Basilica di San Petronio.

hanging but an altar frontal (fig. 1): actually Bologna became very important for gilt-leather production, as Leonardo Fioravanti testified in his *Dello specchio di scientia universale*, published in Venice in 1572, in which he devoted a chapter to *Dell'arte di corami d'oro e sua fattura*.

This reference is indirectly confirmed by the frequent presence of recognizable gilt-leather-hangings in the background of Bolognese paintings – such as *Chess players* by Ludovico Carracci (Gemäldegalerie Staatliche Museen, Berlin) (fig. 2) – and also supported by evidence preserved in the Este archives that registered how in the sixteenth century the artisans who came to Ferrara to work as “auripellarii” were all from Bologna. In Rome too we meet – in 1557 – an “auripellarius” from Bologna, Giovanni Domenico Bonascone, who together



Fig. 2. Ludovico Carracci, 1590, *Two Chess Players*, Gemäldegalerie Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

with a partner from Viterbo made a silver-leather-hanging in which Girolamo Siciolante da Sermoneta had to paint eight ovals¹⁴. Also in Lucca, in 1563, an «Aeneam bononiensem» got permission to set up a shop to make «corame d'oro e d'argento»¹⁵: a manufacture evidently new for this city but which soon came in great demand as we can read in the *Regole per le classi de' sacerdoti, e per ogn' altro Chierico della Città, e Diocesi di Lucca*, written by Alessandro Guidiccioni, bishop of the town at that time, who recommended that each altar must always have its frontal, instructing that there should at least be one painted on gilt leather «almeno ve ne sia uno dipinto, di corame d'oro»¹⁶. A common practice, as testified by the one in San Petronio, decorated with a pattern identical to that of the most expensive worked velvet.

Much more simple is the pattern of a contemporary leather-hanging now in the Museo Bardini in Florence (fig. 3)¹⁷, nevertheless very interesting because similar to the one maybe depicted on the background of Eleonora di Toledo's portrait painted by Bronzino for the Studiolo of Francesco I, a further proof of

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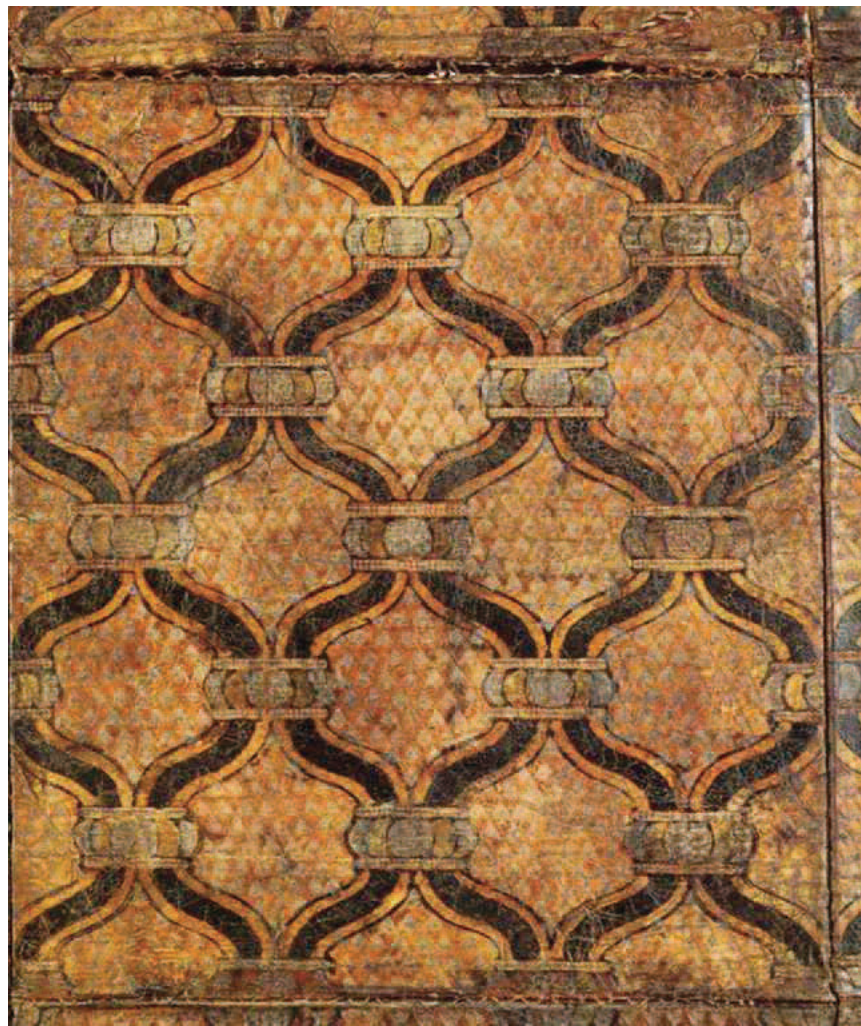


Fig. 3. Parato in cuoio (particolare) - Firenze, Museo Bardini

the employment of gilt-leather in the Palazzo Vecchio rooms.

Patterns could also include friezes and candelabra as in the famous drawing by Pirro Ligorio possibly for the “Appartamento dello Specchio”¹⁸: when in the Summer of 1574 this part of the Ferrara Castle was fitted out to host the King of France, Henry III, the Este arms were also represented in leather-hangings, as documented by a description of the “sala grande” with «corami d’oro e d’argento con un’aquila bianca in campo azzurro per ciascuno» (silver and gilt leather hangings with a white eagle on azure shield each), a very impressive visual self-celebration that could be even more self-concerned as had already happened in 1535 when the previous Duke, Ercole II, commissioned to Paolo Mazola «maestro di corami» in Bologna two gilt leather wall-hangings with his own device¹⁹, and even before, in 1521, when Isabella’s son Federico Gonzaga wrote to Baldassar Castiglione asking him to commission in Rome some leather-hanging with «la nostra impresa del Monte Olimpo dove a voi parerà che sii meglio»²⁰.

Celebration could even include depicted figures, as we can see in a few panels – embossed and silvered in the corners and along the borders – based on drawings by Federico Zuccari telling his brother Taddeo’s story visualized like a model of a brilliant young artist’s rise: a narrative cycle originally conceived for their house in Rome, but possibly repeated elsewhere as an exemplary story²¹. Moreover in 1626-1627 Gonzaga inventory we found «Un appartamento di corame dell’historia della casa d’Austria, con retrati dell’Imperatori et re della detta casa ... in pezzi numero 21»²².

Anyway, basically leather-hangings mostly look like fabrics and not arras, so – although all fashionable – it’s difficult to believe that during the sixteenth century they increasingly replaced tapestries – as in the opinion of nineteenth-century scholars and also in most recent essays.

Instead, several documents provide important clues to deduce that gilt-leather was then considered in some circumstances healthier than other types of wall-hangings. In particular in 1581 Niccolò Cirillo, prior of the Santo Spirito Hospital in Rome paid 990 scudi for gilt and silvered leather-hangings to put on the wall just behind the beds in the Sistine ward²³.

There is even richer evidence of a turn-over during the year between arras and gilt-leather: the first were used in Winter, the second in Summer, of course because cooler. In favour of a seasonal use we can quote three emblematic documents, dated the first 1553, the second 1572 and the last 1611.

The first is linked to a munificent present sent in 1553 by Ercole II d’Este to Henry II and his Favourite Diana de Poitiers, including a gilt-leather-hanging for her Anet Castle.

The Duke’s envoy, Antonio Zerbinati, wrote on September 10th about the presentation in Paris to Diana: «feci portare tutte le robbe nell’anticamera di sua Eccellentia et cominciai a far svalisare ogni cosa et attaccare li corami, et così

Putino non avea anco finito di attaccare doi pezzi, ecco giunger Madama li, la quale [...] commendò essi corami per li più belli, più lustri e meglio fatti che mai havesse veduti» and moreover «disse che se reputava avere una camara fornita da estate meglio che nessuno altro prencipe di Francia»²⁴.

The expression «fornita da estate» that is “fitted for the Summer” leaves no doubt, and we have one more evidence of the exclusive use of leather-hangings during Summer in the 1821 “Effemerifidi letterarie di Roma”, where mention is made of a 1572 document specifying that Papal Palaces in Rome were apparelled with leather-hangings in Summer and with arras in Winter²⁵. Considerable impetus to the diffusion of this leather fashion in Rome was doubtless given by the Este Cardinal Ippolito II, since his court painter Girolamo Muziano in 1561 paid some other painters to work on the leather-hangings in the new rooms of the Monte Cavallo Palace, i.e. the Quirinal Palace.

Anyway it was always a case of public rooms, because in private rooms fabric seems to have been preferred to leather and arras, as we can gather from a 1611 document. In that year Pope Paul V Borghese ordered from Spain 18.000 gilt leather-hangings «per adobar le stanze di Monte Cavallo» (to decorate the rooms at Monte Cavallo). When they arrived «gli furono fatte trovare le stanze nuove del suo appartamento parate le prime di corami di Spagna et l’altre più intime di damaschi nuovi con trine e frange d’oro molto ricche»²⁶.

Finally, a 1612 document provides evidence for both Summer use and for use of leather-hangings in public rooms: it mentions a commission to Andrea Fontana of a leather-hanging for the Sala del Vecchio Consiglio in Modena’s Palazzo Comunale, that is Modena’s City Hall, and it is specified that it is needed for use in the Summer in order to replace arras, used in Winter.

Once more this piece of evidence is most probably linked to the Este family, since in 1598 Cesare – cousin and successor of Alfonso II – was forced to relinquish Ferrara to the Pope and move to Modena, where the first mention of gilt leather-hangings in the ducal castle date back only to 1601²⁷.

*This essay originates in a paper given at The Renaissance Society of America Annual Meeting held in Washington on 22-24 March 2012. Panel 20321 – Time at home: objects and temporality in the early modern domestic interior.

Referenze fotografiche

Fig. 1. Su concessione del MiBACT – Archivio fotografico Soprintendenza BSAE – Bologna.

Fig. 2. Copyright : Gemäldegalerie Staatliche Museen zu Berlin- Preußischer Kulturbesitz Eigentum des Kaiser Friedrich –Museums-Vereins. Photo: Jörg P. Anders.

NOTE

1. «Several large silver ewers to decorate the sideboard». A. Luzio, R. Renier, *Mantova e Urbino. Isabella d'Este ed Elisabetta Gonzaga nelle relazioni famigliari e nelle vicende politiche*, Torino-Roma 1893, pp. 51-52.
2. «According to a model». A. Bertolotti, *Le arti minori alla corte di Mantova*, nei secoli XV, XVI e XVII, Milano 1889, p. 218.
3. «We wrote to my illustrious Father asking for the loan of his set of gilt leather-hangings in order to decorate a room, but I only received the bed spread which is not what we had in mind. We wrote again to Hieronimo Ziliolo asking him to send all the panels necessary to line a whole room». A. Luzio, R. Renier, *Il lusso di Isabella ...*, 1896, pp. 282-283.
4. G. Campori, *Delle tappezzerie in corame, appendice a Arazzeria estense*, in *Atti e memorie delle regie deputazioni di storia patria per le provincie modenesi e parmensi*, VIII, 1876, p. 455.
5. A. Luzio, R. Renier, *Il lusso di Isabella ...*, 1896, p. 283.
6. «As for the leather-hangings please be informed that a few days ago we were discussing this topic with the most illustrious Duchess of Urbino, our sister-in-law and sister ... and that we were advised by her highness to procure them in Rome where we could obtain them faster and as well as if we had gone to Spain since there are in Rome some highly skilled Spaniards who produce these works». A. Luzio, R. Renier, *Il lusso di Isabella ...*, 1896, p. 283.
7. J. Guiffrey, *Inventaires de Jean Duc de Berry*, Paris 1896, vol. II, pp. 222-224.
8. Cfr. *Cordobanes y guadamecies*, catalogo illustrado de la exposición por José Ferrandis Torres, Madrid 1955.
9. «Thirty braccia of leather hangings manufactured in Spain and embossed to simulate the pattern of a brocade textile, and these are set on wooden stretchers with painted frames, and are placed as decorations above the benches all around the walls of the said room». Cfr. J. Shearman, *The Collections of the Younger Branch of the Medici*, in "The Burlington Magazine", CXVII, 1975 pp. 12-27.
10. J. Shearman, *The Collections ...*, 1975.
11. «The exclusive ornament of the palaces of princes and lords, competing with tapestries, indeed in the sixteenth century they prevailed over the latter».. G. Campori, *Delle tappezzerie ...*, 1876, p. 454.
12. In 1530-1531 even Isabella d'Este ordered leather-anging from Venice for twice: A. Luzio, R. Renier, *Il lusso di Isabella ...*, 1896, p. 283.
13. Cfr. E. Droz, *Les tapisseries de cuir de Cathérine de Médicis*, "Gazette des beaux-arts", 65, 1965, pp. 137-154.

14. A. Della Latta, *Le pelli della corte: arredi di corame nelle dimore estensi con qualche appunto mantovano*, in "DecArt", 2005, 4, p. 6.
15. Archivio di Stato di Lucca, Riformazioni pubbliche, 1562 – 1563, Consiglio generale 51, c. 139 r.
16. A. Guidiccioni, *Regole per le classi de' sacerdoti, e per ogn' altro Chierico della Città, e Diocesi di Lucca*, Lucca 1588.
17. Cfr. G. Rossignoli, *Cuoi d'oro. Corami da tappezzeria, paliotti e cuscini del Museo Stefano Bardini*, Firenze 2009, pp. 82-90.
18. A. Della Latta, *Le pelli della corte ...*, 2005, p. 10.
19. G. Campori, *Delle tappezzerie...*, 1876, p. 455.
20. «Our Monte Olimpo device where you think it looks better». G. Bongiovanni, *Baldassar Castiglione*, Milano 1929, p. 54.
21. Cfr. C. Acidini, *Taddeo e Federico Zuccari fratelli pittori del Cinquecento*, Milano-Roma 1999, vol. 1, p. 226, figg. 103-105, e p. 231, nota 157.
22. R. Morselli, *Le Collezioni Gonzaga. L'elenco dei beni 1626-1627*, Milano 2000, p. 488.
23. Cfr. A. Pampalone, *Ferdinando Sermei: i restauri del 1599 nella Corsia Sistina e una nota sulla sua attività nella tenuta del Santo Spirito*, in "Il Veltro", 2002, 1-4, pp. 36 e 54.
24. «I had everything brought to Her Excellency's antechamber and had the men start unpacking everything and hung the leather-hangings; and while Putino had two pieces left to hang, the Lady came into the room, and she begun to praise the leather-hangings as the most beautiful, the most polished and better tooled than any she had ever seen ... and she said she believed she had the best fitted summer room than any other prince in France». G. Campori, *Delle tappezzerie...*, 1876, pp. 454-459.
25. G. Moroni, *Dizionario di erudizione ecclesiastica*, voce "Palazzi apostolici o pontifici", p. 206.
26. «He found the new outer rooms of his apartment hung with leather from Spain, while the inner ones were lined with new damask and very rich gold fringes and lace».
27. Cfr. O. Baracchi, *Per una storia del patrimonio artistico estense a Modena*, in *Atti e Memorie. Deputazione di storia patria per le antiche provincie modenesi*, 1994, XVI, pp. 215-231.