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NORTH ITALIAN, PROBABLY FERRARA

PASTIGLIA CASKET

FIRST HALF 16TH CENTURY

Giltwood and pastiglia, with metal mounts
22.3 x 32.8 x 18 cm

Provenance:

Contini Collection, Florence;
With Alain Moatti, Paris;
Private Collection, New York, until 2000;
Private Collection, United Kingdom.

Comparative Literature:

P. M de Winter, "A little known creation of Renaissance Decorative Arts: The White Lead Pastiglia Box", *Saggi e Memorie di storia dell'arte*, 14, 1984, pp. 9-131.

Pastiglia Boxes: Hidden Treasures of the Italian Renaissance from the Collections of the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome, exh. cat. Lowe Museum of Art, Miami, 2002.

M. Ajmar-Wollheim and F. Dennis (eds.), *At Home in Renaissance Italy*, London, 2006, p. 108, cat. 153.

The present casket, of perfect proportions and exceptionally well preserved, stands out as one of the most impressive in a small group of surviving Pastiglia boxes, probably originating from Ferrara, and which are a testament to the Renaissance's fascination with all things 'antique'. Adorned with

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grotesques and classical motifs, such a box would have been prized by aristocrats, humanists and connoisseurs and often used to hold *studiolo* objects such as semi-precious stones, coins and seals.

The frieze running along the front possibly depicts *The Battle of Cannae*, in which Hannibal was defeated by Scipio Africanus, broadly inspired after a medallion by the Master of Coriolanus (cf. De Winter, op. cit., fig. 49). The reverse shows the *Triumphs of Caesar*, taken from Mantegna's series of nine large paintings, now in the Royal Collection at Hampton Court, but which in the Sixteenth Century would have hung in the Ducal Court at Mantua. On the right-hand side is a scene of elephants carrying aviaries and birds in flight, possibly taken, again, from Mantegna's *Triumphs*, or relating to Hannibal crossing the Alps. On the left-hand side is an unidentified scene of a female prisoner walking before horsemen. On the lid, bringing the scenes together are twin personifications of Rome emblazoned with the famous acronym of the republic: SPQR.

The casket is most likely a product of Northeast Italy. Pastiglia was likely introduced in Ferrara in the 1440s by a French immigrant craftsman, Carlo di Monlione, although Venice later also became a centre for the production of such goods thanks to the presence of great Renaissance presses and its manufacture of white lead, needed for the mouldings. It is made of white lead paste and egg white and was known in Fifteenth-century Ferrara as "pasta di muschio". The figures and decorative motifs were shaped and then applied to the surface of the *cassetta*. Pastiglia caskets were extremely fashionable in Venice and Ferrara from about 1480 until 1550, with members of aristocratic families, such as Isabella and Duke Borso d'Este, owning several examples in their collections.

An almost identical casket resides in the former collections of the Earls of Warwick at Warwick Castle. In that version, however, the decoration is carved from ivory and is therefore after a prototype, most likely to be the present casket.

A closely comparable casket by the Workshop of Roman Triumphs is in the Musée de la Renaissance, Ecoen (inv. no. CL21341). It employs a similar undulating vine leaf decoration with trefoil leaves with grapes (or peas), and a similar way of layering the figures and perspectival extension of the ground. A second casket, attributed to the same Workshop and also at Ecoen (inv. no. ECL21343), has comparable sphinxes. De Winter has also noted similarities to the Workshop of the Moral and Love themes, particularly the stocky figures and prolific adornment, which can be compared to the casket depicting the *Torment of Atilius Regalus* in the Victoria and Albert Museum (fig. 1). Finally, a third casket with relatable lid decoration and punch-mark gilded fields is also in the Victoria and Albert Museum (inv. no. W.23-1953).



Fig. 1: Pastiglia casket in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, inv. no. 5625-1859.