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ART REVIEW | 'THE CASTELLANI AND ITALIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL JEWELRY'

Italian Artisans Who Created New Fashion From an Ancient Style

By GRACE GLUECK

When young Fortunato Pio Castellani set up his jewelry business on Via del Corso in Rome in 1814, it did well. But not well enough for the ambitious proprietor, who was backed by watchful creditors. Although he had no trouble selling the French jewelry he imported, the big-time trade went to more established purveyors in Paris and London.

Then Castellani (1794-1865), a trained goldsmith, became interested in ancient metalwork: the Etruscan, Greek and Roman archaeological jewelry being dug up all over Italy. He developed a chemical method to reproduce the warm, deep yellow tones of the ancient gold, and in 1826 lectured on the process to a group of scholars at an illustrious academy in Rome.

Among those present was Michelangelo Caetani, the son of a noble Roman family and a scholar, aesthete and bon vivant to boot. He knew metalworking and jewelry design, and became a close friend of Castellani's. Why not, he suggested, develop a new line inspired by the ancient artifacts? What's more, he introduced Castellani to a rich and aristocratic clientele, helped make capital available and himself became more or less a silent design partner, accounting for the two interwoven C's that was the firm's mark.

The new line of goods, in the Etruscan style and characterized by intricate, beautifully worked gold settings ornately paved with stones, cameos, enamels and tiny mosaics, took off, and by the 1830's became highly fashionable among an international clientele.

Castellani was doubly satisfied by this turn of events because, as a deeply patriotic supporter of the Risorgimento, the movement for the formation of an independent Italian state, he saw the promotion of the Italian craft tradition as a civic duty.

The Castellani firm lasted until 1927. After Fortunato, it was run by his two sons, Augusto and Alessandro, and then, in its declining years, by Augusto's son Alfredo. Now, a dazzling look at the firm's astonishing production over that period, along with some of the original archaeological jewelry that inspired it, is offered by "The Castellani and Italian Archaeological Jewelry," a show of more than 250 objects at the Bard Graduate Center. With three or four other resplendent jewelry displays now at local museums, it helps make New York, for this Christmas season at least, a bling-bling fest to reckon with.

One of the Castellani specialties was micromosaics: minuscule, highly labor-intensive mosaic insets on gold that depicted classical, religious and other motifs reflecting the glories of the Italian past. The tiny plaques, many less than an inch across, are composed of hundreds of almost invisible tiles, or tesserae,

of gold, silver and colored glass. Introduced in Rome in the 1770's, the mosaic technique had already begun to go out of fashion by 1840. But in the 1850's it was revitalized by the Castellani-Caetani notion of combining mosaic with goldsmith's work.

In new settings of beaded wire and ropework, the Castellani micromosaics are flanked by pine cones, palmettos and other motifs from the ancient world, presenting a very different approach from the sentimental scenic, animal and flower subjects of French and other earlier work. In its "periodo medioevale" or medieval mode, the work focused on images of Jesus and the Virgin, or the Lamb of God. Here, the tesserae were not polished flat but set at angles, so they sparkled in the light like those on church walls. A cloisonné enamel effect was sometimes produced by a new mode of outlining the motifs with gold or silver cloisons, formed by flat wire strips.

In a "periodo moderno," or modern mode, the work often ran to mottoes and inscriptions in Greek, Latin or Italian, like "I Triumph." For these the mosaicists used regular square tesserae, of one color, set in horizontal rows and polished more or less smooth. Cloisons were often used, as in the medieval work, to give emphasis by outlining the motifs.

Sometimes periodo moderno work was devoted to fantastical figures or well-known artists and celebrated contemporaries. A stunning example of the fanciful depicts a winged, snaky head of Medusa, made before 1888 by Luigi Podio, Castellani's master mosaicist.

Round, with the head set on a white ground surrounded by concentric gold rope frames, it has the same motif as a larger mosaic used in the vestibule floor of the Castellani headquarters in the Piazza di Trevi, probably also designed by Podio. The bluish-green wings and greener snakes in the hair are outlined in gold wire, but the hair itself is made of shaped, curved tesserae fine enough to pass for individual strands. The snakes, too, have curved tesserae made to resemble scales. Never did Medusa look so chic.

The firm was also renowned for the scope and quality of its carved gems, with cameos and intaglios playing a large role in Castellani designs. Mythological scenes and figures, famous people and gods and emperors were favorite subjects. An item popular with high-end American tourists was an oval brooch with a cameo of George Washington, turned out by one of the era's great gem carvers, Giuseppe Girometti, in white on a sardonyx ground and set in a dignified gold frame.

For its really privileged clients, Castellani had its contemporary carvers work with semitransparent, monocromatic gems in shimmering colors, like sapphires and emeralds, which were then mounted in ornate, drop-dead settings. One knockout is a sapphire carved by Giorgio Antonio Girardet with a scene representing the massacre of 500 Italian soldiers at the Battle of Dogali in Ethiopia. Around it is built a truly elaborate brooch of gold, adorned with rubies, pearls and enamels. Perhaps once worn by some nabob or his wife, it is today, of course, a museum piece, lent to the display by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

By now it should be evident that this is not a show for dilettantes, requiring as it does strength of eye and the patience of Job for exquisite detail. How much you enjoy it depends on your taste for jewelry-in-depth. Still, it's a spectacular, even for over-the-top New York.

Another word about the remarkable Castellanis, who, if they were serious about jewelry, were equally devoted to Risorgimento activities - so much so that Alessandro was sentenced to a decade's exile from Rome in the 1860's. (This didn't matter; he established an international antiquities brokerage business, while Augusto kept shop at home, raking in customers and lira as the firm branched into other ancient jewelry lines like medieval and Renaissance).

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But Augusto also worked with government councils and committees after the establishment of the new Italian state in 1870, helping to create legislation regulating archaeological activities. And he championed local government oversight of Rome's monuments and material culture. Hoping to produce, through the history of jewelry, a visual representation of the progress of civilization in Italy, both brothers were also founding members and financial supporters of the Museo Artistico Industriale, a study collection patterned after the Victoria and Albert Museum. Its establishment was a key step in the cultural advancement of Rome.

After Augusto's death in 1914, Alfredo carried out his wishes, turning over the majority of the senior Castellani's collection to the Italian state, in whose custody it became the core of the Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia in Rome, which has lent much of the material in this show.