Gilt leather wall hangings in the Stibbert Museum of Florence

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This poster discusses the investigation undertaken into the historical origin of some gilt leather panelling as a necessary preliminary study which could influence future conservation operations.

These oval shaped panels with a flowered decorative pattern and harmonised border are part of a corpus of similar hangings, with silver or red backgrounds, housed in the Chigi Zondadari Villas in Siena and San Quirico D’Orcia, both formerly the property of the Chigi family. The discovery of a series of pertinent purchase documents has allowed the connection between these works and Cardinal Flavio Chigi to be reconstructed. Cardinal Flavio Chigi was renowned for his appreciation of this decorative technique.

The new residence of the Cardinal in San Quirico, planned by the architect Carlo Fontana, was built and furnished between 1684 and 1687. During this period he commissioned his broker in Venice to buy a whole series of Cuoridoro (Cuoridoro literally translated from Italian as ‘Golden Hearts’).

It seems that these wall-hangings, which originally decorated more than 24 rooms in the Villa, were later disassembled; some were moved to the family residence in Siena, while some were given to Frederick Stibbert, a friend of the family. The gilt panels are currently to be found hanging in four rooms in Museum Stibbert. The original sewing method connecting the panels has been retained. This current status is supported by the expense accounts found in the Stibbert archive. (Published in: AA.VV., Il Palazzo Chigi Zondadari a San Quirico d’Orcia, Don Chisciotte editore, 2009)

These red-gold wall-hangings in the Library are richly decorated. The pattern is based on a grid of alternate double-pointed large oval shapes with painted foliage surrounding vases. The flowered border with intertwined leaves and ribbons is particularly suitable to the panelling, although it is not possible to state with certainty whether it was intentionally created to connect the individual panels. While the oval pattern is typical of a XVIth century decorative style, other aspects suggest a later manufacture. The large composition, taken together with the grandeur of the decorative techniques, suggests a date more typical of the XVIIth century. The punch-work and the low relief decorative elements correspond to the construction techniques for Italian gilt leather described in Fioravanti’s 1564 account, Dello spezchio di scienza universale. These elements are particularly typical of the Venetian region between the end of the XVIth and the beginning of XVIIth centuries.

The Vogeltapete pattern (Dutch: ‘Bird Carpet’) in the Dining room can be originally connected with one of the Patrons d’Étoffes et le Velours by Daniel Marot issued in 1703 used extensively throughout the following three centuries, which can be dated back to the production of Carolus Jacobus (active Mechelen 1693 - 1728).

Although the Stibbert panelling are of a good quality, the panels are constructed in rather low relief and are decorated using only two dominant colours. These aspects could support the hypothesis that these are XIXth century leather replicas.

The Stibbert Museum contains other gilt leather works collected by its founder. While some have been used to fill in missing pieces in the wall-hangings, others have been patched together to decorate the walls and the ceilings of other rooms such as the Library. Furthermore, several panels and frontals have been attached to doors, or used as upholstery on furniture. Other works have been kept in storage.