

V Simposio de la Fundación
Historia del Diseño

COMIDA, MEMORIA Y SOCIEDAD

La configuración
del quehacer gastronómico



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28 y 29 de noviembre de 2024

Eina Centre Universitari de Disseny i Art de Barcelona

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COMIDA MEMORIA Y SOCIEDAD. LA CONFIGURACIÓN DEL QUEHACER GASTRONÓMICO

PROCEEDING BOOK SIMPOSIO FHD 2024

Libro de actas del V Simposio FHD 2024

Comida, memoria y sociedad: La configuración del quehacer gastronómico

Lugar: Eina. Centre de Disseny i Art de Barcelona

Fecha: 28 y 29 de noviembre 2024

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DOI: 10.48254/SimposioFHDProceedingBook2024

The Fashion of Zoomorphic Tableware at the Court of Francesco Maria II Della Rovere in Urbino (1549-1631)

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Abstract:

This contribution aims to take a comprehensive journey through the production of animal-shaped tableware commissioned in the most important European courts of the Sixteenth Century. By exploring the intricate artistry and craftsmanship behind these unique objects, we will delve into the ways in which these pieces not only served practical purposes but also acted as symbols of wealth, power, and prestige. Through detailed examinations of specific examples, such as the majolica duck shaped containers and the ornate metal jugs painted by renowned artists like Giulio Romano, we will uncover the cultural and social significance that these zoomorphic items held within the aristocratic households of the Medici in Florence, the Gonzaga in Mantua, the Della Rovere in Urbino, and the royal courts of Prague and Spain.

This study will illuminate the fascinating intersection of art, nature, and function, showcasing how these elaborate pieces of tableware were used to impress and astonish guests during grand banquets, while also reinforcing the identity and status of their owners. Since the Sixteenth Century, zoomorphic tableware has represented a captivating combination of functionality and ornamentation, becoming symbols of social status in the most important courts of Europe. These artifacts, made of majolica, silver, and metal, were often intended to contain food, spices, or liquids but were primarily used to adorn tables and sideboards, affirming the prestige of their owners. During banquets, guests were astonished by these artistic marvels, depicting fantastic and exotic animals like turtles, lions, and colorful parrots, vividly brought to life with bright enamels. An emblematic example is the precious metal jug painted by Giulio Romano, depicted in the fresco of the Banquet of the Wedding of Cupid and Psyche at Palazzo Te in Mantua. This fresco showcases the magnificence and complexity of Renaissance sideboards and the Gonzaga's ostentation of power through the arts. Giulio Romano often integrated animal imagery in his tableware designs. A drawing at the British Museum in London features a duck with an enlarged beak shaped like tongs, blending natural and artificial elements to delight viewers. Among the most represented animals are birds, as seen in the majolica duck-shaped containers at the Civic Museums of Pesaro and Polesden Lacey. These objects, featuring holes in the beak or head, were likely designed for cooking purposes.

The marine world also featured prominently, with many salt and sauce containers shaped like shells and dolphins, though crab-shaped artifacts were rarer. Examples at the Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche in Faenza and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London display intricate internal decorations inspired by marine life. In conclusion, the zoomorphic tableware of the Sixteenth Century not only met functional needs but also represented a means to display luxury and power through art, evoking wonder and amazement among guests and contributing to defining the social identity of their owners. The use of animal and marine

motifs, combined with the imagination of artists like Giulio Romano, created objects that were true works of art, celebrating nature and human ingenuity.

Article

During the Renaissance table settings transcended mere functionality, serving as a sophisticated visual language through which aristocratic courts displayed power and status.¹ Among the various types of tableware, zoomorphic pieces stood out for their artistic creativity and symbolic significance, becoming a crucial part of the banquet culture of the most influential families.² The Medici, Gonzaga, and Della Rovere families, among many others, used these artifacts for any official gatherings, to emphasize their own wealth, elevating the dining experience into a showcase of opulence and prestige, and to capture the admiration of guests. Tableware of various forms and sizes, all crafted in luxurious materials like maiolica, silver, and gilded bronze—often embellished with vibrant enamels—were arranged into elaborate displays on the tables and on the shelving units along the walls, following criteria of perfect order and symmetry.³ Specific shapes and motifs were carefully chosen because of their ability to evoke wonder and to convey specific symbolic values: eagles and majestic lions symbolized strength and royalty, while creatures such as turtles and vividly painted parrots suggested worldly knowledge and the patrons' dominion over distant lands.

Valuable iconographic insight into the magnificence and complexity of a Renaissance sideboard is provided by Giulio Romano's frescoes at Palazzo Te in Mantua.⁴

Specifically, in the *Banquet of the Marriage of Cupid and Psyche* an intricate metallic jug is painted in great detail and placed on the sideboard of the room in which the nuptial banquet is taking place⁵. The images painted on the walls perfectly mirrored the real-life social gatherings of the Gonzaga family, where zoomorphic items, while conceived by artist and

¹ For a comprehensive study of Renaissance banquets, refer to: Bertoluzza, 1975; Benporat, 2007, *Le tavole di corte. Tra Cinquecento e Settecento*, 2013; Ridolfi, 2015

² Scaffidi, 2023, pp. 41-50.

³ These structures presumably appeared in the French courts of the 15th century and were known as *buffet d'ostentation*. Their use quickly spread to courts throughout Europe, where they were set up according to strict criteria of proportion, color, and harmony with the environment; the objects were often not used but remained on display purely for show. (Fina, 2023, pp. 166-171).

⁴ Taylor, 2014, pp. 137-153.

⁵ Ibid.

artisans as functional tools, served primarily as emblematic expressions of authority.⁶ Giulio Romano's interest for tableware is further demonstrated by his extensive repertoire of drawings, which frequently presented animal imagery.⁷ For example, in a drawing now housed in the British Museum in London the beak of a duck is exaggerated to form a large clasp, illustrating the artist's distinctive blend of natural and artificial elements to captivate and delight his audience, who is then invited to reimagine the animal within the context of an ordinary domestic object.⁸



Fig.1. Attributed to Giulio Romano (Rome 1499–Mantua 1546), *Drawing of a standing cup with a swan neck*, Pen, brush, and brown ink. Private collection.

Evidence of the significance of these designs can also be found in the inventory of Federico Gonzaga, thoroughly analyzed by Ugo Bazzotti and Michael Snodin.⁹ Among the notable pieces listed by the inventory, a large salt cellar shaped like a crab, flasks decorated with salamanders—the Duke's personal emblem—and “a two-handled vessel with the heads of four ducks and two masks with heads serving as spouts”¹⁰ demonstrates the circulation of animal-

⁶ Holman, 1997, pp. 94-98.

⁷ Bazzotti, 1989, pp. 454-465.

⁸ British Museum: Inv. no. 1874,0808.80.

⁹ Bazzotti, 1989, pp. 454-465; Idem, 1996, pp. 99-103; Taylor, 2014, pp. 137-153.

¹⁰ Taylor, 2014, pp. 137-153.

shaped table decorations and the wide reach of the culture of *naturalia* among the aristocracy starting from the 16th century.¹¹

The same culture found particularly fertile ground in the Duchy of Urbino, nurtured by the interests and passions of Duke Francesco Maria II Della Rovere (1549-1631).¹² Educated by prominent figures of his time, including Girolamo Muzio, the Duke developed a strong fascination with the exotic and the fantastic from an early age. His particularly curious mind and the fervent admiration of nature and animals, further deepened through his extensive travels, were clearly expressed in his acquisitions and collections, as documented by inventories and expense records.¹³ Fallow deer, stags, peacocks, ducks from "India," rabbits and many more were acquired by Francesco Maria to embellish the gardens and parks of his estates, which were modelled to mirror and surpass the grandeur of the Medici gardens and Farnese estates, the splendor of Iberian palaces, and the pleasure gardens of the d'Este which had left a profound impact during his formative years.¹⁴

¹¹ These objects may have been used on the table or may simply have been appreciated as collectibles suitable for a Renaissance *Kunstammer* (cabinet of art) or *Wunderkammer* (cabinet of wonders). As Timothy Wilson noted, 'cleverly made and amusing objects like the present one may in some degree be compared with the natural and artificial wonders being assembled at the same date north of the Alps, especially by Habsburg princes such as Emperor Rudolf II at Prague'. (Wilson, 2016, p. 306)

¹² *I della Rovere*, 2004; Moretti, 2004, pp. 195-201.

¹³ Moretti, 2023, pp. 13-16.

¹⁴ Moretti, 2018, pp. 167-183. An example is the "Barchetto" in Urbania (Italy) a now-lost garden that featured a fenced landscape inhabited by free-roaming animals, a fish nursery, and even a rabbit enclosure. (Ibid.)



Fig. 2 Federico Barocci, *Francesco Maria II della Rovere*, 1572. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi

An essential source for understanding the taste that informed the Duke's acquisitions and artistic patronage is his *Libreria*, consisting of more than 13,000 printed volumes, a substantial number of which are naturalistic and encyclopedic texts in the latest illustrated editions for the time¹⁵. Works such as *De Historia Animalium* by the Swiss physician Conrad Gesner and volumes by Ulisse Aldrovandi with their updated botanical and zoological illustration apparatuses were extremely common in the *Libreria*, proving that his passion for natural world was supported by scholarly studies.

The Library is well-documented thanks to a catalog compiled before Pope Alexander VII ordered the transfer of almost the entire Durantina collection to Rome, where it was largely

¹⁵ *La libreria di Francesco Maria II Della Rovere a Casteldurante*, 2008. The Libreria embodied the Duke's identity as a scholar and intellectual, as he was committed to the accumulation and preservation of knowledge. The Casteldurante Library was modeled after Philip II's one in the Escorial complex in Madrid, where Francesco Maria stayed from 1565 to 1568. He was particularly struck by the grandeur and strict protocol of the Spanish court, and was inspired to build a center of learning dedicated to all human knowledge within his own court (Moretti, 2013, pp. 19-38; Idem, 2014, pp. 508-536; Fontcuberta Famadas, 2023, pp. pp. 301-314.). The first stone of the foundation of the Casteldurante Library was laid on November 28, 1607, as noted in Francesco Maria II's own diaries ((Sangiorgi 1989, p.160; Moretti, 2008, pp.139-169).

incorporated into the Biblioteca Universitaria Alessandrina, where most of the volumes still are today. This catalog, known as Ms. 50 and currently preserved at the same library, presents a systematic and topographic classification of the *Libreria*, divided into 70 shelves, each subdivided into sub-shelves systematically arranged by subject.¹⁶

Among these shelves, the one dedicated to the *Artes variae* encompasses works on all the topics that did not fit strictly into literary or scientific classifications, such as the arts of cooking, drinking, feasting, and also hunting, dancing, writing, games, alchemy, and precious stones¹⁷, highlighting the cultural significance of the convivial practices and customs within the Della Rovere court. A particularly relevant subsection is the one titled *Dell'arte della cucina, del bere e dei conviti*, which contains 15 works.¹⁸

In the section dedicated to *Conviti* (Banquets) there are works that document the traditions of *mise en place* and the preparation of Renaissance and medieval banquets and, among these, the *Ordine et officij* by Pontano, cited by Grieco, serves as an essential source for understanding the convivial traditions of the Urbino court.¹⁹ Pontano details the presence of two distinct groups of officiants within the court, responsible for meal preparation and table service, since banquets were organized differently depending on whether the guests were family members or outsiders. Family meals were served in a private room known as the 'tinello', with service managed by the household steward, assisted by a cook, one or two table attendants, and a wine server, while for banquets reserved for foreign guests the steward was joined by the 'credenziere' (cupbearer) and other officers, whose role was to ensure the comfort and ease of travelers and provide impeccable hospitality.

In the *Bere* (Drinking) section, Rabasco's *Il Convito*, published in 1615 and dedicated to Carlo Medici, emerges as a seminal treatise and a milestone in banquet literature.²⁰ This work offers an in-depth examination of banquet organization, serving as both an etiquette guide and a manual on the art of banquet arrangement. *Il Convito* serves as a foundational text for

¹⁶ Additional documentation regarding the volumes transferred to Rome is found in the Alessandrine manuscripts nos. 51 and 5273 (Serrai 2008, p. 34; Sabba 2012, p.9)

¹⁷ Sabba, 2023, pp. 67-78.

¹⁸ Policari, 2018-2019, pp. 39-46.

¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 60-61.

²⁰ Ibid, pp. 222-225.

understanding the organization of both public and private banquets, including ceremonies such as weddings and baptisms. Rabasco meticulously details table arrangements, guest etiquette, the roles of servants, the preparation and presentation of dishes, appropriate music, and suitable conversational themes.

The presence of such volumes indicates that banquets and formal gatherings were not only moments of social interaction, but also fundamental expressions of cultural and political identity, embodying the values, tastes, and sophistication of the court. The meticulous attention to table setting, the selection of food, and the order of service highlighted the status and refinement of the host, making these events essential in reinforcing social hierarchies and courtly etiquette. The combination of these elements—along with the Duke's passion for the animal world²¹ and his documented role as a patron of the decorative arts²²—thus allows us to understand the significance of zoomorphic artifacts produced within the Duchy.

The aesthetic inclination towards animal-shaped motifs is evident in numerous crafted objects, embodying both a fascination with the natural world and a commitment to integrating artistic innovation into the material culture of the court. The inventories compiled during the last fifty years of the Duchy's existence for his main ducal residences - Pesaro, Urbino, and Casteldurante,²³ provide a detailed overview of the furnishings and decorations of these spaces, documenting not only painted masterpieces and primary furnishings, but also a wide array of decorative objects, many of which are animal-shaped: turtles, parrots, lions, and many others reflect the complex aesthetic sensibility of the Duke, his desire to evoke awe

²¹ The section of the *Libreria* dedicated to animals and the art hunting has been detailed by a recent publication edited by Massimo Moretti (*Gli animali e la Caccia nell'immaginario di Francesco Maria II della Rovere*, edited by M. Moretti, Rome, 2023), where the engravings inside the book are studied to provide a better understanding of the Duke's passion for the natural world. The study is part of the *Immaginare i Saperi* project, a collaborative initiative supported by the Italian Ministry of Culture and Sapienza University of Rome, under the direction of Professor Massimo Moretti from Sapienza University, dedicated to the systematic examination of the iconographic heritage preserved in the books of the personal library of Francesco Maria II della Rovere.

²² In the Duchy of Urbino, personal workshops of the Duke had existed since the time of Guidobaldo della Rovere, located in the underground spaces of the Ducal Palace in Pesaro. Under Francesco Maria II Della Rovere, these workshops were further enhanced and became extraordinary centers of artistic production, where Italian and foreign artists worked under the Duke's direct supervision. Even in 1621, after the tragic death of his son Federico Ubaldo, the aging Duke, who had retired to Casteldurante, requested an annual income of 49,000 scudi to continue supporting these art workshops. (Montevecchi, 2001, pp. 323–334)

²³ For the Inventories of the Ducal Palace of Urbino, compiled in the years 1582, 1599, 1609, 1631: Sangiorgi, 1976. For the Inventory of the Ducal Palace of Pesaro, drafted between 1623 and 1624: Scatassa, 1899, pp. 49–68; Calzini, 1914, pp. 129–137, 170–177. For the Inventory of the Ducal Palace of Urbino, 1631: Biganti, 2002, pp. 111–121; Biganti, Semenza, 2004, pp. 241–244; Biganti, 2005.

and fascination among hosts and visitors and his overarching intent of expressing power and prestige through art.²⁴ Therefore, in Urbino objects crafted in maiolica, silver, and other precious materials²⁵ to adorn tables and credenzas became an integral part of a unique and deeply rooted cultural tradition, sometimes replicating the forms and dimensions of far more expensive works made with precious metal, such as the ones produced in the Giambologna²⁶ workshop, influenced by the classical-inspired bronze animals.



Fig. 3 *Parrot*, Urbino, 1560-1600 ca, maiolica. Great Bookham, Polesden Lacey.

The inventory compiled in 1623 of the Guardaroba of the Ducal Palace of Pesaro, within the section "Vasi et Maiolica diversa",²⁷ meticulously details various types of maiolica wares, showcasing a rich repertoire of animal forms: "scimmiotti nove et un piccolino [...], schiena

²⁴ Semenza, 2023, pp. 99-110.

²⁵ Such animal-shaped table objects were also crafted in other materials, such as sugar, and through the art of napkin folding. While we do not yet have evidence that these were produced in the Duchy of Urbino, it is highly probable, given courtly trends, that they were also created there. For further insights on this topic, see: Morselli, Piccinelli, 2013, pp. 217-250; Sallas, 2015, pp. 39-47.

²⁶ Paolinelli, 2023, pp. 265-270.

²⁷ "Various Vases and Maiolica"

una di tartaruga che fa da saliera con un Cupido per coperchio [...], coniglio uno di maiolica [...], saliera una con due salierini, uno rotto, vi sono due figure sopra due teste di Castrato [...], fiaschetto di maiolica bianca fatto a conchiglia con due maniche [...], figura una di terra cotta col Calamaro et un Orso".²⁸

Among the most frequently represented animals in the inventories of Della Rovere court, the turtle stands out, depicted in both earthenware (maiolica) and precious metals such as silver.²⁹ The 1609 inventory of the Ducal Palace of Urbino mentions "una tartaruga grande istoriata con aquila sopra che serve per bacile e bocale".³⁰ Similarly, the 1631 inventory, compiled after the death of Duke Francesco Maria II Della Rovere, lists numerous turtle-shaped objects housed in the Ducal Palace of Casteldurante: "tartaruga una grande col suo coperchio d'argento sopra il quale è un granchio con doi lomache piccole, con l'arme della cerqua, in parte dorata [...]; tartaruga una d'argento dorata, con un granchio et doi lumachette nel coperchio [...]".³¹ A turtle-shaped design is preserved in the Vatican Apostolic Library, adorned with intricate oak leaf motifs, suggesting a close ties with the Della Rovere family;³² Benedetta Montevecchi suggests it was intended for an ebony and ivory artifact, while Semenza posits that it served as a preliminary design for a silver lid, as indicated by contemporary annotations.³³ As Claudio Paolinelli has extensively studied, the turtle - an emblem of Guidobaldo della Rovere - symbolized resilience and defensive strength, qualities derived from its terrestrial adaptation and powerful, digging claws.³⁴ This made it a powerful metaphor in both military and artistic contexts, as documented in Roberto Valturio's *De re militari*, where a war machine is likened to a 'testudo' (tortoise) formation.³⁵ A tortoise was also part of the extensive table service commissioned by the Duke of Urbino's sister from

²⁸ "nine little monkeys and a tiny one [...], a turtle's back serving as a salt cellar with a Cupid as the lid [...], one rabbit made of majolica [...], one salt cellar with two small salt dishes, one broken, there are two figures above two Castrato heads [...], a white majolica flask shaped like a shell with two handles [...], one terracotta figure with a Squid and a Bear." (Paolinelli, 2023, pp. 265-270)

²⁹ Mallet and Wilson, 2012, p. 61; Paolinelli, 2019b, pp. 231-238; Paolinelli, 2023, pp. 265-270.

³⁰ "a large, decorated turtle with an eagle on top that serves as a basin and pitcher".

³¹ "One large turtle with its silver lid on which is a crab with two small snails, partially gilded with the oak arms [...]; one turtle in gilded silver, with a crab and two small snails on the lid [...]" (Paolinelli, 2023, pp. 265-270)

³² Prevalent in inventory records and integral to the furnishings of the Dukes of Urbino are artifacts embellished with the oak motif, an emblem of the Della Rovere family. This symbol was widely employed in the decoration of residential interiors and the precious furnishings that enriched them. (Montevecchi, 2001; Paolinelli, 2019a, pp. 12-36)

³³ Montevecchi, 2001, pp. 330; Semenza 2023, pp. 106-108.

³⁴ Paolinelli, 2019b, pp. 231-238.

³⁵ Ibid.

Francesco Patanazzi's workshop in 1599 as a gift for the wife of the Viceroy of Naples.³⁶

These tureens were possibly designed to serve dishes such as soups or stews made from both marine and land tortoises, as documented in Bartolomeo Scappi's 1570 recipe book, which is preserved in the Duke's library and includes recipes for both types.³⁷ The motif was widely used by artists active in other courts as well, as evidenced by the drawing attributed to Giulio Romano, shaped like a tortoise and currently housed at Chatsworth,³⁸ which appears intended for an inkwell or, more likely, as suggested by the reference to marine mollusks, a salt cellar.

The aviary theme was also a favored motif, as evidenced by the 1631 inventory of the Ducal Palace of Urbania: "ucelli, animali, statuette e vasetti diversi di terra invetriata, numero quarant'otto".³⁹ An exemplary instance is seen in duck-shaped maiolica vessels with perforated beaks or heads made in Urbino, such as those housed at the Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Imola, the Musei Civici of Pesaro, and the English estate of Polesden Lacey.⁴⁰ These objects were likely intended not only for ornamental purposes but also for practical use in food preparation. Notably, bronze ducks attributed to Urbino artist Donnino Ambrosi were created for the fountain in Piazza del Duca in Senigallia (1599 - 1602) by Francesco Maria II Della Rovere, commemorating the reconstruction of the San Gaudenzio aqueduct and the reclamation of the Le Saline marshlands, known for their population of waterfowl.⁴¹ At Polesden Lacey, there is also an object in the shape of a parrot, another animal motif highly prevalent at the Della Rovere court.⁴²

The ducal imagination extended to the marine world, inspiring the creation of salt cellars and sauce boats shaped like shells, dolphins, and even rare forms resembling crab carapaces, as seen in pieces housed at the Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche in Faenza and the Victoria and Albert Museum.⁴³ The interiors of these objects frequently display intricate painted decorations that evoke aquatic themes.

³⁶ Franz, Hollein and Wilson 2022, p.117, cat. no. 72.

³⁷ Di Schino, Luccichenti, 2016.

³⁸ Bazzotti, 1989, pp. 458, inv. no. 123.

³⁹ "birds, animals, figurines, and various glazed earthenware jars, number forty-eight" (Biganti, 2005, p. 409)

⁴⁰ Paolinelli, 2023, pp. 267-269

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ For the Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche in Faenza piece: Mazzotti, 2012, pp.230-231; For the Victoria and Albert Museum piece: Rackam, 1977, inv. No. C.2277-1910; Bojani, Ravanelli Guidotti, Fanfani, 1985, p. 141, Cat. No. 339.

For example, three salt cellars, one is housed at the Victoria and Albert Museum, another in a private collection in London



Fig.4 *Crab-shaped sauceboat*, Urbino, 1550–60, maiolica. London, Victoria & Albert Museum.

and the third at the Wallace Collection feature shell-shaped vessels, with the first two depicting a putto accompanied by a dolphin, while the third features a painted representation of Neptune, the god of the sea⁴⁴.

⁴⁴ For the Victoria and Albert Museum piece: Inv. No. C.32-1961; For the private collection piece: Bertolami auction houses, November 2018, London, lot. 67; For the Wallace Collection piece: Norman, 1976, Inv. No. C124.



Fig. 5 Fontana Workshop, *Salt cellar in the shape of a shell*, Urbino, first quarter of the 17th century, maiolica. London, Private collection.

This attraction to the fantastical and monstrous is further evident in Urbino maiolica works, such as an ewer at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and a jug at the Louvre in Paris,⁴⁵ both adorned with dragon motifs. Another striking piece within this fantastical realm is an Urbino ewer, circa 1560, formerly in the Rothschild collection,⁴⁶ modeled as a harpy-like creature with a winged, bird-like body with a long, twisted tail curving backward to form a dragon-like opening, blending human and avian characteristics.⁴⁷ The spout is crafted as a bearded male head on a long neck, with its mouth serving as an additional opening.

⁴⁵ For the one at Metropolitan Museum see: Wilson, pp. 306-307, cat. no. 108; For the one at the Louvre:

⁴⁶ Christie's, 12 October 2023, lot. 126.

⁴⁷ For a model of a harpy attributed to the Patanazzi workshop, see Giuliana Gardelli, *"A Gran Fuoco", Mostra di Maioliche rinascimentali dello Stato di Urbino da Collezioni Private*, Palazzo Ducale, Urbino, July – September 1987 Exhibition Catalogue, Urbino, 1987, pp. 144-145, no. 61.



Fig. 6 Ewer in the shape of a dragon, Urbino, ca. 1600, maiolica. Paris, Louvre Museum.

In the Duchy of Urbino, the animal world served as a constant source of artistic inspiration, as evidenced by the inventories, which document its influence in the design of wine coolers and salt cellars - essential and eye-catching elements of table decoration. These pieces often featured a variety of animal motifs combined and were crafted with exceptional skill in silver, gold, and maiolica. The 1582 inventory of the Ducal Palace of Casteldurante records: “Un bacile grando a treangolo, con mascaroni dentro di relevo a grotesca [...] Saliere doi historiate con li coperchi de rilievo [...]”⁴⁸. The same inventory, under the section “Credenza de Altonso Patanazzo ed piatti istoriati, con li infrascritti vasi”,⁴⁹ notes: “[...] renfrescatore historiato a triangollo [...] saliere con li coperchi”.⁵⁰ Although brief, these descriptions confirm that the Patanazzi workshop, one of the most prominent maiolica producers of the 16th century, created numerous tableware pieces for the Della Rovere,⁵¹ and many of the surviving ones are

⁴⁸ "A large triangular basin, with grotesque relief mascarons inside [...] Two decorated salt cellars with lids in relief [...]" (Sangiorgi, 1976, p. 190)

⁴⁹ "Credenza of Alfonso Patanazzo and decorated plates, with the below-listed vases" (Ibid, pp. 191)

⁵⁰ “[...] a triangular historiated wine cooler [...] salt cellars with lids." (Ibid)

⁵¹ For an in-depth study on the Patanazzi workshop, see: Vanni, 2005, pp. 292-297; Vossilla, 2001, pp. 92-102.

adorned with animal motifs. One notable example is a salt cellar supported by three dolphins, now housed at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.⁵² Descriptions of maiolica salt cellars and wine coolers in the Della Rovere inventories are more concise, as seen in the 1631 record: “saliera una d’argento, che rappresenta il Tevere et un cornucopia con l’arme del signor Cardinale d’Urbino, sostenuta da quattro tartarughe et altre figurette, al quanto dorata [...]”; saliera una d’argento dorata, tonda, con alcuni fogliami, guarnita d’oro massiccio, con tre aquile d’oro et coperchio d’oro e tre gigli d’oro [...]”; “Rinfrescatori uno grande d’argento sopra quattro piedi di leone, con l’arme de serenissimi Principe e Principessa in rilievo [...] et con la sua brocca d’argento grande assai, con un manico lavorato a fogliami et angeli a piedi, et una testa d’aquila [...]”.⁵³



Fig. 7 Patanazzi workshop, *a Duchy of Urbino maiolica ewer*, Urbino, circa 1580–1600, maiolica. Formerly in the Rothschild collection; now in a private collection.

The production of maiolica tableware decorated with scenes featuring animals in the Duchy of Urbino is further exemplified by the *Wine Cooler with a Pageant Battle with Elephants*, likely

⁵² Inv. N. 8402-1863

⁵³ "one salt cellar in silver, representing the Tiber and a cornucopia with the armorial of Cardinal d'Urbino, supported by four turtles and other small figures, partially gilded [...]; one salt cellar in gilded silver, round, with some foliage, adorned with solid gold, with three gold eagles and a gold lid and three gold lilies [...]; "A large silver cooler resting on four lion feet, with the coat of arms of the Prince and Princess in relief [...]. Accompanied by its large silver pitcher, with a handle decorated with foliage and angels at the base, and an eagle's head [...]" (Biganti, 2005, p. 235, p. 240)

produced by the Fontana workshop between 1562 and 1575, now housed in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art⁵⁴. This basin is supported by three trapezophori with lion's paws crowned by lion heads, and it features a central scene depicting a battle with elephants - an iconographic subject circulating in the Duke's circle since the time of Guidobaldo della Rovere. Specifically, this basin is believed to be part of the "Spanish Service," commissioned around 1560 by Guidobaldo Della Rovere, Duke of Urbino, as a diplomatic gift for Philip II of Spain.⁵⁵ This set, one of the most ambitious maiolica services of the sixteenth century, comprised dozens of pieces adorned with scenes from Caesar's Gallic and Civil Wars, based on designs by the painters Taddeo Zuccari and Federico Zuccari⁵⁶. The presence of early reproductions, however, suggests that this piece may have been produced a few years later by Orazio or possibly his successor, Flaminio Fontana.⁵⁷

The elephant, depicted frequently in the Duchy, served as a powerful symbol, carrying philosophical and religious associations and signifying an animal reserved for rulers and pontiffs. This symbolic resonance, combined with Francesco Maria II's scientific curiosity, likely motivated his decision to bring an elephant to his court. The arrival of the animal at Casteldurante in 1630 was meticulously recorded by the Padri Caracciolini, reflecting the court's great enthusiasm for this rare addition.⁵⁸ The significance of elephants is also documented in various textual sources, including Ms. 2 from the Biblioteca Universitaria Alessandrina and two manuscripts now preserved at the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.⁵⁹ The first is a Latin manuscript, containing annotations by anonymous authors on naturalist texts, notably Aristotle, with a particular focus on the elephant, while the second is a vernacular adaptation of Aristotle's *Historia Animalium*, crafted within the Della Rovere court.⁶⁰

Animal-shaped artifacts extended beyond table decoration to the broader context of court life, influencing the arrangement of banquet halls and formal settings. A striking example is a pair of grand torchères, 123 cm in height, crafted in the latter half of the 16th century to support

⁵⁴ *Exuberant Grotesques: Renaissance Maiolica*, 2009; Wilson, 2016, Inv. N. 32.100.362.

⁵⁵ Wilson, 2016, pp. 288-291, no. 103.

⁵⁶ Clifford, 1991, pp. 166-176.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Antonella Attanasio has analyzed the document describing the arrival of the elephant Don Diego at the Duke's court: Attanasio, 2023, pp. 253-264.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

torches that illuminated ceremonial spaces.⁶¹ Their relief decorations include phytomorphic and zoomorphic figures derived from grotesques - herms, shells, griffins, camels, sphinxes, satyrs, medallions, monstrous visages, and fantastical bodies - rendered in vivid, almost surreal colors. Acquired by the state for Urbino in 1988 from the Cassa di Risparmio di Rimini, these rare and splendid pieces, possibly from the workshop of the Patanazzi family, find echoes in the 'Inventari' of ducal assets, particularly the 'Lista delli vasi di maiolica'⁶² from 1609, which mentions "Torchiere n. doi, formate, de relevo, depinte con satirre".⁶³



Fig. 8. Torchère, Urbino, end of 16th century, maiolica. Urbino, Galleria Nazionale delle Marche

⁶¹ Montevecchi, 2001, pp. 324.

⁶² "List of Maiolica Vases"

⁶³ "Two candlesticks, molded in relief, painted with satyrs". (Valazzi, 2000, pp. 84-87)

The presence of such items showcases the exceptional skill of Renaissance artisans in reimagining animal forms, blending utility with artistry, and reflecting the sophisticated taste of the dukes, whose aim was to astonish and captivate their guests at courtly gatherings. Finally, a valuable source for understanding the daily life and rituals of the court is the *Diary* of Francesco Maria II, preserved in the State Archives of Florence,⁶⁴ which provides a rare insight into the Duke's life, spanning approximately forty years and covering the period from late 1582 to March 7, 1623.⁶⁵ However, the entries become notably sparse from November 1621 onwards, coinciding with Francesco Maria II's decision to abdicate in favor of his son. Despite its historical richness, the *Diary* contains very few references to banquet practices or the manner in which such events were conducted in the Duchy.⁶⁶ Mentions of convivial occasions are almost exclusively related to the Swiss Guards, a contingent of approximately 45 soldiers responsible for palace security, as was customary in Italian courts.⁶⁷ The only significant references to banquets pertain to the wedding and baptism of the Duke's son; it is likely that the Duke considered only events of deep personal significance worthy of record, thus omitting documentation of other formal gatherings that undoubtedly took place within the palace.

This exploration into the customs, aesthetic preferences, and animal imagery of Duke Francesco Maria II has highlighted, as already known, his profound passion for the natural world, making the court of the Della Rovere a crucible of innovation where the natural and the fantastical were transformed into objects blending reality with myth and legend. The zoomorphic items did not solely serve a practical purpose; they encapsulated the taste and status of the elite, reflecting Renaissance cultural trends grounded in curiosity and ingenuity. What emerges clearly is the Duke's intent to tame and elevate nature through art, thus evoking "marvel," awe, and admiration for the splendor of his court. The ultimate aim was to uphold a criterion of magnificence that would solidify his prestige and legitimize his power. It is certain that at the court of the last Duke, animals were observed, painted, studied, and described until the final days, as long as the Duke retained his physical and intellectual vigor⁶⁸.

⁶⁴ *Memorie concernenti la vita di Francesco Maria Secondo della Rovere*, (Ed. rist.) 1995, pp. 57-91; Mei, 2008, pp. 59-82

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Policari, 2018-2019, pp. 47-50.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Moretti 2023, p. 16.

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