

## LOVE AND MARRIAGE IN RENAISSANCE FLORENCE THE COURTAULD WEDDING CHESTS

In 1471 Lorenzo di Matteo Morelli, a Florentine patrician aged about 30, married Vaggia di Tanai Nerli, the daughter of another wealthy Florentine. The following year he commissioned a pair of splendid wedding chests to commemorate this event. Now part of The Courtauld Gallery, Lorenzo Morelli's chests are amongst the most important surviving examples of Renaissance furniture and they offer rich insights into art and life in Florence at the height of the city's glory.

Marriage – or the lack of it – was one of the key defining events for most Renaissance Italians. However, a Renaissance marriage had little in common with its modern equivalent. A marriage in fifteenth century Florence was not primarily about love, or even religion. Instead it was a legal contract agreed between the families of the couple, a dynastic alliance informed by wealth, power and prestige. If conjugal love developed between a husband and his wife, that was a bonus, but it was not essential.

Marriage involved huge expenditure both by the groom and by the bride's family. A patrician husband would buy clothes, jewels and textiles for his new wife and would often refurnish his suite of rooms in the family palace. Among the most significant items commissioned at the time of marriage were pairs of richly decorated chests. These large painted and gilded chests, now generally called *cassoni*, were used to store precious items such as clothes. They were also among the most magnificent and costly items of furniture found in Florentine palaces.

***Love and Marriage in Renaissance Florence: The Courtauld Wedding Chests***, on view at The Courtauld Gallery, Somerset House, London, from **12 February to 17 May 2009**, is the first exhibition in the United Kingdom devoted to these important objects. Historically, they have been underestimated by art historians because they straddle the modern division between the fine and decorative arts. However, they offer a unique insight into the values of Renaissance Florence and how family life was lived in its palaces.

At the heart of this exhibition are the celebrated Morelli-Nerli chests; the only pair of Renaissance Florentine marriage chests to survive with their accompanying painted backboards (*spalliere*) and to be fully documented. Vaggia Nerli brought with her a sizeable dowry of 2,000 florins, but her husband was responsible for redecorating his rooms to welcome his wife to her new home on the Borgo Santa Croce.

Lorenzo recorded these considerable costs in a surviving document entitled 'My expenses when I took my wife home'. He had the existing bed and *lettuccio* (daybed) in his *camera* (chamber) gilded, and commissioned further carved decoration for the *lettuccio* as well as new curtains for the bed. Almost two-thirds of Lorenzo's substantial decoration expenses (61 large florins) were for the pair of painted *cassoni*, ordered in 1472, now in The Courtauld Gallery. From the documents, we know that the chests and *spalliera* panels were constructed by the woodworker Zanobi di Domenico. They were adorned with gilded and painted decoration by the painting partnership of Biagio di Antonio and Jacopo del Sellaio.

Like his contemporaries, Lorenzo placed his *cassoni* in his chamber. They probably dominated this relatively small but significant space at the centre of the household's activities. Here, the husband and wife would – hopefully – conceive the next generation of their family. Here, too, important guests might be entertained or family discussions held. The *cassoni* provided the backdrop to the life of the family and their painted decorations were chosen with suitable care, providing both entertainment and instruction.

In an age of limited literacy, these finely painted and beguiling panels were visual storybooks with the power to transport their viewers into a new world, which imaginatively combined past and present. The tales they depicted were drawn from a large pool of familiar stories – the literature and history of ancient Greece and Rome, the Old Testament, and the poetry of Boccaccio and Petrarch.

The exhibition will reflect the extensive subject matter used in *cassone* painting. This included stories intended to divert and give pleasure to the husband and wife, such as Lo Scheggia's *The Meeting of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba* (Private Collection). However, they often contained a strong moral message. For example, the pair of paintings by Giovanni Toscani (National Gallery of Scotland and Private Collection) – reunited in the exhibition for the first time in over 150 years – represent a story from Boccaccio's *Decameron*. For having accused Ginevra falsely of adultery, Ambrogiuolo was punished by being stung to death by bees. The stories chosen for other chests emphasised ideal virtues such as bravery, constancy, obedience and prudence; models which members of a patrician family might strive to emulate.

Paintings for *cassoni* were also designed to remind Florentines that they were true Renaissance men and women – the Christian inheritors of the virtues of Republican Rome. Lorenzo Morelli chose to decorate his chests with exemplary scenes from Roman history. The main panel of the Nerli *cassone*, bearing his wife's coat of arms, shows the punishment of the treacherous schoolmaster of the town of Falieri who offered his pupils as hostages to the Romans. Vaggia Nerli was encouraged not to follow his example, but rather to care for her charges – her husband's children – with devotion.

The final section of the exhibition will consider the subsequent history of *cassoni*. Lorenzo Morelli passed his chests to his son, and they remained in the family's possession for over two hundred years as valued memorials of an important marriage. Like many chests they were purchased in the nineteenth century by collectors eager to own objects made during the 'Golden Age' of Lorenzo de' Medici. At this point they were altered so that they conformed to nineteenth-century ideals of the Renaissance. As a result, *cassoni* are not merely significant Renaissance objects but important material documents of how fashion and taste, and successive generations' interpretations of Renaissance Italy, have changed over the years.

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## FACT SHEET

- Exhibition title:** *Love and Marriage in Renaissance Florence: The Courtauld Wedding Chests*
- Dates:** 12 February to 17 May 2009
- Sponsors:** The Italian Cultural Institute  
The Michael Marks Charitable Trust  
Madeleine and Timothy Plaut
- Location:** The Courtauld Gallery, Somerset House, Strand, London WC2R 0RN  
Tel. +44 (0)20 7848 2526, fax. +44 (0)20 7848 2589  
[www.courtauld.ac.uk](http://www.courtauld.ac.uk)
- Opening hours:** Daily 10 am to 6 pm, last admission 5.30 pm
- Admission:** Included in admission to permanent collection:  
Adult: £5.00, concessions: £4.00;  
Free admission: Mondays 10 am to 2 pm  
Free at all times for under 18s, full-time UK students and unwaged
- Catalogue:** The exhibition is accompanied by a fully-illustrated catalogue by curator Caroline Campbell, Schroder Foundation Curator of Paintings at the Courtauld, published by Paul Holberton in association with The Courtauld Gallery.  
128 pages, paperback, 260 x 216 mm, ISBN 9781903470 91 6, price £20.
- Gallery Talks:** There will be a programme of talks by curators and Courtauld students, free with admission.
- Related Display:** *Design Drawings from High Renaissance Italy*  
A special display of rarely seen Italian sixteenth-century design drawings from The Courtauld Gallery's extensive drawings collection has been arranged to coincide with the exhibition. These drawings, some of which have never been on public view, have been chosen to explore the range of objects which a Renaissance artist might be called upon to design, such as furniture, household objects and architectural ornaments.
- How to get there:** The Courtauld Gallery is situated in the North Building of Somerset House, which has entrances from the Strand and the Victoria Embankment. Mainline trains to Charing Cross, Waterloo or Blackfriars; underground stations Temple (District and Circle lines), Covent Garden (Piccadilly line) and Charing Cross (Northern, Bakerloo and Jubilee lines); buses 6, 9, 11, 13, 15, 23, 77a, 91 and 176 to Strand.
- Access:** The Gallery is wheelchair accessible, with level access to most areas and a lift to all floors. Assisted ramp access is available for gallery 1. 24 hour access information line +44 (20) 7845 4671.
- Shop:** The Courtauld Shop is open daily during Gallery hours offering exhibition catalogues and a variety of merchandise inspired by the temporary exhibitions and the permanent collection.  
Tel. +44 (0)20 7848 2579, [shop@sctenterprises.com](mailto:shop@sctenterprises.com)
- Café:** The Courtauld Gallery Café is open daily 10.00 to 17.30 serving light meals and drinks.