

# TEACHERS' RESOURCE

LOVE AND MARRIAGE IN  
RENAISSANCE FLORENCE  
THE COURTAULD  
WEDDING CHESTS  
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Cover:  
The Master of Marradi *The Reconciliation of the Romans and the Sabines* (detail) c. 1480  
By kind permission of the Earl and Countess of Harewood and the Trustees of the Harewood House Trust

Left:  
Biagio di Antonio, Jacopo del Sellaio and Zanobi di Domenico *The Morelli Chest* (side view), 1472

# WELCOME

The Courtauld Institute of Art Education Programme aims to help young people understand art as a means of exploring creative ideas and cultural history in an informed and critical way.

The new resources for schools are underpinned by the intellectual rigour and excellence that is characteristic of The Courtauld. The content is designed to encourage further research and experimentation and we welcome your feedback.

We hope the material proves useful and inspires interest and enthusiasm for the subject itself and for The Courtauld Gallery as a unique source of learning and a fantastic place to visit.

With best wishes,



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# 10 THINGS YOU MAY WANT TO KNOW ABOUT CASSONI



Above:  
Biagio di Antonio, Jacopo del Sellaio and Zanobi di  
Domenico *The Nerli Chest* (front view with lid open,  
side view and back view), 1472

### ONE

*Cassoni* (*cassone*: singular) is the name given to Italian Renaissance painted chests.

### TWO

In fifteenth-century Italy pairs of *cassoni* were often commissioned at the time of marriage.

### THREE

*Cassoni* were made throughout Italy. However, they were particularly associated with Tuscany and Florence.

### FOUR

Painted chests were sometimes part of the procession which a bride made from her father's house to her new home with her husband and his family. They could contain her *trousseau* (dowry).

### FIVE

*Cassoni* were valuable possessions. They were generally displayed in a man's *camera* (chamber), one of the most important rooms in a house.

### SIX

These chests were decorated with paintings of popular stories. These were drawn from the most familiar literature of the day: including the works of the Italian poets Boccaccio, Petrarch and Dante, the Old Testament, and ancient Greek and Roman history.

### SEVEN

Paintings of ancient heroes like Scipio – who returned a beautiful female captive to her *fiancé* – told young husbands how to behave towards their wives. They were to treat them with respect, but the men were to remember that they were ultimately in control.

### EIGHT

Painted chests often stayed in families for generations. They were not just precious in themselves, but symbolised important marriage alliances.

### NINE

Children could take their first lessons from *cassoni*. The pictures on their fronts were close to the ground – a perfect viewing height for children.

### TEN

The Courtauld owns one of the few surviving pairs of wedding chests which can be connected with a particular marriage. These chests were made for the 1472 marriage of Lorenzo Morelli to Vaggia Nerli. This was a happy and successful match. Their son Leonardo inherited the wedding chests from his father and also used them to decorate his chamber.

# RE-IMAGINING THE PAST: THE VARIED HISTORIES OF THE MORELL-NERLI CASSONI

The Courtauld's two large ornate chests, known as the Morelli-Nerli *cassoni* (fig. 1 and 2) were commissioned by Lorenzo di Matteo di Morelli on the occasion of his marriage to Vaggia di Tanai di Francesco Nerli. They date from 1472, and were carved by Zanobi di Domenico, with painted decoration by Jacopo del Sellaio and Biagio di Antonio. They would have constituted one of the most expensive items purchased by the groom for his marriage home and would then have been placed in the groom's chamber and used for the storage of fine clothes and linen. The accompanying panels, known as *spalliere*, were part of a decorative scheme that included the marriage chests.

Examples of fine craftsmanship, the underlying structure of the chests, made from poplar, would have been completed before the chests were then carved, painted and gilded. Although art historians considered them minor items until about 30 years ago, they in fact demonstrate as much artistic skill and thoughtful planning as any wall painting or altarpiece from the era. Indeed, fine art was an integral part of the typical elite, or 'patrician', household in fifteenth century Florence. Specifically commissioned by a husband to be, used by his wife and enjoyed by his children, the chests would have been an important and beautiful part of family life, to be passed down through generations.

The passing down of history is a fundamental aspect of these wedding chests in a number of ways, which will be discussed here. Firstly, they were made to last as expensive heirlooms, evidence of the considerable financial wealth of Morelli and intended to prolong his reputation and 'presence' long after his death. The Morelli and Nerli coats of arms can be seen at the corners of both chests and the identity of the families is accorded as much importance in this respect as the narratives that adorn the front and side panels and *spalliere*. These images themselves represent a re-interpretation of the past to give the chests an instructive value: the stories and virtues depicted would have been carefully chosen to signify certain qualities that were intended to teach or remind the family how to behave. The ways in which the stories were visually

manipulated to make them appealing to a fifteenth century Florentine audience were also important. Finally, the later restoration of the *cassoni* to fit a Victorian ideal of the Italian renaissance demonstrates not so much the preservation of the chests or their return to their original state, but an imagined history mapped onto them that the current exhibition seeks to decode in order to understand them in a more authentic manner.

The term *Renaissance* has been commonly used since the mid-nineteenth century to broadly describe the artistic practices of the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries, centred on Italy and especially Florence. The connotations of the term (literally 're-birth') involve the rediscovery of certain ideas, imagery and traditions taken from ancient Greece and Rome in the fifth century BC through to the first century AD. The Roman empire in particular was an important source and role-model for Florentines, Florence being seen to have inherited its democracy and liberty from Rome; even the term 'patrician', used to describe the elite classes, derives from the name given to Roman senators. The skilful modelling of the ideal human body achieved by ancient sculptors was emulated by painters who, with the development of perspective, found a means not just of copying Roman sculptors (as the Romans had copied the Greeks), but of representing three-dimensional space and objects on a flat surface to create an almost perfect illusion of 'reality'. Likewise, the legends and heroes of ancient Rome could be used as moral or 'didactic' examples.

A major source for understanding history was the Roman historian Livy's *History of Rome*, itself based on accounts that were partly documented as fact but often passed on by word of mouth, in a storytelling tradition, changed and adapted by different story-tellers through various eras. His work, which was an amalgamation of various sources, given a gloss that accentuated Roman virtue, constituted a poetic, legendary history rather than a source history. Patricians would often keep 'chapbooks', or manuscript compendia, which contained important stories, sometimes religious, sometimes secular,



historical, mythological or poetic. The commissioning patrician groom chose the narratives that would be painted onto the *cassoni* by the artist, who would then create his own depiction of the story, thus the tales told on the sides of wedding chests were often hybrids or amalgamations of aspects of different versions, manipulated to suit both contemporary Florentine taste and the particular morals that the groom wished to have portrayed.

The specific stories chosen for the Morelli-Nerli chests were drawn from Livy's history. The Morelli chest (fig. 1) has the Morelli coat of arms on the left corner and the Nerli arms on the right corner. Its front panel depicts the Roman general and statesman Camillus expelling the Gauls from Rome, an heroic military tale that shows the virtue of the Roman leader, who was to become known as Rome's 'second founder'; the *spalliera* depicts Horatius Cocles defending Rome, the story emerging theatrically from between two painted drawn curtains. The narratives would perhaps have reminded Morelli to follow famous examples of protection and honour in the leadership of his own household. The figures are dressed in a fashion that resembles that of fifteenth-century Florence, with some of the soldiers wearing doublet and hose and the hero Camillus wearing an approximation of fifteenth-century armour. The city of Rome is represented in a condensed manner, with famous buildings such as the Pantheon, Trajan's Column and the Campidoglio adjoining each other; this is a common device that allows a clear narrative without the need for geographical accuracy, and mirrors the type of written history created by Livy and the chapbooks. The two side panels represent the virtues of Fortitude and Justice, again qualities required of the new husband.

The Nerli chest (fig. 2) has the Nerli coat of arms on the left corner and the Morelli coat of arms on the right. The front panel shows the bad schoolmaster of Falerii, who offered his pupils as hostages to the Romans. He was confronted by Camillus and whipped as punishment by his pupils. The accompanying *spalliera* portrays Mucius Scaevola, whose devotion to Rome, shown in his willingness to kill for

his country, and courage, shown in his readiness to accept just punishment, made him an heroic figure. The side panels show the virtues of Prudence and Temperance, especially suitable for the conduct of a young bride. All these stories combined to encourage Vaggia Nerli as a potential mother to be fair, patient and devoted in her care of Morelli's children, unlike the wicked schoolmaster, and the children in turn were encouraged to be as virtuous as the pupils.

The *cassoni* on one level re-imagine the past by portraying narratives deemed relevant to the lives of the newly married couple for whom they were made and for the lives of their prospective families. Placed at floor level, with intricate detailing and small-scale imagery, they were the perfect 'picture-book' for fifteenth-century children, who learnt from them important narratives and morals.

However the history of *cassoni* does not end in fifteenth-century Italy. A number of generations, including the family of the Morellis' eldest son, lived with the great chests, which became gradually worn and discoloured through age and use. They were eventually considered unfashionable and possibly replaced with new, more modern furniture.

The whereabouts of the Morelli-Nerli chests is unknown between 1680 and their purchase by Sir Herbert Smith for Witley Park in Worcestershire by 1938. However, certain facts surrounding a revival of interest in them amongst European collectors may help to explain their arrival in England. The sixteenth-century writer, Giorgio Vasari, wrote favourably of *cassone* painting in his famous *Lives of the Artists*, first written in 1550 but significantly expanded by him in 1568. With the revived interest of nineteenth-century art critics, historians and collectors in what they termed the Italian Renaissance, Vasari's work too was re-read, and *cassone* painting became a natural fascination. A Victorian dealer, William Blundel Spence, was particularly active in acquiring *cassoni* for British collectors and it seems possible that the Morelli-Nerli chests could have passed through his hands on their way to Sir Herbert Smith. Indeed, what may be



Figure 1:  
Biagio di Antonio, Jacopo del Sellaio and Zanobi di Domenico *The Morelli Chest* (front view), 1472

Spence's handwriting has recently been discovered on the back of the Nerli chest. (fig.2)

One of the problems for collectors wishing to display their new acquisitions in their homes and galleries was the poor state of the objects. They did not look as glorious as they believed such objects should, and thus did not conform to the nineteenth-century ideal of the Renaissance. Consequently, extensive restoration work was often undertaken on the chests – from over-painting the original panels to make the colours brighter once again, and to cover up damage done by keys dangling from the lock, to re-gilding the decoration, and even adding feet in place of the missing bases on which it seems the chests would have originally stood. Some chests in particularly poor repair were even disassembled, and the painted panels either framed and hung as pictures or used to create completely new pieces of furniture.

All these alterations were symptomatic of a tendency to re-invent the original style and intention of the chests in an attempt to present an understanding of how they may or should have looked. The result was a gradual loss of authenticity, meaning that it is hard to classify some of the surviving examples as genuine fifteenth-century rather than nineteenth-century objects.

The Morelli-Nerli chests were not as extensively altered as many other examples, the added lower mouldings, lion's feet and some re-gilding being the most significant changes in this instance. They are therefore an excellent source for understanding both the original intentions of those who commissioned and made them and the mentality and activity of the Victorian dealers and collectors, in particular Spence, who were responsible for the alterations of so many other examples.

The value the Victorians placed on cassoni soon declined. The Morelli-Nerli chests remained unsold at the sale of Sir Herbert's possessions in 1938. They were subsequently bought for £150 each by the dealer Thomas Harris and soon offered them to Boston's Museum of Fine Arts where they were turned down. However

Thomas Harris eventually managed to sell them in 1947 to Lord Lee of Fareham for the enormous sum of £10,000. It was Lord Lee who bequeathed the chests as part of his collection to The Courtauld, where they now remain.

This rather sad history of neglect and disinterest seems to jar with the importance placed on the chests when they were created, and their gradual return to favour perhaps mirrors the histories and legends of ancient Rome that they depict. Their display in the current exhibition *Love and Marriage in Renaissance Florence* attempts to decode their past and their representations of the past and to display them both authentically and accessibly. The cassoni themselves are evocative of the unreliable but poetically beautiful attempts to re-construct history that have been characteristic of almost every age.



ALL THESE  
STORIES COMBINED  
TO ENCOURAGE  
VAGGIA NERLI  
AS A POTENTIAL  
MOTHER TO BE  
FAIR, PATIENT AND  
DEVOTED IN HER  
CARE OF MORELLI'S  
CHILDREN.

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SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING  
Baskins C, Cassone, gender and humansim  
in early modern Italy, Cambridge, 1998.

Baxandall M, Painting and experience  
in fifteenth century Italy: a primer in the  
social history of pictorial style, Oxford,  
1972.

Campbell C, Love and marriage in  
Renaissance Florence: The Courtauld  
Wedding Chests, exh. cat, London,  
Courtauld Gallery, 2009.

For detailed and complete images please  
refer to the Learning Resource CD.



Figure 2:  
Biagio di Antonio, Jacopo del Sellaio and Zanobi di  
Domenico *The Nerli Chest* (front view), 1472

RE-IMAGINING THE PAST  
Written by Caroline Levitt, who recently completed  
her PhD at The Courtauld Institute of Art.

CURRICULUM LINKS  
Art and Design, Art History, History and other  
humanities.

# CASSONI – THE MANUFACTURING PROCESS

These magnificent chests consist of a wooden body that is primed, gilded, and then painted. The manufacture of these pieces of furniture involved several craftsmen and could take several months or even longer, as matching items such as *spalliere* (painted wooden panels made for display on the walls) were often commissioned. A great - and the only known - example of chests with matching panels can be seen in this exhibition: the Morelli-Nerli *cassoni* and *spalliere* were made for the same room.

In 15th-century Florence, the habit of commissioning painted chests for newly-weds' homes became a flourishing business; several workshops specialised in the production of furniture. The difference between painted furniture and painting was less striking than we might think today and it is in fact often difficult to categorise objects in such a way; most workshops concerned produced furniture and other paintings. This is also evident in the similar technique used for both - paintings were not yet being painted on canvas and so we find that the structure of a *cassone* is very similar to that of an altarpiece.

The wooden chest was produced by a carpenter. It was then delivered to the painter's workshop where flaws in the wood and joins were covered with pieces of fabric in order to alleviate the effects of the moving support on the paint layers on top (wood changes its dimensions with climatic changes or fluctuations). As a base for gilding, silvering, and painting, the whole chest was primed with several layers of gesso, gypsum bound in animal glue. Before the painter started his actual work, the framing elements of the chest were water gilded. This was done by another craftsman, the *mettodoro*. To do this, a bole, a thick red earth, was applied onto the dry gesso layer, after which a thin metal leaf was laid over it. This type of gilding is very susceptible to water - it was employed because of the possibility of burnishing it at a later stage to create a shiny surface that looked like solid gold or silver. The burnishing was carried out with small semi-precious stones and took as much experience as time.

The thoroughly planned design for the painted front and side panels was then sketched in. The lines of areas that were to be gilded or silvered, and often also the outlines of architectural elements, were incised. This was necessary in order to be able to distinguish the lines or outlines after the slightly overlapping metal leaves were laid or, in case of the architectural lines, after an opaque mid-tone had been applied. The next step was the gilding and silvering of certain areas within the painting. Silver was often used to represent armour whereas gold represented expensive textiles or gold objects. The gilding technique was the same as described above. The metal surfaces were then decorated with differently shaped punches or patterns engraved with sharp semi-precious stones.

The painting was carried out with pigments bound in a medium. While we can determine the typical pigment palette of the time easily, it is harder to tell what these media were. Pigments often identified are different kinds of ochre-coloured, red, brown, and yellow earths, lead white, carbon blacks, vermilion (red), lead-tin yellow, azurite (blue), and malachite (green). However rarer pigments like lapis lazuli (natural ultramarine) or the synthetic green pigment verditer were also found. Red and purple organic lake pigments were employed in most of the paintings. The medium usually used for painting at the beginning of the 15th century was egg or egg yolk. As the century progressed, artists started experimenting with oils. It is often not possible to gain conclusive scientific evidence and we thus have to rely on other observations. It is likely that artists used egg tempera and oily media and mixtures of the two in the same paintings to achieve multiple effects.

The techniques observed are as diverse as in panel paintings, which again shows how similar furniture and other paintings of the time were. Besides gilding, punching, engraving, and employment of different media in the same paintings, other techniques have been observed, such as *sgraffito* (where pigments weakly bound in glue are applied onto the burnished metal leaf and patterns are scratched out with a

## IN 15TH-CENTURY FLORENCE THE HABIT OF COMMISSIONING PAINTED CHESTS FOR NEWLY-WEDS' HOMES BECAME A FLOURISHING BUSINESS.





Detail of *The Siege of Carthage* around 1460. The whole panel includes many additional ornaments and here clearly shows gilding on the horses' bridle and saddle.

slim piece of wood when the paint is dry), or translucent lake paints applied on top of metal and tempera paint. Sometimes, the artist used mordant gilding to apply gold ornaments on top of painted areas: the ornaments were designed with an oil paint (mordant) and the gold leaf was then applied and stuck to the oil. With mordant gilding the metal surface cannot be burnished.

Another craftsman made the hinges for the lid and the lock mechanism. The chests could then be opened and closed with keys. In contemporary wall paintings we find illustrations of keys dangling from the hole. The fact that the chests were items of daily use - they were used to store precious clothing and the like - explains the characteristic use-marks that make it possible to identify *cassoni* or paintings from them. The most common traces are small indentations and losses in the upper centre of the front paintings caused by dangling keys. Deliberately scratched faces can also often be seen - a form of damage likely to have been caused by children.

Many *cassoni* or panels from chests are poorly preserved due to their owners treating them as minor objects or simply using them for their purpose as storage devices. Most chests were sold to art traders several hundred years after their manufacture and were - due to their poor condition - reworked, disassembled and reassembled in different configurations. Sometimes front panels were singled out, framed, sold as independent pieces of art and given a new meaning as panel paintings displayed at eye level.

Unfortunately, it is thus often impossible to tell what the original chests might have looked like or to identify the wedding for which a specific *cassone* was commissioned.

The Morelli-Nerli *cassoni* and *spalliere* are a very rare and well-preserved pair of chests that have never been disassembled; they give us an idea of common practice in 15th-century Florentine high society.



left: Studio of Giovanni Toscani, *Cassone with scenes from 'The Decameron': The Tale Of Ginevra, Bernabò and Ambrogiuolo* (front view with lid open), c. 1420-25. Private Collection

CASSONI-THE MANUFACTURING PROCESS  
Written by Tilly Schmidt, who worked in The Courtauld Institute Department of Conservation and Technology on *Cassoni* preparation for the exhibition.

**CURRICULUM LINKS**  
Art and Design, Art History, Design and Technology, History.

# GREAT STORIES FOR GREAT FAMILIES

THE PAINTED PANELS SET INTO THE WEDDING CHESTS TELL FASCINATING TALES FROM ANCIENT GREECE, ROME AND PALESTINE, AS WELL AS FROM FLORENTINE LITERATURE AND MORE RECENT HISTORY. THESE BEAUTIFULLY TOLD STORIES WERE INTENDED TO ENTERTAIN AS WELL AS TO INSTRUCT HUSBAND AND WIFE, THEIR SERVANTS, CHILDREN AND VISITORS.



## LIFE OF DELLO DELLI: FLORENTINE PAINTER.

Cassoni were highly valued and an important medium for painters to work on in mid-fifteenth century Florence. The following extract is taken from Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, Florence, 1568 (2nd edition). Written a hundred years after cassoni were popular, it is the earliest historical analysis of the wedding chests on record. In it the artist and art historian Giorgio Vasari writes about cassoni and the life of the painter Dello Delli, who was alleged to have worked primarily in this art form.

'At that time it was normal for there to be great wooden chests, like sarcophagi, in the chambers of citizens, with the covers shaped in various forms. There were no painters who would not paint these cassoni. They depicted stories on their fronts and on their sides, and had the arms or insignia of the married couple on the corners and sometimes elsewhere.

And the stories which were painted on the fronts were for the most part tales taken from Ovid and from other poets, or stories taken from the Greek and Latin historians, and similarly hunts, jousts, tales of love and other similar things, according to what each one liked best. The interiors were lined with fabric or cloth, according to the rank and power of those who had them made, for best storing inside silk garments and other precious things.

This kind of object was in use for so many years that even the most excellent painters occupied themselves with these sorts of work without shaming themselves, as many would today, by painting and gilding such things. And what is true, is that one can see even today, among many other things, several painted cassoni, backboards and mouldings in the chambers of the Magnificent Lorenzo de' Medici the Elder, on which are painted by the hands not of common painters, but excellent masters, all the jousts, tournaments, hunts, feasts and other spectacles of his times, with

judgement, with invention, and with marvellous skill.

Such things are to be seen in all the most noble houses of Florence. There are men who, out of attachment to these ancient usages, truly magnificent and most honourable, have never replaced these furnishings with modern ornaments and customs.'



Above:  
Detail from *Camillus chases the Gauls from Rome*, Biagio di Antonio, Jacopo del Sellaio and Zanobi di Domenico *The Morelli Chest*, 1472

### CAMILLUS CHASES THE GAULS FROM ROME

Many of the stories depicted on *cassoni* were taken from Roman histories, and in particular those of Livy. They were chosen both for their potential to provide vivid and engaging illustrations and for the moral character of their protagonists, which reflected (hopefully) that of the owners of the *cassoni*; or at least provided something to aspire to. One such moral example was the Roman general and politician Marcus Furius Camillus, successively Consul, Military Tribune and Dictator of early republican Rome.

'In 387 BC, Rome came under attack and was besieged by the Gauls. Having withstood all kinds of evil, it was, in the end, the threat of famine that drove the Romans to seek a deal. The invaders let it be known that they could be paid off for a thousand pounds of gold, and then set about making the transaction as humiliating as possible for their opponents. Using false weights, then adding a sword to the pile to be balanced, the Gauls taunted the Romans, crying out, "Woe to the vanquished".

Before the payment could be completed, however, Marcus Furius Camillus arrived, ordered the gold to be removed, and the Gauls to leave. When the Gauls complained that the deal was done and he was too late, Camillus told them that as Dictator, no agreement made by a lesser magistrate in his absence could stand on his return – and then he defeated the Gauls in a skirmish, sending them packing from the city before slaughtering them later in a pitched battle some miles to the north.'

This story is taken from Livy, *The Early History of Rome*, Book 5, Chs. 48-49), depicted on the Morelli Chest in the exhibition.

### THE SCHOOLMASTER OF FALERII

One of the best examples of the reuse of Livy is the story of the Schoolmaster of Falerii. In addition to its being painted to provide an example of morally appropriate behaviour on a *cassoni* panel, the diplomat and writer Niccolo Macchiavelli borrowed the incident to demonstrate, 'how much more can be accomplished on occasion by a single humane act full of charity than by an act that is ferocious or violent.'

'For many years, the Romans waged war against the Etruscan cities to their north, victory gradually being ground out, largely through the efforts of the same Marcus Furius Camillus who would later drive the Gauls from Rome. In 395 BC, in an effort to defeat Falerii, the last Etruscan city to stand against them, the Romans turned to Camillus, who marched the 50 km north and besieged the town.

Now the people of Falerii employed a schoolmaster to educate their sons, and it was his custom to exercise the boys outside the city wall, a practice he continued during the siege. Spotting a chance to ingratiate himself with the Romans, one day he marched his charges directly to the Roman camp and gave them up to Camillus, saying "I have delivered Falerii into your hands by putting in your power those boys whose fathers are at the head of affairs."

Camillus was appalled by his treachery. "Neither the people nor the commander to whom you have come, you wretch, with this villainous offer, are like you. War has its laws as well as peace... We carry arms not against children but against men who carry arms, like ourselves." And with that he ordered the schoolmaster stripped and the boys given sticks to beat him back to the city.

Camillus's justice and good faith impressed the Faliscans so much that they willingly sued for peace with Rome, convinced that they would "live more happily under your government than even under our own laws."

This story is taken from Livy, *The Early History of Rome*, Book, 5, Ch. 27 and is depicted on the Nerli Chest in the exhibition.



Left:  
Detail from *The Schoolmaster of Falerii*, Biagio di Antonio, Jacopo del Sellaio and Zanobi di Domenico *The Nerli Chest*, 1472

GREAT STORIES FOR GREAT FAMILIES Written by Jim Harris, a current PhD student at The Courtauld Institute of Art. You can listen to recordings of Jim narrating these stories on the CD provided.

CURRICULUM LINKS  
Art and Design, Art History, Drama, English Lit&Lang, History, PSE.

## THE CONTINENCE OF SCIPIO

Like the story of the Schoolmaster of Falerii, Machiavelli used this one, of the Continenence of Scipio, to show the power of mercy in waging war.

'After the Roman general Scipio Africanus, had taken the city of New Carthage (present day Cartagena in Spain) from the Carthaginians in 209 BC, he was presented with a prisoner, a girl of exquisite beauty. On discovering that she was engaged to be married to a local prince named Allucius, Scipio summoned both him and the girls parents to appear before him. The Roman General spoke to Allucius as one young man to another. "I heard of the very great love you have for her," Scipio told him, "and I considered that if I were at liberty to indulge the pleasurable pursuits adapted to my time of life, I should wish that my affection for my intended bride should be viewed with an indulgent eye, and I therefore resolved to do all I could in favour of your passion." Recognising the fear and anxiety that must come from seeing his betrothed in Roman hands, Scipio reassured Allucius, "Your beloved, while in my care, has been treated as respectfully as she would have been in the house of her own parents. She has been preserved in perfect safety, that I might be able to present her to you, her purity unblemished, a gift worthy of me to bestow, and of you to receive."

Allucius was overwhelmed and called on the Gods to reward Scipio; but the general was not yet finished. Refusing the great ransom and personal reward pressed on him by the girl's parents and relatives; he asked them instead to lay their gold at his feet and turned again to Allucius. "Besides the dowry which you are to receive," he said, "you must also take this marriage gift from me." And with that, he sent the young man away with all the gold. Allucius could hardly keep his good fortune to himself, and told any one who would listen, "A god-like youth has come amongst us, subduing all, not only by the power of his arms, but by his goodness and generosity."

This story is taken from Livy, *The Early History of Rome*, Book 26, Chapter 50, and is depicted on a panel painting in the exhibition (cat. 7)



Above:  
Detail from *The Continenence of Scipio*  
Follower of Giovanni di Ser Giovanni  
(Lo Sheggia) around 1460.



ONE EVENING, A GROUP OF ITALIAN MERCHANTS MET FOR DINNER IN PARIS AND FELL TO TALKING ABOUT THEIR WIVES AT HOME.



### THE TALE OF GINEVRA, BERNABÒ AND AMBROGIUOLO

More recent literary sources also provided inspiration for the painters and patrons of cassone panels, one of the most popular being Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Like Livy, Boccaccio would have been familiar to many educated Florentines.

'One evening, a group of Italian merchants met for dinner in Paris and fell to talking about their wives at home. All of them feared that they would be cuckolded in their absence; all except one, Bernabo Lomellino of Genoa, whose praise of his wife, Ginevra's faithfulness and chastity was unstinting.

One of the gathering, a young man called Ambrogiuolo from Piacenza, laughed at this and persuaded Bernabo to bet on Ginevra's ability to withstand an attempt by him on her virtue.

Ambrogiuolo took himself off to Genoa and quickly learned two things; first, that Bernabo was right about his wife, who was genuinely good and faithful, and, second, that one of her servants could be bribed. It was enough to form a plan to avoid defeat. He paid the woman to hide him in a chest in Ginevra's chamber, from which he could emerge while she was asleep. This he duly did, not only learning the layout of her bedroom, but seeing her naked and stealing certain objects he could only have obtained from that one place.

Having spent two nights in the room Ambrogiuolo paid his accomplice and returned to Paris, where he told Bernabo

that he had won the bet. To Bernabo's horror, he could describe not only the contents and arrangement of his wife's chamber but also the mole beneath her left breast. Heartbroken, he ceded the wager to Ambrogiuolo and ordered that his beloved wife should be put to death. Ginevra, horrified at the unjust loss of her reputation, immediately fled east, to Alexandria, where, taking the name Sicurano and disguising herself as a man she entered the service of the Sultan, rising eventually to be Captain of his Guard.

Six years later, when Ambrogiuolo was in the city, Ginevra saw him and, throwing herself on the Sultan's mercy, tearfully revealed her story and true identity. Turning to Ambrogiuolo, she challenged him to say whether he had truly slept with her as he had boasted. Of course he could not, and the Sultan ordered him covered with honey and tied to a stake, to be left in the sun for the flies, and his estate to be made over to Ginevra. Bernabo, summoned to Alexandria by his wife, thus found her wealthy and willing to forgive him, and they returned to Genoa together, rich and happy.'

This story is taken from Boccaccio, *The Decameron* (day 2, novella 9) and is depicted on the private collection cassone and the National Gallery of Scotland Cassone in the exhibition. (cats 3+4)

Below and left:  
Studio of Giovanni Toscani Cassone with scenes from 'The Decameron': *The Tale Of Ginevra, Bernabò and Ambrogiuolo* (detail), c. 1420-25.  
Left image © National Gallery of Scotland  
Right image Private Collection



# LANGUAGE AND ART

The following activity is designed for KS3 and KS4 MFL French students or young French speaking visitors to the gallery.

Activité préliminaire: observation du panneau central du coffre dit 'Morelli cassone'

- A première vue, que voyez-vous?
- Quels sont les détails qui vous sautent aux yeux dans cette scène?
- A votre avis, que décrit ce panneau?
- Pouvez-vous raconter une histoire qui illustrerait la scène que vous voyez?

Voici ci-dessous, le récit fait par Tite-Live (59 av JC – 17 apr. JC) de l'épisode de Camille chassant les Gaulois de Rome. Plutarque (46 – 125 apr. JC) rapporte une version semblable dans La Vie des Hommes Illustres.

Une entrevue eut lieu entre le tribun Quintus Sulpicius et Brennus, chef des Gaulois; ils convinrent des conditions, et mille livres d'or furent la rançon de ce peuple qui devait bientôt commander au monde.

À cette transaction déjà si honteuse, s'ajouta une nouvelle humiliation: les Gaulois ayant apporté de faux poids que le tribun refusait, le Gaulois insolent mit encore son épée dans la balance, et fit entendre cette parole si dure pour des Romains: "Malheur aux vaincus!"

Mais les dieux et les hommes ne permirent pas que les Romains vécussent rachetés. En effet, par un heureux hasard, cet infâme marché n'était pas entièrement consommé, et, à cause des discussions qui avaient eu lieu, tout l'or n'était pas encore pesé, quand survient le dictateur [Camille]: il ordonne aux Romains d'emporter l'or, aux Gaulois de se retirer. [...]

Comme ceux-ci résistaient en alléguant le traité, Camille répond qu'un traité conclu depuis sa nomination à la dictature, sans son autorisation, par un magistrat d'un rang inférieur, est nul, et annonce aux Gaulois qu'ils ont à se préparer au combat. Les Gaulois, dans le désordre d'une surprise, prennent les armes et courent sur les Romains avec plus de fureur que de prudence. Mais la fortune avait tourné, et

désormais la faveur des dieux et la sagesse humaine étaient pour Rome; aussi, dès le premier choc, les Gaulois sont aussi promptement défaits qu'eux-mêmes avaient vaincu sur les bords de l'Allia. Tite-Live, Histoire Romaine, Livre V, chapitre 48-49, traduction nouvelle, Paris, 1995 (Garnier- Flammarion - GF 840)

## 1: OÙ EST CAMILLE ?

Retrouvez les différents éléments de l'histoire de 'Camille chassant les Gaulois de Rome' dans le cassone Morelli.

- Les guerriers: Gaulois, Romains, les troupes de Camille, les troupes de jeunes Romains. Comment sont-ils habillés? A quoi les reconnaît-on?
- La balance: la voyez-vous pencher? Voyez-vous l'épée de Brennus? Comment attire-t-elle notre œil? Qui sont les personnages autour d'elle?
- Rome: quels sont les éléments qui décrivent la capitale (architecture, le Capitole, la porte, le paysage alentour)
- La bataille: notez tous les détails minutieux qu'a peints l'artiste (harnais des chevaux, drapeaux, armes, armures...)
- Camille: à votre avis, lequel de ces personnages est Camille? Et Brennus?
- Dans le panneau, où commence l'histoire (à gauche, à droite), où finit-elle?

## 2: LE RESTE DU CASSONE

Faites le tour du coffre: Voyez-vous les deux autres panneaux, où les figures de Justice et Tempérance sont représentées?

Le coffre: la structure même du coffre (en bois de peuplier) est originale. Les pieds de lion ainsi que les guirlandes qui forment les moulures sont des ajouts, probablement du 19e siècle.

Le spalliera (ou panneau supérieur): il illustre la bravoure du Romain Horatius Cocles. Lors d'une bataille avec les Etrusques, Horatius continua de se battre sur un pont qui était en train d'être détruit pour empêcher les ennemis Etrusques d'entrer dans Rome. Un rideau peint encadre la scène.

## CAMILLE CHASSANT LES GAULOIS DE ROME HISTOIRES ET INTERPRÉTATIONS





Above:  
Detail from *Camillus chases the Gauls from Rome*,  
Biagio di Antonio, Jacopo del Sellaio and Zanobi di  
Domenico *The Morelli Chest*, 1472

### 3: DÉCOUVERTE: GAULOIS-ROMAINS, UNE HISTOIRE SOUVENT RACONTÉE.

A l'inverse du récit de Tite Live, de nombreux textes racontent l'invasion de Jules César en Gaule en l'an -58 avant JC. Peut être la version la plus connue de nos jours, est-elle celle imaginée par Goscinny et Uderzo dans la bande dessinée d'Astérix et Obélix dont le premier tome, *Astérix le Gaulois*, commence par:

"Nous sommes en 50 après Jésus Christ. Toute la Gaule est occupée par les Romains... Toute ?... Non ! Un village peuplé d'irréductibles Gaulois résiste encore et toujours à l'envahisseur. Et la vie n'est pas facile pour les garnisons de légionnaires romains des camps retranchés de Babaorum, Aquarium, Laudanum et Petitbonum."

Le premier album, *Astérix le Gaulois*, d'Uderzo et Goscinny a été publié pour la première fois en 1961. Depuis, les 33 albums de bande dessinée ont été traduits dans plus de 100 langues à travers le monde.

Retrouvez les histoires d'Astérix en bande dessinées, dessins animés et films. Visitez le site [www.asterix.com](http://www.asterix.com) pour plus de détails.

### 4: RECHERCHE ET ANALYSE

- Mythes et légendes en peinture: comparez plusieurs versions picturales d'un même mythe, épisode historique ou religieux célèbre.
- La tradition orale dans la littérature: contes, récits et légendes dans la littérature française.
- Renaissance et Humanisme en France au 16<sup>e</sup> siècle.



Left:  
Biagio di Antonio, Jacopo del Sellaio and Zanobi di Domenico *The Morelli Chest* (front view with lid open), 1472

LANGUAGE AND ART  
Written by Alice Odin

CURRICULUM LINKS  
MFL French, Art and Design, Art History, History

# LANGUAGE AND ART: A TRANSLATION

## CAMILLIUS AND THE GAULS STORIES AND INTERPRETATION

Activity designed for KS3 and KS4 MFL  
French students or young French speaking  
visitors to the gallery.

Preliminary activity: observation of the  
central panel of the 'Morelli *cassone*'

- At first glance, what can you see?
- Which details can you easily make out?
- What do you think this panel describes?
- Can you make up a short story based on the scene you are looking at?

Below is Livy's account of Camillius chasing  
the Gauls out of Rome, taken from The  
History of Rome, book V, chap. 48-49.

'A conference took place between Q.  
Sulpicius, the consular tribune, and  
Brennus, the Gaulish chieftain, and an  
agreement was arrived at by which 1000  
lbs. of gold was fixed as the ransom of a  
people destined ere long to rule the world.  
This humiliation was great enough as it was,  
but it was aggravated by the despicable  
meanness of the Gauls, who produced  
unjust weights, and when the tribune  
protested, the insolent Gaul threw his  
sword into the scale, with an exclamation  
intolerable to Roman ears, 'Woe to the  
vanquished!'

But gods and men alike prevented the  
Romans from living as a ransomed people.  
By a dispensation of Fortune it came  
about that before the infamous ransom  
was completed and all the gold weighed  
out, whilst the dispute was still going on,  
the Dictator appeared on the scene and  
ordered the gold to be carried away and  
the Gauls to move off. As they declined  
to do so, and protested that a definite  
compact had been made, he informed  
them that when he was once appointed  
Dictator no compact was valid which was  
made by an inferior magistrate without  
his sanction. He then warned the Gauls to  
prepare for battle, and ordered his men to  
pile their baggage into a heap, get their  
weapons ready, and win their country back  
by steel, not by gold. [...]

The Gauls, alarmed at the turn things had  
taken, seized their weapons and rushed  
upon the Romans with more rage than  
method. Fortune had now turned, divine

aid and human skill were on the side of  
Rome. At the very first encounter the  
Gauls were routed as easily as they had  
conquered at the Alia.'

Translation from Rev. Cannon Roberts, by  
the Perseus Project at Tufts University

### 1 – WHERE IS CAMILLIUS?

Spot the various details of the story of  
Camillius and the Gauls.

- The soldiers: the Gauls, the Romans, Camillius' troops. How are they dressed? How can you recognise them?
- The scales: can you see them tip to one side? Can you see Brennus' sword? Who are the people around the scales?
- Rome: which elements depict the city (architecture, the Capitol, town gate and walls, surrounding landscape)?
- The battle: can you see all the details in the battle scene? (horse harnesses, flags, weapons, coats of arm...)
- Camillius: according to you, who is Camillius, who is Brennus?

### 2 – THE REST OF THE CASSONI

Walk around the *cassone*: can you see  
what's on the side panels? Who are these  
figures?

The *cassone*: the original structure of  
the chest is made out of poplar and is  
probably original. The lion feet as well as  
the moulded garlands are however 19th  
century additions to the structure.

The *spalliera* (upper panel): 'the fictive  
curtains draw back to reveal Horatius  
Cocles (who singlehandedly held back the  
Etruscans from crossing the bridge into  
Rome) dressed in Florentine doublet and  
hose.' – exhibition booklet, p. 8

### 3 – ROMANS/GAULS: A WELL KNOWN STORY.

Many writers, such as Plutarch and Livy,  
have depicted the century long battles  
between the Gauls and the Romans.  
However, after 58 BC and Cesar's invasion  
of nearby countries, many writers also told  
the tale of the Roman invasion of Gaul.

Nowadays, one of its possibly best  
known versions (which is highly fictional!),  
comes from the comic *Astérix* and  
*Obélix*, created by the French artists  
Goscinny and Uderzo. The first book  
was published in 1961, and since then  
33 collections have been released and  
translated in more than 100 languages  
around the world.

The opening page of most of the  
books comprises the well known  
sentences: 'The year is 50 BC. Gaul  
is entirely occupied by the Romans.  
Well, not entirely...One small village of  
indomitable Gauls still holds out against  
the invaders. And life is not easy for the  
Roman legionnaires who garrison the  
fortified camps of Totorum, Aquarium,  
Laudanum and Compendium.'

Log on to [www.asterix.com](http://www.asterix.com) for more  
information. Many comics, films and  
cartoons of Asterix's adventures have  
also been produced!

### 4 – RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS:

- Myths and legends in visual arts: compare different paintings of a similar historical or religious event.
- Oral tradition in literature: tales, stories and legends in French literature
- Renaissance and Humanism in France in the 16th century.

# LEARNING RESOURCE CD

Included in the Love and Marriages in Renaissance Florence Teachers pack is a CD of images from the exhibition and related works. This disc has been specially formatted to be easy to use. Images can be copied and downloaded as long as they are used for educational purposes only. A copyright statement is printed at the end of this section which outlines authorised and restricted usage. This should be read by every user before using this resource.

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**CASSONE EXHIBITION  
CATALOGUE IMAGES**

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Section 2:  
**OTHER RENAISSANCE STORIES**

The works below depict other Florentine paintings, from a domestic setting. Some of these paintings might have been *cassoni* front panels, later dismantled and sold as separate paintings.

Section 3:  
**INSIDE AN ITALIAN RENAISSANCE HOME**

All the works below present items which would have commonly been found in Italian homes and in their *cameras*. The *camera* was the room in which the family entertained close friends and relatives but was also the room in which a married couple would sometimes sleep. The *camera* was a space both intimate and social, where a *cassone* would usually have been displayed.

Also included on the CD is a PDF of this resource if you wish to print any of it out and the narrated stories by Jim Harris from **GREAT STORIES FOR GREAT FAMILIES**

## HOW TO USE THIS CD

You will need a web browser such as Internet Explorer, Firefox or Safari to access the contents of this CD. Most computers have such software already installed.

Image list pages include a thumbnail and a full description of each image. Click on the thumb to see the image full size. The image can then be copied or downloaded:

PC users: right-click on the image and select 'Save Target As...' Then choose the location to which you want to save the image.

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- The Courtauld Gallery: [www.courtauld.ac.uk/gallery](http://www.courtauld.ac.uk/gallery), where you can learn more about our collection, exhibitions and events.

### CURRICULUM LINKS

Art and Design, Art History, English Lit, Geography, History.

# WITH THANKS

## 10 THINGS YOU MAY WANT TO KNOW ABOUT CASSONE

Caroline Campbell

## RE-IMAGINING THE PAST

Caroline Levitt

## CASSONI - THE MANUFACTURING PROCESS

Tilly Schmidt

## GREAT STORIES FOR GREAT FAMILIES

Jim Harris

## LANGUAGE AND ART

Alice Odin

## LEARNING RESOURCE CD

Courtauld Colour Slide Scheme

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TEACHERS' RESOURCE: LOVE AND MARRIAGE IN RENAISSANCE FLORENCE  
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