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AN INTERIM REPORT ON THE
MARBLE TOPS OF THE CHISWICK
HOUSE TABLES

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Summary

A partial identification has been made of the individual inlaid marbles which form the "slabs" of the two Burlington Pietre dura tables recently aquired by English Heritage and returned to Chiswick House. The two marble-slabs are formed from over 250 geometrically-shaped polycrome marbles. A range of classical marbles are present as well as Mediaeval and later types.

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# AN INTERIM REPORT ON THE MARBLE TOPS OF THE CHISWICK HOUSE TABLES

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## INTRODUCTION

A visual examination was undertaken on the matching inlaid marble table-tops at Chiswick House, at present situated in the gallery fronting the garden, facing the venetian window and the Italianate gardens below. These were acquired at auction in 1996 by EH with the assistance of other bodies [Bryant, 1996]. The marble-tops, or "slabs", form part of a pair of side tables with curved and gilded wooden supports in the form of nereids, boys and the masks of a water god, with accompanying volutes, shells and swags. The carving of the gilded framework has been attributed to Giovanni Battista Guelfi and seems to have been carried out in England in about 1725 [Bryant, 1997].

The marble table-slabs were almost certainly bought in Italy by Richard Boyle, third Earl of Burlington [1694-1753], probably during his second "Grand Tour" in 1719 and possibly in Genoa [*ibid.*]. Burlington was a leading figure in the cultural life of early eighteenth century England, and was especially associated with the promotion of English Palladianism architecture and the introduction of the "villa" into the country [Harris, 1994]. The completed tables, marble tops and gilding, are listed for the first time in an inventory of the furniture of Chiswick House [the "villa"] dated 1770 [Rosoman, 1985]. They were probably originally intended for the Jacobean Old House at Chiswick, though fire damage to the house in 1725 led to the building of the present Chiswick House in Palladian

style *c*.1726-1729 and the tables were probably installed there at an early date [Spence, 1993].

## THE CHISWICK HOUSE MARBLE-TOPS

The Chiswick House rectangular marble slabs each measure 84.5cm x 144.5cm x 67.5cm and together comprise well over 250 geometrically-shaped polished polycrome marbles placed as inlays in a white marble ground, into which appropriate areas have been cut out to receive the insets. In this context the use of the word "marble" is taken to describe any decorative stone which can take a good polish, rather than the narrower geological term meaning limestones or dolomites which have been completely metamorphosed and recrystallized by heat or pressure. Thus granites, limestones and other types of rock may be commonly referred to as "marbles" when used as decorative polished stones. The various pieces of marble used in the Chiswick House table-tops were probably cut into thin veneers with a small saw or a copper wire kept sharp by a moist abrasive, these would then be tightly fitted into the inset but would probably also be attached with an adhesive backing such as beeswax and colophony [Giusti, 1992].

Each table-top is a white statuary marble into which have been placed various coloured marbles cut into a number of geometric shapes. The white slab may be from the quarries at Carrara but the visual identification of white marble presents difficulties and another source is possible. The central feature of each table-top consists of a large starburst which forms an octagon surrounded by four large triangles forming an incomplete square. The centre of the starburst is made of Imperial porphyry with four small insets of light green ophiolite, surrounded by a small octagon ring of light grey bardiglio. Coming out from each of the bases of the octagon are eight white triangles formed from the actual marble slab itself. These triangles cut into another eight triangles which have been half made

of Sienna Brocatello and Giallo and half of an as yet unidentified marble. The four corner triangles are of Imperial porphyry with small attachments of ophiolite at each of their points. This central starburst feature, together with the actual marble composition, is the same for both tables. A little to the left and to the right of the large starburst are two smaller ones, made up of a central marble surrounded by eight white marble triangles [again part of the slab itself] into which are set eight coloured marble four-sided figures. This geometric pattern of two smaller starebursts is common to each table. However, apart from the white "table-top" triangles, the composition of the coloured marbles which make up the form varies from starbust to starburst, with the opposite pairs of outer coloured marbles being the same.

Many of the remaining coloured marbles have been cut in the form of octagons, crosses and squat "T" shaped figures liberally placed within the general central scheme of the table-top, together with small pieces of green ophiolite with pyramid determinations. Around this arrangement have been placed various coloured marbles in the form of alternating half-octagons and squat "T" shaped figures. Outside of this there is a ribbon border composed of Sienna Brocatello.

The identification of a large number of the coloured marbles represented in the Chiswick House table-tops has proved difficult. There are three main reasons for this. Firstly, all of the individual shapes are relatively small. Many marbles display a certain variability in colour and content and a confident attribution can often only be made when one is in possession of a large area to study. Secondly, some of the shapes need cleaning to better highlight certain of their features. Thirdly, the use of Renaissance marbles, i.e. those not quarried in classical times, has not been as well studied as their counterparts of Roman and Greek times, where a great deal of work has been put into identifying and sourcing classical marbles [cf. Gnoli, 1988; Borghini, 1997]. There are though some marbles such as the Sienna Brocatello and Giallo which can be identified in the Chiswick House table-tops and are generally assumed not to have been used in classical

times [Mannoni, 1984]. These two types play an important part in the geometric patterning. The brocatello is used for the ribbon border and for a number of the individual shapes of the composition, while both types have been used in the arrangement of the central starbursts.

It is clear, however, that many of the marbles present in these table-tops are in fact of an ancient classical origin, and at some stage must have been "acquired" from Roman buildings in Italy. Many of these were not quarried in Italy but come instead from the provinces of the Roman Empire. They include marbles from Egypt, Asia Minor, Greece, North Africa, Spain and France. Moreover, the use of Imperial Porhyry as the central feature of both large starbursts and also for the surrounding triangular borders, suggests that the symbolism of this particular stone was not lost on the designer or marble worker of the table-tops. This very hard purple coloured stone was unique in the classical world and symbolized the power and authority of the Emperor, both of Rome and later Constantinople. It was much sought after by later holy Roman Emperors to emphasize their authority to rule and a similar reason may well explain its revival in sixteenth century Florence [Moscati, 1987; Greenhalgh, 1987; Peacock, 1997]. Another Imperial stone has been used, although sparingly, in the left smaller starburst on the *right* table and its significance may not have been appreciated. This is the "granito del foro", the granite of the Trajan's forum, where it appears in columns. Like the porhyry, it comes from Imperial quarries in the eastern Egyptian desert and seems to have been used almost exclusively by the Emperor himself [Peacock *et al*, 1994]. The remaining classical marbles are commonly encountered on Roman sites in Italy and to a lesser extent elsewhere in the provinces.

It is interesting to note that the Bellinter table-tops, probably acquired by John Preston for his new "Palladian style" house in Co. Meath in the first half of the eighteenth-century, share certain features both in design and to a limited extent composition of marble inlays with the Chiswick House tables [Christies Auction

Catalogue for 17th April 1997]. The Bellinter table-tops also have rectangular white statuary marble slabs, containing the same geometric design of ribbon border and central large starburst with two smaller ones as described above for the Chiswick House tables. The border is also composed of Sienna Brocatello as are segments of all of the large and smaller starbursts. However, the range of marbles used is much more restricted, no Imperial Porphyry for example, and the table-tops lack the richly displayed individually-shaped marble designs which take up much of the white slab in the Chiswick House table-tops. In addition, the workmanship of the Bellinter table-tops appears to be of a lower standard than that of the Chiswick House ones. For example, the various joining strips on the ribbon border are end-butted together while on the Chiswick House table-tops they are diagonally butted, making for a more smooth and less obvious join. Also, some of the marble insets are slightly raised above the white marble slab, rather than being flush with it as is the case with the Chiswick House table-tops. It has been suggested that the shared ribbon border and starburst design point to the same workshop being responsible for all four tables, possibly in England [*ibid.*, 62]. If the former is true, then the wide range of classical and other marbles available to the maker of the Chiswick House tables-tops would certainly appear to preclude an English source of manufacture. While the noticeable difference in the workmanship of both table-tops indicates they were certainly not made by the same person.

In all probability, the Chiswick House table-tops were made in Italy, though it is perhaps unlikely that they were actually made in Genoa, where it seems they could have been bought [Bryant, 1997]. They may instead have been made in Rome, which during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries seems to have specialized in these slabs containing a wide range of specimen marbles [Giusti, 1992, Pl. 11 and Fig. 17]. However, this kind of work was undoubtedly carried out elsewhere and another source, possibly Florence, is quite feasible.

## BACKGROUND

The technique used to construct the Chiswick House table-tops, in which polished marbles were cut into various thin shapes and inlaid in a ground, is commonly known as *stone intarsia* and comes under the general term of *pietre dure*, or specialist work with hard stones, which was practised from the Renaissance period onwards. The "marbles" used could be semi-precious stones such as lapis lazuli, jasper and chalcedony, often with a hardness between 6 and 8 on the Mohs scale. There are, however, many examples of softer stones being employed, and the colour and rarity value of a particular stone seemed to have played a major part in the choice. Many of the stones used were rare polychrome marbles of ancient origin, reused from the profusion of classical buildings or ruins to be found in Italy.

The Farnese Palace in Rome, built in the early sixteenth century, was one of the earliest examples of the re-discovery and reuse of classical stone and marble, much of it being "acquired" from such buildings in Rome as the Colosseum, the Baths of Caracalla, the Theatre of Marcellus and from the nearby port of ancient Rome at Ostia [Raggio, 1960]. The *pietre dure* technique as applied to furniture does not seem to have been much used before the middle years of the 16th century [Vasari, 1907]. One of the first of such works is the large Farnese table believed to have been made in Rome around 1565, which has a top covered in detailed marble patterning, mostly made up of excavated marbles [Raggio, 1960]. The *Opificio della Pietre Dure* [workshop of hard stones] was begun in Florence in 1580 by Francesco I de Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, utilizing the skills of Milanese specialists in working semi-precious stones, and was later moved to the Uffizi Palace and issued with an official degree by Ferdinando I in 1588. However, Florence did not have a monopoly of *pietre dure* work as this was carried out at other Italian cities such as Rome, Venice and Naples with the *Laboratorio delle Pietre Dure* which was set up in 1738. Italian craftsmen in the *pietre dure* technique also exported their skills abroad and similar official

workshops were established in Prague, at the Gobelins factory in Paris and at the Buen Retiro in Madrid [Gonzalez-Palacios, 1977; Fock, 1982; Giusto, 1992].

*Pietre dure* work seems to have attracted the attention of foreign visitors to Italy, including the English [Honour, 1958; Cornforth, 1988]. The diarist John Evelyn, one of the earliest "grand tourists", visited the Uffizi workshop in October 1644 and bought some panels for a cabinet to be made up on his return to England [Neumann; 1960; Honour, 1958]. He also mentions the numbers of *pietre dure* tables that were being constructed there [*ibid.*]. Many marble "slabs" with specimen marble inlays meant for tables [with the base, wood or stone, to be completed in England] were acquired during the Grand Tours of the English in thee eighteenth century and were also popular in the following century. A number of these slabs which display a wide range of polished geometric polished polychrome marble designs had an accompanying key listing the types of marble used. For example, a pair of slabs with specimen marbles by Giccomo Raffaelli and Guiseppe Leonardi was bought in Rome probably in 1827 by Sir Clifford Constable of Burton Constable House, east Yorkshire [Gilbert, 1991]. The table-tops came with a list identifying the one hunded and fifty different marbles used. A *pietre dure* table top bought by Charles Tilt of Bathwick Priory in 1847, was made a year earlier in Rome by Alfonso Cavamelli [Coleridge, 1967]. It uses some two hundred and fifty specimen marbles and these are also identified in a accompanying document. It is interesting to note that this document mentions that although many of the marbles were collected from around the world, there are also "ancient" marbles collected from from Roman sites in and around Rome, while the geometrical pattern is said to be based on mosaics from Rome [*ibid.*]. However, it remains to be proved how reliable these lists really are.

## CATALOGUE OF IDENTIFIED MARBLES

**1]. Alabaster**

A massive form of gypsum and a compact, often translucent rock, quite soft. There are a number of examples here, many may be of classical origin.

**2]. Aswan Granite** [Lapis Pyrrhopoecilus]

An ancient stone from the Aswan region of the River Nile. A distinctive granite with large pinkish-red felspars.

**3]. Bardiglio Antico**

A grey marble, possibly from Carrara.

**4]. Bianco e Nero Anticho** [Marmor Celticum]

A black and white marble from the Pyrenees. Known since Roman times.

**5]. Breccia Corollina**

An ancient stone from Bithynia in northern Asia Minor. Named after its cement, which is usually of a coral colour.

**6]. ?Breccia Policroma di S. Benone**

A breccia with a red cement and white, grey and pink inclusions. Possibly from Greece.

### 7]. Breccia Violetta

A delicate breccia of violet, white, grey and blue from Tuscany. Known since Roman times.

### 8]. Breccia

A rock with distinctive angular inclusions.

### 9]. Crystalline Limestone

This term covers a number of different varieties on display.

### 10]. Giallo Antico [Marmor Numidicum]

An ancient stone quarried at Chemtoum in modern day western Tunisia. A fine-textured compact golden yellow limestone with some red veins.

### 11]. Imperial Porphyry

Quarried at Mons Porphyrites [Gebel Dokan] in Egypt's eastern desert, the only known source of this purple porphyritic rock, from the early first century A.D. until the mid fifth century A.D. [Peacock and Maxfield, 1994]. The stone is a red quartz andesite and was used mainly in building and sculture, symbolizing Imperial power and dignity. Fairly widely distributed in classical times, but especially common in Rome and Constantinople.

### 12]. Lumachella Nera

An ancient stone, deep black with white shells, from ?North Africa.

### 13]. Lumachella

A term applied to marbles containing a large proportion of fossil shell.

**14]. Mons Claudianus** [Marmor Claudianum]

This is the famous "granito del foro", a granodiorite rather than a granite, of small to medium grain size, light to dark grey in colour with black flecks of hornblende and biotite [Peacock et al, 1994]. This stone was quarried from the first to the third centuries A.D. and in the ancient world had a very restricted distribution, as essentially it seems to have been for the Emperor's own particular use [Peacock and Maxfield, 1997]. It is found at Hadrian's villa at Tivoli and at Diocletian's mausoleum at Split, as well as for the more imposing public buildings in Rome [Peacock, 1997]. It was a stone which more than any others [except perhaps Imperial Porphyry] was a symbol of the power of the emperor over his vast empire.

**15]. ?Onyx**

A cryptocrystalline variety of silica, which often occurs as layers of different colours.

**16]. Ophiolite**

An ultrabasic rock. The examples here are light to dark green in colour and probably originate from Italy or perhaps Greece.

**17]. Porfido Verde** [Lapis Lacedaemonius]

An ancient stone from the quarries at Croceae, 20 miles south of Sparta, in Lacedaemonia, Greece. It is a green porphyry with very distinctive light green roughly tabular crystals of labradorite felspar, occasionally crossed, set in a darker green matrix.

**19]. Porto Venere**

A black marble with yellow or gold veining, from Liguria.

**20].** Sienna Brocatello

**21].** Sienna Giallo

Both of these stones do not appear to have been used in Roman times, and were only quarried in the Mediaeval period [Mannoni, 1984, 261]. The Giallo is plain yellow in colour while the Brocatello has a rich yellow matrix covered by a pattern of dark blue and purple veinings.

**22].** Spanish Brocatello [Marmor Schiston]

An ancient stone from Tortosa, Tarragona, in Spain. This is a lumachella, with many small fragments of white and yellow shell set in a light red matrix.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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