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A Renaissance Ceiling in Baltimore from the Palazzo Aliverti in Milan

C. D. DICKERSON III

On 27 May 1903 the Venetian antiques dealer Giuseppe Piccoli concluded the sale of what is almost certainly the largest art item ever acquired by Henry Walters: "A ceiling composed of 10 large square pieces in Renaissance style with reliefs of all varying designs from the noble Aliverti family of Milan."¹ By September of that year, the wooden ceiling, which measures approximately 13.5 x 7.5 meters when assembled, was steaming toward New York, soon to be sent on to Baltimore, its final destination.² In 1905 Walters broke ground on the large Italianate building that would become his art gallery on Mount Vernon Place; by its completion in 1907, his young architect, Williams Adams Delano, had made the ceiling part of the permanent fabric of this building, using it to crown the main, south-side room on the ground level, a function it continues to fulfill today.³

Since its departure from Italy in 1903, the Walters' ceiling has been virtually lost. In 1934 a plaster ceiling was suspended from it, and this was removed only in 1975 during a campaign to renovate the building. The original woodwork was then restored.⁴ The one instance when the ceiling did receive scholarly treatment, in a publication of 1967 on the Palazzo Aliverti, the author assumed the ceiling to be destroyed since he could not trace its whereabouts. While the ceiling's provenance has been recorded in its curatorial file since its accession, this information has never reached a wider audience. This brief note seeks to connect these two sources as a platform for future research.

As indicated in the sales receipt drawn up by Piccoli, the main portion of the ceiling takes the form of ten, identical square coffers, all carved from wood. These units are arranged in two equal columns and feature at their center a hexagon decorated with a foliate motif (fig. 1). Piccoli fails to mention the fourteen rectangular bays that run around the perimeter of the ceiling, constituting a decorative border. Eight are adorned with abstract patterns that surround a plaque containing epigrammatic inscriptions in Latin.⁵ The four bays on the short sides of the ceiling are decorated with grotesque heads, while the two central bays on the long sides

of the ceiling feature heads of Medusa. The Medusa on the north wall is especially well carved. Her face is sensitively modeled, while the snakes that form her hair are deeply undercut and seem animate.

Purely in stylistic terms, the Walters' ceiling, with its strict sense of balance and order, fine classical details, and monumental scale, speaks the language of late sixteenth-century Italian architecture. Piccoli helps to confirm this dating by noting that the ceiling came from "the noble Aliverti family of Milan," a clue that leads directly to the late sixteenth-century Palazzo Aliverti, situated on via Broletto (no. 20) in the heart of Milan's medieval quarter. In 1967, on the occasion of this building's conversion into a bank, Ferdinando Reggiori published an extensive account of the history of the palace, and this remains the principal source for the patron of the Walters' ceiling, the largely forgotten Castopolimio Aliverti.⁶ Reggiori indicates that in 1524 Castopolimio was living at his family's residence near Milan's Porta Ticinese.⁷ By 1547 he had moved to the via Broletto, renting a structure that also served as the site of his fur and fabric business. This venture was evidently successful, for he was able to purchase his rented quarters in 1560 and commission a new *palazzo* to take its place. This structure was likely completed around 1565, just after the ceiling now in Baltimore had been installed.

According to Reggiori, who again does not cite his source, two carpenters by the names of Ambrogio da Ello and Giovanni Pietro Alfieri were contracted on 29 May 1563 to execute a ceiling in the Palazzo Aliverti's main salon. They had reportedly finished their job by 22 April 1564, the date of their last payment receipt.⁸ That this ceiling is to be identified with the one now in the Walters Art Museum can be said with absolute certainty, for Reggiori had at his disposal an eyewitness description of the ceiling made in 1881 before the ceiling had been removed.⁹ Citing this source, Reggiori provides the same measurements as those for the Walters' ceiling as well as transcriptions of four of the inscriptions. Reggiori was also lucky to have a watercolor

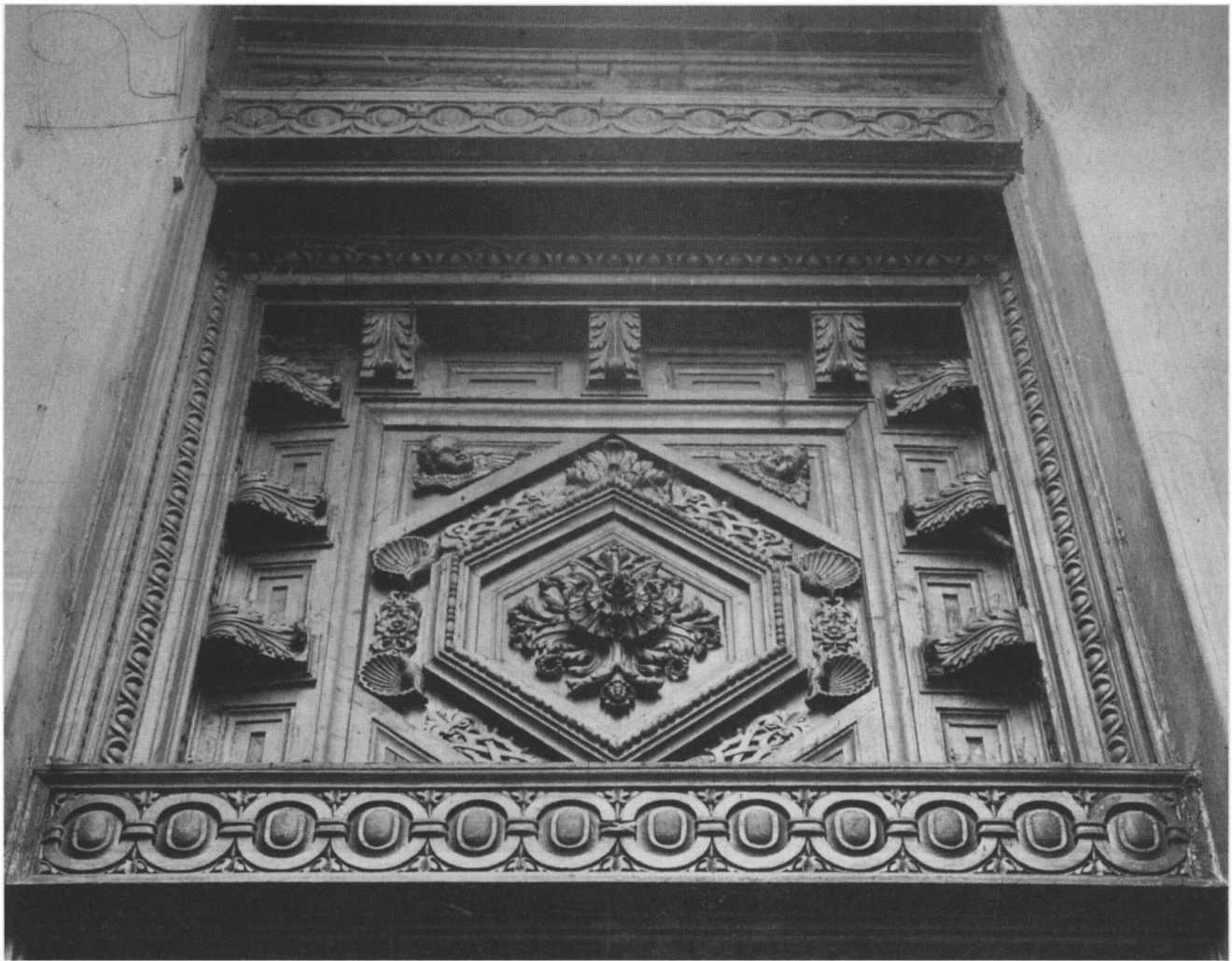


Fig. 1. Detail of coffers from the ceiling in the main salon of Palazzo Aliverti. Undated photograph in curatorial files, acc. no. 64.154, Baltimore, Walters Art Museum

done by the painter Giuseppe Candiani around 1881 depicting the ceiling (fig. 2).¹⁰ By this date, the ceiling's original room had been partitioned into three separate rooms, so Candiani's watercolor represents an imaginary reconstruction of the ceiling's original setting, known to have included wall frescoes.¹¹ In any case, the ceiling that Candiani depicts corresponds precisely with the one now in Baltimore.

During the sixteenth century, the Walters' ceiling was not the only impressive work of carpentry to be installed in the Palazzo Aliverti. There were at least two other wooden ceilings, both smaller, one of which survives and is now on display in the Castello Sforzesco in Milan.¹² This ceiling is more elaborately decorated than the Walters' ceiling, featuring an assortment of figurative elements, such as female allegories in the corners, two busts of emperors in roundels (top and bottom of the ceiling), and two children flanking the cartouche

at the center of the richly carved dodecagon that forms the main decorative field. No payments are known for this ceiling, but it must date from the late sixteenth-century since it bears the Aliverti coat-of-arms, three sets of wings.¹³

As for the third ceiling, Reggioro describes it as lost, and it remains unidentified.¹⁴ What little we know about it comes from Reggioro's eyewitness source, mentioned above, the historian Enrico Mazzola. According to him, the ceiling featured at its center a representation of Mercury, while on its periphery were four medallions with portraits of emperors as well as four of empresses. Perhaps by giving fresh attention to the Walters' ceiling, this other important artifact from the original Palazzo Aliverti will be identified.

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Fig. 2. Albumen photograph, undated, of Giuseppe Candiani watercolor of the main salon of Palazzo Aliverti, Milan. Curatorial files, acc. no. 64.154, Baltimore, Walters Art Museum

NOTES

My initial research on the ceiling (acc. no. 64.154) was undertaken in Fall 2005 at the request of Joaneath Spicer, the James A. Murnaghan Curator of Renaissance and Baroque Art at the Walters Art Museum, who sought more information on the room that would become the new Chamber of Wonders.

1. For this sales receipt, see the curatorial file for acc. no. 64.154: "Plafons [*sic*] composé de 10 grands pièces carrés en style renaissance avec des frézes toutes en Dessins variées qui provient de la Noble famille Aliverti de Milan." Giuseppe Piccoli, a self-described "negociant d'antiquités," ran his business from a building in the *sestiere* of San Polo near the Palazzo Barbarigo della Terrazza. The address for the ground entrance was Calle Priuli, no. 2088.

2. In a letter dated 20 September 1903 addressed to Henry Walters in New York, Piccoli advises Walters on how to expedite his shipment through customs, suggesting that it was already en route (see curatorial file for acc. no. 64.154).

3. For the history of this construction, see William Johnston, *William and Henry Walters, the Reticent Collectors* (Baltimore, 1999), 163–69.

4. I thank John Klink, formerly chief designer at the Walters Art Museum (now with Charles Mack Design), for discussing the restoration with me. He indicated that after the plaster ceiling was removed, there were many holes that had to be filled with putty, including those created by the suspension rods for the plaster ceiling. Once these had been repaired, the ceiling was spray varnished.

5. Moving clockwise, these inscriptions read (1) *ERRARE COMMUNE EST OMNIBUS* (northwest corner); (2) *NULLUM DAMNAVERIS NON COGNITA CAUSA*; (3) *FOELIX ERISI SI IN OMNIBUS SAPIES*; (4) *ABEUNT OMNIA UNDE ORTA SUNT* (northeast corner); (5) *SILENDIO MULTIS RESPONDETUR* (southeast corner); (6) *VIRTUS IN ACTIONE CONSISTIT*; (7) *INDUSTRIAM VALDE DEUS ADJUVAT*; and (8) *EX LABORE GLORIA ORITUR* (southwest corner).

6. Ferdinando Reggiori, *Palazzo Aliverti a Milano: Nuova sede del Mediocredito Regionale Lombardo* (Milan, 1967).

7. For the life of Castopolimio, see Reggiori, *Palazzo Aliverti*, 48–50.

8. *Ibid.*, 50.

9. E. Mazzola, *Di tre soffitti della seconda metà del XVI intagliati in legno di larice esistenti nella casa già Aliverti ora Carones (via Broletto 20)*

(Milan, 1881). I have not had the opportunity to consult this source. The ceiling appears to have remained in place until at least 1890, when, according to Reggiero (1967, 50), Mazzola came out with a second edition of his small pamphlet on the three ceilings.

10. Reggieri, *Palazzo Aliverti*, 40, provides no indication where this watercolor exists, only that it was prepared by Candiani and exhibited at the Esposizione Nazionale held in Milan in 1881.

11. On this subdivision into three rooms, see *ibid.*, 51. With regards to the frescoes, Reggieri (*ibid.*) quotes Mazzola as writing that the walls of the main salon and “the adjacent salon is decorated with frescoes representing mythological and medieval subjects. The style is very good, and the period of the work can be retained as contemporaneous with that of the ceiling.” (“dell’attiguo salottino sono ornate di affreschi rappresentanti soggetti mitologici e medioevali. Lo stile è buonissimo e l’epoca del lavoro si può ritenere contemporanea a quella dei soffitti.”) No trace of these frescoes remains today.

12. See Reggiero, *Palazzo Aliverti*, 51–52. The measurements of the ceiling are given as 7.33 x 4.76 meters.

13. Reggiero, *Palazzo Aliverti*, 51, indicates that the letters A. L. and C. E. are carved next to each of the two busts. These were interpreted by Mazzola, *Di tre soffitti*, to stand for *Alivertius Castopolimus Exerxit*.

14. See Reggieri, *Palazzo Aliverti*, 52–53. The measurements of the ceiling are given as 5.48 x 4.20 meters.

PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS: Walters Art Museum, curatorial files: figs. 1, 2