
Koopman Rare Art

Directors Choice – Timo Koopman
A Masterpiece by Francesco De Poletti



A 19th Century Micromosaic Gold Box Paris, 1809-1819

Goldsmith mark of Nicolas Lecouffe

The mosaic attributed to Francesco De Poletti

Weight: 288 g, 9 oz, 4 dwt, Dimensions: 9.5 x 6.6 cm, 3.7 x 2.5 in

Micromosaics, a unique area of the decorative arts is still celebrated with as much love as it was at its conception and had its original patrons in the Vatican, the Napoleonic court, Imperial Russian court and amongst others the 18th century noblemen on their 'Grand Tour'. The Piazza di Spagna in Rome was the centre for these workmaster's shops and with the scientific developments in '*mosaici in piccolo*' the range in production was extraordinary.

My Director's Choice this week looks to one of these exquisite masterpieces that has survived in pristine condition. The mosaic attributed to the celebrated De Poletti who was one of the finest craftsmen in the field of miniature micromosaics. He worked in a studio at number 32 via Condotti near the Piazza di Spagna, Rome, and is mentioned by Moroni as one of the nine most distinguished artists in mosaics at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1810 he participated in the exhibition of Works of Art and Industry of Rome' at the Campodoglio on the Capitoline Hill.

The mosaic on the lid of this box depicts the three Fates, Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos, with Father Time, an old man carrying a scythe and an hourglass. The composition uses the baroque device known as '*sotto in su*' (from below upwards), often employed in ceiling

decorations, resulting in figures that are notably foreshortened and appear three-dimensional. The Fates are usually represented side by side, hard at work spinning gold, silver and woollen threads. In this image, Clotho, the youngest Fate, holds the spindle thread, Lachesis on the right spins it, while Atropos, the oldest, stand in the middle in order to cut it off when a human is ready to die. Atropos is sometimes depicted alone, as her task is the most important. A fourth sister, Tycha or Fortuna, has been omitted in this instance. The Fates were worshipped by both Greeks and Romans, receiving offerings of honey and flowers.

The mosaic framed with a surround of 76 faceted cushion-cut rubies and the gold box itself of superb quality. The gold work with chased and applied bluebells and foliate decoration has its sides decorated with a similar frieze together with another of triumphant palms. The reverse of the box with an incredible plaque depicting an altar on its pedestal foot with bountiful fruit, insects and foliate scrolls. The reverse of the box beautifully in harmony with the front. With the sacrificial altar ready for the worshipful offerings to the Three Fates. It would have taken an educated individual fully versed with the classics to have understood this wonderful iconography.

The goldsmith of this extraordinary gold box is Nicolas Lecoufle, a maker of boxes and small objects in gold and silver, working in Paris at 242 rue St-Denis. He registered marks in 1809, 1811-1812, and 12 December 1823, and was removed from records 1st September 1831. He died 31 July 1830. Lecoufle's widow, Catherine-Marie-Flor Torlet carried on the business at the same address, registering her mark 7 September 1831, erased 3 March 1837.



Smalti filati – small threads

To understand how amazing these precious mosaics are one has to understand the difficulty and skill of the process. The first recorded exhibition of micromosaics was held in 1775 by Giacomo Raffaelli (1753-1836) at his private studio in the Piazza di Spagna, at Via S. Sebastiano. Raffaelli came from a family of Workshop mosaicists, and he is generally credited with many of the innovations in mosaici in piccolo, although it is probable that some had been developed a little earlier. Most significant was the invention of '*smalti filati*'. To make these, a globule of molten glass was placed between two metal rods which were then drawn apart, so the glass formed a thread. Cut from the rods, and while cooling, this thread could be shaped into a square section by working it with spatulas on a metal plate.

Once cold, it was cut into short strips ready for use. To create the micromosaic the craftsman would select a shallow tray of the required size - it was usually made of copper and put in a layer of slow-drying mastic. Then would begin the painstaking process

of inserting with pointed pincers the tesserae into the mastic to create the image. When complete the piece was allowed to dry thoroughly before it was polished to make a smooth and even surface. Small gaps in between the tesserae could be infilled with suitably coloured wax.

Francesco De Poletti

Born in Rome on April 25, 1779, he soon revealed a happy disposition for the fine arts and proved to be a versatile genius. He successfully devoted himself to painting, mosaics, the restoration of ancient ceramics, and antiques. According to Visconti, who left a large epitome of his life in the obituary that appeared in the *Giornale di Roma* in 1854, he learned the principles of drawing and painting in the studio of Pompeo Batoni. But rather than a being a direct apprentice, it is better to speak of his development being influenced by Batoni's style, held in high esteem by the last eighteenth-century generation of painters, given that De Poletti was only eight years old when the famous painter died in 1787. To what extent he had made Batoni's formal values his own is however impossible to establish, as his pictorial work is completely unknown at present. We do know that he specialized in landscape painting, bringing back great praise.



Signed De Poletti depicting a shepherd and his flock in a classical landscape

Probably by the end of the 18th century he approached the study of mosaic technique, taking an interest in particular in minute mosaic, an artistic field then in great expansion. With the new technique of spinning enamel, Roman artists, starting with Giacomo Raffaelli, active in this sector since 1775, began to spread a completely new original art. By reducing the glaze into very thin rods and then obtaining tiles of tiny proportions from them, they obtained the result of being able to spread the mosaic even on surfaces of a few centimetres, equalling the effects of the miniature. The possibilities of application were many and the proliferation of Roman workshops specialized in minute mosaic is a confirmation of the appreciation given by contemporaries to the new artistic genre. Gaetano Moroni mentions Depoletti twice, remembering him first among the most distinguished mosaic artists active in Rome at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and later among the owners of the most flourishing shops in the city. His studio was located at no. 32 Via Condotti, in an area of strong tourist attraction.

Two mosaics by De Poletti, signed and dated 1818 and 1819, have been published by González Palacios (1982), now in a private collection. These are reproductions of the two famous landscapes by Claude Lorrain from the Doria Gallery and Palace in Rome. Visconti

speaks of these paintings, stating that they were then in Florence, in the villa of Prince A. Demidoff, whose father had commissioned them from Depoletti.



Landscape with dancing figure (the Marriage of Isaac and Rebecca)

Claude Lorrain Doria Gallery and Palace Rome

Visconti also recalls three paintings, exhibited at the first Capitoline exhibition of Roman arts and industry held in 1810, depicting Un Paese taken from Salvator Rosa; a copy of Guercino's Aurora; a view of the Sepulchre of the Plauzi, taken from an original by A. De Angelis. For these works Depoletti was awarded the first-class silver medal. The news of the award ceremony was also published in the Giornale del Campido of 1 September 1810. Later the artist made a copy of Domenichino's The Hunt for Diana in the Galleria Borghese in Rome, which Visconti says was purchased together with another work, The Shield of Achilles, by Lord Bristol (in those years, Frederick William Hervey, fifth Earl of Bristol).



An Italian micromosaic plaque depicting the shield of Achilles

Second quarter 19th century by Francesco De Poletti

The shield of Achilles by De Poletti, a work also mentioned by Guattani (1819), was probably inspired by the famous round mosaic table depicting the same theme, executed at the Vatican Mosaic Studio between 1812 and 1818, donated in 1825 by Leo XII to Charles X King of France and now in the Museum of Versailles. The last mosaic mentioned

by Visconti, after 1819, is Un Paese, defined as of right size, taken from an original by the Roman G. Gabrielli and then owned by Card. G. Antonelli, Secretary of State of the Pontiff and Prefect of the Sacred Apostolic Palaces.

In 1824, probably towards the end of the year, De Poletti moved to Naples with his family, called by Ferdinand I to take care of the processing of paintings and friezes in mosaic for the church of Saint Francesco di Paola under construction, and the organization of a mosaic school like the one active in Rome in the Vatican. These plans never came to fruition, due to the death of the sovereign on January 4, 1825. However, De Poletti was able to draw useful experiences from his stay in Naples by coming into contact with one of the most skilled restorers of the Bourbon Museum, Daniele Sabano, and learning from him the technique of restoring Etruscan vases, a discipline still not very common in Rome where it was the prerogative of a Giovanni Crescenzi, also a Neapolitan, who exercised it in absolute reserve.

De Poletti immediately benefited from this study because, coinciding with his return to Rome, important discoveries of Etruscan pottery took place in Canino, Corneto, Cerveteri and in other centres of maritime Etruria. This skill learned in Naples made De Poletti the most sought artist for the restoration of excavation finds. He worked for the Gregorian Museum in Rome and then for the same purpose in Paris, London, Berlin, Munich and St Petersburg. These trips also favoured his activity as an antiquarian and at the same time allowed him to get to know European artistic culture.



Mosaic by Francesco De Poletti after the painting of 'Rinaldo and Armida' by Michele Rocca
– Walter Art Gallery, Baltimore

De Poletti died in Rome on 15 Sept. 1854. In addition to praise for the results obtained in his artistic activity, Visconti also pays tribute to De Poletti for the self-sacrifice with which he carried out the office of deputy for public safety for the Campo Marzio district, on the occasion of the cholera epidemic that struck Rome in 1837. For these services the artist was awarded the gold medal by Gregory XVI.

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Mosaic by De Poletti in the Gilbert Collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum. This scene is not as complete as our current example which includes a cherub holding an hourglass for Old Father Time

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