

Restoration of National Gallery's 18th century scagliola table top at Russborough.

Tuesday 26 January 2010, 10am-12.30pm
Photocall at Russborough

In 1902, Lady Geraldine Dowager Countess of Milltown gifted to the National Gallery of Ireland the contents of Russborough, Co. Wicklow, in memory of her husband, Edward Nugent, 6th Earl of Milltown (1835-1890). The gift was so extensive and varied – it included paintings, furniture, sculpture, mirrors, silver and objets d'art – that it was necessary to construct a new building (The Milltown Wing) to accommodate the collection.

Included in the Milltown Gift were 3 eighteenth-century scagliola console table-tops, the largest of which is currently on loan to Russborough, and now in need of conservation. To this end the National Gallery of Ireland has commissioned two conservators, **Chiara Martinelli** and **Francesca Toso** of the **Opificio delle Pietre Dure** in **Florence**, who have the specialist expertise in the restoration of this medium.



Scagliola is an artificial ornamental marble. Used as a substitute for real marble it is created by way of a complex process which uses pulverized selenite, mixed with glue and pigments.

The technique was refined in the mid-eighteenth century by Enrico Hugford, Abbot of the Vallombrosan Monastery of Santa Reparata, near Florence.

The large scagliola table top at Russborough is one of 3 commissioned from Hugford's pupil at the monastery, Don Pietro Belloni, for Russborough, by Joseph Leeson 1st Earl of Milltown during his Grand Tour to Italy in 1744. The design of the table is intricate and highly colourful with a rich pattern of decorations framing pastoral scenes in each corner and a large landscape in the centre.

Given the size (107 x 211.5 x 6cm) and fragility of the piece, conservation on the table top is being carried out *in situ* at Russborough until end January 2010. It will be reunited with the recently recovered gilded Rococo console base that Joseph Leeson had made for it when it first arrived in Russborough. The table-top will return to public view when the house reopens in the spring.



See supplementary information below.

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SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

Scagliola is a plaster made of pulverised selenite (gypsum), mixed with glue and pigments. In the Russborough tables, a *coperta* layer of black *scagliola*, composed of gypsum, natural glues and charcoal pigment was thinly spread on a stone support. After an initial polish using pumice and oil the craftsman carefully etched out the design, just a few millimetres deep, using a burin, or a similar tool. These shallow areas were filled with liquid gypsum plaster, glues and pigments, and this process was repeated as necessary to add layers of additional detail to the decoration. Finally the finished top was polished using oils, waxes and shellac. The refinement and sophistication of detail thus achieved is remarkable. While Belloni may have been criticised by Mann as being ‘inferior’ to Enrico Hugford, and for his slowness, the table tops he produced for Leeson and his friends are examples of the *scagliola* technique at its finest.

JOSEPH LEESON (1708-1787) AND HIS SCAGLIOLA TABLES

Collecting for Russborough

The son of a wealthy Dublin brewer, Joseph Leeson (later 1st Earl of Milltown) inherited his father’s estate in 1741, and immediately purchased a large property in County Wicklow. Here, he built Russborough, a country residence in the Palladian style, to the designs of Richard Cassels (or Castle). The work took many years to complete, and in 1744 Joseph decided to undertake his Grand Tour to Italy, not least with the intention of acquiring works of art suitable for his new residence.



In Rome, where he stayed for several months, Leeson sat for his portrait. Indeed, he was one of the first British or Irish travellers to have his portrait painted by Pompeo Batoni, an artist who would later become the most famous painter of young gentlemen on their Grand Tour. He also purchased four landscapes from the celebrated painter of *vedute*, Giovanni Paolo Panini. From Horace Walpole’s correspondence we know that in 1745 a merchant ship carrying a cargo said to be worth £60,000, including statues and pictures belonging to Leeson, was captured by a French privateer; evidently Joseph was serious in his desire to embellish his country seat in a style appropriate to his status as one of the wealthiest men in Ireland.

Russborough was probably nearing completion by 1748, but Joseph was already planning a second trip to Italy. This time he was accompanied by his elder son Joseph and his nephew Joseph Henry, and by March 1750, he was once more settled in Rome. Among the most notable works of art that can be linked to this second trip are the four oval seascapes representing the times of the day by Joseph Vernet that today still adorn the plaster cartouches prepared for them in the drawing room at Russborough.

THE SCAGLIOLA TABLE TOPS

While in Italy, Leeson ordered three table-tops decorated in the *scagliola* technique. Two of these, a pair, are referred to by Horace Mann, the British Resident in Florence, in a letter to Horace Walpole dated 11 July 1747, and must therefore have been commissioned during the first tour.

You bid me get you two scagliola tables, but don't mention the size or any other particulars. The man who made yours is no longer in Florence. Here is a scholar of his [Don Pietro Belloni], but vastly inferior to him, and so slow in working that he has been almost three years about a pair for a Mr Leson [Joseph Leeson], and requires still six months more.

The third and largest of the *scagliola* table-tops is signed and dated *D: Petr^o Belloni Monach^o: V:^{ae} F. Anno.Dñi 1750*. Don Pietro Belloni was a monk at the monastery of Vallombrosa near Florence, and an assistant to the abbot, Don Enrico Hugford. Hugford, born in Italy but thought to be of Irish descent, was a remarkable craftsman who advanced the unusual art of *scagliola* so that refined decorative elements including landscapes and figures could be depicted. He had previously been a monk at the Monastery of Santa Reparata at Marradi, where the selenite essential for the working of *scagliola* was quarried.

Hugford had an elder brother, Ignazio, who was a painter, but who also acted as an art agent and *cicerone* (or guide) for British and Irish Grand Tourists. It is not unlikely that Ignazio was responsible for proposing commissions for his brother and his assistant. There are only a half dozen documented table tops by Belloni, all commissioned by Joseph Leeson and his friends, who were in Rome together between 1750 and 1753: the others included Sir Matthew Fetherstonhaugh of Uppark in Sussex, Robert Clements of Killadoon, Co. Kildare, and Leeson's neighbour Ralph Howard of Shelton Abbey (County Wicklow).

The date on Joseph Leeson's table should be regarded as the year the work was completed, and there is no known documentary evidence to indicate whether it was ordered during the first or second tour; but considering that Fetherstonhaugh waited three or four years for his pair of Belloni tables, it is likely that Joseph ordered all three in Florence at the same time during his first trip.

The general design and decorative motifs used by Belloni are similar in all his table tops, with a central landscape panel framed within an elaborate cartouche. The large table top in Russborough shows a river view with boats, fishermen and a curiously shaped castle in the background. The inspiration for this type of scene was undoubtedly the work of contemporary painters, like Locatelli, or the Florentine Giuseppe Zocchi who Belloni must have known. This panel is set in a black background dotted with butterflies, and along the borders, scrolling ribbons richly decorated with flowers are inlaid, interspersed here and there with small animals. At the corners, medallions crowned with shells frame pastoral scenes containing tiny figures. When his table tops finally arrived – this may have taken as long as six years – Leeson placed them on specially designed carved and gilded console bases that he had made for them.

HOW THE TABLES CAME INTO THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF IRELAND COLLECTION

With the extinction of the direct male line, in 1899 Lady Geraldine Dowager Countess of Milltown, decided to donate almost the entire contents of Russborough to the National Gallery of Ireland. The gift was finalised in 1902. Although it mainly comprised paintings, it also included items of decorative art, not least the tables and a series of eighteenth-century mirrors with magnificently carved and gilded frames. When an inventory of the collection was made at the time, the large Belloni table was in the Music Room at Russborough. Its original Rococo console was described as a: ‘richly carved & gilt wood stand with scrolls’ (Deed of Gift of The Milltown Collection, 30 June 1902, p. 18, NGI Archive). One of the large Rococo mirrors similarly decorated with a ‘rich design of scrolls and foliage and birds’ was hanging above it. The two smaller tables were in the Dining Room on their own carved and ‘gilt stand[s] with flowers and scrolls’. Above them, were two splendid pier glasses ‘in carved and gilt Italian frames with man’s mask below ... cherub heads on each side surmounted by an eagle...’.

THE FATE OF THE SCAGLIOLA TABLES

For some unknown reason, the large table top was never brought to the Gallery. It was found by Sir Alfred Beit in an outhouse at Russborough some time after he purchased the property in 1952, and he had a simple neo-classical base made for it by Hicks of Dublin. The base for the large *scagliola* table must have been transferred to the Gallery but was moved off-site to a furniture store and only recently recovered (by Joe McDonnell). Equally curious is the fact that the two smaller tables, which were moved to the Gallery, were left to languish in a basement store, until they were identified by Sergio Benedetti following the exhibition ‘The Milltowns: a family reunion’ which he curated in 1997. Their original bases remain lost.

Today, finally, all three tables are receiving the attention they so richly deserve. The large table is being restored by two specialists who trained and worked with the Opificio delle Pietre Dure in Florence. When their work is complete, it will be placed once again on its original base – and will remain on loan at Russborough. The two smaller tables were treated in 1998, and the Gallery has plans to commission new console bases for them – with the intention of placing them once again under the eagle-head pier glasses – as originally intended by Leeson.

References

Gervase Jackson-Stops in *The Treasure Houses of Britain*, exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Art, Washington/Yale University Press, 1986, pp.253-54

Uppark, West Sussex, a National Trust handbook, 1995, pp. 20-21, 54

Sergio Benedetti, *The Milltowns: a family reunion*, exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Ireland, 1997