



# Medici masterpieces and Chinese camels

A look ahead to Maastricht, where star attractions include panels from the Medici workshops and a pair of Tang camels

**F**RANZ I, Holy Roman Emperor (1745–65), François III Étienne, Duke of Lorraine and Bar (1729–37), and Francesco Stefano, Grand Duke of Tuscany (1737–65), were all the same person. At that period, as so often in its long history, Lorraine was a shuttlecock between its neighbours, France and Germany, and it became a vital element in the diplomatic manoeuvring that ended the War of the Polish Succession. Francis (for simplicity) was married to the Emperor's heiress, Maria Theresa, whereas the defeated candidate in Poland was father-in-law to Louis XV.

Francis gave up his duchies to Polish Stanislaus, who, in time, would leave them to the French Queen. There was also a succession problem in Tuscany, where the last Medici had no male heir, so Francis was compensated there. In due course, he and Maria



Fig 1: *The Game of Billiards*, by Giuseppe Zocchi of the *Opificio delle pietre dure*. With Galerie Kugel

Theresa inherited the imperial crown, which inevitably ignited the War of the Austrian Succession—*und so weiter, und so weiter*.

If given Tuscany as a wedding present, most people would happily spend as much time there as possible, even if Florence was very dilapidated, despite the final Medici's efforts.

Francis and Maria Theresa spent only three months there, at the beginning of 1739. One of the things that they did during their stay was to visit the *Opificio delle pietre dure*, or workshop of semi-precious stones, which had been founded by Ferdinando I de' Medici in 1588 and produced what were effectively large-scale inlaid stone

megamosaics. The loss of Medici patronage meant that many artisans emigrated, but commissions from Francis and his appointment of Louis Sirès as director and Giuseppe Zocchi as designer reinvigorated the industry.

One of their triumphs was a series of six panels of games, which are of unrivalled sophistication. One of them, *The Game of Billiards* (Fig 1), 17in by 23½in,

disappeared from the imperial collection in Vienna before 1841, perhaps as a diplomatic gift; it re-emerged briefly in 1870, when the *opificio* recognised its 'historic importance', but had not the funds to buy it—how things do not change. Now, it will be a major star at Maastricht (open to the public March 11–19), where the Galerie Kugel of Paris describes it as 'the perfect TEFAF →



Fig 2: One of a pair of 38¼in-high Tang camels. With Van-dervén



Fig 3: Marble dogs from a *gisant*. With Brimo de Laroussilhe







Fig 4: *Listening Fauns* by von Stuck. With Nicholas Hall

object: one that crosses the artificial boundaries between the fine and decorative arts'.

Another highlight I am greatly looking forward to is what promises to be the best matched pair of Tang (618–907) camels (Fig 2) that I will ever have encountered. At 38½in high, they are certainly the largest and they will be in the place of honour at the front of the stand of Vandervan of S'Hertogenbosch. They might well have been intended to stand guard in a similar manner in a tomb, as one rider pulls what would once have been the long-vanished reins with the right arm, the other with the left. Bactrian camels were not indigenous to China and they often came with their foreign grooms or riders, as here. They are splendidly

modelled, seemingly in motion as the riders pull their protesting mounts into position.

The only movements one might imagine from another pair of finely sculpted animals, two little marble dogs (Fig 3) with Brimo de Laroussilhe of Paris, are the breathing of the sleeping one and a shake as the other gnaws at a bone. It had become customary by the 14th century for French royalty to have three burial sites: for the body, heart and entrails. These dogs were originally placed at the feet of the *gisant*, or recumbent effigy, of Blanche de France, duchesse d'Orléans (d. 1392), the posthumous daughter of Charles IV, which marked the resting place of her entrails in a Cistercian abbey at Couilly-Pont-aux-Dames. They must have been removed before the Revolution, thus escaping the damage inflicted on the *gisant*. Entrail figures were often smaller than life and the dogs are only 10½in wide.

The illuminations in a volume offered by Dr Jörn Günther Rare Books of Basel look much earlier in style than the dogs, but were created about 50 years later. They illustrate a *Historia Scholastica* (Fig 7), which was a Biblical paraphrase first written in about 1170 in medieval Latin as universal history, at least from the European perspective,



Fig 7: *Historia Scholastica*. With Dr Jörn Günther



Fig 5: Rococo candlesticks of satyrs. With Koopman. Fig 6 below: Deruta or Gubbio plate. With Julius Böhler



and translated into French by Guyart des Moulins (1251–1322). That history might explain the old-fashioned style of this copy made in about 1416. God creating the world with his craftsman's dividers is particularly appealing.

I had planned to discuss the paintings at Maastricht after my visit, but an email from the New York-based dealer Nicholas Hall prompts me to mention two rather different views of fauns, or satyrs, here. The first are

pairs of rather elegant, even demure, male and female satyrs forming the columns of a superb pair of Rococo silver candelabra (Fig 5), with the London dealer Koopman. They were made by George Wickes in 1744, measure 17in high, and were bought by the 20th Earl of Kildare the following year for the equivalent of \$45,000. The Earl had just succeeded his father after a Grand Tour that had made him an enthusiast for the style. He proceeded to rise through the ranks to be created Duke of Leinster.

Mr Hall's painting by Franz von Stuck (1863–1928), *Listening Fauns* (Fig 4), measures 47in by 44in including the frame, which was designed for it, and his fauns are far from demure. Carl Jung noted that many of Stuck's works drawn from mythology perfectly express a 'mixture of anxiety and lust'. He influenced such avant-garde painters as Klee and Kandinsky, but his own art came to be thought old-fashioned and his reputation suffered because Hitler admired him. Since the 1960s, he has come back into favour.

The long-established Munich dealer Julius Böhler offers a collection of maiolica, including an appealing Deruta or Gubbio small plate (Fig 6) dating from about 1525. The peacock-feather decoration was already popular, but the combination with a ruby-red glaze was innovative. ➤

Next week Drawings and a gem

## Pick of the week

Alexander Calder's 1967 *Curly Blue Tail* mobile was inspired by the tricks of a circus sea lion, and recalls his work in the 1920s, when he made an entire circus in wire. It is with Von Vertes from Zurich.

