



*1 – Chimney piece in Charlemont House, Dublin  
(photograph: Conor O'Neill)*

# Scagliola inlay work: the problems of attribution

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DONALD CAMERON

**A**LTHOUGH THE ROMAN ART OF SCAGLIOLA INLAY WAS REVIVED IN ITALY BY Guido Fassi before 1600, the earliest known examples imported into England or Ireland dated from the 1670s and 1680s. The chimney piece in the Queen's Closet in Ham House, Richmond, can be dated to about 1675 from the Earl and Countess of Lauderdale's cipher on the frieze.<sup>1</sup> The earliest scagliola work known in Ireland consists of a pair of table tops of very high quality, signed by the artist, Laurentius Bonuccelli, and dated 1685 (private collection). Both depict pastoral scenes in the centre (Plate 2), surrounded by broad golden frames of laurel and ribbon. The borders are extensively inlaid with floral and ribbon designs.

By the mid-eighteenth century there was a considerable fashion for scagliola table tops in the Italianate style. These tops were rectangular marble slabs, heavily inlaid with Rococo decoration. The central cartouches were frequently inlaid with real or imaginary landscapes, seascapes, heraldic devices or musical trophies, almost invariably inlaid on black or brown marble slabs.

The most famous maker of these pieces was Don Enrico Hugford (1695-1771) of Florence, but the only documented example of his work in England is the pair of tables at Penshurst, Kent, both bearing his initials. His assistant, Don Pietro Belloni (1695-1771), made tables for a number of Irish patrons, including a pair for Ralph Howard (signed and dated 1750, formerly Shelton Abbey, county Wicklow) and Joseph Leeson, who acquired a table signed by him for Russborough, county Wicklow.<sup>2</sup> A further pair of tables attributed to Belloni, and formerly at Adare Manor, county Limerick, is supposed to have been commissioned by Viscount Cremorne. Another of Hugford's apprentices, Lamberto Christiano Gori, executed tables for the 4th Duke of Bedford at Woburn, an octagonal table for Penshurst, and was almost certainly responsible for an attractive pair of armorial tables in the same collection in Ireland as the Bonuccelli tables.



2 – Bonuccelli table-top detail  
 (all photos by the author unless otherwise stated)

The first itinerant scagliolists to work in England were Francis Vassali and Charles Clerici, who were primarily concerned with architectural scagliola work, including the decoration of floors, columns and wall panels. In 1737 Vassali made wall panels for the Temple of the Four Winds at Castle Howard, Yorkshire,<sup>3</sup> and Clerici was employed by the architect John Carr at Thoresby, Nottinghamshire, and Wentworth Woodhouse, Yorkshire, from 1760 onwards.

The first scagliola inlay work produced in England was executed by Domenico or Dominic Bartoli, who came from Leghorn.<sup>4</sup> The earliest known documented reference to him in England is a court record of 1761, in which he is described as a carver.<sup>5</sup> This is of interest since scagliolists were usually trained as stuccodores, but in order to carry out inlay work, would have had to learn to carve to be able to cut their patterns. It is possible that Bartoli was training as a mason at this time.

By 1763 Bartoli was employed by William Constable at Burton Constable Hall in the East Riding of Yorkshire. He was being paid a guinea a week (about £140 at present day values) and the cost of his materials.<sup>6</sup> A number of accounts

relate to his stay at Burton Constable, many of which confirm the traditionally secretive nature of his craft: one refers to a sum of 3s 6d for ‘stuff for the water for making up the stuff’, and the same bill details ‘two ounces of terra suna at 2s pr’, ‘Cuttle fish bone 3 pounds at 6 pr’, and ‘a silk sieve at 2s/6d’.<sup>7</sup>

During his time at Burton Constable, Bartoli executed seven pieces of scagliola work: a pair of imitation porphyry table tops, a pair of massive Italianate inlaid tables (one signed), two chimney pieces, and a coat of arms of the Constable family. The inlaid tables show quite exceptional mastery of the skill of inlaying. One has an extravagant strapwork and foliate border, with a second strapwork border within it wreathed in ivy leaves. The central cartouche frames a figure of Britannia seated on a lion, holding a spear and a Union flag shield in her left hand, and a swag of laurel in her right. The second table has a beautifully drawn border of oak leaves – a favourite device of Bartoli – surrounding a capriccio scene of a medieval town.

The coat of arms gives an insight into how the colours in scagliola can deteriorate when exposed to sunlight. Since we know the exact heraldic colours that were originally intended, we can compare these with the existing colours. Two striking features emerge: the reds have turned to brown and the yellow has failed in the mixture for green, turning the greens to blue. This presumably accounts for the odd colouring on a number of Irish scagliola chimney pieces, the one at Castletownshend, county Cork, being an example, which has blue vine and ivy leaves, and brown-on-black Etruscan inlay in place of the more usual red on black.

The chimney piece in the Long Gallery at Burton Constable follows the Italianate template of the Rococo style. The frieze and jambs are inlaid with fruits, flowers and birds on black marble, and the centre tablet displays a capriccio scene. In the State Bed Dressing Room, the chimney piece (Plates 3, 4) is inlaid on statuary marble, which is possibly the first use of statuary marble for inlay in England. The frieze panels depict a viper and a rattlesnake, while the centre tablet displays military trophies, and the blockings above the jambs are decorated with musical symbols. The jambs are freestanding Ionic columns inlaid with a motif unique to Bartoli, and apparently of his own invention – oak leaves intertwined with a broad ribbon (Plate 4). The design by the architect Timothy Lightoler for this chimney piece exists in the print room at Burton Constable. It shows that instead of the oak leaves, he intended the jambs to have vine leaf decoration. Bartoli was certainly producing his own designs at this time, as an unexecuted design for a table top by him is also to be found in the print room at Burton Constable.

In 1766, after leaving Burton Constable, Bartoli went into partnership with John Augustus Richter, working from premises in Great Newport Street, near Leicester Square, London.<sup>8</sup> Richter was born in about 1730,<sup>9</sup> and is supposed to have come from Dresden.<sup>10</sup> Bartoli and Richter worked almost exclusively for





3 – Chimney piece in the State Bed Dressing Room at Burton Constable, Yorkshire  
 opposite 4 – Jamb detail of chimney piece in the State Bed Dressing Room at Burton Constable

Robert Adam. The first work the firm produced was a pair of tables in an Italianate style, designed by Adam for the 1st Earl of Coventry.<sup>11</sup>

As with so many other branches of art, Robert Adam dramatically altered taste in scagliola work. The Coventry tables were in the Italianate style, but by the early 1770s, he had begun to design inlays for semicircular or, more commonly, D-shaped tops of pure white statuary marble, using strictly neoclassical motifs. There are a number of executed and unexecuted designs for this type of table amongst the collection of Adam's drawings at the Soane Museum (Plate 5). The executed works, for which the bills survive, are all by Bartoli and Richter.

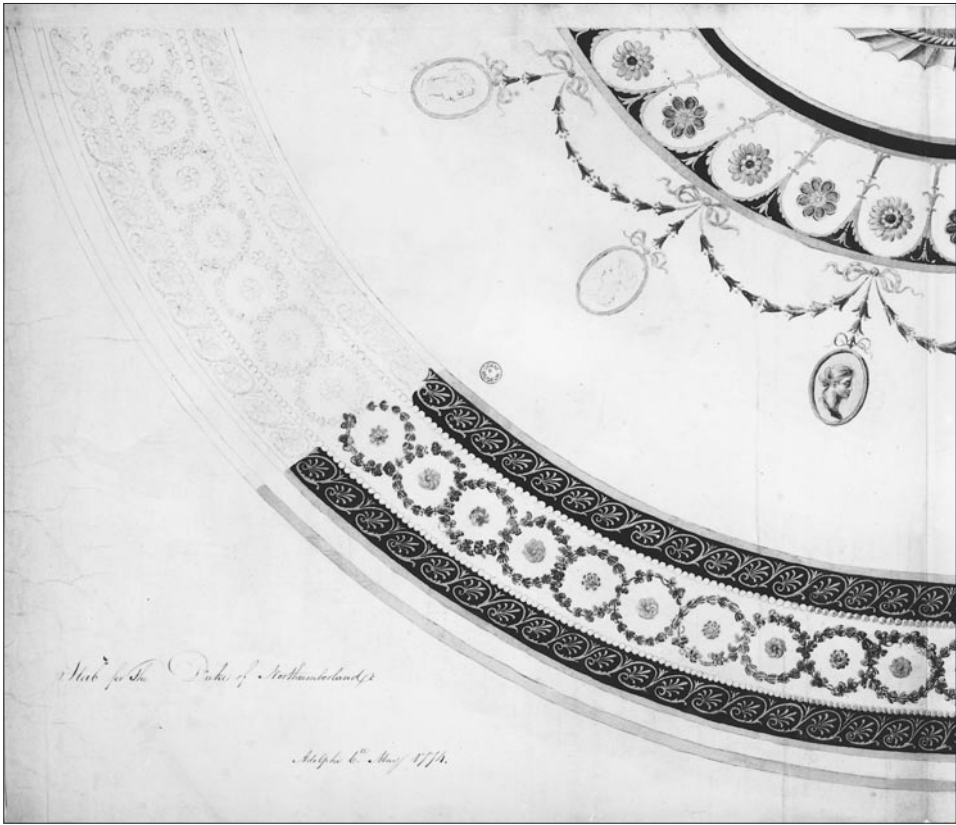
All of Adam's neoclassical table designs follow the same template: at the centre of the straight edge is a stylised fan, and radiating from this central motif are bands of running decoration, so that if a pair of the tables was placed back to back they would make a coherent circular or oval pattern. Richter and Bartoli made tables

of this type to Adam's designs for Nostell Priory in Yorkshire, Northumberland House in London, and Osterley Park and Syon House in Middlesex.

Although Bartoli and Richter are frequently spoken of as an enduring entity, the partnership appears to have been a relatively brief one, lasting only ten years from 1767 to 1777. It is clear that the partnership was an unequal one in terms of skill. Only five inlaid pieces (a tablet in the V&A, illustrating a scene from *Ossian*, the chimney piece designed by Robert Adam for Horace Walpole at Strawberry Hill, and a chimney piece and two table tops at Burghley House, Northamptonshire) are known from documentary evidence to be by Richter alone, and they are inferior in both design and execution to Bartoli's work.

After the partnership was dissolved, both men continued to take individual commissions, Bartoli working for the architect, James Wyatt, at No. 15 St James's Square in London, Thomas Leverton at Watton Wood Hall, Hertfordshire, and George Steuart at Attingham, Shropshire, amongst others. When designing pieces himself, Bartoli produced work mainly in the Adam style, but he was capable of producing attractive and distinctive designs of his own, most notably for the chimney piece for the 3rd George Room at Burghley, for which he was paid £225.16.6 on 6 November 1784.<sup>12</sup>





5 – Robert Adam, design for a table top, Northumberland House, now in Syon House  
(Sir John Soane's Museum, Adam Drawings, 39/8; courtesy of the Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum)

In 1794 Bartoli came to Ireland to work for James Wyatt at Castle Coole, county Fermanagh.<sup>13</sup> He made a screen of four monumental porphyry Doric columns for the hall, two engaged and two freestanding, with marble bases and plaster capitals by Joseph Rose. From Wyatt's original drawing for the hall, which is still at Castle Coole, it is clear that he intended the columns to be fluted and of *rosso verona* rather than porphyry. This would have lent a more subtle appearance, but the massive purple bulk of the columns as executed has an almost Imperial grandeur, an effect that would have been emphasised by the original stone colour of the walls.

Also at Castle Coole, Bartoli made a set of black and grey Corinthian pilasters for the saloon, very similar to those he had executed at Attingham for the architect George Steuart. The two massive sienna columns in the staircase hall have traditionally been attributed to William Crogan, but it is more likely that these too are by Bartoli since the dimensions closely match those of the porphyry columns.

In Dublin, the principal inlayer of marble was Pietro Bossi, who is known to have resided in the city from 1785 to 1798 and to have carried out scagliola work at Aldborough House.<sup>14</sup> Little else is known of him; however, an advertisement found recently in *Saunders Newsletter* in 1786 states

Peter Bossi, Inlayer of Marble, lately removed to No 38 Fleet-street, has now for sale an elegant pair of statuary marble tables, also chimney pieces, the whole inlaid scagliola, on an entire new design. He engages the above pieces to be as good workmanship as any done in London. Apply as above.<sup>15</sup>

This advertisement is of great interest since it is the first evidence we have that Bossi actually made scagliola inlay work. It also gives us an insight into his working practice. It is clear from the advertisement that he sold pieces on his own account. The ‘entire new design’ suggests that Bossi was indeed producing original designs rather than copying those of Robert Adam, and indicates he may well have been responsible for the pieces in the very distinctive Etruscan style such as the Charlemont House chimney piece illustrated in Plate 5.

Problems of attributing scagliola work in Ireland arise as, in the past, the major pieces surviving in public and private collections have been referred to as ‘Bossi work’, which has been taken to mean work by Bossi. The most famous of such pieces is the chimney piece at Charlemont House, Dublin, formerly belonging to St Anne’s, Clontarf (Plate 1), and the quality and style of this piece is a useful benchmark for distinguishing between work attributable to Bossi, work by Bartoli, and work by later imitators. A number of other pieces can convincingly be attributed to the same hand as the Charlemont House chimney piece, such as scagliola work in the same Etruscan style in Castletownshend, and in the Office of An Taoiseach in Government Buildings, which, according to the Georgian Society Records, originally came from No. 45 Merrion Square. There is also a chimney piece now in a private collection, which was reputedly removed from Powerscourt House, county Wicklow, and although it has been cut down to fit a smaller aperture, the inlay work is of very high quality.

In this article, I would like to suggest that some of the pieces in Irish collections traditionally attributed to Bossi may, in fact, be the work of Bartoli. A case in point is a table top in the National Museum of Ireland (NMI), acquired in 1886 (Plate 6). The NMI acquisition book records this table top as of ‘white marble with a design in coloured cemento by Bossi, an Italian who worked in Dublin in the latter portion of the 18th century. Purchased for £10.00.00’.<sup>16</sup> However, it is much more likely that it was Bartoli who was responsible for this piece. The NMI table top is closely allied in design to the table at Russborough, and another table formerly at Russborough and now at Malahide Castle (Plate 7). All include repeated use of the





6 – Attributed to Bartoli (formerly to Bossi),  
detail of a scaglio inlay table top at the National Museum of Ireland

7 – Attributed to Bartoli, table top at Malahide Castle, Dublin  
(courtesy Malahide Castle)





8 – *Attributed to Bartoli, table-top detail*  
*(private collection, Ireland)*

Adamesque border, and are strikingly similar in the overall design – with loops of bellflowers and the central stylised fan – to tables such as the Syon House pair, which are known to be the work of Bartoli. They all have the variations on a circular motif of leaves and flowers, which were developed by Robert Adam as a more sophisticated version of the plain contiguous circles which he used on the chimney piece at Strawberry Hill and on the tables designed for the Earl of Coventry. Adam used this motif on the chimney piece he designed for the Glass Drawing Room at Northumberland House, and on the table top he designed for Syon House (Plate 5), both executed by Bartoli.

There are other table tops in the Adam style in Irish collections that are almost certainly by Bartoli. One pair of tables (Plate 8) is based on a design adapted from a drawing of a table by Adam for the Duke of Roxburgh.<sup>17</sup> Bartoli made some changes to the original design: the central stylised fan and the running bands of decoration were closely copied, but the design was enriched by the addition of swags of bellflowers suspended from anthemias, and Bartoli replaced Adam's geometric outer band with his own motif of the oak leaves and ribbon which he had used on the



9 – Table top at Syon House, Middlesex  
(courtesy Duke of Northumberland)

10 – Attributed to Bartoli, table top from the collection of Archbishop Agar  
(courtesy of the owner)



State Bed Dressing Room chimney piece at Burton Constable.

Another table (Plate 10) was originally acquired by Charles Agar, Archbishop of Dublin (1736-1809). Again, it closely imitates an Adam design (Plate 9) for a table top, now at Syon House, by Richter and Bartoli. The decoration of the Agar table is much richer than that of the pair mentioned above (Plate 8). The central band consists of great circles of foliage containing concentric circles of bellflowers and a central medallion. On the Agar table, Bartoli alternates the larger foliate circles with smaller ones, but the appearance is strikingly similar. The ribbon and oak leaves with which he replaces Adam's outer border is further enriched by the addition of a second ribbon to form a double helix. The stylised fans on both tables are nearly identical, but Bartoli employs a Greek key border on the Agar table as opposed to the foliate border of Adam's design.

In a private Irish collection there is a pair of tables almost entirely uninfluenced by Adam's designs except for the D shape and the use of a statuary marble slab. The tables, formerly in the collection of the Duke of Leinster, may be attributed to Bossi (Plate 12). Indeed, this may be the pair referred to in the Bossi advertisement of 1786 since there are no other table tops documented as being by him.<sup>18</sup> There is no central fan and there are no running bands of decoration except for a delicate black border, which is broken on the bottom edge. Finely drawn Etruscan medallion heads of bearded men suspended below tazza urns reveal what seems to be a typically Bossi touch on the rims of the urns, the colours running from dark to light and back to dark, to give the effect of a shaft of light striking the urn. These central motifs are flanked by beautifully balanced scrolls of flowers and foliage, topped with stylised ears of wheat. The overall effect is one of remarkable beauty and originality, quite unlike any other tops that have come to light thus far.

Bartoli seems to have been responsible for few chimney pieces in Ireland, the only known exceptions being two in a private Irish collection that were 'rebuilt' in the 1840s by Daniel Robertson, whom Howard Colvin suggests may have been a relative and former pupil of Robert Adam.<sup>19</sup> Robertson took the frieze, blockings and jamb panels from two very large eighteenth-century scagliola chimney pieces and set them into chimney pieces of Victorian design with arched apertures (Plate 11). The scagliola inlay, particularly the leaf work, is stylistically very close to Bartoli's chimney piece in the 3rd George Room at Burghley House.

Bartoli made a number of chimney pieces in the Etruscan style for Watton Wood, Hertfordshire; Osterley Park, Middlesex; and in London for No. 20 St James's Square, Home House, Portman Square, and a chimney piece now at St James's Palace, possibly designed for Carlton House.<sup>20</sup> However, they are all very different in feel and execution to the Charlemont House piece. The Etruscan heads on the Home House and St James's Palace chimney pieces are enclosed by circular medal-





*11 – Chimney piece reconstructed by Daniel Robertson (c.1840s),  
with scagliola inlay work attributed to Bartoli*

*12 – Attributed to Bossi, table top  
(private collection, Ireland)*





lions, whereas Bossi, from what we know, usually favoured oval shapes, and the heads themselves are in shades of yellow and brown rather than the Etruscan red found on the Charlemont House chimney piece. On the frieze on the Osterley House chimney piece, the heads are separated by carved marble fillets, whereas the chimney pieces attributed to Bossi are invariably without carved decoration.

Apart from these Etruscan pieces, the chimney piece formerly at No. 6 Merrion Square and now in a private Irish collection, and a small number of associated pieces, have strong claims on stylistic grounds to be by Bossi. The hallmarks of his work are exquisitely balanced designs, highly accomplished cutting, and beautiful ribbon and leaf work. The best example of this leafwork is probably the chimney piece in the director's office at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

It is frequently difficult to distinguish Bossi's inlay scagliola work from work by Bartoli, but there are some differences. Bartoli frequently 'miniaturises' his leaf work, whereas Irish leaf work is usually life-sized. Bartoli frequently uses oak leaves, which are rarely found on Irish pieces, which almost invariably have either vine or ivy leaf inlay. Bartoli produced heraldic work and landscapes in scagliola, and was particularly skilled in the depiction of birds; the Long Gallery chimney piece at Burton Constable and a chimney piece formerly at Wroxton, Oxfordshire, have beautifully worked depictions of parrots and swallows.

It is likely that many later pieces of variable but often inferior quality, traditionally ascribed to Bossi, are by the firm of Sharpe & Emery, imitators and restorers of Bossi work, established before 1870 in Dublin and still in business in 1940.<sup>21</sup> There is one design in particular (Plate 13), frequently seen on inlaid chimney pieces, which may be the invention of Sharpe & Emery. This is an asymmetrical motif of cherries and leaves, which betrays its later origins. Firstly, its asymmetry places it outside the grammar of strict neoclassicism within which Bossi worked, and secondly, on chimney pieces where the cherries have lost all or part of their inlay, it is apparent that the pattern has been crudely and deeply cut as if by a drill, whereas the revealed cutting on eighteenth-century pieces is highly refined and shallow, and the keying or roughening of the surface to hold the inlay is very evenly executed. An Etruscan style chimney piece, formerly in a house in Mountjoy Square, has the cherry motif, indicating a nineteenth-century 'improvement' by Sharpe & Emery.

It is hoped that more documentary evidence will come to light concerning the career of Pietro Bossi. Presumably of Italian origin, though possibly born in Dresden,<sup>22</sup> his major work was all carried out in Ireland. Only by distinguishing his work from that of Bartoli and his later imitators can we truly appreciate his extraordinary genius.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> R.B. Wragg, 'The History of Scagliola', *Country Life*, CXXII, 10 October 1957, 718-21.
- <sup>2</sup> Sergio Benedetti, *The Milltowns, a family reunion* (Dublin 1997), 78-79, pl. 24.
- <sup>3</sup> George Howard, letter to *Country Life*, CXXII, 24 October 1957, 883, concerning the Temple of the Four Winds: 'all the surfaces between the floor and the cornice are of scagliola. The walls are white scagliola and the architraves of black scagliola with gold veining.'
- <sup>4</sup> Anna Maria Massinelli, *Scagliola* (Rome 1997) 49.
- <sup>5</sup> London Metropolitan Archives, MJ SP 1761/02/011, 10 January 1761: Domenico Bartoli, carver of Newman Street, was released from prosecution for assault and battery by William Morrison, shoemaker, and his wife Dorothy, of Peter Street, Westminster.
- <sup>6</sup> Beverley, East Riding Archives, DDCC/2/51. A receipt states: 'Decr. 13 1764 Recd. Of William Constable Esqur at the hands of Robt. Foster Fifty Four pounds twelve shillings in full One years Wages due 2nd October 1764 by me Dominick Bartoli.'
- <sup>7</sup> Beverley, East Riding Archives, DDCC/2/51.
- <sup>8</sup> Letter from William Chambers, 1773, cited in R.B. Wragg, 'The History of Scagliola', *Country Life*, CXXII, 10 October 1957, 718-21.
- <sup>9</sup> A manuscript label on the reverse of a plaque by him, illustrating a scene from Ossian, is dated 1809 and records his age as 79 (Victorian & Albert Museum, ref. A25-1932).
- <sup>10</sup> Rupert Gunnis, *Dictionary of British Sculptors 1660-1851* (London 1951) 321.
- <sup>11</sup> The Croome Court Account Books record payment of £134.5.0 for these tables. Eileen Harris, *The Genius of Robert Adam* (London 2001) 340.
- <sup>12</sup> Burghley Archives, Lord Exeter's Account Book for 1784.
- <sup>13</sup> Alastair Rowan, *The Buildings of Northwest Ulster* (London 1979) 178; Conor O'Neill, 'In Search of Bossi', *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies*, I (Dublin 1998) 147.
- <sup>14</sup> Bossi is the only inlayer of marble recorded in *Wilson's Directory* during the late 1780s and throughout the 1790s. See Conor O'Neill, 'In Search of Bossi', *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies*, I (Dublin 1998) 147; Aidan O'Boyle, 'Aldborough House, Dublin: a construction history', *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies*, IV (Dublin 2001) 120.
- <sup>15</sup> *Saunders Newsletter*, 22 March 1786. I am grateful to John Rogers for drawing this to my attention.
- <sup>16</sup> National Museum of Ireland, Acquisitions Record Book, 1886, no. 71.
- <sup>17</sup> London, Sir John Soane's Museum, Robert Adam drawings, 17/49: *Design for a table for the Second Drawing Room at Lord Roxburgh's*.
- <sup>18</sup> Like so much of Bossi's work, the origins of these table tops are not clear but they were apparently in the Duke of Leinster's collection at Leinster House. They were later sold to a private buyer at an auction on the quays in the late 1940s or early 1950s, and repurchased and sold by the Dublin trade in the late 1950s. They reappeared on the market in the late 1980s when they were offered for sale by Christie's, and are now in a private collection in Ireland.

<sup>19</sup> Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Artists* (New Haven and London 1995) 822.

<sup>20</sup> London, St James's Palace, Royal Archive, The King's Works, RA GEO/25189. Both Richter and Bartoli are recorded as having provided pieces for Carlton House. Bartoli wrote begging for payment for two table tops, and a payment of £84 was made on 11 March 1805 (RA GEO.25190a). This is particularly interesting, as hitherto no records of Bartoli having worked after 1795, when he finished at Castle Coole, have come to light.

<sup>21</sup> Two advertisements confirm the range of work they undertook:

Dublin Bossi Inlay: This beautiful lost art revived. Old examples restored. Any designs can now be executed by Smart [Sharpe] and Emery

(*Connoisseur*, VI, August 1903)

'Dublin Bossi Inlaid Marble Mantelpieces

We have some of these fine antiques, thoroughly restored

Sharpe and Emery

17 Great Brunswick Street

Examples kept at Berners St Oxford St London'

(*Connoisseur*, IX, May 1904)

I am grateful to Patrick Pilkington for drawing these to my attention.

<sup>22</sup> A family of stuccodores called Bossi worked in and around Dresden in the mid-eighteenth century, whose members include a Pietro Luigi Bossi. It may not be coincidental that Richter is also supposed to have come from Dresden. U. Thieme and F. Becker, *Allgemeines Lexicon der Bildenden Kunstler*, IV (Liepzig 1989) 404.

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13 – Detail from a chimney piece,  
showing asymmetrical motif of cherries and leaves by Sharpe & Emery

