



Pietre Dure **Art, science and nature interconnected**

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Pietre Dure refers to a method of inlaying multicolored marbles or semi-precious stones into a stone base. Derived from ancient Roman decorative stonework, opus sectile, the art of Pietre Dure was mainly developed in Renaissance Florence, where the manufacture of precious objects and ornaments, was sponsored by Medici Princes. This technique includes painting in stone, presenting subjects such as landscapes, townscapes, flowers, birds. It includes also abstract geometric or organic patterns realized as ornaments for walls, furnishes or objects like tabletops and cabinets. Other works were vessels and ornaments carved with virtuosic skill from a single piece of rare and brilliant stone; objects such as boxes, clocks, and jewelry that employed both the stonecutter's and the goldsmith's art; portraits of nobles sculpted in variously colored stones.

Rarity, preciousness, symbolic and magical values, variety of colors, physical properties, astonish look are among the main reasons for which many civilizations, along the course of the history, employed natural hard stone, minerals, precious and semi-precious stones. Many different techniques have been developed in many different context, architecture, ornamentation, jewelry, artwork. Among others, the technique of Pietre Dure reached, during the modern period, a surprisingly high-quality refinement and great consideration. The medium was esteemed beyond most others. Just an example: Philip II of Spain, in the second half of XVI century, paid 60 to 200 ducats for paintings by Titian but owned a table ornament of rock crystal valued at 500 ducats.

The most used stones were lapis lazuli, chalcedony, jasper, porphyry, agate, alabaster, serpentine, orbicular, different kinds of colored marbles. And the city of Venice, which was the main European port of entry for exotic hard-stones from the Orient, during the middle-age, developed a long history of hard-stone cutting, centuries before Florence. The hard-stone carvers' guild was established there in 1284. Regulations for the craft followed in 1318 and were enforced. Venetian luxury goods flooded into the northern states of Italy and from Italy the medium spread across Europe, to Prague, Madrid, Naples, Paris, Saint Petersburg.

Decorative stone inlay was also revived in Rome in the 1550s, inspired by archaeological excavations made from the beginning of the XVI century and the resulting availability of ancient marbles in the city. The decisive moment for this technique occurred some years later, when the success of Pietre Dure work was rapidly established by the Medici Grand Dukes of Florence. A document by a 1553 inventory of the Palazzo Vecchio firstly witnesses the intention to establish a centre of stone-working in Florence. Stores of alabaster, jasper, serpentine and marbles are listed there. In order to set this up the Medici Grand Dukes brought craftsmen to Florence from Rome, but also from Milan, where there was a strong tradition of carving rock crystal and other hard-stones into vessels. In 1588 the disparate hard-stone workshops that had sprung up in Florence were consolidated by Grand Duke Ferdinando I into the Galleria dei Lavori (works gallery). Located in the Uffizi, the Grand Ducal workshops were the first court manufacture in Europe to specialize in hard-stones.

Pietre Dure had intellectual and spiritual appeal as well. Symbolic and mysterious meanings were ascribed to some stones. At the same time, in an age of exploration and dawning scientific inquiry, the art of Pietre Dure found a perfect aesthetic consonance with the taste for Wunderkammer, cabinets of curiosities where exotic shells, coral, petrified wood, ostrich eggs, natural "wonders" of all sorts, were avidly collected and displayed side by side with antiquities, ethnographical and archaeological objects. Moreover, the imitation of painting which was pursued in Florentine works,

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by carefully exploiting the natural striations and colors of the stones, aimed to evoke a sense of great astonishment in the viewers. In their combination of expensive raw materials, pictorial design, technological development and a high degree of skill, Pietre Dure works represented the ideal fusion of art, science and nature. A relationship between fields of knowledge which is currently taken into great consideration. Handling this technique requires high skill and well trained craftsmen, DCCAC is pleased to offer unique opportunities to develop artistic projects where contemporary interpretations of Pietre Dure works play a significant role. DCCAC supports contemporary artists in developing fruitful relationships with the few existing artisans still working this precious and refined technique.

