

P A T R I C K J E F F E R S O N



## A RENAISSANCE PATTERN CENTRE TABLE

BASE IN THE MANNER OF JACQUES I ANDROUET DU CERCEAU

SUPPORTING A SEVENTEENTH CENTURY EBONISED PEARWOOD TOP

INLAID WITH GEOMETRIC PATTERNS INCLUDING THE RUB EL HIZB



The Southern European parquetry top (*circa* 1670) with overlain squares of ebonised pearwood forming geometric patterns; the French ebonised base (*circa* 1870) with addorsed winged lion monopodia carved from a block of solid mahogany, raised on an oak substrate. Altogether, a *tour de force* of cabinet making.

Dimensions:      Height: 29 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" (75.5 cm)      Length: 83" (211 cm)      Depth: 46 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" (117.5 cm)







Fig. 1

The design for the base derives from the antique *cartibulum*, seen for instance in the Oratorio di Santa Barbara al Celio, Rome (fig. 1).

The pattern was revived and elaborated in the Renaissance. Echoes for the present work can be found in the designs of Jacques Androuet du Cerceau (1510-84), *architecte du roi* under Henri II, whose lavishly sculpted furniture was shaped by Northern Mannerism. Du Cerceau published various influential designs for similar tables from 1550 that were known for their twin, fan-shaped end supports and elaborate decoration (fig. 2).

The Renaissance revival in France began in the mid-nineteenth century with enlargements to the Louvre. Gothic influences were side-lined in favour of antique ornament, leading to the creation of this extraordinary base, commissioned specifically for the earlier top. While the beginning of Neo-Renaissance period can be defined by its simplicity and severity, what came later was far more ornate in its design, reflected in the bold carving, Corinthian columns, arches, powerful lion monopodia, acanthus scrolls, and muscular proportions of the base.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

One table that draws close parallels is a model listed in the Révillod Collection, cited in Eugène Royer, *La Renaissance de François 1<sup>er</sup> à Louis XIII, Décorations Intérieures Boiseries Panneaux Meubles* (Paris, 1895). Both have gadrooned friezes, similarly dramatic monopodia supports terminating in massive lion paw feet, and arches connected by Doric columns. The length and scale of the offered table, however, has a deeply considered architectural power that changes from every angle viewed, contrasting tightly carved muscular ends with open arcades and the enigmatic inlaid top.





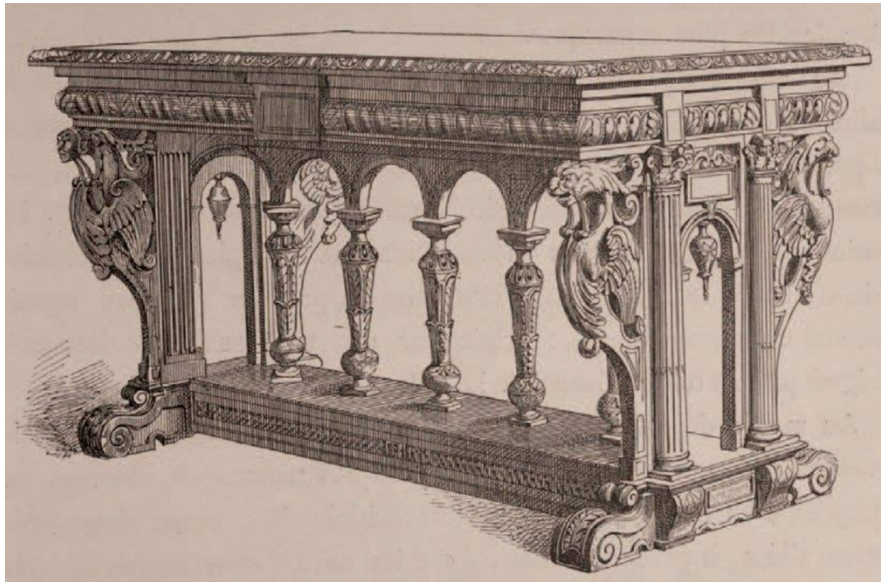


Fig. 4

The 'Du Cerceau' table (fig. 4 & 5) in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, is another apposite comparison, as it is generally accepted that, although basically 'genuine' (*circa* 1560-80), it was significantly restored in the 1840s during that most active phase of antiquarian invention.

Carved in the form of a nymph standing between two monopod sphinxes, the table has a similar central longitudinal stretcher and twin, fan-shaped end supports. As the name suggests, it was almost certainly influenced by Jacques Androuet Du Cerceau's 1550 designs. Du Cerceau, however, was not the inventor of the form, which appeared in Italy from the 1520s, probably inspired by antique marble tables. Tables of this form were found in France by 1549, and the evidence of inventories suggests that they were considered highly fashionable, appropriate for dining, business or conversation with guests. Their impressive sculptural end pieces and their ornament, derived from classical antiquity, distinguished them from the simple, standard trestle tables which had been used during the medieval period.

The 'Du Cerceau' table was a very early acquisition by the nascent South Kensington Museum in 1860 and may well have had a considerable influence.



Fig. 5



The spectacular parquetry top is arranged in intricate geometrical patterns including the motif of overlain squares known in Islamic culture as the Rub el Hizb ('the quarter group'). An early use of this idea is in the Parthian palace at Nysa, for instance, from the second century BC. The design, according to Schmidt-Collinet, 'can therefore be interpreted as a symbol of the universe, a cosmological sign with esoteric meaning, the number four and its duplication being related to the relationship of the divine to the world.'<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere, it is seen in the coffered ceiling of the Temple at Baalbek (early third century), and later in Egypt under the Tetrarchy (293-313).<sup>2</sup>

Early Christian as well as Judaic sources indicate its pervasiveness at this time, the former attested by numerous Coptic textiles, the latter by a mosaic from the synagogue at Ein Gedi (third to fifth century).<sup>3</sup>

In the Christian tradition, the number eight was associated with regeneration and baptism, following the eight who are saved in the story of Noah and the combination of the six days of creation, the day of rest, and the day of regeneration through the sacrament of baptism (hence the octagonal form of many baptisteries).

Islam's adoption of the motif was more profound, as it became the most important of polygonal signs, a foundation for its rectilinear art, the form dictating mosque design and decoration and informing the arrangement of the Koran.

The Rub el Hizb ('the quarter group') star divides chapters to aid recitation, sixty divisions (hizb) occurring within, the star dividing each hizb by four. In this way, it is associated intimately with calligraphy, and it is interesting to note here the symbol's conjunction with the abstracted vine (which came to be conflated with the idea of writing), as well as its function in fourfold division. The eight-pointed star was also connected to prayer, since the ground plan of the Dome of the Rock was built to mark the city's status as the first Qibla, or direction of prayer, hence the alternative term, the star of al-Quds, the star of Jerusalem. Furthermore, eight is the number of gates to Janna ('Garden'), or Paradise; and eight the number of angels who bear Al-Firdaus Al-'Ala, the Throne of Allah, which forms the roof of the Garden Paradise.

<sup>1</sup> Andreas Schmidt-Colinet, 'Deux carrés entrelacés inscrits dans un cercle. De la signification d'un ornement géométrique' (in Annemarie Stauffer, *Textiles d'Égypte de la collection Bouvier, Antiquité tardive, période copte, premiers temps de l'Islam*, Musée d'art et d'histoire Fribourg, Bern, 1991, p. 24). This essay provides the most comprehensive survey of the motif.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> See also a fourth to fifth-century fragment discussed in Dorothée Renner, *Die Koptischen Textilien in den Vatikanischen Museen*, II, Wiesbaden, 1982, pp. 36-8, pl. 2, and the eleventh- to twelfth-century woollen tunic from Haifa Museum (inv. no. 6788), which combines the 'x' motif; in Alisa Baginski, Amalia Tidhar, *Textiles from Egypt 4-13<sup>th</sup> Centuries C.E.*, L.A. Mayer Memorial Institute for Islamic Art, 1980, cat. no. 255, p. 161, pl. 7.