



The Triumph of Marriage

PAINTED CASSONI OF THE RENAISSANCE

ISABELLA
SEWART GARDNER
MUSEUM

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During the Renaissance, wealthy families in Florence and Siena cultivated honor and public prestige through the celebration of marriage. The joyful procession of a bride to the home of her new husband was a magnificent display of luxury goods. Such parades also reminded citizens of ancient Roman triumphs – processions that celebrated military victories.

The paintings in this exhibition once adorned cassoni – large wedding chests – that contained the bride’s trousseau. Made in pairs, cassoni were originally carried in bridal processions and then placed in bedrooms.

Cassoni were often painted with allegories and historical subjects related to the ideals of marriage. The images dramatized conflicts between love and duty and commemorated weddings by depicting triumphal themes.

Opulent wedding parades were sometimes criticized for being decadent and immodest, and in the 1460s they were restricted in Florence. However, the painted chests continued to refer to triumphal processions.

Triumph of Scipio Africanus

around 1470

Lo Scheggia (Florence, 1406–1486)

The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art,
the State Art Museum of Florida, Sarasota

Amidst an exuberant throng and a background of raised spears, the Roman general Scipio celebrates his victory over Carthage with a triumphal entry into Rome. The magnificently poised general prepares to enter the city where he will dedicate his spoils to Jupiter, whose temple is shown as a large gray cylindrical structure. Scipio was celebrated by Renaissance humanists for his courage and his restraint – a worthy model for both political leaders and husbands.

Two Panels: The Story of Antiochus and Stratonice

around 1470

Sieneese painter (called the Stratonice Master)

The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens,
San Marino, The Arabella D. Huntington Memorial Collection

This pair of paintings tells the story of Antiochus' love for his father's second wife, the young and beautiful Stratonice. In the first panel (left), Antiochus lies in bed stricken with lovesickness. He is next shown dangling a military baton: his secret love has sapped his strength. At the right, the court physician explains Antiochus' condition to the king. The generous king annulled his marriage and allowed the young lovers to marry.

In the second painting (right), the king presides over the wedding ceremony. A jubilant dance follows, and in the final episode, at right, there is an enigmatic scene where Stratonice and her attendants seem to ponder the surprising turn of events.

To give to another his beloved spouse: O utmost love, unheard of courtesy! Petrarch, *Triumph of Love*, on the tale of Antiochus and Stratonice

Marcus Furius Camillus Brings the Statue of Juno to Rome

early 1470s

Biagio d'Antonio (Florence, 1446–1516) and workshop
National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection

The festive chariots, bound captives, and gold booty leave no doubt that this is an ancient Roman triumph celebrating a military victory. Riding an elaborate golden chariot is Camillus, the Roman general who conquered the rival Etruscan city Veii. The prized loot is a golden statue of Juno, goddess of the Veiians. As a maternal deity, Juno echoed figures of the Virgin Mary that were periodically paraded through the streets of Renaissance Florence.

*Queen Juno, I pray that you may leave this town where now
you dwell and follow our victorious arms into our city of Rome,
your future home.* Camillus

Triumphs of Love, Chastity, and Death
Triumphs of Fame, Time, and Eternity
around 1450

Francesco Pesellino (Florence, 1422–1457)

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

These paintings show a parade of allegorical figures set against a visionary landscape. Based on Petrarch's epic poem, *The Triumphs*, the paintings narrate a journey of the soul from earthly life to eternity.

The first painting shows a battle between desire, represented by Cupid standing on a chariot, and virtue, represented by Chastity. The grim figure who enters at the right atop a hearse drawn by oxen signals the inevitability of death.

In the next panel, Fame, vanquisher of Death, sits enthroned in a sphere of glory and surrounded by worthy men. Relentless Time charges toward earthly Fame on a chariot borne by stags. Eternity is shown on the right. This is the final triumph: a separate pictorial dimension in which Christ presides over a new heaven and a new earth.

*Seven Virtues**Seven Liberal Arts*

around 1445

Francesco Pesellino (Florence, 1422–1457) and workshop

Birmingham Museum of Art, Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation

These paintings show the Seven Virtues (above) and the Seven Liberal Arts (below) enthroned against an arcade of columns. Each of these women holds an identifying symbol and is paired with a figure from ancient Greek, Roman, or Biblical history who exemplifies her qualities. Viewers were urged to emulate their worthy deeds and learning. The Virtues and the Liberal Arts thus connected marriage to civic virtue.

Triumph of Chastity

around 1464

Francesco di Giorgio (Siena, 1439–1501)

J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

In the foreground stands a chastened Cupid – blindfolded, wings clipped, his arms bound. Having slaughtered Cupid’s majestic white horses (seen in back), Chastity and her companions march the god of love towards the temple where he will be imprisoned. The Virtues accompany Chastity in her triumphal carriage while exemplary figures, including Lucretia and Scipio, walk alongside. The subject was taken from Petrarch’s *Triumphs*.

The painting is flanked by two swans holding the coats of arms of the bride and groom. Made in raised plaster, these figures are attached to the single piece of wood that formed the front of the chest.

Triumph of Venus

around 1500

Florentine painter (called Pseudo-Granacci)

The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore

Seated on a parade float, Venus and her attendants wind their way through a verdant landscape. Dressed in pale robes, the goddess is here the champion of correct marital conduct. She has captured Cupid, her errant son, and uses her girdle to further restrain the boy. This symbolizes the restraint of physical passion expected in marriage. Venus also prepares the way for the Three Graces, at the right, who represent beauty, mirth, and good cheer.

That wicked and headstrong boy goes running around armed with flames and arrows, ruining everyone's marriages.

Apuleius, on Cupid

Triumph of Alexander and the Women of Darius

around 1480

Florentine painter (attributed to Bernardo Rosselli)

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Phil Berg Collection

In an extravagant procession Alexander the Great displays the booty of his successful campaign against the Persian king Darius. Among the spoils are Darius' kinswomen seated on a richly adorned carriage. Alexander preserved the women's chastity and gave them regal clothing, thus displaying his characteristic restraint and generosity. Alexander's treatment of the Persian women is a model for relations between a bride and groom, dowry and trousseau, chivalric display and republican restraint.

The Siege of Naples in 1441

1460s

Florentine painter

The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art,
the State Art Museum of Florida, Sarasota

Alfonso of Aragon laid siege to Naples in 1441, just a few years before this painting was made. The attack on the city walls is shown as a confusion of soldiers, horses, banners, and weapons. On the left is the military encampment; on the right, the capitulation of the king, René of Anjou. With this military victory, Alfonso secured the crown of Naples for himself. This rare subject may have been commissioned by a Florentine family with diplomatic or military ties to Alfonso of Aragon.

Tarquin and Tanaquil Entering Rome

around 1470

Jacopo del Sellaio (Florence, around 1432–1493)

Cleveland Museum of Art, Bequest of John L. Severance

Riding in a lively procession, Tarquin and Tanaquil head towards Rome where Tarquin will soon be proclaimed king. The narrative, taken from ancient history, unfolds in three episodes against the sweeping backdrop of the Tiber valley. On the left Tanaquil scans the sky for auspicious signs. In the center an eagle flies off with Tarquin's hat. At the right, as they prepare to enter Rome, the eagle descends to return the hat, confirming Tanaquil's prophetic vision of her husband's success.

The Coronation of Frederick III in Rome

around 1460

Lo Scheggia (Florence, 1406–1486)

Worcester Art Museum

In 1452, the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick III, visited Italy to marry Leonora of Portugal and be crowned. At the left, in front of old St. Peter's in Rome, the pope crowns the kneeling emperor. In the center, the imperial procession makes its way through the city. At the right, Frederick III knights his brother on the Ponte Sant'Angelo.

This chest is unusual because it depicts contemporary political events. Smaller panels originally decorated the ends of the cassone (and were in the same positions as installed here). They show the Empress Leonora returning to her palace, and Frederick III riding through Rome after his coronation.

On the sides of the pedestal:

*Leonora and Ladislaus Returning to the Vatican**Frederick III's Procession through Rome*

EXHIBITION CONTINUES

Books related to the exhibition are displayed in a case in an adjacent gallery.

On the second floor of the museum are several complete wedding chests and more cassone paintings. Proceed up the stairs to the Early Italian Room (straight ahead) and the Raphael Room beyond.

Even the most excellent painters exercised themselves in such labors, without being ashamed, as many would be today, to paint and gild such chests.

Giorgio Vasari, 1550, recalling cassoni painting of the previous century

Cassoni, or marriage chests, were practical objects used to store household goods, such as clothing, linens, and valuables. But they were also luxury goods in their own right – they celebrated weddings through gold surfaces and colorful paintings made by specialized workshops.

Cassoni were meant to be informative as well as delightful. The paintings often featured moral tales of ancient history or allegories derived from Italian poets such as Petrarch. The instructive function of cassoni subjects was complemented by triumphal themes that invoked honor. Cassoni revealed the ingenuity of the artists, as well as the status and ideals of their patrons.

Over centuries of use, marriage chests became worn and damaged. The paintings on the fronts were often removed and sold to art collectors. In the galleries on the 2nd floor, some examples of complete cassoni can be seen.



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A fully illustrated catalogue of the exhibition is available in the Museum Shop.

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