



Medallion - Arms of the della Rovere family

Object: Medallion

Place of origin: Italy (made)

Date: 1475-1500 (made)

Artist/Maker: Unknown

Materials and Techniques: Carved stone

Museum number: 373-1878

Gallery location: Medieval and Renaissance, room 50a, case WS

Public access description

The use of coats of arms (stemme in Italian) emerged in the 12th century as a way of identifying armoured knights in combat. The practice was then adopted by the nobility and by banking and merchant families. They placed them on the outside of buildings and on tombs as identifiers or signs of allegiance. Similar stemme also appeared on livery and small-scale objects.

Descriptive line

Circular medallion with a wreath of oak leaves and a coat of arms

Physical description

Circular medallion. Framed in a wreath of oak leaves, the medallion contains a shield with arms of Della Rovere showing ownership of Jerusalem, Aragon, Hungary, Naples and Montefeltro.

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Object history note

Purchased in London in 1878 from J C Robinson with 20 others. Robinson had selected all the finest specimens of architectural fragments from the Rocca and offered them to the museum. Acquired as an example of Renaissance ornament. Since the opening of the Aston Webb extension in 1909, the group of capitals has been shown in various settings alongside some larger works of architectural sculpture. Robinson gave seventeen other capitals to the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

Historical context note

This medallion come from the Rocca Roveresca di Mondolfo (destroyed 1864-1895) near Sinigallia in the Marches, central Italy. It is thought that this stronghold was built in between 1483 and 1490 and designed, at least in part, by the painter, sculptor, architect and engineer Francesco di Giorgio Martini for Giovanni della Rovere, whose coat of arms appears on one of the capitals.

The della Rovere acquired fame and wealth when Francesco rose through the Franciscan Order to become its general in 1464 and then Pope in 1471 as Sixtus IV. Instantly supplied with a genealogy and a coat of arms (an oak tree - rovere in Italian), the family further enhanced its position when Francesco's nephew Giuliano was elected pope, with the title Julius II, in 1503. The secular fortunes of the family began when Sixtus invested his nephew Giovanni (1457-1501) with the lordship of Senigallia, thus giving him a rank which made possible his marriage to Duke Federico of Urbino's daughter. Giovanni, on his death, entrusted his son Francesco Maria to Federico's successor Guidobaldo (Duke 1482-1508) who, without an heir, devised the duchy on the boy. Thus from 1508 to 1631, when their line expired, Urbino came to be ruled by successive della Rovere dukes.

Francesco di Giorgio Martini (1439-1501) Italian architect, engineer, painter, illuminator, sculptor, medallist, theorist and writer. He was the most outstanding artistic personality from Siena in the second half of the 15th century. His activities as a diplomat led to his employment at the courts of Naples, Milan and Urbino, as well as in Siena, and while most of his paintings and miniatures date from before 1475, by the 1480s and 1490s he was among the leading architects in Italy. He was particularly renowned for his work as a military architect, notably for his involvement in the development of the Bastion, which formed the basis of post-medieval fortifications. His subsequent palace and church architecture was influential in spreading the Urbino style, which he renewed with reference to the architecture of Leon Battista Alberti but giving emphasis to the purism of smooth surfaces. His theoretical works, which include the first important Western writings on military engineering, were not published until modern times but were keenly studied in manuscript, by Leonardo da Vinci among others; they foreshadowed a number of developments that came to fruition in the 16th century.

Francesco worked on numerous fortifications in parts of the duchy of Montefeltro, and he discussed some of them in the Trattati, where he illustrated the castles of Sassofeltro, Tavoletto and Serra S Abbondio (all c. 1478-86; destr.), that of Cagli (c. 1480-85; partly destr.), and two built between 1483 and 1490 or later for Giovanni della Rovere: Mondavio (incomplete but in good condition) and Mondolfo (destroyed 1864-95).

URL

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O118715/medallion-arms-of-the-della-rovere/>

