

Piece Work

Designed by Gio Ponti and executed by Dassi, a boutique furniture maker in Milan, in 1938, this Greek-themed credenza is an unusually skilled example of craftsmanship. The 9.5-foot-long piece features figurative marquetry on pigskin parchment, which is particularly tricky to do, says Adam Brown, a partner at Iliad, the New York gallery that recently sold the credenza for \$250,000. "Because they used parchment, it added hundreds and hundreds of hours to the manufacturing process," he says, explaining that the material shrinks over time and can pull away from the wood, leaving unsightly gaps in the surface.

Somehow, Dassi's craftsmen found a way around this problem and a second one, also. Marquetry calls for pieces of wood to be inlaid and sanded flush, but because parchment is too delicate to survive a sanding, the pieces had to be cut to a precise thickness

before they were positioned. Nor did they skate by with minimal effort. The figure of Cassandra, which appears near the center of the credenza, contains at least four different woods: olive for her hair, sycamore and olive ash burl for her robes and aniegre, an African wood, for her skin.

Brown theorizes that by showcasing Cassandra, the seer who foretold the Trojan War and was fated to be ignored, Ponti might have been needling his wealthy northern Italian client, whose identity is unknown but who would almost certainly have been a supporter of the Fascist party. Regardless, Ponti's credenza captures the drama of the ancient tale: Cassandra rushes forward just as Achilles raises his sword to behead Troilus. "She's too late," Brown says. "Before her eyes, the key event that sets the war in motion is on the verge of happening." —SHEILA GIBSON STOODLEY



