



oro (questi erano però forse grandi vasi da porre sui tavoli a muro), Numero 6 animali di porcellana di Sassonia / Numero 28 figure bianche di Firenze / Numero 10 cichare di porcellana [...], Numero 29 figure di Napoli pittate / Numero 2 uccelli, due figure e due vasi di crocchiole di mare», ed altro ancora²².

Non erano le uniche porcellane della casa, se ne leggono diverse collocate nella Galleria: «Sei vasi di porcellana del Giappone blu ed oro posti sopra li boffettoni»,

«Quattro trombe uguali» e «otto grastoni della China bianchi, torchini, rossi ed oro». Per desinare, e quindi elencati nel «Guardarobba», erano conservati: «143 piatti di porcellana della China di diverse fabbriche [...], 30 insalatiere uguali [...], un servizio di porcellana d'Olanda bianca, rossa, torchina e d'oro per numero 24 coperti [...] tutto compito con supplieri e tutt'altro [...], 12 chicari e piattini bianchi con fiori, un piatto rosso [...], 24 scotellini e piattini bianchi e damantini di Sassonia [...], due zucarieri uguali di Sassonia [...], un gruppo di Sassonia a due figure [...], due detti a tre figure [...], uno di caccia ed altro di pesca [...], due tais a due figure [...], 16 figure sonanti e giardinieri [...], 12 detti con canestri per composti [...], 8 figure di Francia bianchi [...], 10 mezzi busti con posi di terraglia [...] e] diversa porcellana ordinaria»²³.

Palazzo Comitini era dunque all'altezza delle altre grandi dimore aristocratiche palermitane anche per lo sfoggio di gusto esotico alla moda con una collocazione particolare molto ben studiata il cui esito forse potrebbe essere dovuto ad un concorso tra il fondatore e il gusto della seconda moglie Maria Anna Massa che lo potrebbe avere portato a definitivo compimento.

Molto più tardi, tra il 1852 e il 1854, nel cosiddetto "salotto della Regina" del Castello di Moncalieri decine di piatti furono incastonati nelle *boiseries*, nell'ambito dei rifacimenti neobarocchi dovuti a Maria Adelaide d'Austria, moglie di Vittorio Emanuele II e Regina di Sardegna²⁴. Il salone regio era prossimo alla camera da letto, esattamente come a palazzo Comitini.

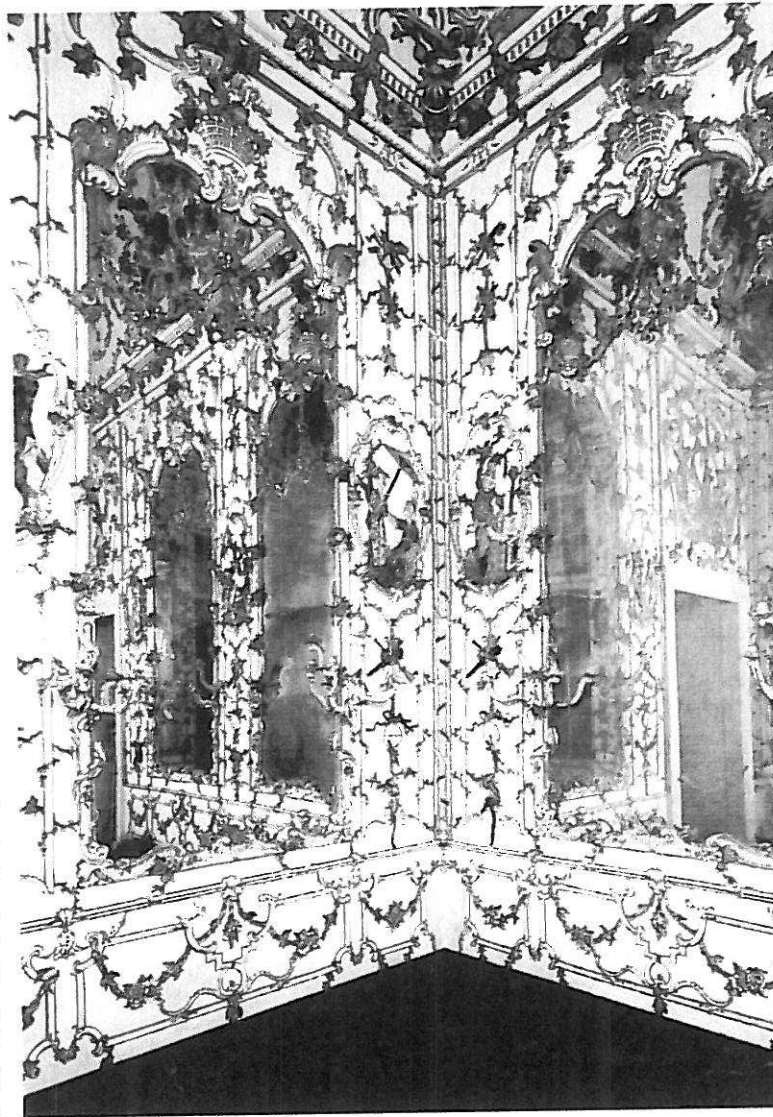


Fig. 8. Boiserie intagliata, Palermo, palazzo Comitini, "camerino di porcellana", 1766-1770 ca., particolare.

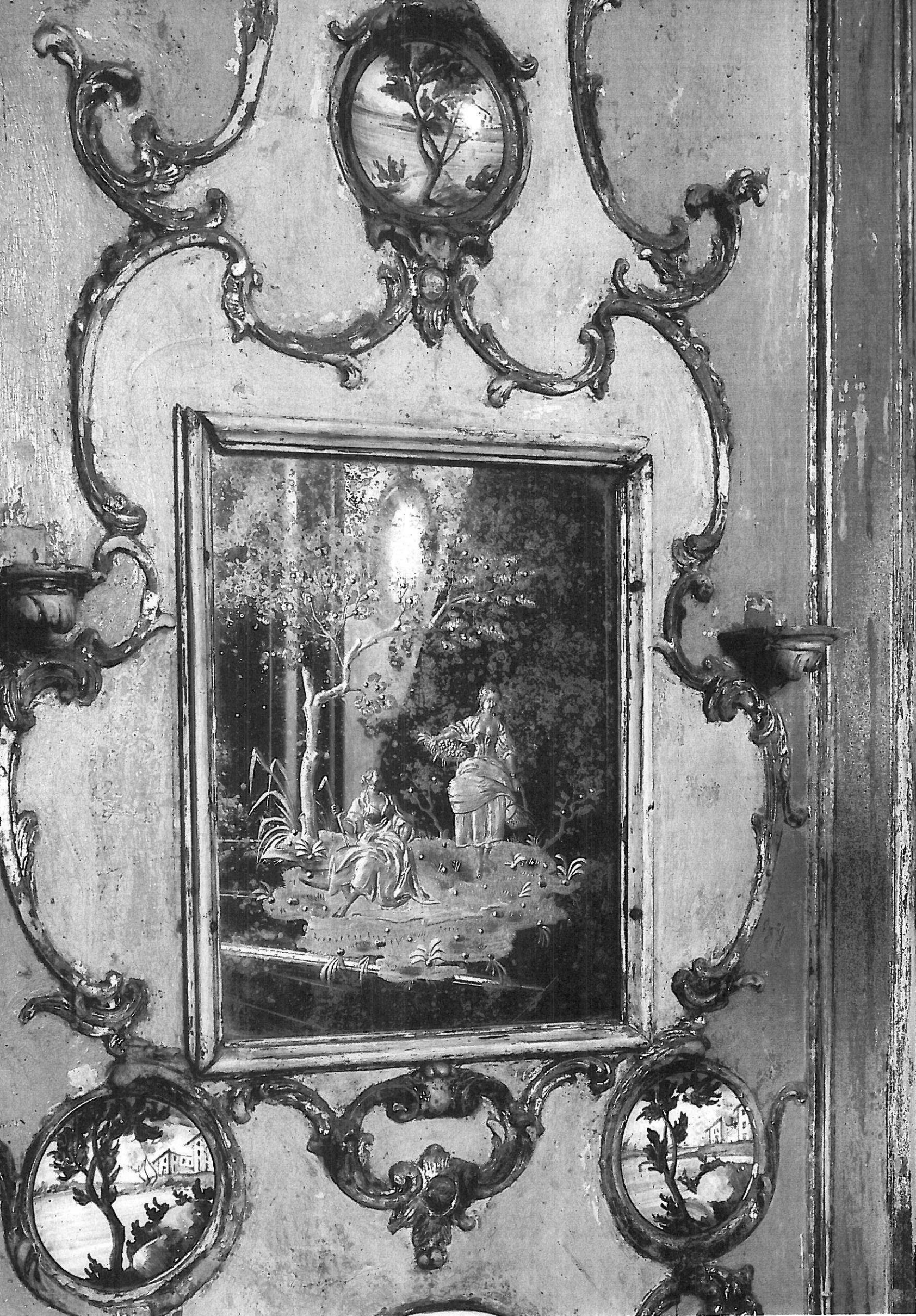
Fig. 9. Palazzo Reale di Capodimonte, gabinetto di porcellana di Maria Amalia di Sassonia, 1757-59, particolare.

Fig. 10. (nella pagina successiva) Boiserie intagliata, Palermo, palazzo Comitini, "camerino di porcellana", 1766-1770 ca., particolare.

²² Cfr. *Ibidem*.

²³ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

²⁴ BERTOLOTTO 2003, pp. 81, 85-87.





THE "PORCELAIN CHAMBERS" OF PALAZZO COMITINI

A SIGNIFICANT VARIATION ON PALERMO'S ROCOCO CHINOISERIES

Pierfrancesco Palazzotto

Contrary to even recent theories, it is becoming increasingly clear today that Palermo's taste for chinoiserie, or rather indiscriminate exoticism, does not date to the Reale Palazzina alla Cinese - Chinese-style Royal Palace - at the Parco della Favorita (1790) but to many years before.

How did the so-called East Indies appear to the eyes of Palermo's inhabitants? They saw an idealized China whose icons (rocks, trees, flowers, pavilions, pagodas, birds, animals and quaint characters) were drawn from imported porcelains as well as from the fine silks, the painted wallpapers and the widespread and often imaginative descriptions of travelers. The latter were not true to reality, as the clients had no interest at all in a faithful rendition of that world. Due to its very nature, the mythical Far East had to be distant and distinct, its contours had to be blurred, it had to be dreamed of but not clearly defined. This was probably the key to its success. It was seen as a sort of heaven on earth, gently spared of climatic rigors and perfect for the total and fortunate symbiosis between man and nature, as is well illustrated in the paintings of the Palazzina Cinese and in the later Sala alla Cinese of the Royal Palace of Palermo dating to the early 1830s.

The key to success lied in the porcelains and other objects imported by British and Dutch trade companies, which in the period between the 17th and 18th centuries were a must in the "porcelain chambers" of Europe's main aristocratic estates, among which suffice it to mention the Porzellanenkammer at Charlottenburg Palace in Berlin (1710) - where porcelain items were displayed on numerous small shelves entirely covering the walls, from the floor to the ceiling - the Japanisches Palais in Dresden (1715 and 1717), the Chamber of Mirrors at Castle Weissenstein in Pommersfelden (1714-1718), it too in Germany, the lacquer-finished hall rich in porcelains that Catherine I ordered at the Monplaisir Palace at Peterhof, near St. Petersburg (1720s) and, last but not least, the Porcelain Room of Maria Amalia of Saxony at Portici (1757-59), which was later moved to Capodimonte.

In Palermo these influences came directly from Germany, France or other Italian states (Piedmont, Lombardo Veneto, Naples), as a result of personal visits of local aristocrats or, indirectly, through manuals and printed repertories that circulated around Europe thanks to the drawings of Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684-1721), François Boucher (1704-1768) and, later on, Jean-Baptiste Pillement (1728-1808) and Daniel Marot (1661-1752). Moreover, many inventories show that Palermo's most important families, among whom, the Moncadas and Brancifortes, certainly had oriental or orientalizing furniture and porcelains.

One of the first examples in Palermo was probably Palazzo Cottone di Castelnuovo where some rooms were painted with figures in "Chinese" style in 1752-1753. The project at Palazzo Valguarnera Gangi was much more ambitious. A well-known document reveals that between 1757 and 1759 prince Pietro Valguarnera and his wife Marianna (heir to the family title) had decorated most of the present-day rooms with corner cupboards with shelves to expose the huge collection of Chinese porcelains. It cannot be ruled out that even the walls were covered with Chinese painted silks or papiers peint - painted wall coverings glued on canvas - depicting scenes of oriental

life. Today there are still consistent traces of the interior design works in the hall of mirrors, the many wood shelves to display porcelains and the two small adjacent sitting rooms with depictions of Chinese and Native American figures. From then on there is an even greater spreading of this taste for China. Another significant example in Palermo is the imposing Palazzo Branciforte di Butera where between 1750 and 1775 prince Salvatore changed the interior furnishings of what are known today as the Gothic, yellow and red chambers. The style that could be appreciated there varied between chinoiserie and turquerie, substantial traces of which can be found in the carved porcelain racks, the wax models in exotic-Arcadian style, the paintings of the vaulted ceilings, the window shutters and door panels.

Something similar was done also by prince Michele Gravina di Comitini, magistrate of Palermo between 1764 and 1766 for his renovated and imposing residence. The works were executed between 1765 and 1771, the year when the facade on Via Maqueda was completed. The interior decor dates to this period and saw the involvement of many skilled masters.

This residence too has two sitting rooms, whose walls are covered with golden stucco rinceaux that culminate with the porcelain racks typical of a now well-established taste that took inspiration from the aforementioned etchings as well as from those of André Charles Boulle (1642-1732) and Paul Decker (1677-1713). In addition, there were etched mirrors fit alongside the many dozens of cells that certainly hosted porcelain plates that were then replaced by ceramics made by Florio. After all, the purchase of Chinese-style items made in Saxony, Naples, Savona, Malta and Britain, in addition to original items from China and Japan, was a typical and expensive custom that was quite widespread among the higher classes of society.

The solution adopted at Palazzo Comitini where fine porcelain plates were added to the vases and statuettes on the shelves differs from the previous and more traditional experiences already described. It is a genuine unicum on the local scene (at least according to the current state of studies), which probably was the result of the printed Middle-European repertoires of the time, as the majesty of the palazzo called for.

These small rooms, almost contemporary with those of Palazzo Butera in Palermo and Palazzo Biscari in Catania (1766) were used, as in the case of Palazzo Gangi, for extremely confidential purposes, because they were connected to the princess's master bedroom. In addition, a plan signed and dated by the Palermo-born architect Giovan Battista Palazzotto in 1877 identifies this portion of the building in the legend as the main room called "bedroom". Next to it was the "guest sitting room" and then came the small rooms called in those days "guest rooms", which could be reached only through the main hall and which opened on the internal terrace. This indicates that the "porcelain chambers" of the Comitinis were small secret treasure chests to be shown only to the elect few who were granted the honor to enter. Between the first and the large hall there is a double door, thereby underscoring the desired privacy. Like the boudoirs at Palazzo Gangi, these rooms offered though a feigned isolation, since the French-style bedroom was created to receive select guests and show them a greater degree of confidentiality and intimacy while always aimed at having a stately purpose and impressing guests. Therefore, the sitting rooms perfectly followed Jacques-François Blondel's idea that the Chinese style was appropriate for a room "where one can stop to have a coffee" that is both secluded and informal, while he despised the style in France. The testamentary inventory of the belongings of prince Michele Gravina written in 1777 and discovered by Angheli Zalapì confirms these theories. Right after the "camerone" - large chamber - (the living room where guests were received in the 19th century) there was a back room and the "first room next to the large chamber", which was one of the two "porcelain chambers" mentioned in the will as belonging to the apartment of princess Maria Anna Massa, the prince's wife: It was later left to the prince's son and heir Giuseppe Gravina e Massa. The list of items it contained affords a precious picture of how the room was used. Besides "ten golden rattan chairs",



there was the "sofa that serves as a divan with flower-patterned French upholstery"; the same fabric was used to upholster the chairs, which, as illustrated below, provides further evidence that the room was used to relax and for an informal conversation. The "two square Venetian crystals [...] with bas-relief figures", mentioned in the "first room", should be the mirrors with rural, Arcadian and courtly figures that amount to 15 extant items. Thirteen are believed to be missing, but six (one broken) were in the "camerino priega Dio" - prayer room, indicated to be right after this room. They were described as having a "golden frame". Therefore, they were hung and not fit in the walls. Another "nine square Venetian crystals with bas-relief figures [...] and golden frame" were found in the "winter chamber" next to the gallery; finally "a square Venetian crystal with bas-relief figures and golden frame" hung in the "small room leading to the terrace", it too on the other side of the palazzo. It is not known whether the subjects of these 18 mirrors (three more than today's) actually coincide with the extant ones. If this were the case, it could be surmised that the current decor of the chambers is a further embellishment of the original decor as recorded in the inventory of 1777. Therefore, other mirrors were fit into the walls later on, probably by order of princess Maria Anna Massa. This hypothesis is undoubtedly complicated, because the inventory does not mention the second porcelain chamber, while it speaks of the "camerino priega Dio", which definitely ill fits the need for religious contemplation. In the prince's will, though, there are more than one "porcelain chambers". Regardless of how things actually went, the inventory of 1777 lists in the "first room" "51 Saxony plates" and "45 saucers", totaling 96 dishes that correspond to the number of the present-day cells in the first room: 50 large ones and 46 small ones. The shelves that amount to about 100 today probably held the remaining items listed: "two blue and gold Japanese porcelain vases [...] 6 Saxony porcelain animals [...] 28 white statuettes from Florence [...] 10 porcelain cicharas [...] 29 painted figurines from Naples [...] 2 birds, two figures and two seashell vases" and more, not to mention the many other items distributed across the building.

Palazzo Comitini was on a par with the other great aristocratic residences in Palermo when it came to the display of the fashionable exotic style, which could boast a very original arrangement, which could be the result of the collaboration between the founder and the taste of his second wife Maria Anna Massa.

Some decades later, between 1852 and 1854, in the so-called "Queen's sitting room" at Moncalieri Castle, dozens of dishes were fit in the boiseries in the course of neo-baroque renovations under Maria Adelaide of Austria, wife of Victor Emmanuel II and Queen of Sardinia. The royal chamber was next to the bedroom, precisely where it was at Palazzo Comitini.