

Geoffrey Munn examines the influence of the excavation of Pompeii and Herculaneum upon the Naples jewellers and illustrates pieces by Melillo including the only signed jewel by this maker to be published to date.

Giacinto Melillo

A Pupil of Castellani

Geoffrey Munn

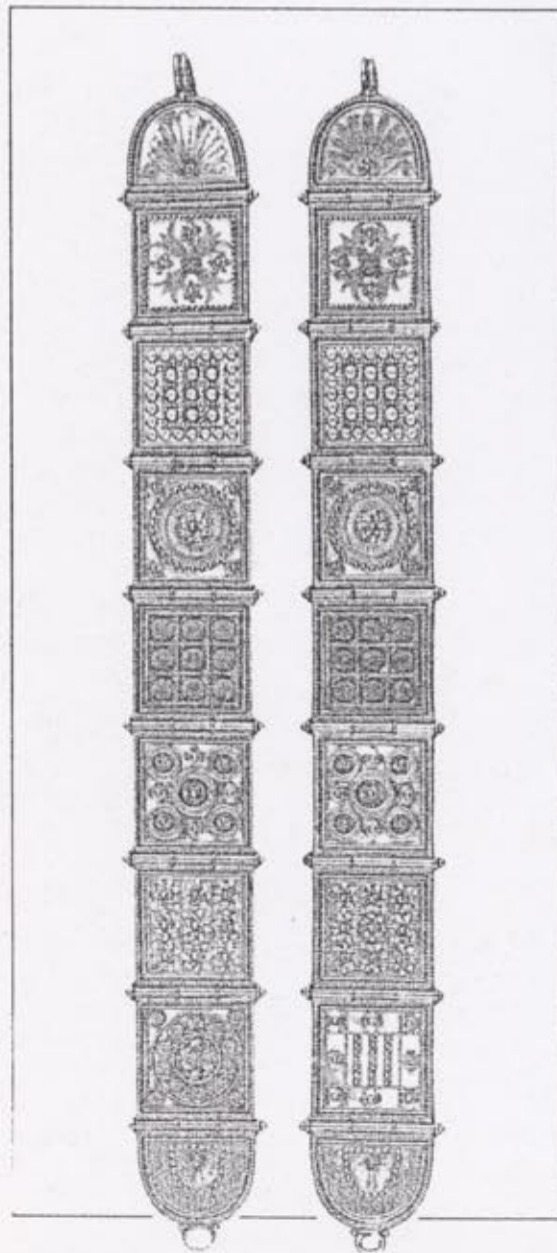
THE impressive queues which snaked their way across the courtyard of the Royal Academy awaiting entrance to the recent loan exhibition from Pompeii were a measure of the interest in classical antiquities which has not seriously diminished since the sixteenth century. The early part of the last century saw a greater passion for archaeology than today. Italy, already the great venue for enthusiasts of the Renaissance, showed promise of a more remote and equally fascinating past in the discovery of Etruscan antiquities and the partial excavation of Pompeii and Herculaneum.

The very nature of the Grand Tourist was to be acquisitive and the small gold ornaments of the distant past were considered particularly palatable. The local population, encouraged by an insatiable demand, were to resort to indiscriminate digging, faking, and finally the honest reproduction of their ancestors' work.¹ It was into this last category that the Roman jewellers Castellani fall, since apart from a rather over-zealous attitude towards restoration² they had a healthy respect for archaeology and the preservation of the ancient jewellery they copied. An important collection of antiquities was formed by the family and later eagerly acquired by the British Museum, the Louvre, and the Villa Giulia Museum in Rome. Apart from the jewels in their possession, those excavated at the extraordinary Etruscan tomb of Regulini Galassi and the Papal Governments' Compara collection supplied the Castellanis with inspiration for their pastiches.

In the paper he read to the Archaeological Society in London in 1861,³ Alessandro

Castellani said: 'Our first object was to detect the processes by which the Ancients worked'. Their interest was not only commercial but academic, and the object of their researches was to preoccupy and elude them throughout their career. The extraordinary fineness of the joints in Ancient Greek and Etruscan jewellery, together with the application of ornamental filigree and granulation are now thought to have been achieved by colloidal hard soldering . . . a technique which utilises the different melting points of fine gold, and gold in the presence of minute quantities of copper.⁴ Tolerably similar effects were achieved by the Castellanis by using an arsenite flux and an impalpably fine solder to fix the fine grains and wires to the background gold. Regrettably the results were usually spoilt by a clogging of the decoration absent in the originals.

The writings of Pliny, Théophilus and Cellini were consulted and the filigree work of Malta, India and Genoa were studied in the hope of finding a key to the problem. Finally, the inroads made into the techniques of jointing and ornamentation of native gold were partially attributed by Alessandro Castellani to the peasant jewellers of St. Angelo in Vado, a remote corner of the Umbrian Marches.



1. Pair of bracelets in gold by Castellani. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

The early 1850s saw an interval in the experiments since Alessandro Castellani was imprisoned in the Castel St. Angelo for his part in the resistance after the short-lived Roman Republic of 1849. In captivity he whiled away his time in translating Shakespeare into Italian and was only to secure release by feigning madness in 1857/8.⁵ Exiled from Rome Alessandro went to live in Naples and opened a workshop there to continue research. Here he employed Carlo Giuliano and later established him in London where he was soon to sever connections with his sponsor and to occupy a leading position as an art jeweller until his death in 1895.

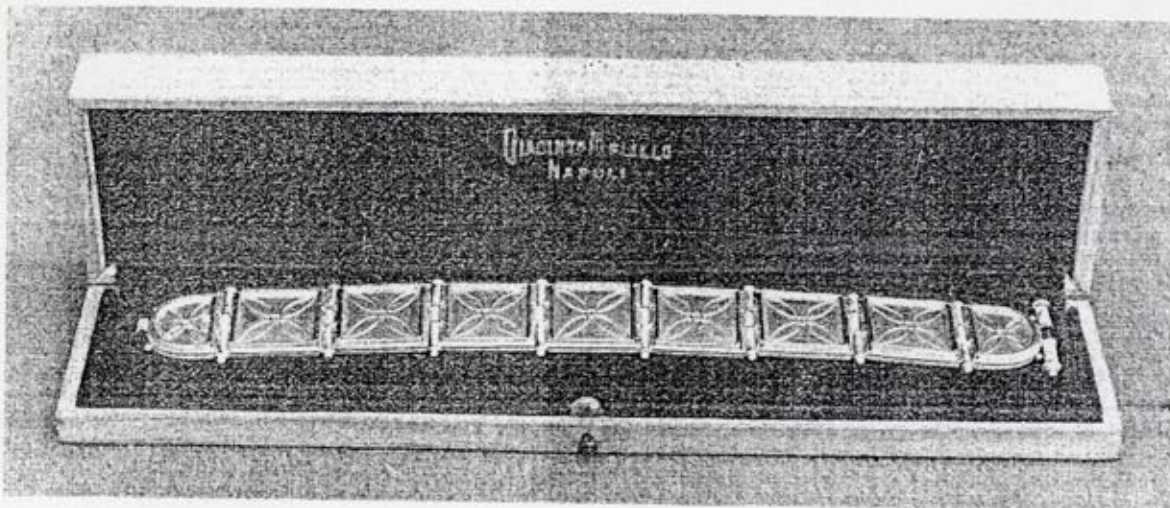
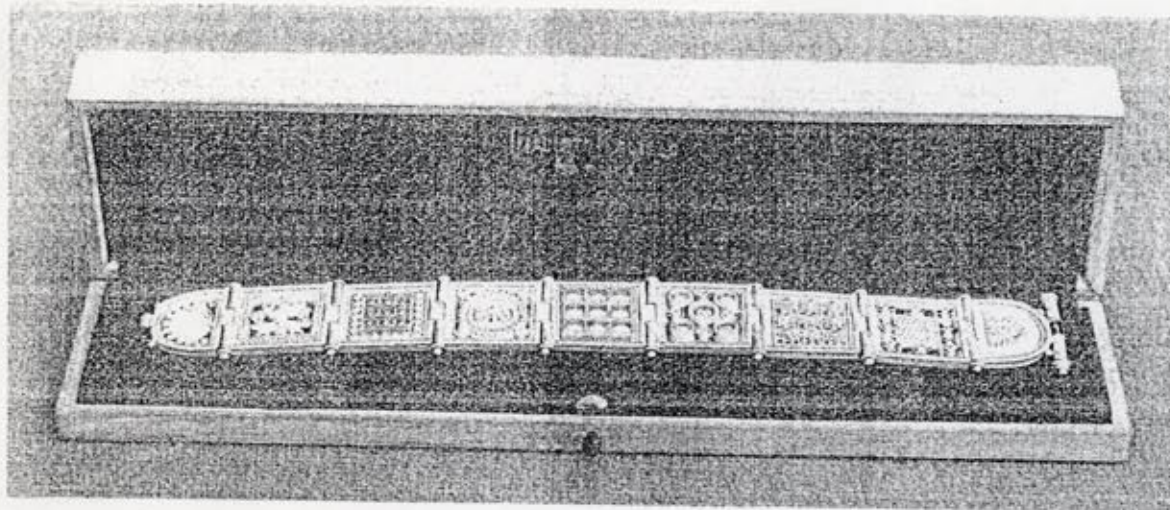
Giacinto Melillo (1846-1915)⁶ was also to find employment at the Naples workshop.⁷ Much the junior of Castellani he was probably employed initially as an apprentice, being only some fifteen years old at the opening of this provincial workshop. Women were employed for the more delicate gold-smithing techniques⁸ and it is probable that apprentices were similarly set to work and later graduated to workshop managers and other responsible positions.

We may deduce that those jewels attributable to Melillo are unlikely to be earlier than the late 1860s or '70s even though they bear close parallels with earlier Castellani pieces. Certainly Alfredo Castellani was selling jewels in the archaeological style as late as 1925,⁹ showing the fashion to be of longer standing than has been generally imagined.

The Victoria and Albert Museum hold a pair of bracelets (No. 1) of classical inspiration purchased from the Castellani Sale of 1884 in Rome, which bear the unusual signature of Alessandro Castellani, being an 'A' over crossed 'c's. The marks, together with the diversity of technique and quality of manufacture exhibited on these bracelets suggest that they were created as a *tour-de-force*. Interestingly enough an almost identical bracelet by Melillo has come to light in a private collection (Nos. 2 and 3) which illustrates admirably the close connection between pupil and master.

Generally unsigned, the jewellery of Melillo is identified by its fitted wooden cases, but the bracelet shown here bears the initials 'GM' near the clasp suggesting that its creator considered it a particularly important piece and possibly a *chef d'oeuvre*.

The Castellani collection undoubtedly supplied Melillo with ideas and designs for jewellery during the formative years of his career, and in the same way the immediacy of those pieces excavated at Pompeii and Herculaneum also had a profound influence on the Naples workshop and its pupil. It is hardly surprising that we saw at the Royal Academy's highly selective exhibition two bronze pieces which are closely related to jewels by Melillo extant. One is the handle of a door or cupboard portraying in relief the head of Medusa (No. 4; Royal Academy catalogue, no. 177) which appears to have been directly translated into a silver brooch (No. 5) just as



4. Bronze from Pompeii, first century AD.
Diameter: 11.2 cm.
Naples Museum.



5. Brooch, silver. Photograph: Sotheby's.

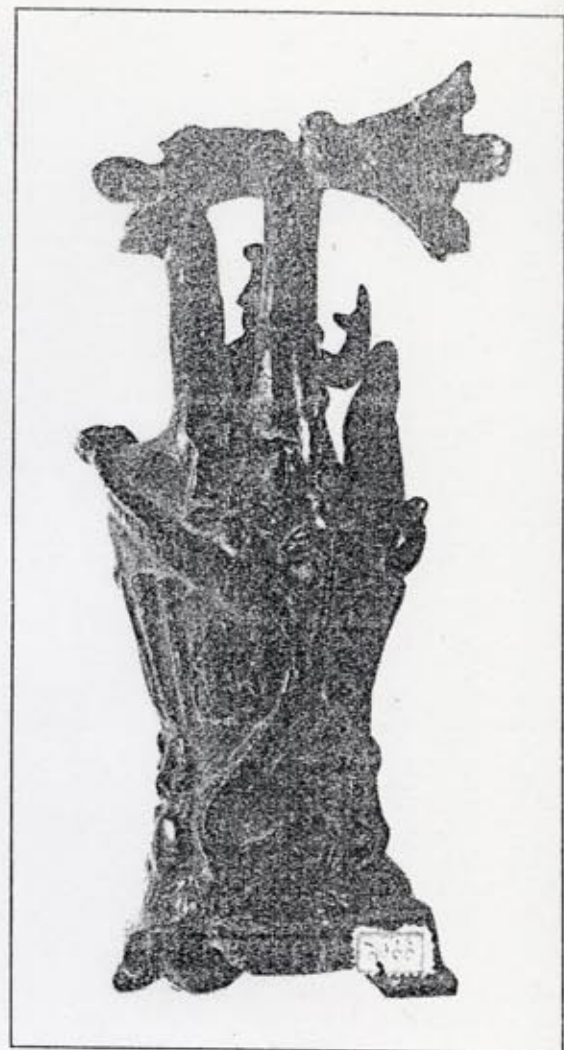
Above.
2 and 3. Bracelet in gold contained
in the original case. Signed: 'GM'.
Hull Grundy Collection.

visually exciting as its antique predecessor. Even the pitted background to the portrait remains and no obvious concessions have been made to the new function of the design. Interestingly Medusa, the snake-haired monster whose face turned all who looked on her to stone, can by an extension of ideas be used as a talisman to protect the person or object it adorned. The other bronze is a votive hand of Sabazius (No. 6, Royal Academy catalogue, no. 200) which served a more obscure religious function within a Dionysian Roman cult, and doubtless its use in the jewellery of Melillo (No. 7, second from left) is purely decorative.

It seems certain that when a jewel was purchased by a tourist, or an enthusiast of the archaeological style, it was accompanied by a verbal essay on its origins and meanings as far as they were understood and would be carried off in a spirit of partial consolation for the absence of the original.

However it should be remembered that these were not souvenirs only and that the style thrived outside Italy. At the house of Giuliano in London jewels in the antique manner were available, made by the proprietor, Castellani and possibly Melillo.¹⁰

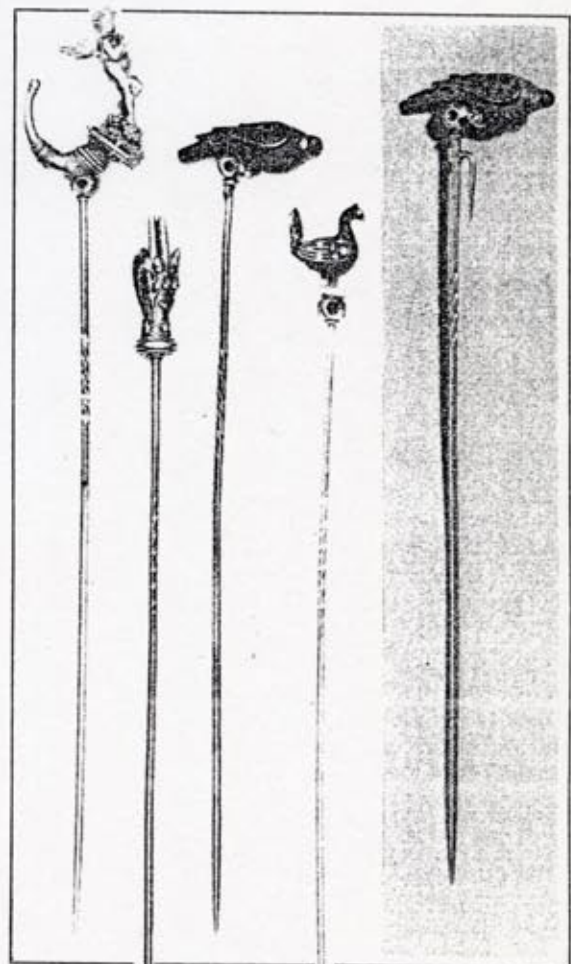
The green enamel parrot in the form of a hat pin (No. 8) is signed by Giuliano but can be seen to be identical to the pin by Melillo (No. 7), illustrating how closely the two makers were affected by their common



6. Bronze from Herculaneum,
first century AD.
Height: 18 cm.
Naples Museum.

Below.
7. Enamel and gold pins by Melillo.
Photograph: Sotheby's.

Below right.
8. Gold and green enamel pin
by Carlo Giuliano. Signed: 'CG'.

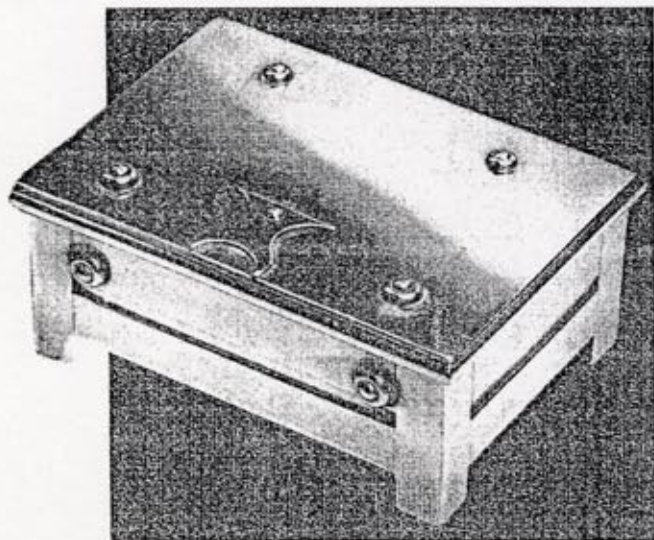




9. Brooch, gold amorino and cornucopia.
Private Collection.



10. Miniature gold standing amorino
on sphere of lapis lazuli.
Private Collection.



11. Heavy silver casket of classical inspiration.
Author's Collection.

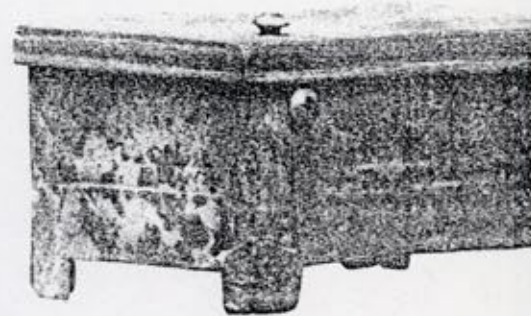
employment at Naples. The pins are of further interest since they seem to derive from a type of Hellenistic ornament which is called 'dipped enamel'.¹¹ A metal armature is made and when heated is plunged into molten glass, some glass adheres to the metal and is modelled by normal glass-working techniques whilst in a viscous state. The nineteenth-century examples have been achieved by *en ronde bosse* enamelling which owes its origins to the sixteenth century.

It was not at enamelling that Castellani and Melillo were to excel, but at the delicate and sensitive working of fine gold. The stick-pin on the left of No. 7 is profusely decorated with granulation and filigree and is a perfectly worked sculpture in the round deriving from a Hellenistic model, probably an earring. This and the related works (Nos. 9 and 10) are certainly as lively as their classical models and are celebrations of ancient craftsmanship and the ante-diluvian fascination of gold.

The Melillo workshops were not entirely devoted to the production of jewellery and from time to time pieces of heavy gauge silver deriving from antique originals were made. The box illustrated (No. 11) is closely related to a miniature Greek bronze casket of third century BC now housed in the Staatliche Museum in Berlin (No. 12).¹² The original, being only some 5.5 centimetres in length, was probably a jewel or unguent box and would be secured by complicated knots tied from the bosses positioned at the top and sides of the casket to fulfil this function. Interference with the contents of the box was prevented since the special knots were not easily repeated except by their owners. The rather larger version by Melillo (No. 11) was probably also designed as a jewel box, although the bosses serve only a decorative purpose. The larger dimensions of the silver objects allowed Melillo space to apply his signature which is usually in full on a tab of silver and hard-soldered to the body of the piece (No. 13).

In conclusion, there are two viewpoints from which to choose. Cellini in his memoirs says that Pope Clement VIII showed him a gold Etruscan necklet of exquisite workmanship which had just been discovered. On examining it he cried: 'Alas it is better not to imitate these Etruscans for we should be nothing but their humble servants. Let us rather strike out in a new path which will at least have the merit of originality'. Even though the techniques of granulation and ornament in Classical jewellery remained a secret until the 1930s, Castellani and Melillo and the archaeological school succeeded in focussing the public eye again on craftsmanship and design and away from a sterile display of intrinsically valuable gems.

Quintilian said that the perfection of Art is superior to the costliest materials. 'ARS SUMMA MATERIA OPTIMA MELIOR'.



12. A Greek bronze casket, third century BC.
Length: 5.5 cm.
Staatliche Museum, Berlin.



13. Signature of Melillo on casket

NOTES

1. A. Castellani, 'Antique Jewellery and its Revival', London 1862.
2. Hugh Tait, FSA, 'Historiated Tudor Jewellery', *Antiquaries Journal*, 1862, Vol. XLII, Part II, Plate XI pp. 237 and 238.
3. *Archaeological Journal*, 1861.
4. For a discussion of this technique see Hoffman/Davidson 'Greek Gold', Brooklyn Museum USA, 1965, pp. 45/46 and R. A. Higgins, 'Greek and Roman Jewellery', London, 1961, pp. 20/21.
5. 'Catalogue des objets d'Art Antiques du Moyen Age et de la Renaissance dépendant de la succession de Alessandro Castellani', Rome 1884.
6. 'Nineteenth Century Jewellery', Cooper Union Museum for the Arts of Decoration, 1955. I am grateful to Mrs. Charlotte Gere for drawing my attention to these dates.
7. Shirley Bury, 'Alessandro Castellani and the Reviv of Granulation', *Burlington Magazine*, October 197
8. William Burges, 'Antique Jewellery and its Reviva', *Gentleman's Magazine*, No. XIV, 1863, p. 405.
9. A Private collection in the United States holds a bracelet and necklace set with scarabs with their original invoices for this date.
10. G. Munn, 'The Giuliano Family', *The Connoisseur*, November 1975.
11. I am grateful to Mr. Peter Hinks of Sotheby's for making this interesting suggestion and for supplyi photograph No. 4.
12. G. M. A. Richter, 'The Furniture of the Greeks, Etruscans and Romans'.

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