

Collecting

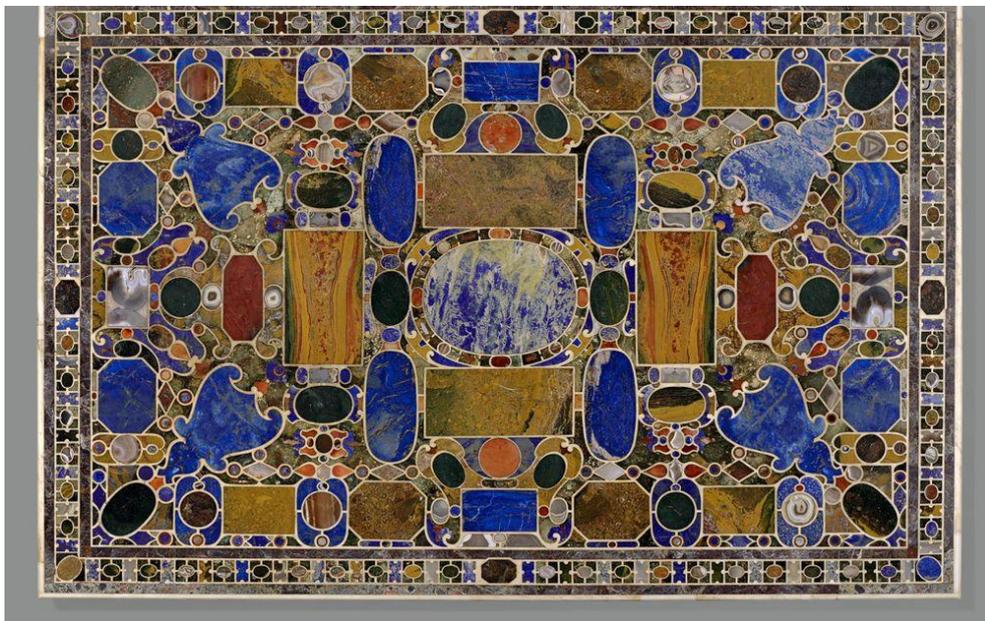
There's a Table On Sale For \$11.6 Million, Legs Optional

It's not as crazy as it sounds.

By

[James Tarmy](#)

21 June 2018, 15:26 BST



SHARE THIS ARTICLE

In 1568, Francesco I de' Medici, heir to the Grand Dukedom of Tuscany, commissioned a table designed by the artist, architect, and writer, Giorgio Vasari.

At the time, Vasari was one of the most famous artists in Florence. The Medici family had already enlisted him for projects ranging from murals in the Palazzo Vecchio to the design of the first buildings of the Uffizi. The table was to be made with an inlay technique called *pietre dure* ("hard stone"), comprised of a design made from hundreds of thinly sliced, immensely valuable stones such as jasper and lapis lazuli, set on top of a piece of white marble.



The table, pictured here on a much later, Georgian-era stand.
Source: Robilant and Voena

It took more than 10 years to build, and cost a spectacular sum. “Putting it in terms of its comparative wealth, you could buy a painting by Titian— the greatest master of his day— for much, much less,” says Benedict Tomlinson, a London art dealer. “At its time, it was a vastly expensive work.”

It still is. Tomlinson is a director of Robilant and Voena, a gallery that will be exhibiting the tabletop at the Masterpiece London art fair, which runs from June 28 to July 4. The table carries an asking price “in the region of €10 million” (about \$11.6 million), he says. Currently, the table sits on a much newer base.

How Can a Table Cost So Much?

“There’s two parts to the price,” Tomlinson explains. “First, you’ve got its history.”

By that, Tomlinson is referring to the table’s nearly unbroken stretch of royal ownership.



The “apron,” the part of the table that attaches to the legs, also includes pietre dure inlay.
Source: Robilant and Voena

Thanks to European monarchs’ enduring (and ultimately devastating) tendency to marry their cousins, the table managed to stay in the immediate Medici family for more than a century, first in the Florentine palace Casino di San Marco, then in the Pitti Palace.

After the Medicis died out (Anna Maria Luisa de’ Medici, who died in 1743, was the last direct heir), the duchy of Tuscany was given to Holy Roman Emperor Francis I, husband of the Austrian Empress, Maria Theresa. His family then passed the table through inheritance for three further generations; by 1800, it had been moved to the nearby Palazzo Vecchio. (No small feat, given that the tabletop alone weighs more than half a ton.) After that, it passed, also through inheritance, into the house of Bourbon-Parma.

The table was eventually moved back to the Pitti Palace and—after a brief stint in the hands of Napoleon Bonaparte’s sister, Elisa, whom he’d appointed Grand Duchess of Tuscany (she was forced to abdicate when Napoleon fell from power)—the table returned to the house of Habsburg-Lorraine, where it stayed for 40 years, until it was transferred to Florence’s Opificio delle Pietre Dure, the court’s official pietre dure workshop.

It was subsequently sold in 1870 by the Italian state to a British art dealer named William Spence, who turned around and sold it to Hugh Lupus Grosvenor, who would become first Duke of Westminster. The table was duly shipped from Italy to Grosvenor House, the family’s massive townhouse in London’s Mayfair, and stayed there for 70 years. In 1953, the family put the table up for auction, at which it passed into private, non-royal hands.



The table appears in a historical image of Grosvenor House.
Source: Robilant and Voena

“You’ve got these 400 years of extraordinary provenance, which is very hard to find,” says Tomlinson. “And then you combine that with Vasari, and it’s just extraordinary.”

It’s not just about who owned the table, though. There’s the object itself. It’s more than five feet long and three and a half feet wide, and covered in giant pieces of agate, jasper, lapis lazuli, and other stones. “The more translucent stones have silver leaf underneath, so they shine,” Tomlinson says. “I had an expert come in here and tell me, ‘You’re lighting it all wrong, you should be lighting it by candlelight.’”

When a Table Is Not a Table

So the table is rare, beautiful, large, and historically important, but Tomlinson readily acknowledges that \$11.6 million is still a tremendous amount of money to spend on a piece of furniture.

“The point is that it seems like an extraordinary amount of money for a design object or table,” he says.



A detail of the tabletop.
Source: Robilant and Voena

But, Tomlinson continues, if you begin to think about it as a work of art, rather than a piece of decorative art, the price tag suddenly becomes less intimidating.

“For a work of art, it’s comparatively inexpensive,” he says, “which is a ridiculous thing to say: It’s still an extraordinary amount of money, but—because the art market has reached a strange moment in history where there’s no limit to prices—comparatively speaking, it’s good value.”

Tomlinson suggests that buyers compare the 400-year-old table to the price of a painting by Christopher Wool, a contemporary artist whose most expensive “word paintings” have sold for more than \$20 million at auction. “It’s actually a beautiful thing,” he says. “You’re not just buying a concept.”

The gallery will exhibit the tabletop at Masterpiece “on an angled plinth,” he says, “so you can look at it and see the lip that goes around the edge.”

Tomlinson says that there's already been some interest from museums, but the table could appeal to anyone with means and an eye for fine things.

It's also, he adds, very durable. "You could quite safely put something on top of it, because it's quite hard. You can't make a dent in it, so you could put a bust on it or something," he says.

"I suppose when you look at a table, it's hard for it not to take on a functional use."

Read the article here: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-06-21/there-s-a-table-on-sale-for-11-6-million>