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## Title of Object

The Coaci Inkstand (including the Case)

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## Photo of Object (optional)



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## Object Information

**Artist:** Vincenzo Coaci

**Culture:** Italian

**Date of Object:** 1792

**Country:** Italy

**Accession Number:** 69.80.1a,b

**File Created:** 11/1/2016

**Material/Medium:** Silver, silver gilt, lapis lazuli, and rosso antico marble

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**Last Updated/Reviewed:** 7/5/2017

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## Tour Topics

Passion-place, Group 4, Highlights 1600-1850, Passion for place, writing, architecture, artist/patron, Christianity, Pope, silversmith, commemoration, mythology, power/status, symbolism, technology, ink, Rococo, Quirinal Plaza, Rome, Roman obelisk

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## Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

Describe inkstands. (Tell brief story about the Syng Inkstand. Show picture of Syng inkstand and distribute quills.)

Can you find the inkwell, quill holder and sand shaker (pounce pot) on the Coaci inkstand?

Compare the Coaci Inkstand to the Syng inkstand. What is the same? What is different? (Show pictures of the open drawer.)

Show fountain pen. What things do you use to send messages today and what types of cases do you have for carrying them?

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## Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

1. Both the Syng and Coaci inkstands are made of silver and are from the second half of the 18th century (1752-Syng and 1792-Coaci). The Syng inkstand contains a quill holder, inkwell and sand shaker. Though of the same Rococo style, the Coaci inkstand is more elaborate than the Syng. In addition to silver, the Coaci inkstand is made from lapis lazuli, silver gilt and marble. Its practical use is not obvious at first. It has a hidden inkwell and sand shaker (pounce pot), and there is no obvious quill holder. There are hidden candleholders and a secret drawer. Inside the secret drawer, "The imagery includes Coaci's calling card with a picture of the ruined Temple of Venus (actually a bath) in Baia, Italy; Salvator Rosa's drawing of an old warrior; a roscone (a stylized rosette commonly found on antique temples); and a musical score that may have been composed by Coaci himself." (see prop photo) The Coaci inkstand is a model of the Quirinal Monument in Rome, featuring an obelisk, a pair of horse handlers and a basin. The kissing lovebirds are the artist's own invention. (Mia label, ArtStories, and Wikipedia)

2. The Coaci inkstand has its own leather carrying case. It is modeled after a walled Ottoman city (minaret in the center), and intended to protect the inkstand as a medieval fortress protected a town. It was common to include an inkstand in one's traveling kit in the last half of the eighteenth century, but it was unusual for the inkstand or traveling case to be so ornate. It is also unusual for a leather case to have survived so long.

3. The inkstand is a precise miniature copy of the monument in the Quirinal Plaza, featuring a Roman obelisk—unearthed in 1783 near the Great Mausoleum of Emperor Augustus—and two large statues of the Gemini twins, Castor and Pollux, which had been commissioned by Constantine the Great, the first Christian emperor of Rome. The access to ink and sand is underneath each of the Gemini Twins (see prop photo.) ArtStories

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## Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

1. Inkstands are stands or trays that once held the things that were needed for correspondence. They commonly held writing instruments (quill pens); an inkwell; and a sand shaker (pounce pot), which contained pounce – a powdered gum - to dry the ink and affix it to the paper. Inkstands sometimes held a candlestick and small tapers, wafers used to seal letters, penknives and extra quills. An inkstand was once known as a standish. (Britannica and Wikipedia)

2. Who owned the inkstand has long been debated. The stand was commissioned by Marchese Luigi Ercolani, but on behalf of an unknown donor. And although it copied the pope's monument, it may never have been given to him—there's no reference to Pius VI or crossed keys, the symbol of the papacy. Eventually, in 1930, the Italian senate gifted Coaci's work to Umberto II, the Prince of Piedmont, who became the last king of Italy. Mia acquired the work in 1969. Overall, it gives a message of the triumph of Christianity over the pagan past of Rome. (ArtStories, Mia)

3. Vincenzo Coaci (1756-1794) was an Italian silversmith working in Rome in the second half of the 18th century. His best-known work is the Coaci Inkstand at Mia. He died at the age of 38, within two years of its completion. "Coaci had a reputation for exceptional craftsmanship, and was proud of it: he engraved his signature not once but twice on the inkstand, translated as "Made by Vincenzo Coaci in Rome, in 1792." (ArtStories)

4. Inkstands fell out of favor in the nineteenth century, as fountain pens became increasingly reliable.

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## Current Mia Label Information (optional)

This ingeniously complex inkstand may have been presented to Pope Pius VI to commemorate completion, in 1786, of the Quirinal Monument in Rome, just across from the pope's summer palace. As seen in the inkstand, the monument incorporates an Egyptian obelisk, which was unearthed about a mile away, and two ancient Roman sculptures of horse tamers. The horse tamers on the inkstand swing out with the press of a lever, revealing an inkwell and sander (a shaker for sprinkling fine sand or powdered talc over wet ink to speed its drying). The sphinxes' headaddresses conceal candleholders, and the center drawer contains an assortment of illusionistic engravings, including Coaci's trade card. The two doves can be made to kiss by means of a lever located under the fountain.

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## Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

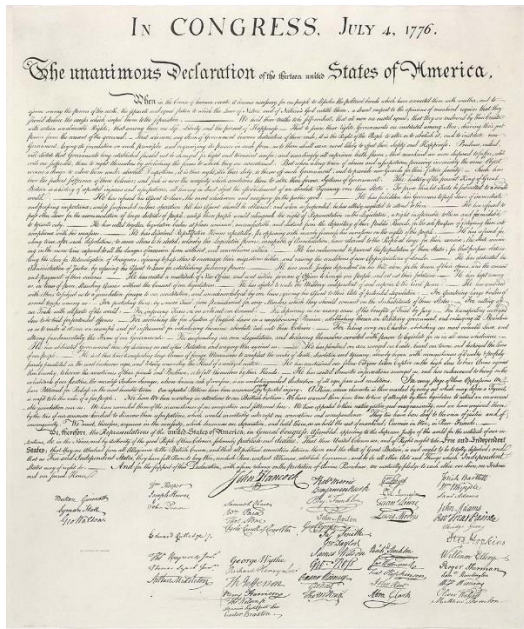
Inkstands, Britannica: <https://www.britannica.com/technology/inkstand>

Inkstands and pounce, Wikipedia <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inkstand> and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pounce\\_\(calligraphy\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pounce_(calligraphy))

The Coaci Inkstand, Artstories (click on this link to go directly to the Artstories: <https://artstories.artsmia.org/#/o/1748>)

Picture of the Syng Inkstand and John Hancock's signature on the Declaration of Independence:





Feather Quills:



Picture of the Coaci Inkstand, with opening under Gemini twin:



Picture of the secret drawer:



Fountain pen, American patent 1867:



*Fountain Pen.*  
*N<sup>o</sup> 68,445.*  
*Sept. 3, 1867*