

## **Set of twenty-four wax models of apples, made for the Botanical Institute of the Royal University of Turin, Italian, c. 1850**

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**S**OON AFTER ARRIVING AT CAMBRIDGE to undertake an MPhil in HPS in 2009, I briefly worked for Liba, sorting out image reproductions of an ancient rose of the winds held in the Vatican Museums. Liba thought I should make the most of my knowledge of Italian and asked me to find out something more about a then ‘mysterious’ object held in the Whipple, a pomological set of twenty-four wax models of apples. The models were displayed in a 19th-century ebony case, bearing the inscription ‘Istituto Botanico. Regia Università di Torino’. The museum label suggested some association with Francesco Garnier Valletti (1808–89), an artisan who produced ‘hundreds of varieties of wax fruit in Turin during the late 19th century’.

The second part of the 19th century was a crucial moment in Italian history, marking the time of the Italian Risorgimento and national unification process. In 1861, Turin became the first capital of Italy: agricultural improvements were part of a broader discourse on modernization sponsored by Camillo Benso Conte di Cavour (1810–61), a Piedmont statesman who supported Italian national unity. Cavour encouraged agricultural fairs and promoted the creation of local assemblies and itinerant chairs to foster agronomic knowledge and expertise. It is in this commercial context that models of apples, pears, grapes, peaches, apricots, and figs were used, so that potential customers could get a sense of what the seeds and trees they bought would yield at a later time. Valletti, to whom the city of Turin has dedicated a museum, worked at exactly this time, practicing a discipline called ‘artificial pomology’, a series of techniques for the faithful reproduction of fruit varieties.

The artisan prepared a mixture of alabaster dust, natural waxes, plaster, vegetal ash and colofonia, a natural yellow resin derived from conifer resin and largely employed in the fabrication of paints. This combination was extremely durable and less affected by changes in temperature



and humidity. He would then cast this compound in different moulds, according to which cultivar he wanted to reproduce. He would use each mould several times, allowing a serial reproduction.\* Naturalistic drawings, whose scientific accuracy revealed a thorough knowledge of botany and agronomy, aided the making of three-dimensional models. Valletti was extremely talented in capturing key features (skin color, lenticels, cuticle, and petiole) which allowed to distinguish between different cultivars.

Despite Valletti's prominence in artificial pomology, the models in the Whipple Museum cannot be attributed to him. Indeed, their bodies are made in wax, not mixed materials. Nevertheless, the suggestion and association of this object with the Piedmont artisan is not surprising. Valletti was the most distinguished wax-modeler in Piedmont at that time. His models were highly appreciated as teaching devices, to facilitate pomological classification, as commercial tools, in the context of agricultural fairs and, finally, as works of art. Going beyond the attribution, this object tells us a great deal of the intersection between botanical and agronomic expertise, commercial imperatives, and political propaganda, not only in Turin, but also in the newly founded Kingdom of Italy.

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\* Daniele Jalla (ed.), *Il Museo della Frutta 'Francesco Garnier Valletti'* (Turin: Officina Libraria, 2007), pp. 109–15.