

Another look at the Cetra in the Gubbio intarsia

I've recently seen a copy of *The Liberal Arts Studiolo from the Ducal Palace at Gubbio* by O. Raggio and A. M. Wilmering (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996, 2004), and inside the back cover is a large photo of the cetra (cittern) wood-inlay depiction. The date it was made seems to be around 1480.

There are inconsistencies in the cetra depiction that strongly suggest errors by the artist or the craftsman who executed it. On all other depictions of cetras I am aware of, the soundboard is symmetric about the central line. This one isn't, with it meeting the fingerboard region at the highest slot on the right, and at one fret-block higher on the left. We are thus unable to discern whether the tops of the fret blocks were at a higher plane than the soundboard, as was the case with the similar cetra depiction in the choir stall intarsia at Monte Oliveto Maggiore near Sienna. The other inconsistency is that over the soundboard and fingerboard region there are nine fairly evenly spaced strings, while in the peg-head region, there are only four course-slots from which only eight strings radiate out from those slots to the pegs, two from each slot. Nine strings occurs in other depictions of cetras, and four courses is usual.

My suspicion is that two per course was usual because each string was fixed to one peg, went down the instrument length to the slot at the tail end, through the slot and around a hardwood or metal bar behind the slot, back through an adjacent slot, and back along the instrument to be fixed to the other peg. If one string broke, the whole course was inoperable. For iron strings, this was tolerable because such strings broke very rarely, but brass strings break much more often. A triple brass course with one string fixed to the bar behind the tail slots allows resumption of playing much more quickly than replacing a course.

Characteristics shared by this depiction and many citoles of previous times, other 15th century cetras and citterns of later times are a body deeper at the neck end than at the tail end, the decorative wings on each side of the body near the neck, and the central hook from the peg head down behind the neck. Winternitz suggested that the decorative wings are vestigial symbols of the arms of the ancient kithara or lyre that was supposed to be its origin (the playing of which reportedly had the magical property of controlling the emotions of listeners). I suggest that the same explanation could apply to the hook, which in some citoles extended to the body at the back, giving in profile (with the neck) some of the two-arm look of the kithara.

Shared with other 15th century cetras is a series of fingerboard blocks which stuck out various amounts on the 'bass' side and not on the 'treble' side. The amount that they stuck out varied on each example, different from other examples. My suggestion for an explanation for this is that this was the first metal-strung fingerboard instrument, and since metal strings are hard and thin, they easily create grooves in a fingerboard (made from other than the hardest wood) by stopping, which introduces instability in the sound produced. I then suppose that when that happens, the player pulls the block out of the groove it sits in, saws a bit off the 'treble' end and replaces it, aligned with the other block 'treble' ends. The varying lengths of the blocks then represents the amount of spare length at the time.

Winternitz stated that the blocks 'are arranged in steps of slightly different height'. Then the edge on the bridge side of each block would act as a fret. Putting a straight-edge along the 'treble' edges of the intarsia depictions I've seen does not show this step arrangement. Another consideration is the relationship between the slots and the bridge, which is much more consistent with diatonic than chromatic placement, yet the slots are evenly spaced, which is inconsistent with diatonic placement in any musical mode. We thus have to consider the possibility that the blocks were used like an unfretted fingerboard.

