





BRIGHT SPARKS

The pyrotechnic possibility of gunpowder fired the imagination of Europeans from the Middle Ages, reaching its apogee in the hands of the Ruggieri brothers. Their brilliance, says Antonio Ferri, dazzled royalty across the continent

Bologna is famous for its university, the oldest in Europe, founded in 1088. But another of its schools, which originated in the eighteenth century, was also a resounding success: the school of pyrotechnics, led by its incomparable masters, the Ruggieri brothers. Gaetano, Pietro, Antonio, and Petronio were born between 1699 and 1715, in a Bologna that the Popes had designated the second city of the Papal States after Rome. The brothers designed fireworks so stunning that they were invited to entertain the courts of Louis XV at Versailles and George II in Great Britain.

When the Ruggieris left their hometown in 1730 to seek their fortunes in France, they were very poor, and Petronio, the youngest brother, was just 15 years old. Gaetano, their leader (at 31), had insisted they go to Paris to look for work in the *Commedia dell'Arte* theater companies, like many other Italians. (Unfortunately, nothing is known of the family they left behind.) After arriving in Paris the Ruggieris asked some of the actors of the *Comédie-Italienne* for help, and found work doing menial odd jobs.

But they soon became known for the brilliant inventions they introduced “on set” – what we now call special effects. Gaetano had read the Bolognese edition of *De la pirotechnia* (*On Pyrotechnics*), first published in 1540 and republished by Longhi in Bologna in 1678, where the author, Vannoccio Biringuccio, explains how to “melt metals and... make fireworks.” Gaetano had also heard about Carlo Vigarani, an Italian from Modena, who had made his fortune in Paris 50 years earlier with his pyrotechnic displays.

And so the “Bolognese-style” shows were born: Gaetano and his brothers first invented transparent backdrops behind which they would set off gunpowder charges; then they enraptured audiences with their showstopping colored fireworks, a rainbow of rockets. People flocked to see the Ruggieris’ brilliant displays until word reached the court of King Louis XV himself, who demanded to meet them and put them to the test. It was a triumph. Gaetano, Pietro, Antonio, and Petronio lived up to their reputation, rounding off their repertoire at the court of Versailles with Catherine wheels, exploding “bombs” that were set off from air balloons, and “sequential ignitions” (entrusted to the youngest brother, who had to connect the rockets to avoid having to light them one by



Remonté par Delafosse

VEUE GÉNÉRALE DES DÉCORATIONS, ILLUMINATIONS ET FEUX
sur la Riviere de Seine en presence de leurs Majestés le Vingt Neuf Aoust Mil
de France, et de Dom





Deuxième et dernière page de J. P. Bouchard

D'ARTIFICE, DE LA FESTE DONNÉE PAR LA VILLE DE PARIS
Sept Cent Trente Neuf à l'occasion du Mariage de Madame Louise Elizabeth
Philippe Infant d'Espagne.

Bastille Day fireworks on the Champs-Élysées, Paris, 1801 (opening pages); an extravagant display on the Seine, Paris, marked the wedding of Louise

Elisabeth of France and the Infante Philip of Spain. Copper engraving, colored by Jacques-François Blondel, 1739 (previous spread)

one). The Ruggieris' crowning achievement was the *feux d'artifice* display in Paris on the evening of August 29, 1739, in which they lit up the Seine to celebrate the marriage of Louise Elisabeth of France and Philip, younger son of the King of Spain. The King was delighted, and even the jaded French courtiers were thrilled.

Paintings based on contemporary drawings show how the Ruggieri brothers transformed the art of the firework display: fantastical scenes exploded into thousands of colors while numerous fizzling firecrackers "devastated" papier-mâché palaces, towers, arches, and gardens. Very soon, Louis XV could not do without the Ruggieris. They had become vital to the success of any festival, and in 1753 the brothers moved to his court. They worked with dozens of assistants, carpenters, masons, and metalworkers, and the cost of their displays was astronomical: two hundred thousand rockets might be set off in a single show (costing the equivalent of up to a year's wages for the average Parisian). They also organized festivals for other patrons who wanted to show off their power and wealth.

The fame of the brothers spread over the Channel to the court in England, which, though more austere than that of Paris, was equally interested in glorifying the British crown with the art of pyrotechnics. King George II asked Louis XV to send at least one of the brothers to Great Britain, and the King of France appointed the oldest, most experienced, Gaetano. King George was so delighted with his work that he did not allow him to go back to the French court. When Gaetano Ruggieri died in London in 1782, the British accorded him the ultimate mark of respect by burying him in Canterbury Cathedral.

Although the Ruggieris are notable among the progenitors of pyrotechnics, others in Europe had experimented with gunpowder since it arrived with the Mongol invasion of Hungary around 1241. Some scholars maintain that "Chinese snow" wasn't introduced to the continent until the fourteenth century – by the German monk Berthold Schwarz. But though he is credited as the first person to use gunpowder to fire a projectile (and to use it in the composition that is used today), it is not certain that Schwarz ever actually existed. Then again, according to one source, fireworks for display were being made in Germany as early as 1340 – Nuremberg boasted a major school that primarily used the technique of aerial firecrackers set off from air balloons.

In Italy the recreational use of gunpowder also dates back to the late Middle Ages, above all in the *sacre rappresentazioni*, the religious-themed theatrical dramas that were particularly popular in Tuscany. And it was in Florence, at the height of the Renaissance, that fireworks were first used to celebrate the festival marking the anniversary of the conquest of the Holy Sepulchre in 1099 during the first Crusade. The traditional *volo della colombina* (flight of the dove – a rocket disguised as a dove) and the *scoppio del carro* (explosion of the cart) were part of a popular ceremony that is observed across the whole city to this day.





IN ITALY THE RECREATIONAL USE OF GUNPOWDER ALSO DATES BACK TO THE LATE MIDDLE AGES, TO THE RELIGIOUS-THEMED THEATRICAL DRAMAS

The eighteenth century concluded in France with the Jacobin Reign of Terror and the rising star of Napoleon. Although pyrotechnics were a symbol of the aristocracy's squandering of public money, they were not subject to censure by the revolutionary code of ethics. Quite the contrary! In 1804, Petronio Ruggieri's two sons, Michel and Claude-Fortuné, were appointed fireworks specialists to the emperor. The following year, in 1805, the Ruggieri brothers accompanied Napoleon on his trip to Italy and organized a show of unprecedented magnificence in Bologna to celebrate his arrival in their ancestral city.

It was now more than 70 years since the four brothers had left Bologna. Their Parisian atelier was on rue Saint-Lazare. In 1776, the entrance to the present-day synagogue faced the Ruggieri garden, the first public garden in Paris where people would come to drink, dance, and admire the fireworks. The garden was later closed, but the Ruggieri brothers' workshop is still there, on the corner of rue Laferrière. The Ruggieri brothers never stopped operating the family business: the sons, grandsons, and great-grandsons of Gaetano, Pietro, Antonio, and Petronio continued to enchant the world with their pyrotechnic displays until 1997, when the French fireworks manufacturer Lacroix bought the Società Ruggieri and formed Lacroix-Ruggieri, which is still active in Europe today.❖

Translated by Luisa Nitrato-Izzo

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Opposite, top: water fireworks at the Charlottenburg Palace, for the wedding of Louisa Ulrika to Adolf Frederick of Sweden, August 1744. Etching by Johann Schmidt, colored later, 1744.

Below: this painting, based on a contemporary illuminated manuscript, depicts pyrotechnics in honor of the 800-year anniversary of the Abbey of Ranshofen, Upper Austria, in 1699. Watercolor by an anonymous artist, from Austria, c. 1700. Above: another French firework display in the Place Louis XV marks the dedication of the equestrian statue of the king, June 20, 1763. Colored engraving, 18th century