



More about *Portasanta*

Portasanta is the name given by the scalpellini, the stonecutters of Rome, to the marble that forms the jambs of the Holy Door at St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican City. It is also used for door jambs in other basilicas of Rome. Faustino Corsi uses the older spelling *porta santa*, and he tells us another place it can be seen is in the 'Circus Agonalis', the square in Rome now called the Piazza Navona, where it forms the fountain basins.

It was obtained from near Chora on the Greek island of Chios. Originally quarried by the ancient Greeks, it was

*The Porta Santa,
the Holy Door
of St Peter's Basilica.*

extensively exploited by the Romans from the first century BC onwards. Ancient authors such as Pliny, Strabone and Theophrastus all write about Chian marble. In common with many other ancient stones, the quarries closed

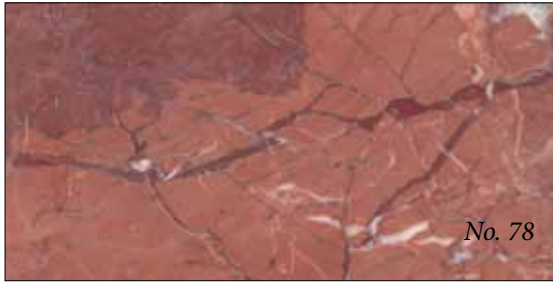
during Byzantine times and their location was lost for many centuries.

In the late 19th century, the quarries were rediscovered by the great English marble hunter William Brindley. Quarrying has taken place sporadically since then.

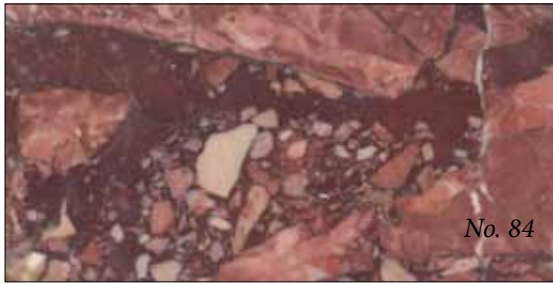
*The fountain basins of
Piazza Navona.*



Corsi Collection
of
Decorative Stones



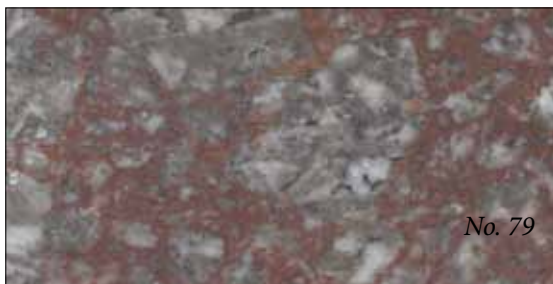
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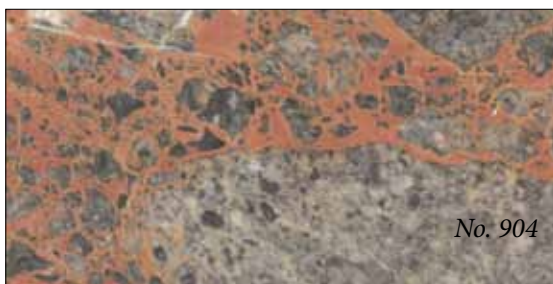
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No. 79



No. 904

Examples of portasanta from Chios in Faustino Corsi's collection.

Portasanta from Chios is a fine-grained compact limestone breccia. Corsi's samples are combinations of pale pink, salmon-pink, dark red, and grey. They have white calcite-filled fractures and abundant stylolites (zigzag lines containing insoluble residues left when the stone has been compacted during burial). Stylolites coloured red, pink or orange by iron oxides, form the net-like arrays that feature in some examples of Chian *portasanta*, see for example nos. 79 and 904 (left). Corsi called these *porta santa reticulata*.

By the 19th century, when Corsi was building his collection, the scalpellini of Rome had developed their own terminology for the various different marbles, and they included a number of stones under the name '*portasanta*' that did not come from Chios. Two examples in Corsi's collection are shown below. No. 85 has been recognised as *rosso Montecitorio* and comes from Monte Kumeta in Sicily, while no. 84 is a typical *cipollino mandolato* from the French Pyrenees.



No. 85



No. 86



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