

Extract from the unofficial catalogue, Palace of Culture Museum, Cermalo, Upper Bohemia

The prosthetic nose [cat 114A.23] was alleged to have been made for the actress, Miriam Belleroni, after her unfortunate accident with the mandolin.

This catalogue entry (in English) gives rise to more questions than it answers, from the use of the word 'alleged' onwards. None of the many biographies of Belleroni (1767-1841) mentions an accident, unfortunate or otherwise, involving a mandolin.

Indeed, it is not even clear whether the instrument referred to is of the musical or culinary variety (neither is represented in the museum's collection, which does however contain both a lute and a lemon squeezer of the same period).

The culinary mandolin might initially seem the more likely culprit, but Belleroni's powerful distaste for nurseries, kitchens and other haunts of the 'domestic' class from which she had so dramatically risen, is well documented, and the contemporary records (double-entry accounts) of the famous 'Kirschsteiner's Brasserie' show a standing order of fifteen prepared dishes a day for delivery direct from Kirschsteiner's kitchen to Belleroni's boudoir.

Furthermore, there are strong rumours linking Belleroni with the Neapolitan court musician and choreographer Giannandrea di Altagaluppi, who would almost certainly have played the then voguish 'mandolino'.

This, however, does not explain how the accident would have occurred. Again, the word 'alleged' suggests a scandalous element, and rumours of Belleroni's involvement in unusual and even dangerous sexual practices were commonplace at the height of her fame and remain current to some extent even today (cf. Catherine the Great and her 'erotic cabinet' [cat 211B.34]). The precise nature of such an accident is none the less difficult to picture.

The item itself is missing, but is believed to have been of enamelled silver inlaid with a single diamond; a description in Buoninfanti (1848, p. 117ff) states that the prosthesis had an internal chamber in which 'a quintessence of attar of roses' was placed, so that, in Belleroni's alleged phrase, 'wherever I may stick it, I shall pull it out smelling of roses'.

(327 words)