

Rome's Pagan Ceilings

by Gail Leggio

The pagan gods survived in the Christian world in a variety of ways, notably through the pervasive cult of astrology and the Neoplatonism that provided the philosophical underpinning for artists as different as Botticelli and Michelangelo.¹ But, at a certain point, in the early decades of the sixteenth century, the gods seemed to throw off their disguises as exemplars of virtues and vices, declaring, as Leonard Barkan puts it, their “independence from narrative, from allegory, from moralization.”² Barkan associates what he calls the Ovidian Renaissance with a new sensuousness in art, deeply entwined with a frank celebration of “the image in itself.”³ The Roman poet Ovid (43 B.C.–17 A.D.) had not been unknown in the middle ages, but medieval commentators felt constrained to moralize the stories of the *Metamorphoses*, uncovering arcane allegorical, pseudo-Christian meanings in unlikely places. Renaissance and Baroque artists saw Ovid’s tales of desire and transformation differently, as opportunities to explore bodily beauty and their own artistic process. The *Metamorphoses* became a treasure house of incidents and themes for visual artists and writers, an essential part of the Western cultural heritage.⁴

The pagan revival was particularly vigorous in Rome, worldliest of cities, where physical evidence of antiquity was—and continues to be—thrown up with every new building project. Bernini’s *Apollo and Daphne* (1622–25) is a prime example of Ovidian metamorphosis. As the god catches the fleeing nymph, her skin scales over with tree bark, her toes lengthen into roots, her fingers sprout leafy branches. But the greatest magic is in the hands of the sculptor, who turns cold marble into warm flesh and then girl into tree. *Apollo and Daphne* was one of the pieces commissioned by Cardinal Scipione Borghese for his private palace, now the Borghese Gallery. The greatest of Rome’s Ovidian paintings, Annibale Carracci’s *The Loves of the Gods* (1598–1602), was commissioned by another prince of the Church, Cardinal Odoardo Farnese, who wanted a sumptuous ceiling for his banqueting hall. This tour de force of illusionistic painting and compendium of pagan myth belongs to a remarkable subgenre of decorative art, lavish and intellectually ambitious. I will look at four Roman examples, all still in situ in their original palatial settings.

The Villa Farnesina was built as an elegant suburban retreat for Agostino Chigi, across the Tiber in what is now the Trastevere neighborhood. One of the wealthiest men of his time, Agostino was known for his lavish banquets. During one of these affairs, he impressed his guests by tossing the gold and silver vessels into the Tiber after each course, although he had sensibly arranged for nets to catch them, so the dinnerware could be retrieved after the party. Unlike some of his fellow plutocrats, Agostino did not have an impressive collection of



Raphael and workshop, Loggia of Cupid and Psyche, 1518

VILLA FARNESINA, ROME

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Raphael and workshop, *Psyche Borne to Olympus* (detail), Loggia of Cupid and Psyche, 1518
VILLA FARNESINA, ROME
ALINARI / ART RESOURCE, NEW YORK CITY. PHOTO: ANGELI ALESSANDRO

antiquities, but he had excellent taste in decorators. Baldassarre Peruzzi, who designed the villa, painted the vault of the Loggia of Galatea with a mythological and astrological program (1511) based on Agostino Chigi's horoscope. The ceiling is neatly compartmentalized by faux architectural elements, with figures against deep blue sky or trompe l'oeil gold mosaic. Apollo and a centaur, for example, illustrate the Sun in Sagittarius. Peruzzi also frescoed the Hall of Perspective Views (1519), with urban and rural scenes glimpsed through trompe l'oeil columns, an elegant display of illusionism that makes you feel as if you could step out onto the balcony and catch the air. In 1519, another painter, Sodoma, frescoed another room with scenes from the life of Alexander the Great.

Agostino's greatest coup was hiring Raphael, whose *Galatea* (1511–12) upstages even Peruzzi's astrological ceiling. The painting is one of the touchstones of Renaissance classicism: the nymph rides a dolphin-drawn shell, the wind stirring her hair and cloak, amid a retinue of naiads and mermen, while a trio of amorini draw their bows in the sky above. It looks breezier, effortlessly graceful in its proper setting, on the wall where it has been for 500 years. The Loggia of Cupid and Psyche (1518) is less universally known, but it is one of

the loveliest interior spaces in Rome. Raphael laid out the cycle and made drawings for many of the figures, but his workshop, which included Giulio Romano, was largely responsible for the execution. Trompe l'oeil lunette windows mirror the arches on the garden side. Now glassed in, the loggia was once open, giving it the feeling of a garden pavilion. It's essentially a fictional pergola, with the various vignettes separated by festoons of greenery adorned with over a hundred species of flowers, fruits and vegetables, by Giovanni da Udine. Swelling gourds and clusters of grapes intermingle with flowers and apples and cucumbers, with paradisaic promiscuity, but the garlands are neatly bound together as emblems of fecundity in marriage.⁵ When Cupid and Psyche are married, they have a daughter, Pleasure (*Voluptus* or *Diletto*), which symbolizes, David Coffin notes, "the purpose of Agostino Chigi's villa."⁶

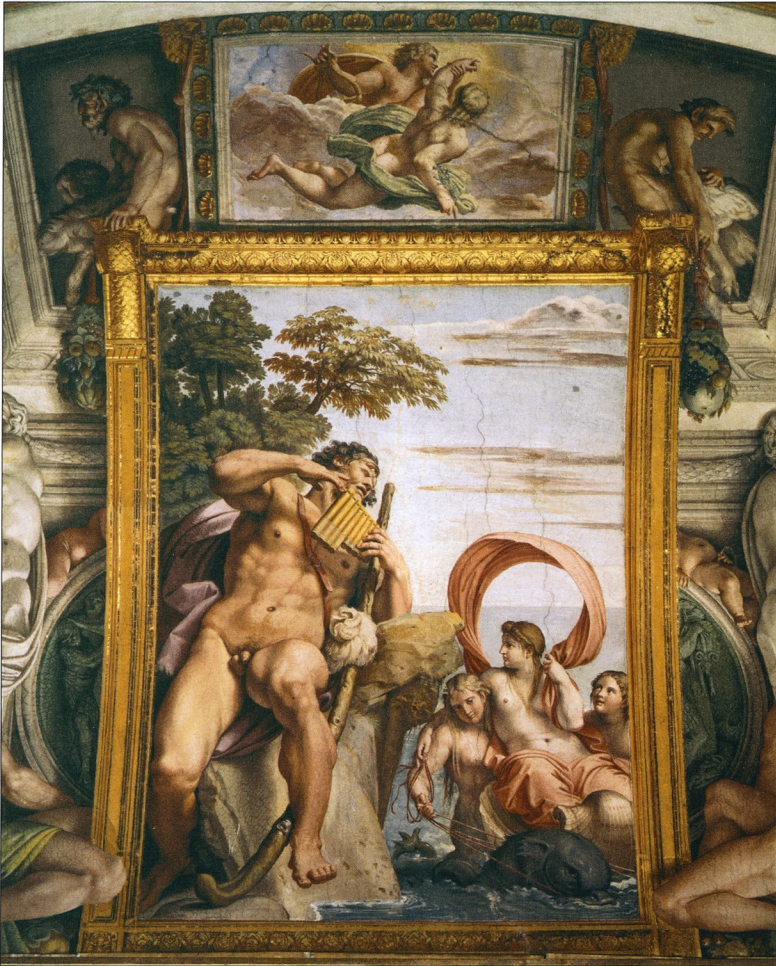
The triumphant finale of the story of Cupid and Psyche is pictured in two fictive tapestries suspended overhead, *The Council of the Gods* and *The Marriage of Cupid and Psyche*, which seem to be tied to the garlands. The story itself is a fiction, a late antique romance from *The Golden Ass*, written by Lucius Apuleius (second century A.D.). Psyche's beauty arouses the envy of Venus, who sends her son, Cupid, to infatuate her with some lesser creature. But Cupid falls in love and visits Psyche by night, setting the rule that she must not look at him. Curiosity overcomes her, and he disappears. After wandering the Earth and undergoing many trials, she is forgiven, taken up to Olympus and reunited with Cupid. The story inspired Neoplatonic parables of the Soul's (the Greek word for soul is *psyche*) longing for Divine Love, as well as the fairy tale Beauty and the Beast. But the Farnesina Loggia largely avoids scenes of suffering; Psyche's trials are alluded to, not depicted as part of a narrative. The mood is "festive and theatrical."⁷ Individual vignettes in the spandrels created by garlands show Psyche encountering various deities or feature amorini carrying divine attributes. In one vignette, Psyche kneels alongside Venus, presenting her with the casket retrieved from Hades (one of Psyche's tasks). Raphael's lovely drawing (Louvre, Paris) shows how he accommodated the figures to the inverted triangle of space: the blond, naked, diademed goddess spreads her arms in a gesture of graceful surprise, while her hip rests comfortably on a cushion of cloud. The painting adds sensuous color, especially in the azure sky that forms a continuous background. This is Venus as contemporary poet Ted Hughes describes her, "afloat on swansdown in the high blue."⁸ In another spandrel, amorini, accompanied by bats, wrestle with Cerberus and wield a pitchfork, attributes of Pluto. The ceiling figures are cleverly foreshortened. When Psyche is borne to Olympus by a trio of amorini, the soles of their feet seem to hover above the viewer. It's an endlessly engaging work. A few years ago, I watched a group of elementary school children sprawled on the floor, sketching—with the help of mirrors—various scenes, while their teacher taught them how to recognize the deities in this delightful painting, which is at once iconographically rich and lighthearted.

The goings-on in Carracci's *The Loves of the Gods*, dated 1598–1601, on the cusp of the Baroque, are considerably more carnal. Cardinal Odoardo Farnese commissioned the ceiling for his monumental urban showplace, the Palazzo Farnese, near the Campo de' Fiori. The building features a cornice designed by Michelangelo. The ceiling is Annibale Carracci's masterpiece, a bravura demonstration of his genius, and he did the lion's share of the work himself, with some assistance from his brother Agostino and his protégé Domenichino. Unfortunately, since the Palazzo Farnese has housed the French Embassy for many years, it is not easily accessible. A recent exhibition, "Palais Farnese: De la Renaissance à l'Ambassade de France" (December 1, 2010–April 27, 2011), offered access to the Carracci Gallery, along with a small selection of preparatory drawings and some paintings borrowed from other museums, notably Annibale's seductive *Venus, Satyr and Two Amorini* (c. 1590, Uffizi, Florence).⁹ The Emilian painter Annibale Carracci was known for a naturalistic style that would have enormous influence through the family academy, established in Bologna in the early 1580s. The Carraccis' illusionistic style was rooted in real-



Annibale Carracci, Triumph of Bacchus and Ariadne (detail)
The Loves of the Gods, 1598–1601

PALAZZO FARNESE, ROME. SCALA / ART RESOURCE, NEW YORK CITY



Annibale Carracci, Polyphemus Discovering Galatea (detail)

The Loves of the Gods, 1598–1601

PALAZZO FARNESE, ROME. SCALA/ART RESOURCE, NEW YORK CITY

ism (*il vero*), painterliness (*pastosità*) and the colors of living flesh (*viva carne*).¹⁰ Annibale brought his formidable skills and sensuous vision to bear on Ovid's tales with spectacular results at the Palazzo Farnese.

The trompe l'oeil scheme is elaborate: a faux cornice expands the wall area; the cornice is supported by grisaille stone figures, some full-length, others like herms, painted as if lit from below. Flesh-colored ignudi and putti perch in odd corners and hold garlands of fruit and flowers. Bas-relief bronze medallions, with a green patina, depict some Ovidian scenes, for example, the flaying of Maryses and a satyr pursuing a nymph. Most of the major scenes are presented as paintings "framed" in stone or gold, like thickly ranked works in a picture gallery that extends across the ceiling. In one ornate gold frame,

embellished with grisaille sphinxes and cartouches, Mercury plummets from the sky to hand Paris the apple he will award to Venus in the fabled beauty contest that precipitated the Trojan War. In another painting, Diana slips in on a cloud to caress the sleeping Endymion. An appealing dog lies curled up asleep at his feet, but mischievous amorini watch from the bosky wood behind the lovers. Jupiter coaxes a lovely blond Juno into bed in one scene and, in eagle form, carries off a handsome young Ganymede, in another. The one-eyed giant Polyphemus, an unusually appealing Cyclops, plays his pan-pipes on the rocky shore, serenading the sea-nymph Galatea. The arch of rose-pink drapery over her head is an attribute of Aura, Roman goddess of the air. There are no moral lessons being drawn, just an implicit analogy between the beauty and transforming power of the gods and the painter's mastery of illusion and aesthetic power. The centerpiece of the ensemble is, fittingly, the triumph of Bacchus and Ariadne, in an elegantly rowdy procession that includes leopards and goats, satyrs and putti, an amiable, drunken Silenus and radiant baccantes. Bacchus, patron of the theater arts and an embodiment of both the joys and dangers of ecstasy, is here more splendid than any Apollo in his apotheosis.

All the ceilings described in this article were designed for private, albeit palatial residences. The public spaces of Rome are architecturally and historically alive, and the piazzas are theaters where people are simultaneously actors and spectators. But at nearly every turning in the centro storico, there are tantalizing glimpses into grand courtyards. Many of the old palazzi have become museums or official buildings, but some remain in private hands. The Palazzo Pallavicini-Rospigliosi was built in 1613–16, on the Quirinal Hill, on the site of Scipione Borghese's gardens, over the remains of the Baths of Constantine. It was purchased in 1704 by the Pallavicini-Rospigliosi family, who still live there.¹¹ The Casino dell'Aurora, a separate building in the garden, is open for just a few hours on the first of every month, except January. The building is striking; the façade is decorated with fourteen sarcophagi from the second and third centuries A.D. The main attraction is the ceiling fresco inside, *Aurora Scattering Flowers before the Chariot of the Sun* (1613–14), by Guido Reni. Like the Carracci, Reni was a Bolognese artist, but with a gentler style. The *Aurora* is not part of an elaborate trompe l'oeil scheme but simply a painting on the ceiling. (A tilted mirror is provided to help the viewer study the composition.) The handsome young blond Apollo guides his chariot, pulled by four high-stepping horses with wonderful brown and cream markings and wavy manes. Apollo is accompanied by a group of Muses or Hours; their billowing Grecian robes flutter in a luminous rainbow of colors. A torch-bearing putto, representing the morning star, hangs poised above the quadriga, and Aurora, dawn, leads the way. The radiant heat of oncoming day gives her skirt a golden glimmer, but the drapery is a cooler lavender-gray where she reaches forward into the still-cool pre-dawn. The backdrop is a triumph of the colorist's art: the cloud bearing the messengers of day shifts from yellow-orange to dusky lavender,

and the stylized landscape below reveals shadowy shoreline and an ultramarine sea. Guido Reni was enormously popular well into the nineteenth century, although Ruskin did not find the generalized beauty of his figures and his soft-edged painting style persuasive. By the time of Berenson, Reni was decidedly out of favor. *Aurora* has a buoyancy of color that makes the old gods come alive as embodiments of natural beauty; it is hard to imagine anyone encountering the work in its original jewel-like setting resisting Reni's charms.

The Farnesina Loggia has as its subject the story of Cupid and Psyche; at the Palazzo Farnese, Carracci gives us the loves of the gods; at the Palazzo Pallavicini-Rospigliosi, Reni decorates the Casino with an image of Aurora guiding the chariot of Apollo. The title of Pietro da Cortona's ceiling at the Palazzo Barberini is *The Triumph of Divine Providence and the Fulfillment of Her Ends under the Papacy of Pope Urban VIII* (1632–39). Despite the implicit invoking of Christian religion or, more accurately, papal politics, Cortona's exuberant extravaganza represents a continuation of the pagan ceiling tradition. Cortona fills the great vault, the voltone, with a vertigo-inducing pile-up of gods and goddesses, satyrs, giants, putti and allegorical figures. The centerpiece of the iconographic program could be more succinctly and accurately titled the apotheosis of the Barberini. A bevy of comely personifications—Providence, Purity, Justice, Mercy, Truth, Beauty, Immortality—float around Barberini emblems, including the family's signature bees. The theological virtues—Faith, Hope and Charity—put in an appearance but are upstaged by the figure of Rome, holding aloft the papal tiara. The pagan gods are an essential part of the cosmology: a naked Chronos devouring his children, the three Fates, a drunken Silenus accompanied by baccantes. The principal exemplars of virtue are classical: Hercules fighting off a harpy, and Minerva, attacking from the air, swooping down on a pack of brutish giants. The huge giants, with their contorted faces and enormous hands and feet, are a tour de force of dynamic foreshortening. They seem to be hurtling toward the viewer. In this instance, Cortona was most likely influenced by Giulio Romano's frescoes in the Sala dei Giganti in Mantua's Palazzo del Te, while the whole premise of *The Triumph* builds on Carracci's work at the Farnese.¹²

Cortona's brazen confidence in the effectiveness of his visual rhetoric is matched by his compositional daring. A trompe l'oeil cornice—anchored at the four corners by grisaille sculpture groups embellished with decorative motifs—frames landscape passages and the seemingly infinite sky above. But the frame cannot contain the hundred naturalistic figures that come spilling out over the edges. The trompe l'oeil architecture of the Farnesina Loggia of Cupid and Psyche, mostly created through swags of vegetation, suggests a garden pavilion, with figures framed in separate vignettes. Carracci's more opulent Farnese ceiling takes trompe l'oeil to another level, creating an art gallery on the ceiling, with gold-framed mythological paintings juxtaposed with faux stone and bronze sculptures and flesh-colored nudes and putti. The viewer

marvels at the layers of virtuoso illusionism and delights in the sheer sensuous beauty of the ceiling. Cortona employs some similar effects. Writhing stone nudes support bronze medallions depicting civic and moral virtues as illustrated by incidents of ancient history. But we are more likely to be beguiled by the realistically painted symbolic animals below the bas-reliefs. The Prudence of Fabius Maximus medallion cannot compete with the two little she-bears, emblems of sagacity, peering at us from the cornice. Everything in Cortona's fresco seems to be happening at once, across a continuous space. This is a secular version of the full-blown theatrical illusionism of Rome's Baroque churches, where swarms of saints and angels seem to dissolve in the buoyant light of domes. At the Palazzo, the old gods and classic virtues are central players in a grand advertisement for the Barberini family, rulers of the new empire of the Roman Catholic Church.

It is difficult to overestimate how much the noble families of Rome changed the urban fabric in the seventeenth century, equally difficult to separate their ambitions from their appetite for splendor. In his fascinating study *The Families Who Made Rome*, Anthony Majanlahti remarks how these nobles, although often "callous and venal," gave the city enormous gifts by "patronizing architects and artists, adopting new styles, from Renaissance to Baroque, Rococo to Neoclassical" and commissioning works from a staggering array of artists.¹³

All the painters discussed here painted religious subjects as well; museums and churches are full of their deeply moving Pietàs and Assumptions. But these pagan extravaganzas testify to the lasting cultural value of the old myths and of joyful self-indulgence, on the part of artist and patron alike, at least at this astonishingly high level of painterly execution and fluent imagination.¹⁴

NOTES

1. For an important discussion of this milieu, see Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance: An Exploration of Philosophical and Mystical Sources of Iconography in Renaissance Art* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1968).
2. Leonard Barkan, *The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 183.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 184.
4. Twentieth-century artists largely lost contact with the tradition, but writers fared somewhat better. John Barth draws on Ovid as well as Homer for his delightful modernist story "The Menelaïad" (*Lost in the Funhouse*, 1968), in which the protagonist's wrestling match with the shapeshifting god Proteus becomes a parable for the author's fertile imagination and the complexities of narrative.
5. The Villa Farnesina has a special aura that makes it a favorite haunt of many visitors. Leonard Barkan discusses the sexual iconography of the Loggia of Cupid and Psyche in his charming memoir *Satyr Square: A Year, a Life in Rome* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2006), and pop crime writer David Hewson uses the Farnesina's illusionistic décor as a thematic setting in *Dante's Killings* (New York: Dell, 2010).

6. David R. Coffin, *The Villa in the Life of Renaissance Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 107.
7. *The Villa Farnesina in Rome*, edited by Gianfranco Malafarina, translated by Mark Roberts (Modena: Franco Cosimo Panini, 2003).
8. Ted Hughes, "Venus and Adonis," *After Ovid: New Metamorphoses*, edited by Michael Hoffmann and James Lasdun (New York: The Noonday Press, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), p. 245.
9. Francesco Buranelli, editor, *Palais Farnese: De la Renaissance à l'Ambassade de France* (Paris: Giunti Gamm, 2010).
10. Charles Dempsey, "The Carracci Reform in Painting," *The Age of Correggio and the Carracci: Emilian Painting of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art; New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art; Bologna: Pinacoteca Nazionale, 1986), p. 247.
11. Giovanna A. Bufalini, *Il Casino dell'Aurora Pallavicini* (Milan: Skira, 2007).
12. Anna Lo Bianco, *Pietro da Cortona's Ceiling* (Rome: Gebart S.p.A., 2004).
13. Anthony Majanlahti, *The Families Who Made Rome: A History and a Guide* (London: Pimlico, 2006), pp. 5–6.
14. For general information on these works, opening times and useful maps of Roman neighborhoods, consult the most recent editions of *The Blue Guide*, which has in-depth historical entries, and *The Rough Guide*, which is more street savvy and has excellent restaurant recommendations.