

THE PAPACY AND THE ART OF REFORM IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY ROME

From his election in 1572 to his death in 1585, Pope Gregory XIII, schooled in the upheavals in the Catholic Church that marked the preceding violent decades, undertook to mend and reform the institution he headed by building and restoring Rome's streets, churches, and public monuments. One major monument, unstudied heretofore, is the three-story apartment called the Tower of the Winds rising up from the Vatican Palace. It was built and painted to celebrate the most famous achievement of Gregory's papacy, the calendar reform. The program of the entire tower proclaimed with assurance not only Gregory's political and religious authority over the capital, but also Gregory's domination of nature, time, and past and present cultures. Its innovations in architecture and decoration – efflorescent Flemish landscapes in all of its seven rooms – and its wider religious and political purpose in the culture of Gregorian Rome and the Counter Reformation, are the subject of this book.

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THE PAPACY
AND THE
ART OF REFORM IN
SIXTEENTH-CENTURY
❧ ROME ❧

GREGORY XIII'S
TOWER OF THE WINDS
IN THE VATICAN

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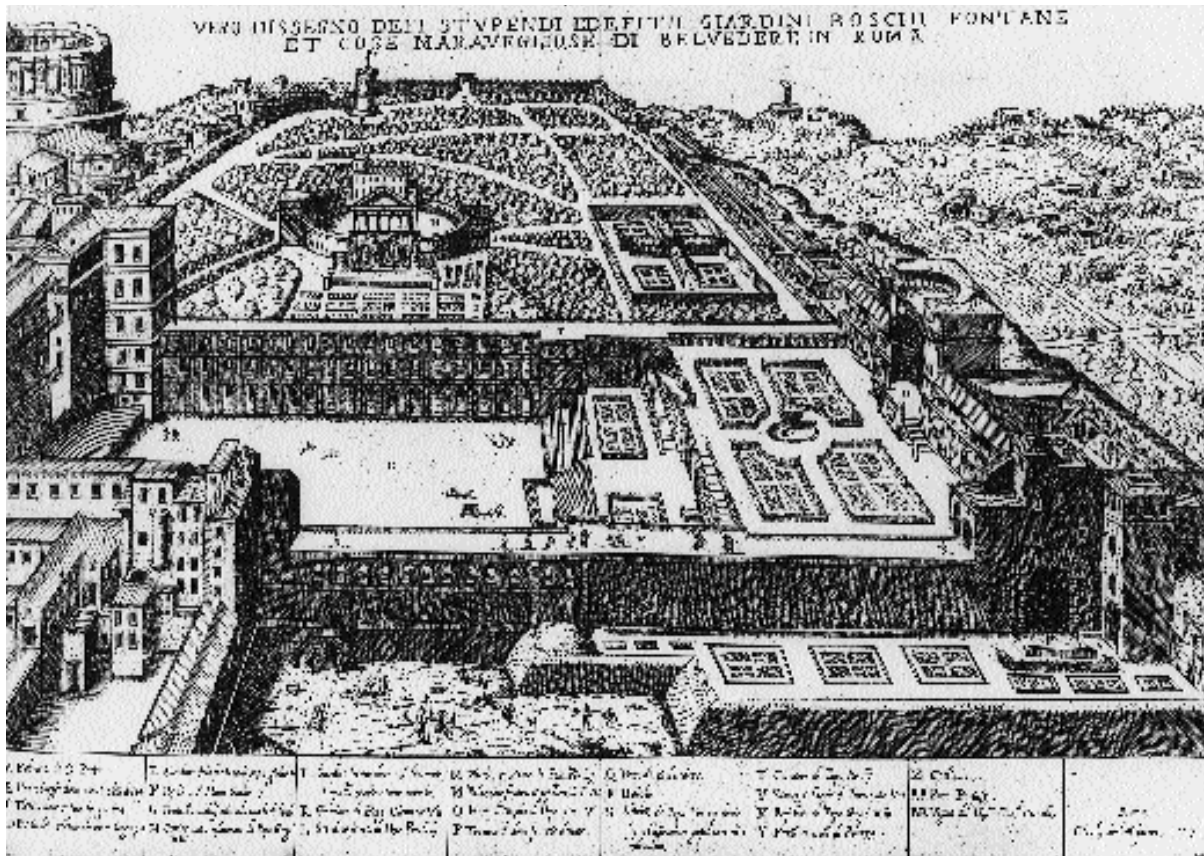
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INTRODUCTION

From his election in 1572 to his death in 1585, Pope Gregory XIII (Boncompagni), schooled in the upheavals in the Catholic Church that marked the preceding violent decades, spent a great deal of the money that was entering the institution's coffers anew on the building and restoration of Rome's streets, churches, and public monuments. In the thirteen years of his reign, a related focus of Gregory's efforts was ordering and overseeing extensive additions to the Vatican Palace, which served both as the seat of state ceremony and as his personal domicile. These two endeavors, the restoration of the physical fabric of Rome and the papal palace, mirrored the pope's proclaimed mission to heal and reform the Catholic Church, as well as to assert the papacy's right to the unquestioned leadership of that institution. These goals, as well as the image of the pope and the imagery of reform developed during Gregory's pontificate to promote them, are the subject of Part I, Chapter 1.

The burgeoning Vatican Palace was the locus of some of Gregory's most powerful imagery celebrating the aims and achievements of the Counter Reformation and the origins of its reforming authority. Following a comprehensive campaign to build and decorate rooms in the heart of the papal palace, Gregory turned his attention to the vast Belvedere Courtyard extending from the medieval core of the pontiff's residence to a fifteenth-century papal Villa Belvedere, once far removed to the north (Fig. 1).¹ One of the long, arcaded corridors that were to connect the three levels of the staggeringly ambitious garden-theater ascending the hilly terrain – planned by Julius II's architect Bramante at a time when colossal papal projects were undertaken as a matter of course – was still unfinished. Instead of merely completing this western enclosure, in 1578 the papal architect, Ottaviano Mascarino, added an extra storey spanning more than half the length of the terraced expanse (Pl. I). Decorated in encyclopedic fashion with forty maps of Italy on the walls and a cycle on the vault depicting sacred historical events that had occurred in the various regions of the peninsula, the Gallery of Geographical Maps, completed around 1581, was one of the most cele-



1. Claude Duchet after Mario Cartaro, Cortile del Belvedere and Vatican gardens, 1579, engraving. The medieval Vatican Palace is to the south, on the left (flanking the Torre Borgia, letter “B”); the former Villa of Innocent VIII is to the north, on the right (sculpture court is letter “I”). (Bibliotheca Hertziana U.Pl. B 5758 [R], and Istituto Nazionale di Archeologia e Storia dell’Arte, Rome)

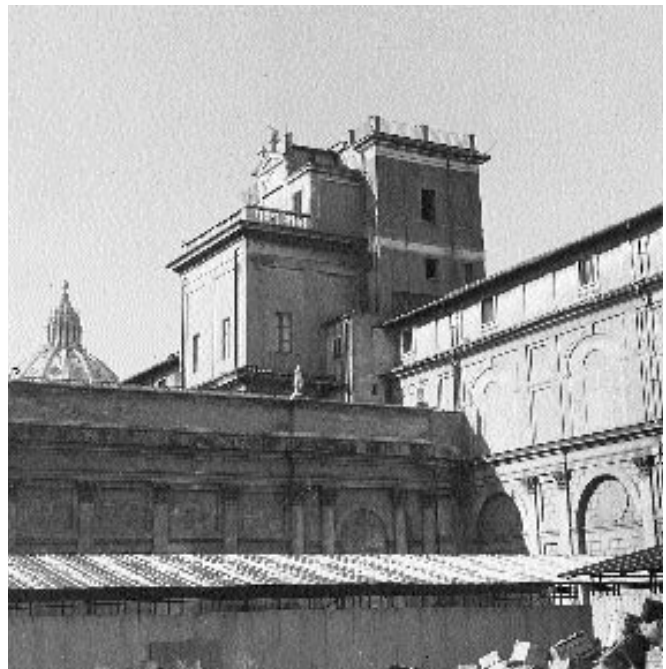
brated projects of Gregory’s papacy.² It lauded what the program characterized as the predestined triumph of Christianity, inaugurated by Constantine and extended by the pope, over the temporal domain.

Planned, built, and decorated immediately afterwards was a new papal suite that crowned a block of apartments adjoining the gallery.³ Called the Torre dei Venti, or Tower of the Winds, it was composed of seven magnificently frescoed rooms grouped together in three stories that jugged prominently above the Belvedere Courtyard, the visual climax of the newly restructured wing (Figs. 2, 3). Long forgotten, the Tower of the Winds has rarely been mentioned in art-historical literature or, when discussed, has not often been treated as a unified entity.⁴ Nor was it regarded as a link in the development of subsequent art, although I will suggest here that in its time it was renowned and its influence was far-reaching. One factor affecting its disappearance from historical consciousness was that soon after the tower’s creation, it was isolated from the main body of the papal palace when Sixtus V (1585–90) added a library connecting the eastern and western corridors of the Belvedere Courtyard.⁵ The tower not only became less prominent visually, but also soon became associated with the new library rather than the corridor, and thus was increasingly inaccessible



2. Belvedere Courtyard seen from the north, photo. The Tower of the Winds is on the western corridor to the right, visible today behind the Braccio Nuovo, a sculpture gallery built in 1817–22 under Pius VII. (Servizi Tecnici del Governatorato, Vatican)

from the body of the Vatican Palace. Owing to this circumstance, its function changed, and during the seventeenth century it was used as a guest apartment – even, rather appropriately to its original intention, for a famous convert to Catholicism, Queen Christina of Sweden.⁶ Eventually, however, forgetfulness set in: By the eighteenth century, because it came to serve the purposes of the library and the papal archive in the floors below, the tower was no longer considered a cohesive suite.⁷ For a time beginning in the late eighteenth century under Pius VI, when it was used as an observatory, the memory of the tower as an entity was revived. But when the Specola Vaticana – the official Vatican observatory founded by Leo XIII in 1890 – was transferred in 1906,



3. Tower of the Winds seen from the north, photo. (Servizi Tecnici del Governatorato, Vatican)

the former papal apartment once again became inaccessible.⁸ In late 1970s, archives stored there were removed from the tower and its art was restored, but the tower remains closed to public view.⁹

Another, more significant factor accounting for the oversight of the tower was that it was created in a period that art historians traditionally have not held in high regard: The Counter Reformation. Even though recent years have seen the publication of much thoughtful literature dedicated to the art of this time, outside of this specialized scholarship, there remains a fundamental reluctance to embrace it. The art of this lamentable post-Renaissance/pre-Baroque era is seemingly lacking in artistic geniuses; it has been deemed unaesthetic and unoriginal; it appears dogmatically to serve a rigid, unappealing ideology rather than the aims of art or higher truths.¹⁰ Undeniably, an essential component of Gregory XIII's Tower of the Winds was the insistence, in visual terms, upon papal and church authority and hierarchy. Yet in much of its art the tower also contradicts negative assumptions about art of the Counter Reformation and, I believe, introduced imaginative possibilities important for seventeenth-century art.

The tower, the one architectural structure in the Vatican apart from St. Peter's dome that was clearly visible from the city itself, was built and painted to celebrate the most famous achievement of Gregory's papacy, the calendar reform. The calendar's purpose has become obscured in our post-Enlightenment age, however, because it was not changed for the sake of scientific accuracy. Gregory's reformed calendar was instead regarded as a sacred vehicle to reestablish divine order in both church and nature: The church historically had determined the measurement of time, since its passage was considered the unmistakable path to salvation. The Tower of the Winds made clear to contemporaries the inextricably intertwined relationship of Gregory's calendar reform to his mission to renew faith and to lead the Christian world towards redemption. It proclaimed with assurance not only Gregory's political and religious authority over the capital and the universe, as did the Gallery of Geographical Maps, but also Gregory's domination of nature and time. The origin of the Tower of the Winds in the calendar reform, and their history, is the subject of Chapter 2.

How could one imagine a building and series of paintings devoted to this triumph of Gregory's reign, art that was to represent a political and spiritual unity under the authority of the pope in the wake of the Protestant revolt? Following Martin Luther's break with the church in 1517, the Christian world was suddenly divided into polarized factions; all universal leadership but God's had been called into question, and no solution to the problem of cohesion in a divided faith could be found, let alone in the form of a Catholic pontiff. How could one possibly represent a pope as devout, as spiritual, as truly reformed, as the legitimate leader of the faith, when, according to innumerable critics, so many papal predecessors had shamelessly, sacrilegiously, and publicly abused their positions of leadership? These were the conceptual and philosophical challenges of the tower's program.

A further challenge was to find compelling and even original *artistic* means to best rep-

resent the potentially exhilarating promise of religious renewal in a time when artistic innovation was often suspect, since all religious truths were believed to be unchanging and age-old, and when no artistic virtuoso was at the helm to ensure the acceptance of a message couched in progressive language. In this post-Vasarian, Counter-Reformation period even Michelangelo's genius no longer represented the absolute authority of the church, nor automatically gained universal approval. In the tower, it was a team of artists unknown today – papal cosmographer Egnatio Danti, architect Mascarino, painters Nicolò Circignani and the Fleming Matthijs Bril – who labored in tandem to represent religious renovation through a variety of surprisingly evocative artistic innovations, treated in Part II. They devised a picture of papal jurisdiction over nature and the world not only in the polemical vocabulary of political dominion and absolute hierarchy developed in earlier “high” art of the Renaissance, but also in terms of an alternative aesthetic, marked by a programmatic return to archaic or “low” art that focused sharply on humble devotional values.

Mascarino's architecture for the papal apartment ranging high above the Vatican Belvedere Courtyard, and its profound, ancient associations with imperial and papal prerogatives of rule that took canonical shape under Constantine, the first Christian emperor, is the subject of Chapter 3. The largest chamber, the Meridian Room, containing one instrument to measure the winds and another to measure time, was dedicated explicitly to the calendar reform; its form and meaning are the topic of Chapter 4. The pope's control of time and the cosmic forces of nature was here celebrated largely by the exalted imagery of high art in palatial ceremonial rooms, but Circignani merged this familiar vocabulary with other traditions – most notably art of the early church – that were intended to express qualities of heightened spirituality. Chapters 5 and 6 treat the remarkable landscape frescoes – small-scale historical cycles in four rooms and large-scale views of the surrounding terrain in the remaining two – painted in a more humble key. Filled with both pastoral and paradisiacal imagery, the Biblical narratives and illusionistic views of contemporary Rome evoke an idyllic, renewed era and suggest that a joyful end for the devout could perhaps be realized in Gregory's renovated capital. Chapter 7 analyzes the artistic innovations in the tower and their meaning for the concept of unity of the faith – likewise the purpose of the calendar reform – and how some of its ideas and visual language took root in art of the following century. Part III consists of the catalogue, which identifies the textual and visual sources for each of the paintings, and the appendix, a previously unpublished transcription and translation of Egnatio Danti's treatise on the winds, which was dedicated to Gregory XIII in honor of the anemoscope (or wind instrument) he designed for the tower.

My fundamental aim in this book has been to reimagine, as much as possible through contemporary sources, the designers' intentions in making the program, and the way the tower would have been understood by its patron, the pope.¹¹ In my mind's eye, I also envision the small circle of highly educated churchmen, delegated with fashioning and carrying out Gregory's program of institutional and personal reform, who presumably viewed it,

too, along with selected visitors such as ambassadors and high-ranking pilgrims; although for want of documents placing them there, this group of beholders remains only hypothetical.¹² What these men intended for the art, or saw in it, was assuredly an ideal, a wished-for perfection, a cosmic unity that resolved conflicts in the actual superstructures of their church, their culture, and their society.¹³ Certainly uncontrollable frictions and fears of rupture with the past may well have given impetus to the development of key aspects of the decoration. These conflicts surely contributed to the formulation of such strident, emphatic statements of the traditional unity of faith and power found in the tower's main ceremonial room, but also, remarkably, to the embrace of low subjects and styles that, in part, were associated with precisely those social forces that, to some, threatened to tear the church's fabric. My primary effort here is not to enlarge upon the manifold ways in which the imagery, from a current perspective, may have contested or undercut the ideology of its makers, however.¹⁴ Instead, I hope that I have illuminated how narrative, iconographical, and other visual devices were employed precisely to construct that elusive perfection.

The designers of the program did not mimic reality; they fabricated an ideal that sings its siren song to this day. Whether that ideal was realized in political terms, or was desirable in human terms, is beyond the scope of my quest. I would like to think, however, that the tower's art amplified concepts that were never so comprehensively and vividly articulated in church doctrine or politics as in this suite. Further, I think it likely that it was understood as such by some observers in succeeding generations, thus making the art an "active agent in history" that had a lasting effect on later art, culture, and society.¹⁵