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INTRODUCTION

Chigi, my good fellow,
While you are leading us round
The rooms of the Villa, and the gardens,
Scrutinising them completely, a whole hour has gone by. And
Intestines are quaking with hunger.
Don't think you can feed with noble
Painting my stomach

(Filippo Beroaldo the Younger)

Agostino gathered there everything beautiful and precious that Nature could give, everything artistic that the mind could invent, everything attractive represented by painting, everything miraculous formed by architecture and sculpture

(Giuseppe Buonafede)

Vasari said of the Farnesina palace that it was not built, but really born – non murato ma veramente nato*; and this phrase is but the expression of an ever-present sense – the sense of interrelation of parts, of unity of the whole*

(Edith Wharton)

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WHO NEEDS ANOTHER book on the Farnesina? No secular building typifies the Italian High Renaissance better than this villa established on the bank of the Tiber by the outrageously wealthy Papal banker Agostino Chigi (1466–1520). With its innovative architecture by Baldassare Peruzzi, brilliant frescoes by Peruzzi himself, Sebastiano del Piombo, Sodoma and Raphael – culminating in the tale of Psyche designed by Raphael and painted by his talented team of artists including Giulio Romano and Giovanni da Udine – it has been thoroughly studied and documented. Already in 1512, a French diplomat called it 'the most beautiful and rich thing I have ever seen', anticipating Goethe's declaration that no more beautiful works of decorative art existed. Every survey of Renaissance art and every study of those individual artists includes a passage on the Farnesina (a nickname given long after the Farnese had bought the property, more correctly known as the Villa Chigi or 'Palazzo Agostino Chigi'). Distinguished architects record it in their sketchbooks (Fig. I.1). In

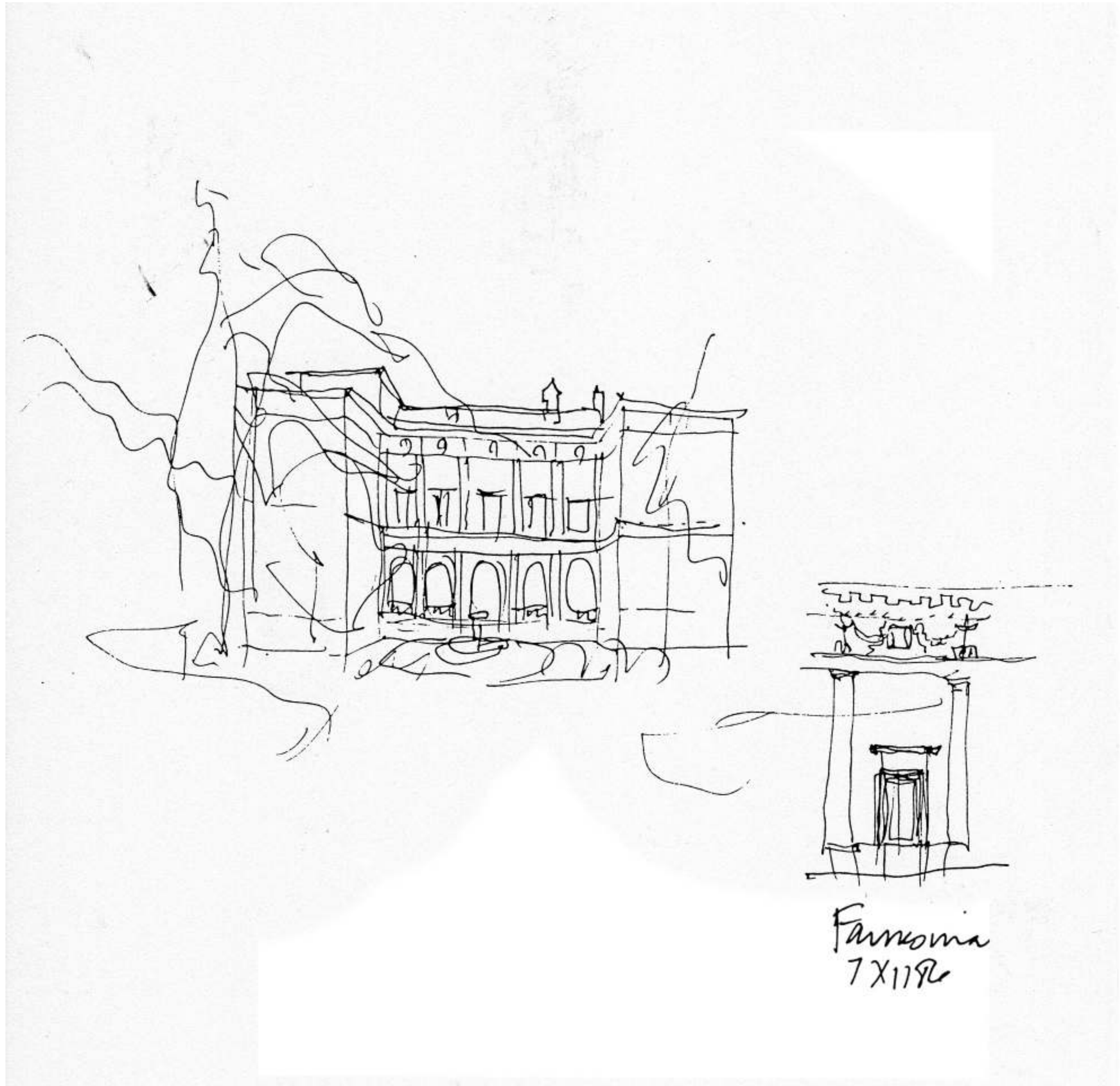

Fig. I.1 Donlyn Lyndon, *Farnesina*, 1986. Private collection

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Excerpt
More Information

a flash of the roller-ball pen, Donlyn Lyndon captures the essence of the place that I will now spend hundreds of pages expounding: the paradox of solid, cubic masses and airy lightness; the alternation of plain surfaces, noble windows and intricate cornice; the roof punctuated by jaunty chimneys. The buoyant line suggests the architecture's affinity with the trees around and the sky beyond.[1] The 'Amor and Psyche' loggia of the Farnesina, drawn by Lyndon as a looping arcade, inspired Paul Hindemith to compose an orchestral piece with that title, alternating tense drama and lush lyricism.

Praise of the Farnesina's 'harmony and pure beauty', its 'airy loggias' and 'miraculous' painted rooms, echoes down the centuries. More than any other work of the Renaissance it has been thought to express a 'Springtime aspiration to healthy joyfulness, beauty of composition and serene life'.[2] Voluptuous nudes, winged deities, lifelike vegetation and illusionistic 'prospects' increase the sense of floating away into an enchanted world, the pictorial splendour always reinforced by the architectural design. One of the pleasures of a stay in Rome was walking down from the American Academy with a poet-laureate colleague who is also a keen naturalist. As he entered the villa for the first time his wondering gaze shot upwards to the vault of the Loggia di Psiche, through the astonishing fictive pergola of fruit and foliage to the blue sky populated with closely observed birds and mythological creatures flying on equally realistic wings (Fig. I.2). Vasari had found in this same loggia *pittura*

Fig. I.2 Visitors in the Psyche loggia (formerly main entrance), Villa Chigi (Farnesina), Rome, 2011

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More Information

e poesia veramente bellissima, 'painting and poetry truly most beautiful' (IV.207), and this eulogy continues up to the present: Jill Burke declares the ceiling 'full of visual wonder and delight . . . the use of the nude here adds to its myriad pleasures; steeped in classical culture and knowledge of antique sculptural prototypes, the paintings are prompts for pleasurable enjoyment of leisure and sensual fulfillment'.[3]

The double-height loggias – one welcoming the guest as the entry hall, the other open to breezes from the gardens and the Tiber, both bright with frescoes by Peruzzi and the Raphael team – remained the principal attraction. But more secluded rooms also offered a thrilling synthesis of grand Architecture and 'noble Painting'. Peruzzi's first figurative frieze was on a more intimate scale, but his immense, illusionistic Sala delle Prospettive, and his sumptuous new bedroom frescoed by Sodoma with the nuptials of Roxana and Alexander the Great, form a compelling climax to the visit, though they were off-limits for many years (Fig. I.3). The fin-de-siècle aesthete Francesco Zacchi, one of the first to articulate the 'sensations' of the place in detail, felt when passing through the 'Hall of Perspectives' that he could actually breathe the country air, so vivid were the painted landscapes glimpsed between painted columns. He required special permission from the Spanish ambassador to enter the Roxana bedroom, but once inside he found it the *punto sacro*, the 'sacred high point' of the entire villa. Zacchi experienced 'the greatest intellectual joy' as he savoured the 'angelic simplicity' of the flying Cupids and the 'transcendent voluptuousness' of Roxana herself, 'throbbing with powerful life and seeming to effuse a most delicate perfume'.[4]

What survives is only a fraction of this most creative house, however. Visitors (and some scholars) seem unaware of what has been lost. The exterior paintings have vanished, the gardens have been washed away and built over, open loggias have been sealed so they can no longer breathe. Large areas of the extant building also remain underinterpreted, preventing our understanding of the whole, the total, work of art 'gathered' by Chigi and his team of artists, poets and intellectuals. In some ways, then, this book is a ghost story.

Fig. I.3 Visitors in the Sala di Rossana (nuptial bedroom) capturing Giovanni Antonio Bazzi, known as Sodoma, *The Nuptials of Roxana and Alexander the Great*, 2019

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Fig. I.4 Bookstand at the College Art Association Annual Conference, 2019

Certain frescoes at the Farnesina have been singled out for study year in and year out. (Not coincidentally, these were in the loggias, more accessible to the public.) Arresting, iconic and immediately recognisable, they now stand in for the Renaissance or for Italian art in general, adorning innumerable book-jackets and digital announcements (Fig. I.4).[5] This triumphal display continues unabated: Raphael's *Galatea*, especially, features prominently in the catalogue for the 2020 Mantua exhibition *Giulio Romano: Art and Desire in the Renaissance*, and will probably continue to appear wherever art and desire are considered together. In this process, the icon becomes exalted and its context fades into the background. Visiting in 1644 and 1645, the expert traveller John Evelyn already described the villa as 'fairely built, but famous only for the painting'; Evelyn observed 'Paynters designing and Copying after it', and specifies that the 'incomparable fable of Galatea . . . is a most stupendious lively painting'.[6]

The *Galatea* had indeed been singled out as a quintessential work by the seventeenth century, thought to inspire the viewer with the same 'Love' that Raphael had invested in it originally. Bernard Berenson assumed that every boy grows up 'haunted' by erotic dreams of Galatea.[7] The fresco became not only a tourist attraction (Fig. I.5) but a synecdoche for art itself. In Robert Rauschenberg's immense collage *The 1/4*

Fig. I.5 Visitors in the Sala di Galatea (formerly garden loggia), with Baldassare Peruzzi's astrological ceiling, Sebastiano Luciani, later known as del Piombo, *Polyphemus*, and Raphael's *Triumph of Galatea*, 2011

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Excerpt
More Information

Fig. I.6 Jacques-André-Joseph Aved, detail with drawing after Raphael's *Galatea* from *Portrait of Carl Gustaf Tessin*, 1749. Stockholm, Nationalmuseum

Fig. I.7 Robert Rauschenberg, detail of Raphael's *Galatea* from *The 1/4 Mile or 2 Furlong Piece*, panel 54, 1983. Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Mile, part of Raphael's *Galatea* appears in the panel dedicated to an art-historian friend. For an eighteenth-century connoisseur like Count Tessin as for a twentieth-century artist like Rauschenberg, a glimpse or fragment of Raphael's design is enough to denote taste and sophistication (Figs. I.6, I.7). The part can eclipse the whole, however. In an earlier book I called the Farnesina 'a living Renaissance survey' (*EV* 124), and it is true that classes from art-schools across Europe and America have studied there from the seventeenth century until now. But in actual surveys and textbooks the building is represented quite minimally, by the same one or two images. The achievement of Chigi and Peruzzi is everywhere and nowhere in art history.

This book aims to undo the isolation of one or two canonical images, placing them back into an enriched context where each element joins in a productive conversation. It is the first study to re-visualise the Farnesina's lost façade decoration and to reintegrate painting, sculpture, architecture, garden design, topographical plans, inventories, legal contracts and literature, notably the poetry and prose of the brilliant circle around Chigi. My first epigraph gives a small sample of this urbane discourse and a glimpse of how the patron presented his house and grounds. I reconstruct the entire estate, as far as possible after great losses: the vanished exterior paintings by Peruzzi himself (larger in area than the Sistine Chapel and with a similar intricate interweaving of picture and architecture), impressive subterranean features in the house and grounds, a sculpture collection now dispersed, and a large landscape garden of which less than a sliver remains. I establish connections among these lost elements and the well-known artworks that still survive inside the villa, and I show striking correspondences to the Imperial Roman 'Villa della Farnesina' on the site, unearthed by nineteenth-century archaeologists.

I make several innovative claims that go against the current consensus of experts. I prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Peruzzi and his team had access to those exquisite ancient wall-paintings buried within Chigi's grounds, thus

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Excerpt
More Information

enjoying their own private Domus Aurea that influenced the modern design. I propose new Peruzzi attributions and give him a larger role in the design of the garden architecture as well as the palazzo. I argue that the great five-bay belvedere or *altana* that extended the villa upward to the seventh floor was integral to the original conception and structure, not tacked on later as scholars have assumed. I show that Bramante's new Via della Lungara was influenced by the innovative layout of Chigi's estate, rather than vice-versa, and I infer that the riverbank site with its dining-pavilion was not planned piecemeal as Christoph Frommel insists, with a second lot improvised when it came on the market some years later but was conceived from early on as completed. I establish the harmonious proportions of the original suites on the reception floor and the *piano nobile* upstairs, before later remodelling transformed their scale completely, and I argue throughout that Peruzzi's design principles were 'pragmatic' and 'painterly' rather than theoretical and mathematical. Above all, I show that the Farnesina was a home for all seasons, enjoying the play of light and the scents of the gardens in summer, the arcaded banqueting pavilion overlooking the Tiber where the brilliant and beautiful of Rome would gather, the grotto and underground pool where 'Venus herself wished she had been born', but also in winter the luxurious steam-baths and monumental fireplaces that centred each room, providing aesthetic coherence, comfort and sociability – all of them later destroyed or thrown off-centre by drastic changes in floor plan. The place is far more complete and significant once these lost elements have been grasped, with the help of prints, drawings, texts and archaeological traces within the villa itself.

Here are new findings and new arguments about what is already known: material in the record but not fully interpreted, artefacts whose Farnesina connection I will propose for the first time, the Peruzzi-related drawings I studied in a previous article, passages of fresco never reproduced before, and new evidence from unpublished private-collection drawings (Ch. 3 n. 2, Figs. 1.12, 3.35). I also go deeper into all the literary sources inspired by the original foundation of the villa, not only short lyrics such as Beroaldo's 'Dum tu circumagis nos, bone Chissie' (first epigraph) but longer poems that eulogise the estate in heroic terms. The descriptive language of Chigi's 'house-poets', though naturally influenced by Classical Latin, provides essential tools for interpreting the Farnesina. Writing while the villa was still taking shape, they record the patron's intentions and desires as well as the features already completed – or in Blosio Palladio's epigrammatic terms, the *affecta* as well as the *effecta* (Q115). This book shares and expands upon Blosio's dichotomy, paying due attention to 'affect' as well as 'effect', to dreams and aspirations as well as facts on the ground.

'NOT BUILT WITH WALLS, BUT TRULY BORN'

Edith Wharton, trying to bring 'architectural principles' back into American design, defines her ideal by quoting Vasari's praise of the Farnesina as 'not built, but really born – *non murato ma veramente nato*'; for Wharton, Vasari's phrase, like the Villa itself, perfectly expressed 'the sense of interrelation of parts, of unity of the whole'. My goal here is to establish those 'parts' and their 'interrelation', and to unfold the various meanings of Vasari's compliment to the building's natural-seeming 'grace'. As Paul Barolsky ingeniously suggests, Giorgio Vasari here 'plays on the difference between being born in the flesh and being made out of stone', thereby linking the fabric of the building to the bodies transformed by Pygmalion and Medusa.[8]

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Excerpt
More Information

The creative architect is imagined, not as a mere builder, but as a kind of magician with the power to animate and petrify. I extend this analogy to the original conception of the estate, the brainchild of the ambitious patron and his protégé, the talented but extremely young architect-painter Peruzzi. In Chapter 3, reconstructing the exterior paintings, I propose that 'form and historiation were conceived in a single mental act', and that Vasari perceived the villa-palace as 'an organic creation rather than a mechanical construction'. Frommel observes that the original decorated exterior 'would have been, not only lighter and more joyful, but incomparably more alive' (*più vivace* or 'vivacious'); I show for the first time how this organic and 'living' quality came about. Significantly, Peruzzi's most ambitious ceiling-painting depicts Medusa amidst the victims she has turned to stone (Fig. 2.55); I interpret this as the artist's manifesto, a display of his prowess as a painter in full colour and in chiaroscuro, bringing fictive sculpture to life, and as an architect who can 'give birth' to animated yet coherent structures.

My opening chapter introduces 'the idea of the chthonic house, burrowing down into more ancient layers while rising on these foundations into realms of modern painting and abundant light'. Tracing first the antique and then the Sienese origins of the architecture and the estate, I propose that Peruzzi learned this conception when working on the Chapel of S. Giovanni in Siena cathedral, which soars upward from a dark stone floor to a cupola representing the heavens, and when helping Francesco di Giorgio Martini transform the ancestral Villa Le Volte, long recognised as a prototype for the Farnesina, but here studied in greater depth. The motifs of upward mobility and outward expansion into the prospect, or what one contemporary called architecture 'lifted into the air', run through my entire analysis of the new villa, culminating in the winged creatures of Giovanni da Udine in the Psyche loggia (Chapter 5). Among the fruitful ideas that Peruzzi inherited from Vitruvius, Leon Battista Alberti and Francesco di Giorgio – ideas that recur throughout this book – is that the villa itself longs to command its surroundings, gazing out 'like a falcon'.

In a sense my approach is ecological, though without the romantic primitivism associated with that movement. I find a useful analogy between Vasari's *nato non murato* and the idea that 'growth means to lie open to the span of the heavens and, at the same time, to have roots in the dark earth'.[9] But I also stress that Peruzzi (like his mentor Francesco di Giorgio) was a practical as well as a theoretical architect. He knew that, however 'uplifted' the final effect, architecture lies heavy on the earth and builds its airy spaces brick by brick and beam by beam. I study in unprecedented detail how Peruzzi achieves effects of grace and organic unity by close attention to foundations, basements, servants' quarters, fireplaces and chimneys, communicating doors, attics and the vertical circulation of staircases. This hands-on research also confirms that the Farnesina was a true dwelling, properly heated, ventilated and secured, rather than a mere 'summer retreat' for occasional visits, as many have thought.

THE HYBRID ESTATE: MULTIPLE STRUCTURES, MULTIPLE ARTS

As early as 1509 Agostino Chigi's Trastevere development, on the riverbank opposite from the historic centre of Rome traditionally identified as the 'Tuscan' or Etruscan side, was listed among the *mirabilia* of Rome that no tourist should miss, and worthy of the same attention as cardinals' houses. In 1520 – shortly after Agostino himself died – the Vatican authorities eulogised his 'supereminent' contribution, not only to private architecture and horticulture, but

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James Grantham Turner
Excerpt
More Information

to the beauty of Rome as a whole. He has 'enclosed, constructed and erected . . . the beautiful, sumptuous Palace, the loveliest orchard, or rather Viridarium, and many other precious and sumptuous buildings', greatly adorning the city that loved and nourished him (*cum maximo almae Urbis ornamento*).[10] In the same spirit, I will emphasise throughout this book the vital relationship between the architecture, the landscape garden and the urban environment.

Guidebooks including Jakob Burckhardt's *Cicerone* have recommended the Villa Farnesina continuously since the sixteenth century. But this complex of buildings and gardens has proved hard to categorise and name. That first guide called it a modest *vigna* or 'House-with-vineyard' (*Domus cum vinea*), and the poets who celebrated its opening named it variously *Viridarium* (a nursery garden, a green world), *Suburbanum*, *parvum rus* or *felix villula* – a 'small country place' or 'happy little villa'; at the same time, however, they emphasise the heroic scale of the building 'surging up to the stars', comparing it to the massive new fortifications of Rome (Ch. 4 nn. 15–16). *Villa* might apply to the whole estate or to its central dwelling, which might be distinguished as the *palazzo*, yet this term is frequently modified to suggest that it is not the conventional 'palace' or élite town house: 'palazzina', 'palazoto', 'Palazzo del Giardino'. Evelyn defined his destination as the 'Palazzo de Ghisi' or 'the Palace of Gichi', within which he singled out the 'sight of Farnese's Gardens, and of the Terrace where is . . . the most stupendious piece of worke in the world'. This accomplished connoisseur experienced the *Galatea* as an outdoor feature.[11]

The great 1765 panorama of Rome by Giuseppe Vasi (Fig. I.8) shows both the 'Palazzo di Agostino Chigi' and a diminutive 'Palazzino e Giardino Farnese', but he has confused two different structures. What Vasi labels the main 'Chigi Palace' (296) is in fact the imposing guesthouse and stable designed by Raphael, now mostly demolished, while the 'little Farnese palace and garden' (295) is the present-day Farnesina. What I call the Hotel Raphael did in fact loom larger than the villa, and from the street appeared more ornate. Vasi's revealing mistake reminds us that the villa was a complex of many 'sumptuous' architectural features integrated into an elaborate landscape garden, the *amoenissimum Viridarium* praised in 1520, rather than 'a neutral box housing three or four canonical frescoes', as it is now. (This integration of multiple buildings and gardens will be studied in Chapter 4.) The interrelation of the estate's multiple buildings, and the merging or exchange of identities between house and garden, palazzo and villa, will be recurrent themes in this book. Chigi's 'suburban' residence, I emphasise, combined elements of the palace, the

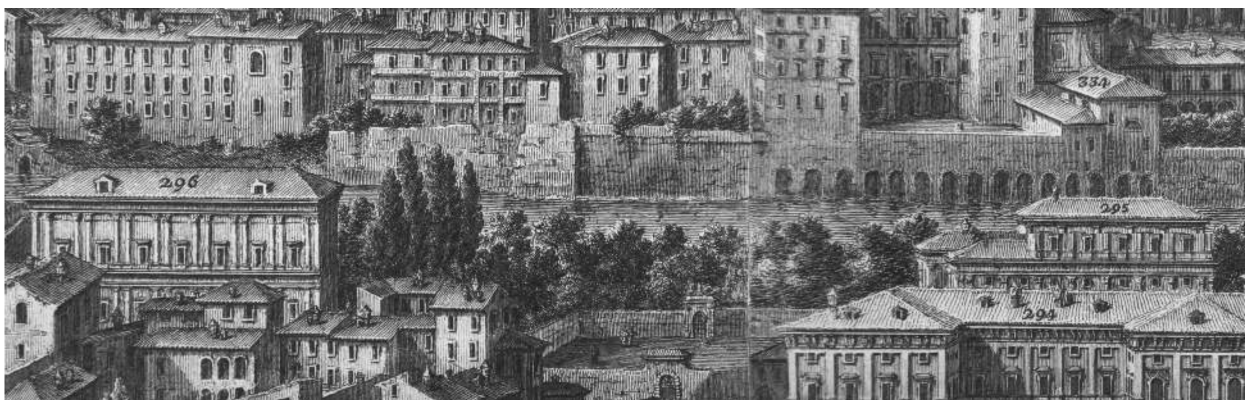

Fig. I.8 Giuseppe Vasi, detail of Raphael's guesthouse and the Farnesina (from Fig. 4.9)

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Excerpt
More Information

banking house and the villa, deliberately synthesising country virtues and 'urban magnificence'.

For convenience I use the familiar modern name 'Farnesina', though this only dates from the later eighteenth century. The Farnese had purchased the property by 1584 and merged the gardens with their own, but the prize building retained the title 'Palace of Agostino Chigi' for two centuries afterwards. One eighteenth-century topographer called it 'Villa de Ghisii', another 'the Farnesini Palace' as if that were the family name.[12]

Multiple kinds of dwelling combine within the main building, and multifarious structures throughout the estate extended this synthesis of contrasts. Raphael's sublime guesthouse is the most obvious and the easiest to reconstruct, from drawings and from a ruined segment of its outer walls still standing (Figs. 4.74a–b). Equally important, and coeval with the first stage of the villa, was the riverside dining pavilion or 'Porticus' situated over an artificial cave-pool or nymphaeum that greatly intrigued the poets; Chapter 4 offers the first coherent reconstruction of this significant feature within the gardens. That chapter brings out the individual character and function of the walled enclosures that controlled access to the buildings and framed the prospect, with entry gates of differing grandeur – the largest one entirely overlooked by previous scholars. I emphasise the inventive hydraulic system shared by house and garden, especially the elaborate fountain designed by Raphael around an antique *Venus* and the heated 'hipocausta' or three-room bathing suite created for Chigi to emulate the ancient baths (another feature previously unsuspected by historians). In its idiosyncratic way the Farnesina was a 'micro-macrocosm' or model of the world. But it is also significant for what it does *not* contain. I have found there none of the 'ancestor cult' that typified the art patronage of another eminent banker of the era, and no trace of Christian imagery or spaces set aside for devotion.[13]

The Chigi family historian Giuseppe Buonafede rhapsodised about how Agostino 'gathered there everything beautiful and precious that Nature could give, everything artistic that the mind could invent, everything attractive represented by painting, everything miraculous formed by architecture and sculpture' – though he thought that the architect was 'Sebastiano Servio'. Since then, better-informed critics have understood that 'painting, architecture and Nature' are 'inextricably connected' in the Farnesina project.[14] But it remains to be shown *how* Peruzzi achieved this 'connection', what were the full resources that he brought together in this hybrid experiment and what were the original relations between the palazzo, the gardens and the urban context. In Chapter 1 I show how the siting of the villa and its relation to the street express the extraordinary combination of qualities for which contemporaries praised Chigi, the private citizen-merchant whose financial enterprise upheld the papacy and entire city states: estate and patron alike were Tuscan yet Roman, ancient yet modern, rural yet urban, urbane and even urbanist, given the Farnesina's role in shaping the new Via della Lungara. I trace the Chigi villa's competitive relation to the neighbouring properties of powerful church leaders, Riario and Farnese.

The belvedere at the crest of the building was essential to the visual command of this environment (Fig. I.9 shows a digital reconstruction). Giovanni Pietro Bellori must have taken advantage of this viewpoint, and probably another rooftop observation area, when he composed his eulogy of Peruzzi's architecture and Raphael's painting:

> the art which disposes, and adorns, this palazzo seems to compete with the natural beauty of the

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