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The Last Days of Beauty

The Sack of Rome in 1527 and the end of the Renaissance

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Die Plünderung Roms 1527 und das Ende der Renaissance)

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On 6 May 1527 mercenary troops in the service of Charles V storm the city walls of Rome and embark on the biggest massacre in the city's history. A short time later the pope is encircled in the Castel Sant'Angelo, the water supply is destroyed and plague breaks out. After the nine-month occupation of the city its population has halved; many residents have fled. Rome is no longer the centre of the world. The Sack of Rome brings to an end one of the most magnificent eras in art history, the High Renaissance; many artists leave the city, the bright skies of the Renaissance cloud over and a dark age begins, an age of Mannerism and the so-called Turkish wars.

This book takes the destruction of Rome five hundred years ago as an opportunity to tell the story of the Renaissance from the point of view of its last untroubled moment and sudden end. It reconstructs the moment when the centre of the western world was unexpectedly destroyed – but above all it is also a lively introduction to the world of the Renaissance.

Through the story of these dramatic days, we meet the most important artists of the High Renaissance and their works from unusual perspectives: how did the painter Parmigianino manage to win over the mercenaries – and when the sack of Rome began, where was Margarita Luti, the mysterious lover (and frequent model) of the painter Raphael? Why did Sebastiano del Piombo alert his friend Michelangelo? Did the sculptor Benvenuto Cellini really defend the life of the pope, as a deadly accurate sharpshooter? Why did the humanist and author Pietro Aretino mock the pope after the sacking, and why did the

Gonzagas want to kill him? Can we, if we take a closer look at one of the famous noblewomen who hid from the soldiers in Rome, solve the secret of the Mona Lisa? And how was the sack of the city even possible, a disaster which no one had anticipated, and which has much in common with the religious, ideological and military crises of today?

The storm begins

The world is disappearing. The defenders are standing on the top of the city wall, ready to fight off the enemy; they know that the enemy forces are down below, they have heard the shouts of the starving soldiers all night, the sounds of hammering and sawing, and they know what it meant. It meant that they were building ladders, hundreds of ladders, to scale the wall at daybreak. But now, as the sun rises on this warm morning of 6 May 1527 and the day breaks, something unexpected happens: thick mist from the Tiber rises over the city. The few troops that Pope Clement VII has managed to assemble to defend Rome against its assailants are suddenly blinded. They don't know where to shoot, because they can barely see two feet in front of them. Rome, the centre of the world, dissolves into a spectral murk; the people looking down from the old city wall gaze into nothingness. But it isn't really nothingness: there are twenty thousand men down there, hungry, furious, prepared for anything. They are mercenaries in the service of the Emperor, German, Italian, Spanish, who have been waiting for their wages, frequently promised and never materialising. Now at last they want to go and grab whatever they can get hold of. They can be heard, a hubbub of cries and shouted orders; but they can't be seen. The dense fog is filled with the clatter of numerous ladders being hurled simultaneously against the walls, a confusion of German, Spanish and Italian voices. And desperate shots being fired at random into the white cocoon that has spread over the centre of the world.

Rome's defensive walls are ancient – erected by the Emperor Aurelian, they were originally intended to protect the city against the Germans who advanced into southern Italy over 1,200 years previously. On that occasion, the panicked Romans were able to build a wall around the city, 20 kilometres long, a bulwark with almost 400 watchtowers that were later further elevated to a height of eleven metres. Because it all had to be done quickly, all the things that

stood more or less on the line of defence – the Pyramid of Cestius, the remains of aqueducts and the Mausoleum of the Emperor Hadrian, later renamed the Castel Sant’Angelo (because Pope Gregory I had a vision of the archangel Michael there in the 4th century) – were built into the walls. Constructed from millions of flat bricks, the walls had not always been able to save the city: in 410 Rome was looted by Gothic mercenaries, then came the Vandals, who fully lived up to their reputation. Despite this, the Baths of Diocletian and Colosseum were kept in operation for a while, but the population fell dramatically; anyone who was able to do so left the city.

Around the year 530, at the start of the Gothic Wars, the inhabitants of Rome still numbered around 100,000. In the wake of the conflict, the ancient water pipes and public infrastructures collapsed. One last chariot race was held in the Circus Maximus in the year 550; that was the end of the classical age. Now the centre of the world was a landscape in ruins. After attacks by Lombard and other invaders, the population of the former metropolis, once home to a million people, had fallen to 20,000, concentrated in the lower quarters of the city near the Tiber, because of the destruction of the remaining water pipes. Houses were built from the ruins of antiquity, including those of the Theatre of Marcellus.

The area around the pilgrim churches stood, San Giovanni in Laterano and Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, for example, resembled a lunar landscape: debris, meadows, a few vineyards and some ploughed land, all within the ancient walls. The Forum Romanum, once the centre of life in ancient Rome, became a wilderness within the city. The area called the Borgo, however, became a new centre, and that centre was a religious one.

As capital of the church state, and with the coronation of Charlemagne by Pope Leo III in the year 800, Rome acquired a new significance – and a new wall, designed to protect the Vatican to the west of the city, on the right bank of the Tiber and outside the ancient Aurelian wall. Pope Leo had the wall built after the sacking of the church’s treasures by Saracens in 846.

In the late Middle Ages, the city began to attract people once more, and the population increased to 50,000. By around 1500 Rome had regained its place as the religious centre of the western world. The Italian dukedoms and republics sent ambassadors, while France and England, the Holy Roman Empire and Spain sent delegates to the papal court. The quickly growing number of cardinals and businesspeople brought wealth to the city and also attracted artists. From 1506, construction began on the new St Peter’s basilica and the pope’s palace on the spot where Emperor Constantine had built his original St Peter’s.

Michelangelo was in Rome to build a monumental grave to Pope Julius II, and cover walls and ceiling of the Sistine Chapel with frescoes, while Donato Bramante was commissioned to design the new basilica. By 1517 Raphael had painted the Sistine Madonna for the monastery church of San Sisto, and *Parnassus* and the *School of Athens* in the Vatican *stanze*: evocations of the world of the classical thinkers and the epitome of a bright Renaissance – in these paintings the sky is almost always bright, deep blue or hazy. In this Renaissance there are no storm clouds, only rarely the blackness of a turbulent night, none of the darkness and melancholy still seen in Raphael's early portraits.

But now, in May 1527, Michelangelo is in far-off Florence, Raphael has been dead for seven years, having passed away at the age of only 37, probably after becoming infected with malaria on an archaeological outing into the Roman marshes.

The storming begins when the city is still in darkness, at four o'clock in the morning on 6 May 1527. The Landsknechts – German mercenaries – try to break through near the Porta San Spirito. At first the defence holds, as it does at Porta Torrione, where the Spaniards are trying to climb the Leonine Wall. To confuse the fog-bound Roman artillerymen still further, the leader of the troops, Charles de Bourbon, organizes a series of feint attacks at the Milvian Bridge and near the Borgo; when the defenders concentrate at that spot, he attacks Porta Santo Spirito. He leads the charge himself, and is the first to climb one of the ladders, when an arquebusier fires at him in the thick morning mist and hits him by sheer chance. He falls, the bullet having passed through his hip and struck his vital organs. With the last of his strength, he orders his men to cover his body with sheets; the Romans must on no account discover that the leader of the enemy fell in the first attempt to get over the city wall. But someone up there knows what happened; the defenders cheer, imagining that the danger has passed, and the leaderless army will retreat and disperse amidst the chaos. The pope finds out about it and thanks the Lord – but his thanks are premature. Because while the German mercenary divisions are doing their best to break into the city, the Spaniards have discovered a hole in the wall, in which an artisan has set up his business. When they climb into the shop they discover that they have, without encountering the slightest resistance, entered the palace

garden of Cardinal Ceri, in the middle of the Borgo, between the Vatican and the Tiber. It may be the most consequential hole in a wall in history.

At about six o'clock in the morning when the mist clears and the sun rises, the attackers break through the city's defences in three places.¹ In the Borgo, the Swiss Gardens are overrun. The imperial troops advance on the Vatican: bullet-holes are still visible in the obelisk there.²

Luigi Guicciardini, the pope's confidant, sees the marauders coming. They look ragged, desperate, dirty – they are, he tells the pope, more like a collection of beggars than an imperial army, desperate and furious and greedy for the wealth of the city.³ The pope has underestimated this army of beggars for a long time, and he isn't alone; his own commander, Renzo da Ceri, from the famous Roman Orsini family, who leads 5,000 soldiers, has told him that these remnants of an imperial army could not represent a serious danger, that they are weary from marching and weakened by an unusually harsh winter. Furthermore, they have on their heels the great army of the League of Cognac, the alliance that Clement had forged a year before against the menacing power of Charles V; apart from the Vatican, its members include Francis I of France, the Medici in Florence, the Sforza in Milan, the Republic of Venice, and the kingdom of England. This mighty army, camped less than a day's march from Rome, could come to their help at any moment. No cause for panic, then.

However, however: the army of the League is led by a thin-lipped, long-haired lipped man called Francesco Maria della Rovere – no friend to Ceri, the commander of the papal army, and not an especially faithful devotee of the pope he is supposed to be hurrying to defend. Why did the Medici pope Clement VII choose a man of whom he is deeply suspicious as leader of his League's army? Very simple: after the bloody losses of the recent major battles, there weren't many *condottieri* – commanders who led armies for money – who would have dared to fight Charles V.

¹ Kenneth Gouwens, *Remembering the Renaissance. Humanist Narratives of the Sack of Rome*, Leiden/ Boston/ Köln 1998, XX

² Chastel, 31

³ 'You saw this army, that was more like a collection of beggars than an imperial army, but inspired by desperate rage and greed for the wealth of the city', Guicciardini, *Sacco di Roma*, XX.

Clement was dependent on the League, only recently established with his former enemies, and on their commander. As it would turn out, this was one of his many fatal blunders. Surrounded though he was by strategists, he could not have imagined the degree to which he could be betrayed.

The assailants are in the majority, and clearly ready for anything. The defenders of the city flee across the Tiber in boats or run across the bridges, and the troops of Renzo da Ceri, the papal commander, have collapsed before he is even aware of it. He suddenly finds himself standing there all alone, and flees to Castel Sant'Angelo, like three thousand other people. One of them is the multi-talented artist Benvenuto Cellini, who has made a name for himself as a goldsmith, sculptor, musician and author. As we read in his memoirs, he has a very high opinion of himself. Of course he wouldn't be Benvenuto Cellini if he called it 'fleeing'; instead he talks about running to the aid of the pope.

Charles de Bourbon has fallen, 20,000 mercenaries are without a leader that they all acknowledge; the city is overrun by men who have marched thousands of miles, often for days at a time and without any food, who have absorbed Luther's anti-pope propaganda, whose trade is in looting, and murder; a few of them, like Sebastian Schertlin, specialize in burning down houses when their owners refuse to pay protection money.

There is no one left to urge adherence to a military code of honour, or to plead reverence for the achievements of civilization. Captain Klaus Seidenstücker has stormed the wall at Santo Spirito, and pointed the cannon intended to protect Rome back into the city itself. Schertlin will later write in his memoirs: 'On the 6th day of May we took Rome by storm, killed around 6,000 men and looted the whole city; we took everything we could find in all the churches and on the ground, burned down a good part of the city and did some strange housekeeping, and we also tore and broke all the copies registers letters and cortisanei.'⁴

⁴ Schertlin, 13.

Convents are attacked, priests killed, houses and palaces set alight. What Schertlin refers to as ‘strange housekeeping’ means: the mercenaries attack with a fury unknown even in the Cinquecento, an age that was certainly no stranger to violence. The pope’s Swiss Guard, resisting the looters at St Peter’s, are easily slaughtered. Benvenuto Cellini will later report that the imperial troops reached Castel Sant’Angelo just as the drawbridge came crashing down. Cardinal Armellino, who had taken a little too long burying the papal jewels in his garden, was lifted into the castle in a basket without a moment to spare.⁵

Anyone who runs to Castel Sant’Angelo after that is as good as dead. Houses are set alight, and the mercenaries rage through the city, fuelled by their greed for blood and gold, breaking into *palazzi* and setting them ablaze.

Renzo da Ceri is discouraged – by his soldiers’ lack of discipline and the lack of assistance from the League. Where are the relieving forces of the League of Cognac that were supposed to support him? Where is Francesco Maria della Rovere? He’s not very far from Rome, less than a day’s march north of the city near the Lago di Bracciano. The only problem is that Della Rovere, who was sent by the League to defend Rome, is inexplicably staying put and showing no sign of heading to Rome and engaging in what would actually be a straightforward battle with the scattered soldiers of the imperial army, too busy looting to put up much of a fight.

For some time Della Rovere’s army had followed the imperial hordes with the cautious respect of a police car following a crowd of demonstrators. Even now they didn’t intervene. While Ceri waited desperately in the Castel Sant’Angelo to be rescued by the League troops, Della Rovere argued that his army was in a poor state, first of all; secondly the Venetians were too weak for an open pitched battle with the Landsknechts (which would never have come about in any case), and thirdly... he found a thousand reasons not to move, demanded money and reinforcement and did: nothing.

The pope’s fatal mistakes

[DEL PIOMBO PORTRAIT OF CLEMENT VII HERE]

During the confusion of the assault, the shouts of the combatants and the people in flight from the soldiers who were now pouring into the city reaches all the way the *stanze*, the

⁵ Hook 1972, 183.

living spaces of the Vatican; Pope Clement VII sits beside Raphael and Michelangelo's works and prays. The view from the window is disturbing, Rome has disappeared, the world has gone, there is fog everywhere; damp oozes into the rooms. The pope has spent the whole night praying, and he is now in an emotional state that is typical of him, one somewhere between disbelief and panic.

Not far from where he sits there is a portrait of him, painted in 1525 by Sebastiano del Piombo. It shows him looking almost relaxed in a chair, gazing into the distance, elegant and blasé, with his chin jutting powerfully, imperturbable as if he has perfect control of the situation. Seldom can an artist have so artfully disguised the true character of a pope, because in reality Clement was a ditherer, apprehensive and emotionally volatile, often poorly advised and badly informed, sometimes euphoric for no reason, sometimes groundlessly anxious, then relaxed again when he has no cause to be. If one knows what lies ahead for this pope, however, one may also discern an inkling of a coming storm in Sebastiano's portrait: the lighter lines in the otherwise monochrome background of the painting look like speed-lines, as if the pope were whirling around, his white cloak hurtling into the abyss. His eyes are strangely reddened, his left hand has already slipped out of the frame of the painting. For all his efforts to gaze serenely into the distance, there is something unstable and unfocused about him.

Even Clement's enthronement in 1523 hadn't been a simple matter, because he was an illegitimate, posthumous son of Giuliano di Piero de' Medici, who was murdered in Florence during the Pazzi conspiracy against his family, before his son was born. It was only because Clement's cousin and predecessor in the post, Pope Leo X, retrospectively acknowledged the affair as a marriage, an extraordinary piece of manoeuvring in terms of ecclesiastical law, that he was made *papabile* – eligible to stand as pope.

Since being installed in office, Clement had made mistakes, serious mistakes, even though he took advice from Baldassare Castiglione, courtier par excellence at the time, who would in 1528 go on to write the guide to success at court and who served as his Nuncio at the court of Charles V, and also from Niccolò Machiavelli, famously adept in the politics of power. At the same time, however, he also received information and advice from Nikolaus von Schomberg, a fervent devotee of the emperor, and also from Matteo Giberti, who was close to Charles's arch enemy, King France I of France, a contradiction that must have unleashed some kind of diplomatic storm in Clement's head. And now, quite clearly, something was happening that no one, the pope least of all, had thought possible: Rome had been conquered and destroyed. Perhaps for the sake of caution he had not even considered

this possibility because the consequences were so unimaginable and terrifying that he preferred not to think about them at all. But what was happening now was as bad as anyone could have imagined, and worse.

When the shouting came closer, and it became clear that the attackers had mown down the Swiss Guard and stormed the Vatican, that they were already in the buildings, the pope too emerged from his stupor and, panicking, fled along the Passetto di Borgo, a covered passageway high above the city, leading to the almost impregnable Castel Sant'Angelo. Thirteen cardinals ran with him, among them Alessandro Farnese, the future Pope Paul III.⁶ Paolo Giovio, Clement's personal physician and chronicler, threw his purple bishop's cloak over the pope so that his white robe didn't give him away: a few hours after the white-clad Bourbon fell – perhaps because the pale material was visible to the arquebus-wielding defenders – the disguised pope was brought to safety. At the same time the Landsknechts were forcing their way into the Vatican.

Had he stayed any longer, Clement could easily have been caught or even killed. Popes had been killed in the past: Pope John XII, for example, deposed on grounds of moral misconduct, was killed in the year 964, but in more recent times the idea of violence against the pope had become unthinkable. But the men who were now invading the Vatican had no respect for the supreme head of the Church; they were fearless. The Church had long been subject to criticism, not least because the pope was turning increasingly into a worldly Renaissance prince, more concerned with politics and power than with faith. Luther's flyers, in which the pope was mocked and compared to an animal, had considerable consequences: for many of the Landsknechts he was nothing but an animal, a monster that could be cut down like any kind of beast.

How had it come to this?

Before the Sack: Rome aglow

To understand what was happening in May 1527, and what was lost forever during those days, we need to imagine the atmosphere that prevailed in Rome in the 1520s – and how, at around this time, hatred of what Rome stood for had grown across Europe over the previous

⁶ Gouvens 1998, xvii.

two decades. Italy was divided into numerous principalities, powerful city states, including the Vatican itself, and was at the same time a focus of interest for both the Habsburgs and for France.

Italy had been politically unsettled since the late 15th century. In Milan, Ludovico Sforza resisted the claims of the French, while Cesare Borgia used his time as pope to build himself a dukedom from the papal possessions in Umbria, Romagna and Tuscany. In Clement's home city of Florence, the Medici had been briefly removed from power by the ascetic preacher Savonarola, who won the sympathies of the people with his severe criticism of conditions in the Church and the luxurious lifestyle of its leaders, before becoming further radicalised. When he finally collected jewellery, expensive clothing and works of art and had them publicly burned as the devil's work – the artist Sandro Botticelli is said to have voluntarily handed over several of his works to be consumed by the flames – the pope excommunicated the religious insurgent; in 1498 he was first hanged and then burnt at the stake. Savonarola was rendered inactive before he could permanently overturn the existing power relations, but the very fact that he had such a large and convinced following was a foretaste of what awaited the Vatican and the Catholic world with the rise of the reformer Luther, a great admirer of Savonarola. 'Hitherto peace had reigned universally,' the papal adviser Guicciardini, not exactly an impartial observer, once lamented, 'everywhere there was flourishing wealth and busy trade. Nowhere was Italy the subject of a foreign ruler. The majesty of the church, the glory of the princes, surrounded by scholars and artists, was the crowning glory of Europe's garden.'⁷ This splendour lasted longest in Rome.

As political power struggles in Europe became increasingly brutal, assuming bizarre and unfamiliar proportions, culture experienced a freedom that it would never attain again. Economically, Rome was an exception and a relatively stable place. And Rome was an international city: a quarter of the inhabitants came from outside Italy, and only one in six was born in Rome.⁸

The lavish lifestyle of the clergy and all those who worked for the church had created a booming service industry of cloth-makers, specialist importers, embroiderers and others. Around 7,500 men and women –around 15 percent of the population of Rome – were dependent on church institutions. According to the census of 1527, no fewer than 700 people worked for Pope Clement VII.⁹ Added to these were 76 cardinals and bishops, who in turn

⁷ Quoted in: Johann J. Wyss, *Vittoria Colonna. Leben, Wirken, Werke. Eine Monographie*, Frauenfeld 1916. 1.

⁸ Chastel, 28.

⁹ Rudolph M. Bell, *Street Life in Renaissance Rome. A Brief History with Documents*, Rutgers University, 18

were responsible for 4,406 people; Cardinal Alessandro Farnese alone had 306 servants. But it was not only the nobility and the church that brought the city and its artists their big commissions; there were also the citizens who had succeeded in enriching themselves.

Rome's most beautiful villa and the artists' competition

One of the best-known of these was Agostino Chigi, the scion of a powerful banking family from Siena. His close relationship with the popes who leased him the papal saline plants and the mining rights for alum – a salt indispensable for the dyeing of textiles, for which Chigi soon held the monopoly – made him fabulously wealthy, and he became the pope's preferred creditor. Like his friend Pope Julius II, Clement's predecessor but one, he invested some of his money in ancient and contemporary art. So that he could surround himself with both, Chigi had a palazzo built near the Tiber, a villa which even today is the epitome of humanist Renaissance Rome and its love of antiquity.

At the time the villa, named 'Farnesina' after its later owners, stood outside the city on a street leading to the vineyards and country houses of the Farnese family near Porta Septimiana. Early in the summer of 1505 Chigi bought a plot of land there, just beside the river, and had the artist Baldassare Peruzzi, also from Siena, design him a palace in the style of the ancient Villa Suburbana. It would become the place where the High Renaissance reached its climax – and its end.

In the summer of 1505, while Chigi was buying his plot of land, a long way away in central Germany a 22-year-old man was running across a field. In the summer term of 1505 his father had advised him to study law in Erfurt. But on 2 July 1505 the rising East German lawyer found himself in the middle of a violent thunderstorm after visiting his parents. The young man was easily startled; fearing for his life, he prayed to Saint Anne. If he was allowed to survive the tempest, he promised, he would become a monk. Survive he did, and on 17

July 1505 he asked to join the monastery of the Augustine Hermits in Erfurt. And so the terrified young lawyer became the monk Martin Luther.

On 22 April 1506 – first because this was the day claimed as the anniversary of the foundation of Rome, and secondly because astrologists had identified the date as coinciding with a propitious alignment of the stars– work began on the building of Chigi’s riverside villa. Five years later, in the summer of 1511, Chigi was able to move in. These were good times for Chigi: by now Pope Julius II had accepted his trusted banker into his family as an honorary Della Rovere, and from 1511 Chigi lived in the villa out of wedlock with the young Francesca Ordeaschi; of modest circumstances, she was the daughter of a Venetian grocer from the Roman district of Castello. Chigi had, his biographers write, ‘brought’ her from Venice; others speak of an abduction.

The 26-year-old painter Sebastiano Luciani, later famous under the name of Sebastiano del Piombo, came to Rome from Venice. He was one of the artists who painted frescoes on Chigi’s villa. Sebastiano had attracted attention in Venice as a gifted lutenist, before studying painting with Giovanni Bellini; from Venice he brought with him specialist knowledge of the application of paints, the famous Venetian *colorito*. At Chigi’s villa he found himself in direct competition with Raphael, but quickly became close friends with Michelangelo, whom he greatly admired. Raphael and Sebastiano found themselves up against one another when painting Chigi’s Loggia of Galatea. In that room, Raphael painted the triumph of Galatea, and Sebastiano the giant Polyphemus. Raphael’s Galatea won greater praise from the Roman art world, but for Sebastiano, whose style in Chigi’s villa appeared more Roman and monumental, this was still a successful entrée. He soon received commissions for portraits, and was seen alongside Raphael as one of the best portraitists of his time.

[PAINTING RAPHAEL TRIUMPH OF GALATEA]

At first Raphael’s painting technique – euphoric, dramatic and clear, the vivid figures in his tempestuous *Transfiguration* in the Vatican assuming an almost three-dimensional reality – seems worlds apart from Sebastiano’s calmer, softer, warmer, darker Venetian style.

A few decades later, in his collection of biographies known as *The Lives of the Artists*, Giorgio Vasari describes how Sebastiano, in the competition between Raphael and Michelangelo, favoured the latter: Raphael of Urbino had ‘won such high esteem as to prompt his friends and disciples to say that according to the rules of painting his works were superior to those of Michelangelo, alluring in their colours, beautiful in their invention, charming in their facial features and appropriate in *disegno*, while those of Buonarroti, except in *disegno*, had none of these qualities. And from this they came to the judgement that Raphael was, if not his superior in painting, at least his equal, although superior to him in *colorito*. This opinion was taken up by many artists who felt a greater connection to Raphael’s charm than to Michelangelo’s depth, and for various reasons they were more sympathetic in their judgment to Raphael than to Michelangelo. But Sebastiano was not among them, since thanks to his excellent judgement he had was most precise in his appreciation of both. The result of this was that Michelangelo turned to Sebastiano, whose colour and charm he liked a great deal. He took him under his wing and thought that if he helped Sebastiano with *disegno* he might in this way, without doing anything on his own part beat those who held that opinion and, in the shadow of a third party, decide which of them was better.’¹⁰ So the beautiful and praiseworthy works of Sebastiano had soon ‘been endlessly elevated and esteemed by Michelangelo’s praise’.

Shortly after moving to Rome, in 1511 Sebastiano painted the *Portrait of a Young Roman Woman*. It shows a young dark-haired woman seated by a window in which a typically Venetian, slightly melancholy evening mood hangs over a simple farmhouse, a painting of poor, rural ‘terra firma’. But the young woman has clearly escaped poverty; she wears a simple dress, but also an expensive coat with a lynx-fur collar, whose soft, fine hairs one might almost touch; the collar emerges from the painting almost as an optical illusion from the painting. That too is one of Sebastiano’s skills – to zoom so close to the figures and, in a softer way than Raphael, paint them so realistically that we can easily imagine the figure stepping from the frame and joining us in real life.

¹⁰ Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, XX [My translation for now]



Some art historians suspect that this woman is not, as its contemporary title has it, a ‘young Roman woman’, but rather Chigi’s lover and future wife Francesca.¹¹

¹¹ Vahland, 90.

Reality and illusion: in the 'Farnesina'

So in 1511, by the sluggishly flowing Tiber, a magnificent villa rose, a palace with two loggias and a total of forty rooms on two floors and two mezzanines, with doric pilasters and a striking Attic stucco band decorated with fruits and putti, as if announcing the excess within, where a world of gods and legends unfolded. Grey-green peperino stone from the nearby Alban hills was used on the façade – a favourite building material among the Romans. Everything was supposed to be suggestive of classical antiquity.

What did the supreme head of Christianity think when he walked into the cool of Chigi's loggia on a hot summer day and, in the presence of the woman with whom Chigi lived 'in sin', found himself surrounded by Zeus, Poseidon, Vulkan and other ancient gods? Or saw the figures from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Sebastiano's giant Polyphemus and Raphael's *Triumph of Galatea*, whirling in among tritons, dolphins and sea gods. Other ancient, and hence 'pagan' myths could be seen on the ceiling: Perseus beheading the Gorgon, the transformation of Callisto into a constellation. Eight lunettes (half-moons in niches or vaulted ceilings) were frescoed by del Piombo, showing among others Dedalus and Icarus, as well as the god of the west wind, Zephyr, blowing on Flora in a form that appears almost surreal; one might not think that the 16th century was capable of such abstractions.



A flight of stairs leads to the first floor, the midday light from the south dazzles the ascending visitors, who is still slightly dazzled as he enters the Hall of Perspectives: in the

winter a fire used to blaze in the hearth there; above the mantelpiece is a painting of Vulcan's forge, beside it Venus and Adonis and the Triumph of Bacchus. Between skilfully painted trompe l'oeil columns we look down on invented cities and landscapes; reality and illusion blur as completely as they must for drunken Bacchus. Vasari claims in his *Lives* that he once brought Titian into this room, and the painter expressed his astonishment that the apparent views were mere paintings.

In fact the whole room, frescoed by Peruzzi and his workshop, was intended to confuse fiction and reality so completely that the myths came as close to the visitor as if they were taking place in the present: the houses of the painted imaginary cities and the roofs of the Campo dei Fiori merge into a single skyline. The god Vulcan is seen in his smithy, and the visitor smells and hears the fire that really crackles in the hearth below. We hear rush of the Tiber and sees the mythical sea of Galatea. What the painters are doing is overcoming what Gotthold Ephraim Lessing would later describe, in his essay *On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power* as the 'nasty, wide gap' which, because of the long period of time, perceived as a great distance, lies between the ancient myth and the present, belief, the legend and its historical verifiability or even imaginability. In Chigi the myths are presented literally: they give off a smell (of fire), they make a sound (like the rushing sea), they forge a path through all the senses to the brain.

If we enter the palazzo from the north, we find ourselves in a breathtaking mythical world – in a loggia dedicated to the story of Amor and Psyche: Chigi had commissioned the painting of the loggia as a magnificent place for his wedding, which was to be held below a picture of the wedding of Amor with Psyche on Mount Olympus. If we believe Vasari's account, Chigi allowed the busy Raphael to live in the villa with his lover, known as La Fornarina, so that he would not be distracted and tempted to leave his work-place. Del Piombo and Sodoma also lived for a time in the villa, which thus became a kind of High Renaissance artists' residency.

The result is one of the most beautiful rooms in art history: if you tilt your head towards the ceiling, you will see a blue sky into which Giulio Romano has painted a naked Mercury with a winged helmet and a floating yellow cloak, seeking Psyche; a naked Venus with a flushed face, showing Amor, arrows at the ready, a highly realistic naked Venus painted by Giulio Romano, with lengths of fabric and fluttering birds floating around her,

drives to Jupiter in a coach; also by Romano, a Psyche borne through the air to Mount Olympus. Everything in these paintings is in swift motion, a cheerful turbulence.



Below them, Chigi and his guests held parties of a kind unseen in Rome since the days of antiquity. The paintings were the context for a revival of the ancient symposia, at which, philosophical discussions were also held about art and the ancient myths and their meaning, with reference to the works of Raphael, Sebastiano and Giulio Romano. This turned the villa into the intellectual engine room of the Roman High Renaissance, the centre of humanist circles, where thrilling parties were held, reputedly a match for the legendary feasts of earlier times: when Chigi's son Lorenzo was baptised, contemporaries reported, the most exquisite delicacies were served, musicians and singers appeared, and afterwards the silver cutlery was simply thrown into the Tiber to demonstrate to the guests that their hosts were too rich to bother with such tiresome matters as washing up. It was said, however, that Chigi had had nets stretched in the Tiber so that the valuable cutlery could be secretly recovered later on. There is also a slightly different version of the story, however: 'On earlier occasions,' Rudolph M. Bell writes, 'several cardinals had assumed the habit of stealing silver cutlery by hiding it under their robes. So for this particular meal Chigi ordered gold plates for all the guests, but insisted that these be thrown into the Tiber after each course. The guests revelled

in this exquisite waste, without guessing that the banker's clever servants had laid fishing nets in the river the day before, from which his precious goods were retrieved the next morning.'¹²

One person not invited to such parties was a dour young man who had come to Rome for the first, and as it would prove, the last time in 1511. Now he was strolling somewhat aimlessly through the Borgo. It was the first big trip that Martin Luther had undertaken, having never previously left his home-town. He didn't like travelling, and never again went as far as he did on this occasion. Even today we don't know what brought him Rome, whether he got there from Erfurt or Wittenberg, whether he was there on behalf of his order to protest against the imminent unification of strict 'observant' and more relaxed 'conventual' monks in shared monasteries, a measure ordained by the leaders of the German Augustine order – or whether there were other reasons. We don't know what exactly happened to Luther in Rome; all we know for certain is that afterwards he hated Rome for the rest of his life.

Luther stayed for four weeks and raised no objections to the selling of indulgences, against which he would later wage such an energetic struggle. He visited places of pilgrimage and, if we are to believe the church historians, 'did not let the ample opportunities for buying indulgences pass him by'.¹³

Luther was, however, furious about what he saw as a general moral decay – about satires, luxury, games, ancient liberties, everything, in short, represented by the man who would later excommunicate him from Rome with the Bull *Decet Romanum Pontificem*: Giovanni di Medici:

When Pope Julius II died in 1513, Agostino Chigi was one of the biggest financial supporters of Giovanni di Medici's election for the papal succession, and his contribution was successful: Medici took office in 1513 as Leo X. Pope Leo enjoyed Chigi's company as much as Pope Leo. He often participated in humanist discussions beneath the heaven filled with

¹² Rudolph M. Bell, *Street Life in Renaissance Rome. A Brief History with Documents*, Rutgers University Press, 18.

¹³ Johannes Wallmann: *Kirchengeschichte Deutschlands seit der Reformation*. 3. Auflage, Tübingen 1993, 19. Contains quotations from Luther about Rome.

Amor and Psyche, attended theatrical and musical performances, and enjoyed banquets of a decadence worthy of ancient Rome. His enemies later reported that Leo had adopted the saying 'God gave us the papacy, let us enjoy it' as his motto, but that may have been malicious gossip.

A Bull of Indulgence dated 31 March 1515 was intended to provide him with money for the new building of St Peter's Cathedral, and also to put Albrecht von Brandenburg, Archbishop of Mainz, in a position to pay back his debts to the Fugger banking house in Augsburg. Without indulgences, there would have been no magnificent church buildings.

The crisis of faith was joined by an economic one: the discovery of America and the importation of the gold found there led to inflation: because so many precious metals were flooding into Europe, the amount of money in circulation reached levels hitherto unknown. The rising price of food and everyday goods hit the poor particularly badly. Before the discovery of the New World gold from the New World a craftsman who owned a gold coin held in his hand the value of several months of work. The new wealth thus made the *piccola gente*, the little people, poorer. Rome was at the centre of its first economic globalisation crisis, which would ultimately lead to the Sacking of Rome.