

*Neptune in Villa Madama as an Allegory of Good Ruler**

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Villa Madama, located on the slopes of Monte Mario in Rome, is generally known as the unfinished architectural masterpiece of Raphael. Since the discovery of a copy of Raphael's description of this villa, its original plan and function as the guesthouse of the Medici family have been much discussed by numerous scholars.¹ Nevertheless, the villa's interior decoration, consisting of stucco reliefs and fresco paintings representing various mythological and allegorical motifs, has yet to be the subject of detailed study. Especially scholars have not arrived at any convincing interpretation of the decoration's program. In fact, the decorative components of the so-called Garden Loggia, which were executed, after Raphael's premature death, by Giulio Romano, Giovanni da Udine, Gianfrancesco Penni and Baldassarre Peruzzi, are rather diverse in their types and their textual sources. Apparently this makes it difficult to read a definite 'program' in them, if ever such existed.

The villa's Garden Loggia has three bays (fig. 1: III, IV, V). In the vault of the southwestern bay (fig. 2), the stucco relief of *Neptune* is represented in the very center (fig. 3), surrounded by four oval fresco scenes depicting *Venus* and playing *Cupids*. The basic idea of the southwestern bay's decoration may well be related to the element of water. According to Claudia Cieri Via, this thematic choice of the sea god is perhaps associated with the view of the Tiber from the villa, and, on a more philosophical level, with the Neo-platonic idea of the 'purification of carnal love through water'.² The actual building of the Garden Loggia was in fact intended to be used in summer. So the allusion to water was quite appropriate for this function, with the fountain and the fishpond in the garden nearby. However, previous studies have not actually posed the simple but fundamental question: why *Neptune* is represented at the top of the vault, that is, at the very key position of the entire decoration of this bay. The significance of this motif choice has not been fully discussed, and to answer this question we must clarify the allegorical meaning of the figure of the sea god. In the present article I shall discuss its visual sources and point out how to identify its fundamental iconographical function according to the Florentine humanist tradition,

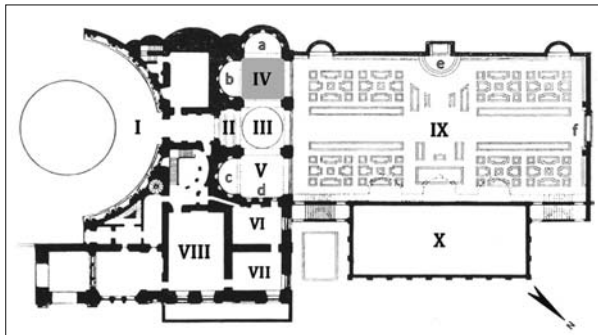


fig. 1 Actual plan of Villa Madama. I: Exedra / II: Atrium / III, IV, V: The Garden Loggia / VIII: Sala di Giulio Romano / IX: Garden / X: Fishpond (IV is the southwestern bay).



fig. 2
The vault of the southwestern bay, Villa Madama. (fig. 1: IV).

which must have been well known to the intellectual environment of the Medici family.

1. Visual Sources of the Stucco *Neptune*

As Cieri Via has already indicated, one visual source for the Villa Madama's *Neptune* was probably the antique sarcophagus representing Neptune and the Nereids (fig. 5), which was in the Church of Santa Maria in Aracoeli in Rome during the Renaissance (now in the Vatican Museums).³ Obviously the figure of Neptune in a quadriga in the center of the sarcophagus offered a model for the stucco figure of the villa.⁴ Nevertheless, another work, not mentioned in the previous literature on Villa Madama, seems to have served as model for the stucco *Neptune*: Leonardo da Vinci's *Neptune and Sea Horses* drawing in the Royal Library at Windsor Castle (fig. 4).⁵

This drawing is generally regarded as a preliminary study for the lost drawing dedicated to Antonio Segni, mentioned by Vasari in his *Vita* of Leonardo.⁶ Based on this Vasari passage, we can suppose that Leonardo sketched the Windsor drawing after studying the Aracoeli sarcophagus during his short stay in Rome from 1499 to 1500 and gave the finished presentation drawing to Segni in Florence before 1504.⁷ Raphael, who was then also in Florence, probably came to know this *Neptune* drawing by Leonardo or some other version, now lost, of the same composition. And later, inspired by both Leonardo's composition and the Aracoeli sarcophagus, Raphael designed the famous engraving of *Neptune calms the Storm* ('Quos Ego') in Rome, to be executed by Marcantonio Raimondi (fig. 6). In this context we can suppose that the design of the Windsor drawing may well have been known to Raphael's workshop.

In all probability Leonardo's *Neptune* was one of the important visual sources for Villa Madama's *Neptune*. In fact, some details of the villa's stucco *Neptune* are comparable only with Leonardo's drawing. The stucco *Neptune*'s frontal face and the bust bending forward apparently differ from Neptune's pose on the sarcophagus, standing straight and showing a profile head. Moreover, as the sixteenth-century drawing copy of the sarcophagus shows (fig. 7), the noses of all four sea horses are horizontally arranged, while the sea horse to the left of the villa's stucco raises his nose upright. These characteristic details of the stucco *Neptune*, while not seen in the Aracoeli sarcophagus, can all be found in Leonardo's drawing. Also, Neptune's raised right arm must have been based on Leonardo's drawing.

The close similarity between the villa's stucco and Leonardo's drawing leads us to a further supposition: the two representations of *Neptune* may share not only the same form but also the same iconographical meaning. According to Vasari, Leonardo's presentation drawing for Segni represented 'Quos Ego', a particular theme known from Virgil's *Aeneid* (I, 135).⁸ In this scene, Neptune calms the storm caused by angry Juno, and Aeneas's ships survive to land at Carthage. This is exactly the scene depicted in Raimondi's engraving after Raphael. The Neptune in the Villa Madama's stucco, most probably inspired by the 'Quos Ego' Neptune by Leonardo, originally held the trident in his raised right hand, and may well be regarded as representing the same 'Quos Ego' scene.

2. Allegorical Meaning of *Neptune*

Michaela Marek plausibly considered that Leonardo's 'Quos Ego' drawing presented to Segni was intended to praise Pope Julius II as a good ruler.⁹ The allegorical association between the sea god calming the terrible waves and the powerful ruler governing his people had in fact been known in humanist thoughts since the late fifteenth century. In *Disputationes Camaldulenses*, Cristoforo Landino, the eminent Florentine scholar and tutor of Lorenzo il Magnifico, explains that the first scene of the *Aeneid* can be interpreted as representing the hierarchy of souls.¹⁰ According to Landino, Aeneas is the human soul, and Juno who intends to destroy him is 'cupiditates'. While the wind god Aeolus who

follows Juno's order is 'ratio inferior,'¹¹ Neptune is 'ratio superior' that intervenes to control the 'ratio inferior' and restores the disturbance caused by vicious desires to the original orderly condition.¹² This allegorical interpretation of the Virgilian myth also has political connotations: the 'ratio superior' is compared to the sovereign who rules the state with rational judgments.¹³

According to Marek, Leonardo's presentation drawing to Segni was one of the earliest examples that visually represented this allegorical idea.¹⁴ Later in the sixteenth century, the 'Quos Ego' Neptune was frequently depicted or sculpted to glorify Italian princes in this context, for instance, Perino del Vaga's decoration of the Palazzo Doria in Genoa for Andrea Doria, and Bartolomeo Ammannati's fountain in the Piazza della Signoria in Florence for Duke Cosimo I de' Medici. Giorgio Vasari's fresco painting of *The Water* in the Sala degli Elementi in Palazzo Vecchio (fig. 8) is especially noteworthy, given that the artist himself explains its allegorical meaning in his *Ragionamenti*, apparently basing himself on Landino's idea.¹⁵

Tutto questo intessuto dell'elemento dell'Acqua, Signor Principe mio, è accaduto al duca signore nostro, il quale venuto in aspettamento dal cielo in questo mare del governo delle torbide onde, e fatte tranquille e quiete, per la difficoltà di fermare gli animi di questi populi tanto volubili e varj per i venti delle passioni degli animi loro, i quali sono dalli interessi proprj oppressi; [...]

In this fresco, which depicts a peaceful marine scene with Venus and sea gods, we can see Neptune holding a trident and casting his watchful gaze on the scene from the right corner. In Vasari's explanation, the duke was expected to calm the Florentine citizens whose changeable attitudes were like the turbulent sea waves. The allegorical concept clearly reflects Landino's passage, which must have been known to Vasari's iconographic advisor, Cosimo Bartoli.¹⁶ Considering that Villa Madama was originally designed for Pope Leo X, son of Lorenzo il Magnifico, we may well read the same political allegory in the stucco *Neptune* of the southwestern bay. In the Florentine tradition of representing Neptune for the glorification of rulers, it occupies a middle position between Leonardo's earlier example and the later monumental works.

3. Neptune and Venus

The above-mentioned painting of Vasari shows another iconographical aspect comparable with *Neptune* in Villa Madama. Vasari's fresco depicts Venus in the center of the peaceful marine world carefully watched by the 'Quos Ego' Neptune. Similarly, in the southwestern bay of the Garden Loggia, the four oval scenes of Venus and Cupids at play are depicted around Neptune.¹⁷

So far the thematic combination of Venus and Neptune has been explained by the rather vague relation between the two divinities, as Venus was born from the sea.¹⁸ However, Vasari's mural painting suggests that the peaceful and prosperous condition brought about by Neptune could be appropriately represented by the figure of Venus. In fact, an interesting composition of a tapestry executed during the later years of the reign of Leo X, *The Triumph of Venus* (fig. 9), seems to confirm this point.

The tapestry in question belonged to the set of *The Triumphs of the Gods* designed by Giovanni da Udine and Perino del Vaga around 1517-21.¹⁹ In this composition, Venus and Cupids are depicted in a large ship on the sea. The sea is populated by numerous marine gods and, in the center, we see the 'Quos Ego' Neptune (fig. 10) to whom the couples of Nereids and Tritons dedicate the fruits of the sea. Obviously, the pose of Neptune is the reversed version of Leonardo's 'Quos Ego', while the



fig. 3 *Neptune*. Stucco relief. The vault of southwestern bay, Villa Madama.

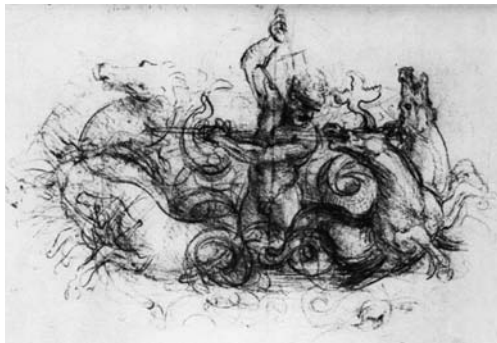


fig. 4 Leonardo da Vinci, *Neptune and Sea Horses*. Black chalk on paper, 251 x 392 mm. Royal Library, Windsor Castel, inv. 12570.



fig. 5 *Sarcophagus of the Neptune*, Vatican Museums, Garden of Pigna.



fig. 7 *Sarcophagus of the Neptune* (detail).
Copy in Codex Coburgensis, Cod. icon. 195, n.120, Veste Coburg.

fig. 6
Marcantonio Raimondi (after Raphael), *Neptune calms the storm* ('Quos Ego').
(detail). 1518 ca. Engraving, 417 x 325 mm. Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester.



fig. 8 Giorgio Vasari, *Water*. 1555. Sala degli Elementi, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence.

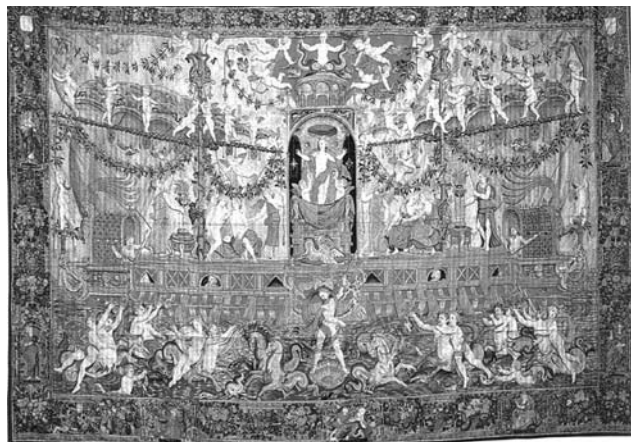


fig. 9 Giovanni da Udine and Perino del Vaga (?), *Triumph of Venus* from the *Triumph of the Gods*. ca. 1517-20, woven in the Brussels workshop, ca. 1560. Wool and silk, 5010x7390mm, Mobilier National, Paris.



fig. 10 *Neptune*. Detail of the *Triumph of Venus* (fig. 9).

Aracoeli sarcophagus may also have been the visual source for the frieze-like arrangement of Nereids and Tritones. On the ship, Venus stands on a throne set inside a pavilion, assuming the pose of peaceful triumph. Numerous Cupids fly around her, some playing and others shooting arrows at the amorous couples on the ship.

From this composition, we realize that the combination of Venus's triumph with the peaceful reign of the sea by Neptune was a common iconographical pattern in the papal court of Leo X. In fact, this subject shares the basic theme of Leo's symbolic Golden Age, which was also represented in the famous tapestry series for the Sala di Costantino, *The Giochi di putti*, with its numerous children at play. Needless to say, Pope Leo's self-image as the bringer of peace was eloquently expressed in Raphael's great fresco of *The Fire of Borgo* in the Sala dell'Incendio as well as in the designs on the reverse of his medals. Therefore, I would like to suggest that the decoration of the southwestern vault in Villa Madama should also be interpreted in the same context, as alluding to the ideal reign of Pope Leo X. The central Neptune, a good ruler, symbolizes the world peacefully governed by the Medici Pope.

Conclusion

In the beginning of June 1520, Cardinal Giulio de' Medici wrote to Mario Maffei, the bishop of Aquino and a member of the intellectual circle of the Medici in Rome, regarding the subjects to be represented in the decoration of the villa.²⁰ The cardinal Giulio, Leo X's cousin and future Pope Clement VII, was then responsible for the practical arrangements of the villa's construction. At this time, shortly after the death of Raphael, the cardinal apparently entrusted the selection of the subject matter to Maffei:

Quanto alle storie o favule: piacemi siano cose varie, né mi curo siano distese e continuate, e soprattutto desidero siano cose note; [...] Le cose di Ovidio, di che Vostra Paternità mi scrive, mi vanno a gusto; però veda di eleggerne le belle, il che a lei rimetto. Cose oscure come ho detto non voglio, ma varie sì e scelte.

Thus we learn that Maffei had suggested Ovidian episodes before the date of this letter, and the cardinal, approving the suggestion, solely requested a rich variety of subjects and the choice of widely-known stories. Obviously, the actually chosen subjects do not accord with Giulio's indications. We might expect from the cardinal's words a rather loose selection of Ovidian episodes, but, through the above analysis of the *Neptune* stucco in the southwestern vault, we may well suppose that Maffei carefully elaborated an allegorical program glorifying the Pope's reign.

The further question of whether this program had already been designed during Raphael's lifetime is debatable. However, considering the close conceptual continuity between the *Triumph of Venus* tapestry and the southwestern vault of the loggia, I am inclined to think that at least some basic iconographic scheme may have been agreed upon by Raphael and the Pope while the artist was engaged in the architectural plan.²¹ The figure of Neptune symbolizes the reign of Leo X's Golden Age, and appropriately embodies the supreme ruler in the center of the peaceful and prosperous world represented in the southwestern vault.

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Notes

- 1 P. Foster, "Raphael on Villa Madama: The Text of a Lost Letter," *Römisches Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, IX, 1967/68, pp. 308-12; R. Lefevre, *Villa Madama*, Rome, 1973; C.L. Frommel, "Die architektonische Planung der Villa Madama," *Römisches Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, XV, 1975, pp. 59-87; J. Shearman, "A Functional Interpretation of Villa Madama," *Römisches Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, XX, 1983, pp. 315-27; C. Napoleone, *Villa Madama: Il sogno di Raffaello*, Turin, 2007.
- 2 C. Cieri Via, "Villa Madama: Una residenza "solare" per i Medici a Roma," in S. Colonna, ed. by, *Roma nella svolta tra Quattro e Cinquecento: Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi*, Rome, 2004, pp. 349-73. About the relation with the Tiber and the theme of water, see p. 354 et seq. In the opposite side of the loggia, the stucco relief of nereid *Galatea* is figured at the top of the vault.
- 3 Cieri Via, *ibid.*, p. 354; P.P. Bober - R. Rubinstein, *Renaissance Artists & Antique Sculpture: A Handbook of Sources*, 2nd ed., London, 2010, p. 143.
- 4 Cieri Via, *loc. cit.*
- 5 K. Clark - C. Pedretti, *The Drawings of Leonardo da Vinci in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen at Windsor Castle*, 2nd ed., I, London, 1935, p. 109-10; C. C. Bambach, ed. by, *Leonardo da Vinci: Master Draftsman*, exh. cat., New York - London, 2003, pp. 512-5.
- 6 G. Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori* [1568], ed. by R. Della Pergola - L. Grassi - G. Previtali, Novara, 1967, III, p. 394. For the presumable copy after the finished work, now at the Accademia Carrara, Bergamo, see C. Gould, "Leonardo's 'Neptune' Drawing," *The Burlington Magazine*, CXIV, 1952, pp. 289-92.
- 7 In 1504, Segni left Florence to work at the Papal Mint under the commission of Pope Julius II: D. Cast, *The Calumny of Apelles*, New Haven - London, 1981, p. 49 et seq.
- 8 According to Vasari, an epigram by Segni's descendant was added to the drawing by Leonardo. It praised his skill, compared with Virgil's Neptune, i.e. 'Quos Ego' Neptune. Vasari - Della Pergola - Grassi - Previtali, *Le vite*, cit., III, p. 394.
- 9 M. Marek, *Ekphrasis und Herrscherallegorie: Antike Bildbeschreibungen bei Tizian und Leonardo*, Worms, 1985, p. 92 et seq.
- 10 C. Landino, *Disputationes Camaldulenses*, ed. by P. Lohe, Florence, 1980; Marek, *Ekphrasis und Herrscherallegorie*, cit., pp. 86-92.
- 11 "Quo in loco si vitae civilis cupiditas sit Iuno, commode Aeolum inferiorem, Neptunum vero superiorem hominis rationem interpretabimur. Non igitur mirum, si ab honorum ac imperii ardentissima cupiditate ratio illa inferior flectitur [...]" Landino - Lohe, *Disputationes Camaldulenses*, cit., p. 161.
- 12 "[...] summum tamen imperium superiori rationi reservatur. Haec igitur ratio, quam nunc Neptuni nomine significat poeta, cum omnia perturbationibus rapi vexarique videat, caput e summa unda veluti ex specula effert." *Ibid.*, p. 165.
- 13 "Verum quemadmodum in bene instituta re publica supremus quidam magistratus creatur, cuius arbitrio, etsi omnia gerantur, alii tamen assunt minores magistratus, quibus singulis singula committantur, [...]" *Ibid.*, p. 169. Virgil compares the sea waves with the rabble. Virgil, *Aeneid*, I, 148-56.
- 14 Marek, *Ekphrasis und Herrscherallegorie*, cit., p. 92 et seq.
- 15 G. Vasari, *Ragionamenti*, ed. by G. Milanesi, VIII, Florence, 1906, p. 28.
- 16 For Cosimo Bartoli's letters to Vasari, see K. Frey, *Giorgio Vasari. Der literarische Nachlass*, Bd. I, New York, 1982, pp. 410-15.
- 17 For the oval scenes based on Philostratus's *Imagines*, see R. Foerster, "Philostrats Gemälde in der Renaissance," *Jahrbuch der Preussischer Kunstsammlungen*, XXV, 1904, pp. 15-48; M. Fukada, "The Kingdom of Venus and Cupids: The Allegory of the Reign of the Pope Leo X in the Decoration of Villa Madama," in *Journal of the Faculty of Fine Arts, Tokyo University of the Arts*, VIII, 2012, pp. 5-15 (Japanese text with English summary).
- 18 C. Napoleone, *Villa Madama*, cit., p. 47.
- 19 This set of tapestries is referred to as "Panni otto d'oro et seta, grotteschi di diversi colori" in the 1533 papal inventory (Archivio di Stato, Rome, [henceforth ASR] Camerale I, busta 1557, reg. 3, fol. 87v), and listed in similar terms in the 1550, 1555, and 1592-1608 inventories (ASR, Camerale I, busta 1557, reg. 3, fol. 95r; busta 1557, reg. 3, fols. 105r, 106v; busta 1557, reg. 7, fols. 1-2.). Then in 1608 it is listed as "Arazzi otto nominati Grottesche di Leone Xmo" (ASR, Camerale I, busta 1558, reg. 8, fol. 3v.) This is generally identified as the tapestry which Vasari described in the *Vita* of Giovanni da Udine: "fece similmente i cartoni di certi arazzi pieni di grottesche, che stanno nelle prime stanze del concistoro." Vasari - Della Pergola - Grassi - Previtali, *Le vite*, cit., VI, p. 401. The original tapestry was lost after the last record in 1767. The rewoven tapestries include some made from the original cartoons in Brussels workshop of Frans Geubels in the sixteenth-century, and others made from the cartoons by Noël Coypel after the original composition in the Goblin Manufactory in the late eighteenth-century. The *Triumph of Venus*, here referred, belongs to the former and is considered to have been woven around 1560. Thomas Campbell supposes that the set of tapestries was for the Sala dei Papi, and designed by Giovanni da Udine and Perino del Vaga, who worked on the vault decoration of this room. N. Forti Grazzini, *Gli Arazzi*, exh. cat., Rome, 1994, pp. 378-91; T.P. Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance: Art*

and *Magnificence*, exh. cat., New Haven - London, 2002, pp. 225-9; J. Vittet - M. Savignac, *La collection de tapisseries de Louis XIV*; Dijion, 2007, pp. 1469-53, 260-71; A. Brejon de Lavergnée, *L'Éclat de la Renaissance italienne: Tissages d'après Raphaël. Giovanni da Udine, Jules Romain, Dossier de l'art*, n. 1, Paris, 2011.

20 Regarding the two letters about the decoration of Villa Madama in 4 and 17 July, 1520 (Forlì, Biblioteca comunale, Raccolta Pinacastelli, *Autografi*, Giulio de' Medici, Nos. 1-2), see J. Shearman, *Raphael in Early Modern Sources*, New Haven - London, 2003, 1520/44, 46, pp. 599-601, 602-5.

21 Conversely, the program of the decoration on the opposite side of the Loggia, the northeastern bay, is not related to Leo X in any way but closely connected to the figure of Cardinal Giulio de' Medici, as the present author has discussed elsewhere. For the author's papers in Japanese concerning this question, see "Giulio Romano's *Polyphemus* in Villa Madama: The Iconographic Interpretation Based on a Drawing in the Musée du Louvre," *Journal of the Japan Art History Society*, CLXX, 2011, pp. 179-95 (Japanese text with English summary); "I rilievi in stucco della *storia di Polifemo, Galatea e Aci* a Villa Madama: La relazione tra Galatea e l'impresa di Giulio de' Medici," *Mediterraneus. Annual Report of the Collegium Meditaranitarum*, XXXIV, 2011, pp. 25-46 (Japanese text with Italian summary).

The Sources of the Illustrations

W. E. Greenwood, *The Villa Madama Rome*, New York, 1928: fig. 1 (modified by the author) / C. Napoleone, *Villa Madama: Il sogno di Raffaello*, Turin, 2007: fig. 2 / Photo by the author: fig. 3 / C.C., Bambach, ed. by, *Leonardo da Vinci: Master Draftsman*, exh. cat., New York - London, 2003: fig. 4 / P.P. Bober - R. Rubinstein, *Renaissance Artists & Antique Sculpture: a Handbook of Sources*, 2nd ed. London, 2010: fig. 5 / R. Jones - N. Penny, *Raphael*, New Haven - London, 1983: fig. 6 / M. Marek, *Ekphrasis und Herrscherallegorie: Antike Bildbeschreibungen bei Tizian und Leonardo*, Worms, 1985: figs. 7, 8 / T.P. Campbell, *Tapstry in the Renaissance: Art and Magnificence*, exh. cat., New Haven - London, 2002: fig. 9 / Photo by Miwa Takimoto: fig. 10