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A Venetian in Chigi's Court: Sebastiano del Piombo and the poetry of styles

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ABSTRACT

In 1512, Roman writer Blosio Palladio published a laudatory prose, entitled *Suburbanum Augustini Chisii*, intended to exalt the magnificence of Sienese banker Agostino Chigi's emerging villa, known today as the Villa Farnesina. In his writing, Palladio invokes a noteworthy allusion between painting and poetry in his discussion of the early work of Venetian Sebastiano del Piombo within the villa's chambers: "Tam foelix pictor vate, ut pictor Poeta" ("So fortunate the painter is by the poet, as the Poet by the painter"¹). This allusion to Sebastiano as poet is undoubtedly a loaded one, as it creates a connection with the *poesie* tradition so often associated with Venetian *cinquecento* painting and the oeuvre of Titian. Simultaneously, this reference bears significance in terms of Sebastiano's approach to painting, particularly in light of Stephen J. Campbell's argument (2010) for the conceptualization of *poesie* painting as a sort of artistic/metaphorical grafting.² Extending Campbell's points, this paper argues that a similar grafting occurs in Sebastiano's early Roman works. Examining key works from this period in Sebastiano's career will reveal how this conceptual graft manifested in his paintings, revealing both Sebastiano's negotiations between Roman and Venetian painterly practice in the early *cinquecento* and the incisiveness of Palladio's words.

¹ This is borrowing a translation of the Latin from Mary Quinlan-McGrath, "Blosius Palladius, *Suburbanum Augustini Chisii*. Introduction, Latin Text and English Translation." *Humanistica Lovaniensia*, 39 (1990), I: 69, 119.

² Campbell, Stephen J. "Naturalism and the Venetian 'Poesia': Grafting, Metaphor, and Embodiment in Giorgione, Titian, and the Campagnolas" in Alexander Nagel and Lorenzo Pericolo, eds., *Subject as Aporia in Early Modern Art* (VT: Ashgate, 2010), 155-143.

Blosio Palladio's 1512 encomium, *Suburbanum Augustini Chisii*, exalted Sieneſe banker Agostino Chigi's Roman villa. Within this writing, however, he diſcuſſed Venetian artiſt ſeſtiano del Piombo's work within the villa's chambers and in doing ſo invoked the alluſion "Tam foelix pictor vate, ut pictor Poeta" ("So fortunate the painter is by the poet, as the Poet by the painter"ⁱ), a phrase that bears reconſideration in light of the recent re-aſſeſſment of the cinquecento Venetian *poesie* tradition through the lens of compoſitional "grafting." This article argues that this grafting proceſſ can be ſeen in the work of ſeſtiano, namely the *Portrait of Ferry Carondelet* (Fig. 1) and *Death of Adonis* (Fig. 2), created between 1511 and 1513 ſhortly after his arrival in Rome and while within Chigi's employ. Given that this ſpace would alſo be foundational for an enduring rivalry between the artiſt and Raphael, the argument will be made that this grafting can be interpreted as a diſplay of ſeſtiano's reaction to the Roman artiſtic environment and his ſubſequent injection of Venetian artiſtic tendencies therein.ⁱⁱ

In a 2010 article, Stephen J. Campbell poſits that Titian's deſcription of his later paintings as *poesie* was in an effort to "[ground them] in a proceſſ of making – and in making meaning," akin to the poetic proceſſ of joining diſverse elements into a cohesive whole, or verſe, through alluſion, ſimile, and metaphor.ⁱⁱⁱ Campbell illuſtrates this connection using Titian's Dresden *Sleeping Venus* and deſcribes this poetic grafting as "an active employment of a poetic principle . . . of diſcovering connection by artiſtic means."^{iv} The reſult is a compoſition that ſimultaneously both engages and limits: the viewer is drawn toward the reclining nude yet her closed eyes render her inaccessible, and her arm that frames her head creates a diſtance amplified by the landscape on to which ſhe has been grafted to convey an air of artiſciality.^v

Extending Campbell's eloquently argued concept of grafting to ſeſtiano's work of the ſame period ſeems natural given their year together in Venice. ſeſtiano had come into direct contact with both Giorgione and Titian while under the tutelage of Giovanni Bellini in the early years of the century, ſo it is reaſonable to propoſe that ſeſtiano would ſhare in a ſimilar approach to Titian. What makes theſe Roman works intriguing, though, is that for ſeſtiano this grafting becomes not a meeting of hands but a melding of regional ſtyles.

ſeſtiano came to Rome in 1511 at the beheſt of Agostino Chigi, who had been ſent to Venice to negotiate on Pope Julius II's behalf. It is not clear why he brought the artiſt back to Rome, however it is enticing to ſubſcribe to Hirt's hypotheſis that "[Chigi's] reſolution . . . muſt reflect the appeal that

Venetian painting of the first decade of the century had for him.”^{vi} As heir to and master of the rich, luminous *colorito* for which Venetian painters were becoming renowned, Sebastiano provided an artistic approach distinct from contemporary Roman painting, where draftsmanship usurped the rich *colorito* and *istorie* and *all’antica* styling supplanted the lyrical *poesie* tradition.^{vii} Part of this stylistic distinction stemmed from the Roman fascination with antiquity. Ancient artifacts that dotted the Roman landscape linked the city to its past grandeur and gave hope that such glory could be rekindled. Accordingly, the celebration of the ancients encouraged artists of the era to study from antiquity and revive a dialogue between past and present in commissions across the city.^{viii} For Chigi, these themes became wrapped up in his plans for his lavish villa and hence perhaps further fueled his wooing of Sebastiano to come to Rome, as one of his first works for the banker would force his stylistic confrontation with rising star – and future rival – Raphael.

At the time, Raphael had already garnered acclaim for his work within the Vatican Stanze.^{ix} The following year, Raphael would complete work within the iconic Stanza della Segnatura, a suite of frescoes that have been praised in scholarship as “the apogee of High Renaissance painting in Rome.”^x In the midst of this rise he was called to the Loggia di Galatea, a striking open-air space of Chigi’s villa that looked upon lavish gardens that extended to the shores of the Tiber River, to paint *Galatea* as a partner to Sebastiano’s *Polyphemus* (Fig. 3), a colossal fresco rendition of the gigantic Cyclops who fell in love with the Nereid in Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*.^{xi} A story of rivalry and unrequited love that culminates in the death of Galatea’s true beloved, Acis, it was a fitting narrative through which a new rivalry would begin.

Neither Raphael nor Sebastiano could have had the foresight to see how caustic their rivalry would become, however it seems that the pitting of the Venetian import against the already-acclaimed Raphael undoubtedly created a charged atmosphere of which Sebastiano was no doubt aware.^{xii} Though he writes no letters to such effect, one can see even in *Polyphemus* how he offers a softened, atmospheric counter to Raphael’s *all’antica* style. Two smaller-scale works from this period, however, showcase how Sebastiano might have used this element of poetic grafting to meld the distinct Venetian and Roman painting traditions.

The portrait of *Ferry Carondelet and His Secretaries* depicts the Hapsburg Archdeacon and budding humanist who was close to Chigi and thus would have had access to Sebastiano soon after his arrival in Rome.^{xiii} Carondelet’s composition is effectively divided into three realms. First there is the foreground, separated from the background by a raised green velvet curtain. Here appears Archdeacon Carondelet and one of his secretaries in the midst of taking dictation. Carondelet holds a paper snippet

containing Sebastiano's dedication of the piece: "to the honourable devout and dear to us Ferry Carondelet, the Archdeacon of Besançon, Counsellor and our emissary. In Rome." It is in this foregrounded zone that Sebastiano displays his Venetian virtuosity for various textures. Foreshadowing later works, such as *Portrait of a Young Roman Woman (Dorothea)* (1513; Gemäldegalerie, Berlin), here Sebastiano reveals finessed contrasts between fur cuffs, lustrous knits, and Eastern carpet motifs.^{xiv} This carpet, draped over the table at which Carondelet and his secretary are seated, is perhaps an homage to Venice that continues in the second compositional realm: that of the background landscape that echoes those that appeared in Sebastiano's earlier paintings and again alludes to the atmospheric brilliance of the Venetian tradition.^{xv} Juxtaposed at left is the third realm, which features a characteristically Roman interior with pedimented doorway inscribed with the Archdeacon's family motto, "NOSCE OPORTUNITATEM," or "Seize Opportunity."^{xvi} Complementing this classicizing pediment is a colonnade of marble Corinthian columns that projects from this rear wall and effectively cuts the background of the composition in two to create a space strikingly similar to some that would eventually manifest in Chigi's villa.^{xvii}

In sum, this parsing of the picture plane results in three different spaces grafted together. The figures in the foreground meet the expanse in the background with a similar abruptness as did, for example, the figure in the *Dresden Venus*, yet here Sebastiano accentuates this disconnect, or distance, by further subdividing the background into two disparate views. From this perspective, it would seem that *Portrait of Ferry Carondelet* presents a conscious confrontation of Roman and Venetian painting, perhaps spurred in part by Sebastiano's hopeful ascendance into the elite echelon of artists working in Rome – or, at the very least, working in Chigi's villa.

Even more indicative of this use of grafting is Sebastiano's *Death of Adonis*, a work commissioned by Chigi around the same time as the frescoed *Polyphemus*.^{xviii} Here, hints of Sebastiano's mastery of color intertwine with the two relatively unprecedented threads – at least in Sebastiano's oeuvre to this point – of mythology and antiquity. This mythological scene plays out across the foreground of the composition, seemingly on a separate plane of the cityscape that appears across a watery expanse. Interestingly, the city depicted is Venice, the *campanile* of San Marco and the Palazzo Ducale identifiable along the skyline.^{xix} Moreover, *Death of Adonis* also marks an early instance of Sebastiano's use of ancient prototypes, as Venus, for instance, appears modeled after the *Spinario* or the *Nymph 'alla Spina'* in his figure of Venus.^{xx}

This melding of references – which culminates in *Death of Adonis* in a literal sunset on the city of Venice – implies that Sebastiano perhaps was contemplating the ways in which he could graft Venetian

and Roman elements together to conjure a new mode of making meaning. It underlines that he was aware of the tensions between color and form, the dynamic that would later fuel – but ultimately dismantle – his relationship with Michelangelo and that would also develop the groundwork for the accusations that Sebastiano would later levy against Raphael in the larger questions of authorship and the bounds of acceptable borrowing of forms later in the decade. Within microcosm of his time under Chigi's patronage, however, these paintings imply that Sebastiano, when plunged into the foreign world of Roman art, found his footing through the poetry of grafting, building new connections between the disparate styles of Venice and Rome.

APPENDIX: Images



Figure 1: Sebastiano del Piombo, *Portrait of Ferry Carondelet*, 1511-1512
Oil on Panel - Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, Madrid (Author's image).



Figure 2: Sebastiano del Piombo, *Death of Adonis*, 1512-1513
Oil on canvas - Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence/Alamy.

ⁱ From: M. Quinlan-McGrath, “Blosius Palladius, *Suburbanum Augustini Chisii*. Introduction, Latin Text and English Translation.” *Humanistica Lovaniensia*, 39 (1990), I: 69, 119.

ⁱⁱ For more on this rivalry see: R. Goffen, *Renaissance Rivals: Michelangelo, Leonardo, Raphael, Titian* (Yale University Press, 2004).

ⁱⁱⁱ S. J. Campbell, “Naturalism and the Venetian ‘Poesia’: Grafting, Metaphor, and Embodiment in Giorgione, Titian, and the Campagnolas” in A. Nagel and L. Pericolo, eds., *Subject as Aporia in Early Modern Art* (VT: Ashgate, 2010), 155-140.

^{iv} S.J. Campbell, 119; Marcantonio Michiel was the first to note the work of both Giorgione, in the figure, and Titian, in the background landscape. See: M. Michiel, *Notizia d’opere di Disegno nella prima metà del secolo XVI: esistenti in Padova, Cremona, Milano, Pavia, Bergamo, Crema e Venezia*, by M. Michiel; discovered in the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana by J. Morelli (Bassano, 1800), 66. Also see: C. Hope and D. Jaffé, eds., *Titian* (London: National Gallery, 2004).

^v For more see: D. Rosand, “So-and-So Reclining on Her Couch.” In J. Manca, ed., *Titian 500* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1993), 101-119. Also see: T. Pignatti, *Giorgione* (Milan: Alfieri, 1978), no. 23; and P. Joannides, *Titian to 1518: The Assumption of Genius* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); 179-180 (fig. 156).

^{vi} M. Hirst, *Sebastiano del Piombo* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), 32; echoed in: C. Barbieri, “The Competition between Raphael and Michelangelo and Sebastiano’s Role In It.” In M.B. Hall, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Raphael* (NY: Cambridge, 2002), 152)..

^{vii} Goffen, 227.

^{viii} For more, see: L. Barkan, *Unearthing the Past: Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Making of Renaissance Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); K. Christian, *Empire Without End: Antiquities Collections in Renaissance Rome, c. 1350-1527* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

^{ix} I. Rowland, “The Vatican Stanze,” In M.B. Hall, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Raphael* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 111.

^x C. L. Joost-Gaugier, *Raphael’s Stanza della Segnatura* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1.

^{xi} S. Mack, “Acis and Galatea or Metamorphosis of Tradition.” *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, 6 (3) (Winter, 1999), 51. Theocritus describes Polyphemus’ lovelorn state in his *Idyll 11*; for a full translation,

see: ‘Cyclops (Theocritus 11),’ trans. by D. A. Svarlien *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, 5 (2) (Spring/Summer 1997), 161-163.

^{xii} For more on the villa and its patron, see: I. Rowland, “Il Giardino *Trans Tiberium* di Agostino Chigi.” In C. Benocci, ed., *I Giardini Chigi tra Siena e Roma dal Cinquecento agli Inizi dell’Ottocento* (Siena: Fondazione Monte dei Paschi, 2005), 57-72, 421.; I. Rowland, “Render Unto Caesar the Things Which are Caesar’s: Humanism and the Arts in the Patronage of Agostino Chigi.” *Renaissance Quarterly*, 39 (4) (Winter, 1986), 673-730; C. Frommel, “La Villa Farnesina,” in C. L. Frommel, G. Caneva, and A. Angeli, *La Villa Farnesina a Roma = The Villa Farnesina in Rome* (Modena: F.C. Panini, 2003), I: 70-71. Hirst, 34; M. Lucco, *L’Opera completa di Sebastiano del Piombo* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1980), 100-101; A. M. M. Tantillo, “Restauro alla Farnesina,” *Bolletino d’Arte* 57 (1972), 33-42, esp. 40; Barbieri, “The Competition,” 153).

^{xiii} Noted in a letter to Margaret of Austria dated 14 November 1512 (R. de Maulde e L. de la Brière, “Dépêches de Ferry Carondelet, procurer en la cour de Rome (1510-1513),” *Bulletin historique et philologique du Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques* (1895), 129-132, no. 21.

^{xiv} For more, see: R. Contini, W. L. Bernd, and C. M. Strinati. *Sebastiano del Piombo 1485-1547*, entry no. 22.

^{xv} For more on the influence of Islamic and Ottoman carpets in Venetian interiors and paintings, see: W. Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1893), ed. D. L. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); G. Hanlon, *Early Modern Italy, 1550-1800: Three Seasons in European History* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2000); P. Fortini Brown, *Art and Life in Renaissance Venice* (New York: Abrams, 1997); and D. Carrier, “Islamic Carpets in Christian Paintings; An Alternative Theory of the Origin of the Public Art Museum.” *Source: Notes in the History of Art*, 25 (1)(Fall 2005), 1-5.

^{xvi} As interpreted by Mauro Lucco in: R. Contini, W. L. Bernd, and C. M. Strinati. *Sebastiano del Piombo 1485-1547*, entry no. 18.

^{xvii} Baldassare Peruzzi’s *Sala della Prospettiva* (1515-1517) and Il Sodoma’s *Marriage of Alexander and Roxane* (1517), both conjured for Chigi, echo this chamber conveyed in Sebastiano’s painting.

^{xviii} Frommel dates this work to being simultaneous to Sebastiano’s work on the lunettes of the Loggia di Galatea, approximately 1511-1512 (Frommel, “La Villa,” no. 91); Lucco reiterates this dating (Lucco, *L’Opera completa*, no. 34).

^{xix} Further demonstrating the evolution of Sebastiano’s style is a comparison of this composition with Sebastiano’s earlier scene of the subject (La Spezia, Museo Civico “Amedeo Lia,” inv. 165; Lucco, *L’Opera completa*, no. 3; also see Lucco’s catalogue entry in: R. Contini, W. L. Bernd, and C. M. Strinati. *Sebastiano del Piombo 1485-1547*, entry no. 1). When paired with Sebastiano’s Roman *Death of Adonis* one can note the evolution from the idyllic, pastoral setting to one imbued with a more direct conversation between Venice and Rome.

^{xx} As Bober noted, both the *Spinario* and *Nymph ‘alla Spina’* (P.P. Bober and R. O. Rubenstein, *Renaissance Artists and Antique Sculpture: A Handbook of Sources*. Second, rev. ed. (London: Miller, 1987), nos. 61(a) and 97, respectively) proved rich sources of study for artists throughout the Renaissance. If the ancient source in this instance is indeed the *Nymph ‘alla Spina,’* one must recall Barkan’s discussion of this ancient piece, which he describes as an “alluring enigma” for its incomplete state and confounding figural torsion, “missing just those extremities that would render the posture logical” (Barkan, 141).