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Playing the Palace

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Seventeenth-Century Roman Palaces: Use and the Art of the Plan

by Patricia Waddy

The Architectural History Foundation and MIT Press, 456 pp., \$47.50

Images of Nepotism: The Painted Ceilings of Palazzo Barberini

by John Beldon Scott

Princeton University Press, 243 pp., \$75.00

1.

The great palaces of baroque Rome, today so often transformed into embassies, banks, and museums, resemble luxury liners in drydock. They once housed an aristocratic and indeed theocratic elite of unparalleled splendor, but today without an effort of the imagination it is difficult to detect where first class ended and second class began, where one slept and dined, where outsiders were welcome and where they were not. As we move through these buildings we can only guess when we are intruding on old theaters of public ceremony, or stumbling upon the patterns of secret circulation permitted only to servants, lovers, spies, or scholars trudging to the family library.

Many later observers found the sparse sumptuousness of these residences repellent and uncomfortable. Nathaniel Hawthorne thought they were intolerably cold. "My fingers were quite numb before I got half way through the suite of apartments," he wrote of his visit to the painting collection in Palazzo Borghese, while in Palazzo Doria "all the rooms are colder and more comfortless than can be imagined." And Hawthorne wrote in the relatively warm nineteenth century, not in the "Little Ice Age" that Europe was passing through in the seventeenth. In the Renaissance there had been occasional attempts to revive the ancient custom of warm baths. But in the baroque age aristocrats stopped bathing. Women, so lively and gay in the pages of Castiglione's *The Courtier*, lost their freedoms in baroque Rome, where they were corralled into isolated women's quarters where no man ever went. The *ruota* or turnbox that still shocks visitors to the

old convents of Rome, who cannot conceive that any society might need *muratte vive* or nuns “buried alive,” was really a feature borrowed from the most aristocratic palaces, where it stood at the entrance to the women’s quarters. The only palaces that could do without one were those of cardinals with no female relatives in residence.

Ariosto, in his satires on the life of the courtier, said that it would take the eyes of a lynx to see through the walls of the palaces like glass. This is the ambition of Patricia Waddy’s book. Her penetrating gaze has been abetted by extensive research in the archives of a select number of Roman baroque families: the Borghese, the Chigi, and above all the Barberini. Her strategy is to comb the documents for payments to masons and decorators that might also mention the function of a given room. She then charts the distribution of apartments between members of the family, and the changes in function over time. She is remarkably patient (and so must the reader be, too), for God is to be found here in small details: the gallery turned into a ball court, the vestibule become a chapel, the bedroom transformed into a sculpture gallery. The prince in Lampedusa’s *Leopard*, who counted it a point of honor not to know how many rooms there were in his palace, would not have liked Patricia Waddy snooping around his family archives.

Scholars in the mid-twentieth century, especially the great Rudolf Wittkower, put the centralized churches of the Renaissance and the baroque at the center of their work.¹ These buildings, exemplifying theories of musical proportion and cosmic harmony, allowed the scholar to listen in, as it were, on the music of the spheres. However, a new and rather more sociologically minded generation of art historians began to come of age in the 1970s and turned its attention to palaces. These historians had a taste for the secular over the ecclesiastic and the political over the theological. Palaces fit such interests perfectly. They were the domestic stage on which were enacted the rituals of courtly life, and in which the careers of brilliant, scheming patrons were planned and celebrated.

A German scholar, Christoph Frommel, produced the first large-scale study of Roman High Renaissance palaces in 1973 by sorting out the tangled histories of forty-two of them.² But it was Anglo-Saxon scholarship that concentrated attention directly on the function of domestic architecture. Mark Girouard, taking up the lead of such scholars as Hugh Murray Baillie, wrote incisively about the workings of great domestic buildings in his immensely popular and imaginative book on the English country house.³ Girouard is not concerned with Italy and thus is not mentioned by Waddy, but he made the entire field possible. In 1975 the magisterial book of a Danish scholar named Christian Elling was translated into English. He sketched in a lively impressionistic way the life that was lived in the palaces of the great Roman cardinals and princes, and he

suggested how the retinue or *famiglia* was structured.⁴ Elling wrote urbanely and wittily, and the book is much too entertaining to be cited by Waddy, who wants to raise the study of palace life from a charming art to a science.

By extensive detective work Waddy has identified the function of every room, from basement to attic, in five of the most important palaces of several papal families. To the reader patient enough to follow her numbered plans of every floor she reveals the long-lost patterns of movement and the forgotten rituals around which these buildings were designed. She also makes extensive use of the old courtesy handbooks by little-known writers such as Sestini, Tantouche, Leti, and a man with the charming pseudonym *Evitascandalo* (“Avoid the faux-pas”).

Papal Rome was a strictly hierarchical society, in which connoisseurs rated families according to the number of centuries in the nobility: 400 years was good, 200 less so, 100 or less marked the *arrivistes*. But at the center of this society was an elective monarchy, the office of the pope, in which the roulette of the conclave could catapult a shoemaker’s son, or the son of an ambitious Bolognese lawyer or Sieneese banker, to the summit. There was upward mobility through the clerical bureaucracy, and downward mobility too, as the older but impoverished families had to sell off their castles and estates to the nephews of the new papal families, gorged with money but starved for titles.

The Colonna family, for example, had long ago entrenched itself in a feudal stronghold carved out of an ancient sanctuary high on the hilltop of Palestrina near Rome. But in 1629 they sold the castle and the title that went with it to the Barberini, a fast-rising family that had come out of Tuscany and had just produced a pope, Urban VIII. A generation earlier the Barberini had had the good sense to get rid of the common horsefly that had been their heraldic emblem and replace it with a more attractive emblem, the bee. By the end of Urban VIII’s reign 10,000 painted and sculpted bees would decorate the cities of the Papal States. Not only did the Pope and his nephews build at a feverish rate, but they also poured kings’ ransoms into the purchase of title-bearing castles like Palestrina. Thus it was that the new Palazzo Barberini in Rome, and not the rambling old Palazzo Colonna, came to be known as the palace of the prince of Palestrina.

In this society rank counted immensely and was always being displayed and tested. Cardinals aped the pope and princes aped the cardinals in their train of carriages, their huge households, and their palaces. In a diplomatic capital ambassadors and statesmen were acutely conscious that the outward signs of their rank were a statement about the

position of their masters on the chessboard of European politics. A slight against an ambassador's coach could be an affront to the independence of the Duchy of Parma or the dignity of the Venetian Senate. But rank was measured indoors as well as out.

Foreign visitors to Rome were all struck by the long enfilades in which one passed through four, five, or six rooms in sequence with their doorways all lined up. When Montaigne visited the city in 1580–1581 he noticed that “the palaces are divided into numerous apartments, one leading to another; you thread your way through three or four rooms before you are in the principal one.” These enfilades deprived the rooms of any sense of privacy, but they served as finely calibrated instruments for the display of rank. A very important visitor had to be met at the head of the stairs, while another lower on the scale would have to make his way alone, or maybe accompanied by the host's gentlemen, through sequences of antechambers until he was met at the door of the audience room, or maybe inside it, by a host who would offer his left hand, or maybe his right, and seat his guest, or maybe not, according to rules of byzantine complexity.

As with the number of guns in a maharajah's salute, everyone knew exactly how many rooms and corridors and flights of stairs he was entitled to be accompanied on his way in or out of a palace. Departing ambassadors left behind lists to help their successors deal with almost everyone in the social hierarchy, from cardinal nephews and titled aristocrats down to the heads of the religious orders. A seasoned diplomat had to be ready when personages (or families or even the representatives of states) of ambiguous status arrived with overblown pretensions. He might have to say one thing with smooth words but another with the closely watched language of spatial compliment. And of course no rank list could ever be complete, and one can only admire the dexterity of the cardinal who feigned illness and received a strange visitor in bed rather than make a mistake about the number of rooms he should advance to meet him.

What Montaigne understood instinctively, and Patricia Waddy understands more scientifically, is the element of measurement in baroque courtesy. Palaces with absurdly long enfilades provided the finest calibrations in the demonstration of respective rank between visitor and guest. A French visitor who wrote about these palaces in the 1670s had the feeling of being on an enchanted stage when he entered them and saw the owner in the far distance, through doorway after doorway, like a point in perspective. The enfilade in the Palazzo Borghese was already long, but in the 1670s the prince lengthened it still further, so that it cut through ten consecutive rooms and continued out over a public street and through the house next door, terminating on the far side of the Tiber. This was the century of the telescope, and one senses a fascination with optics in the prince's gesture, as well as a highly calibrated notion of courtesy.

Waddy has written a good, honest book that she modestly and picturesquely hopes will be absorbed into the discipline of architectural history in the same way that one of her palaces, the rambling old Palazzo Barberini ai Giubbonari, has been absorbed into the Roman quarter in which it was built. Doubtless it will be, and we can hope that her way of providing numbered plans of all the floors of a palace will be widely followed. It has already influenced John Beldon Scott, whose book on the Palazzo Barberini alle Quattro Fontane combines the study of frescoes, architecture, and patronage in its discussion of a palace as a cultural artifact.

2.

Nepotism was the widely criticized but constantly practiced vice by which the Papal States were governed in the Renaissance and baroque periods. *Nipoti*—nephews but sometimes brothers and occasionally grandsons—were entrusted by the popes with the highest offices in the land. The young nephew of a new pope, often in his teens or twenties, would be made *cardinal padrone*, vice-chancellor and secretary of state; another nephew would be married off into the highest nobility, told to propagate the family, made general of the papal armies and given the keys to Castel Sant' Angelo. In an elective monarchy, where there was no dauphin and loyalty to the same monarch and the same dynasty could not be inbred over the generations, ties of blood were the best and sometimes the only assurance of trust.

But no one could be expected to fill difficult positions for nothing, and so the papal nephews were rewarded with lucrative offices and rich benefices, abbeys and bishoprics which they administered through vicars. Sometimes the nephews were reliable conduits through which the wealth of the state could be funneled into the patronage of art and learning, relief for the poor, maintaining the infrastructure of the city, and supporting great works of architecture and urban planning. But none of this could happen unless immense wealth was poured into the family coffers, with no other audit than the Day of Judgment.

The elective character of the papal monarchy encouraged nepotism. No one knew how long a reigning pope would last, so his nephews shored up their fortunes against the inevitable day, while other cardinals bided their time and their nephews tried every possible means to estimate their uncles' prospects. Conclaves were notoriously hard to predict, or as the adage ran, "He who enters the conclave pope comes out cardinal." In 1621–1622 a new system of secret ballots made predictions harder than ever. But whoever was elected, no matter how open the struggle, how blatant the bribery, how evident the compromise, the outcome was universally assumed to be the work of Divine Providence, foreseen by God and written in the stars from the beginning of creation.

Two groups scanned the skies in baroque Rome. Galileo and his followers in the Accademia dei Lincei made ample use of the newly discovered telescope to further the Copernican cause. But Rome also had astrologers who believed that the stars could tell them the length of the current reign and the name of the next pope. A contemporary report says:

In Rome one sees that there are many analyses of astrology and it is made almost a special profession and almost everyone has analyses of nativities. . . . There is not a cardinal nor a prelate nor a prince who does not have his own analyses of birth, with prognostications of good fortune.

Nepotism kept the astrologers in business. No one believed in it more fervently than Pope Urban VIII himself. Although he forbade its practice and conducted two show trials of astrologers guilty of the capital crime of predicting his death, he practiced astrology assiduously in private. He had a chart made of the stars at the precise minute of his birth, and he constantly courted the benign influence of the heavens when the sun entered Leo, under whose sign he was elected. More than anything else he feared an eclipse of the sun. At these baleful moments he used to shut himself up in a darkened room in the Vatican with his astrologer-theologian, Tommaso Campanella, who moved around lamps and candles to manipulate the planets and ward off fatal influences. Not for nothing was Urban VIII's personal emblem the rising sun, and sun imagery (in the constellation of Leo) pervades the Barberini palace. The visitor there would have seen statues of the sun god Apollo and a lion in the main staircase, then Apollo and a lion's skin in the great fireplace of the main *salone*, and finally the sun of Divine Wisdom and the constellation of Leo frescoed on a ceiling. Scott even has found evidence of a payment for "food for the lion," presumably not a work of art.

Scott takes astrology very seriously in his study of the two most celebrated frescoed ceilings in the palace, Andrea Sacchi's *Divine Wisdom* and Pietro da Cortona's *Divine Providence* (see illustration on page 58). These are among the greatest frescoes of baroque Rome, masterpieces that await the visitor to the Galleria Nazionale di Arte Antica which the Palazzo Barberini has become. They are quite different from one another; Sacchi's is small and restrained like a Greek drama, Cortona's enormous and spectacular in the epic mode.

Any astronaut who has looked back from his spacecraft at planet Earth spinning in the firmament will find in Sacchi a kindred soul. His fresco shows a huge green and watery globe hovering in the sky under the sun of Divine Wisdom, a figure enthroned in a golden glow and surrounded by eleven lovely maidens who stand both for

constellations and virtues. Figures representing Love and Fear leap into the scene above our heads riding with acrobatic grace on a lion and a rabbit. Scott convincingly interprets the fresco as an essay in theo-political science. It revolves around the personality and social role of Taddeo Barberini, the member of the family destined to marry and continue the line, and not by chance the inhabitant of this particular wing of the palace. This family was “born and elected to rule,” and since they would govern with Divine Wisdom, they will be “equally loved and revered,” to quote their iconographic consultants.

In fact the state was governed very badly under the Barberini. Hence it was all the more important for them to convey the message affirming their political virtue in ceiling paintings that reflected supernatural events with convincing illusionism. The inner workings of Divine Wisdom could be glimpsed in the skies to anyone entering these rooms. And here the wise astrologer could also see the favorable conjunction of the stars at two key moments, Urban VIII’s birth and election to the papacy. From the ideal station point at the entrance to the room (and Scott is most skillful at determining these points and through them the angle at which frescoes make most sense) one looked into the chapel where the children of the family would be baptized. The work of Divine Wisdom was meant to continue down the generations.

Cortona’s *Divine Providence* is a very different kind of painting. It covers the largest vaulted ceiling in Rome outside the Vatican. In it dozens of colossal figures fill the smoky air with great operatic fury, like the crowd scenes in *Aida*. The visitor to the palace will be riveted by the experience. But in the age of photography it has become easy to distort and even to ridicule this huge work. Le Corbusier included a postage stamp-sized photograph of it in *Towards A New Architecture* in 1923 with the caption “The Rome of Horrors.” Such flippancy helped to blind an entire generation to the lavish beauty of Cortona’s masterpiece. But so did the standard wideangle, all-embracing photographs taken from the center of the room, looking vertically up at the ceiling fresco and completely flattening its spatial relationships. Scott has rephotographed the fresco from the ideal station point at the entrance to the *salone*—although the modern Galleria Nazionale perversely obliges the visitor to enter the room at the opposite end.

The main subject of the fresco might be summed up as “the triple coronation of the Barberini arms.” In the center of the vault the Barberini arms are made up of three huge bees, the size of owls, that rocket up into the sky. Figures representing Faith, Hope, and Charity hold the Barberini laurel around the bees and Rome crowns them with the papal tiara, thus assembling the Barberini arms in the air like a fighter squadron in

synchronized flight. Immortality sweeps in to place her starry crown on the arms, and a *putto* leans over to crown them with the laurel of poetic worth. A painted marble cornice covered with fictive marble figures gives the entire scene a structure through which the action takes place. At the far end of the room Minerva charges down from the sky to repel the attack of rebel giants who have tried to storm heaven. Their swarthy bodies tumble onto the stone cornice and shatter it with the impact of their fall. Elsewhere Cyclopean blacksmiths forge the arms of Vulcan, Hercules battles the harpies, Saturn devours his children, Venus and her nymphs are driven from their baths by Chastity, and the Fury of War is bound up by Gentleness. A bestiary of animals populates the coves of the vault. The illusionism is stunning, worthy of Giulio Romano's fresco of the *Fall of the Giants* in the Palazzo del Te in Mantua, or Veronese's *Triumph of Venice* in the Palazzo Ducale, which were among Cortona's sources. But illusionism here also has theological value, in Scott's words, "as a metaphor to persuade the viewer of God's intervention in human history for the realization of a providential plan."

But why should Divine Providence be so good to the Barberini arms? Like the Roman emperor, the supreme pontiff was believed to be chosen by the provident intervention of God in human affairs. The less likely the choice, the heavier the hand of Divine Providence. Urban VIII, for example, was elected after a long and confused conclave that had focused for weeks on other cardinals but in the end was locked in stalemate. If malaria had not struck and other cardinals had not begun to die off, he would not have been elected as the compromise candidate, and it was not immediately clear that he would survive the fever. He won on a secret ballot that had to be recounted when one vote turned out to be missing. Against all human expectations the hand of God swayed the election. The workings of Divine Providence were perhaps not immediately evident to those politically minded cardinals who bitterly fought through a fever-ridden conclave, but when the smoke of battle settled they were there for all to see, in the luminous frescoes in the palace of the winner.

Who perceived all of the recondite meanings in these frescoes? Contemporaries would have said that there were three levels of audience: at the lower end the vulgar uneducated plebeians who liked a good joke, in the middle educated gentlemen too busy for real learning, and at the upper end the *litterati* who spent their lives in books. The fresco was in the main public room of the palace and doubtless the guardsmen stationed there cracked many a joke about it. Diplomats paced up and down here awaiting their audiences. Literary men went in some numbers to the palace library and were counted by the Barberini as jewels in their crown. Scott's sensible conclusion is that the ceiling had something to offer on all levels—lowbrow amusements like the falling giants and drunken Silenus on his ass, messages for the gentleman-diplomat about war and peace

and the benefits of good administration, and the highest allegories that sacred science had to offer.

Doubtless many people understood the essays in theology and political science on the Barberini ceilings, but were they really effective? In contemporary England, for instance, for all the brilliance of the Stuart masques and all the glory of Rubens's allegories in the Banqueting House, the specter of the scaffold will never quite be exorcised from Whitehall. Divine Providence gave Urban VIII a long pontificate, and his nephews plenty of time to hang themselves. Though everyone knew how nepotism worked, after twenty-one years in power the general consensus was that the Pope's nephews had overstepped all bounds in enriching themselves at the expense of the state.

They even tried to establish a permanent duchy on the model of the most successful nepotistic family of the previous century, the Farnese. In so doing they provoked tremendous reactions: a short but disastrous conflict, the War of Castro, and the election to the papal throne of a successor so hostile that they had to flee to Paris in disguise. The new regime threatened to confiscate their palace or to demolish it altogether. One of the many appealing things about Scott's excellent book is that it is firmly grounded in political reality. With one eye on the complex allegorical message, but the other on the harshness of defeat, he sees the phoenix in the ashes:

One could argue that the Barberini and their image consultants failed, but, if so, they nevertheless created a useful model of patronage and propaganda for the weaker and less inspired papal families who succeeded them, and, most of all, for the power brokers of European monarchical absolutism already on the road to Versailles.

Taddeo Barberini died in exile in France, but the other Barberini nephews eventually returned to Rome to enjoy their benefices and their palace. Cardinal Francesco Barberini, the "purple fox," continued to be a significant patron of art and letters until his death in 1679. Today the family still enjoys a prestigious place in Roman society. The Pope of the rising sun would have smiled at their eventual success. But he would have been startled by the infinitely greater success of the Sun King born a few months before Cortona finished his painting.

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- 1
Rudolf Wittkower, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* (London: The Warburg Institute, 1949). ↩

2. 2
Christoph L. Frommel, *Der Römische Palastbau der Hochrenaissance*, three volumes (Tübingen: Verlag Ernst Wasmuth, 1973). ↵
3. 3
Hugh Murray Baillie, "Etiquette and the Planning of the State Apartments in Baroque Palaces," *Archaeologia* (Volume 101), 1967, pp. 167–199; Mark Girouard, *Life in the English Country House: A Social and Architectural History* (Yale University Press, 1978). ↵
4. 4
Christian Elling, *Rome: The Biography of Her Architecture from Bernini to Thorvaldsen* (Tübingen: Verlag Ernst Wasmuth; copublished by Westview Press, 1975). ↵

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