Two Illustrated Horoscopes of the Italian Renaissance

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Abstract

Among astral representations in Renaissance paintings and frescoes, a particular and very complex class stands out: that of Illustrated Horoscopes, that is, complete charts disguised under the cover of innocent pastoral landscapes or conventional mythological scenes. Two examples pertaining to this elusive class are proposed and analyzed in this article. The first is a Giorgionesque painting in the Royal Gallery in Dresden, the so-called Horoscope, that probably portrays the casting of a birth-chart for Ercole II d’Este, the son of Lucrezia Borgia, and at the same time a scene from the epic of Orlando and the Paladins. The second is Zucchi’s Assembly of the Gods, a copper panel painted for Ferdinando de Medici’s studiolo in the Roman Villa Medici, which arranges the planetary divinities in correlation to the zodiacal constellations, building the extraordinary nativity of the owner. Both astrological charts, albeit veiled and ambiguous by nature, are substantiated by internal signals, verified on the basis of contemporary horoscopes, and justified by the overall painting narrative.

Keywords

1 Introduction

The passion for astral imagery and astrological symbolic devices is a well-known feature of European Renaissance art and culture, \(^1\) thoroughly investigated since the end of the nineteenth century by iconologists of the caliber of Aby Warburg and Fritz Saxl \(^2\) and still a matter of debate and inspiration in modern iconographical studies. \(^3\) Horoscopic vaults such as the celebrated one in Villa Farnesina, large encyclopaedic frescoes as in the Paduan Palazzo della Ragione, or celestial maps akin to the Florentine hemispheres of San Lorenzo and Santa Croce are still studied, interpreted, and appreciated for their artistic, social, religious, and scientific implications, especially in the Italian scenario. Here, astral representations began to be incorporated in the thirteenth century in carved decorations of Romanesque churches and Gothic cathedrals, especially as calendrical indicators, and only slowly extended from simple lunar, solar, and zodiacal symbols related to the Works of the Months to complex astrological systems resurrecting planetary gods and Ptolemaic constellations of Antiquity. During the Renaissance, such representations proliferated also in paintings and frescoes, along the walls of public, laic buildings, extensively reintroducing the astrological discourse in the courts, universities, and institutions, that is, in the larger social arena.

Furthermore, albeit still partly in shadow for our perception focused on scientific precursors and distrustful of what we label as retrograde superstitions, the ubiquitous presence of astral divination in Italian culture at the end of the Middle Ages is confirmed by all kinds of iconographic signals. The sky, portrayed with its promises and menaces in addition to the usual and reassuring regular rhythms, is indeed everywhere.

Nonetheless, a great number of images and symbols are unrecognizable for us, and many allusions to stars and planets are lost because we have forgotten a large part of the codes and context of such a language, as well as the necessary biographical information about the people who commissioned such depictions with genethliac astrology in mind.

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\(^2\) Suffice it to recall Warburg’s classic ‘Italienische Kunst und internationale Astrologie’ and the precious collection by Saxl, *La fede negli astri*.

\(^3\) Among the most recent and useful studies about astral iconographies, I would like to cite Quinlan-McGrath, *Influences*, and Blume et al., *Sternbilder des Mittelalters und der Renaissance*. 
In general, even during the Renaissance, accurate and complete representations of the sky and of celestial objects are very rare and relegated to technical texts and instruments, but the urge to express the messages from the Heaven above—whether religious or political made no difference—insinuated into the art of the late Middle Ages all manner of celestial emblems and allusions. Apart from generic instruments (globes, armillaries, mechanical clocks, and sundials) used as astronomical attributes, it is reasonable to say that there was at the time a heterogeneous and imaginative spectrum of astral symbols that ranged from zodiacal signs intended as simple seasonal indicators, to single planets or constellations used as synecdoche of a nativity or of a foundation chart, to sophisticated planetary/zodiacal systems revealing the presence of complex astrological theories. In a seminal work of the 1980s, Giulia Mori compiled a first systematic list of Italian Astrological Cycles, with a classification based on the presence of five indicators: Zodiacal Signs, Planets, Paranatellonta, Zodiacal Myths, and Horoscopes. Even considering the selection of large cycles instead of single artworks containing celestial references, the very limited occurrence of horoscopic representations is particularly interesting in this catalogue: just four out of sixty-two, while we know, for example, that astrological elements related to nativities were widespread in emblems and impresas as well as in allegorical paintings.

In fact, one class of astral representations is particularly underexplored (so much so that nobody acknowledges at all their existence as a class): that of paintings or frescoes hiding extensive, almost complete, astrological charts, disguised as more or less cryptic allegories. I will call these highly technical (and often playful) depictions ‘Illustrated Horoscopes.’ The presence of planetary symbols or personifications (usually pagan planetary gods) is mandatory, while zodiacal symbols are not necessarily present but are very beneficial in discerning a generic astrological allusion to an ascendant or a solar sign at birth from a precise horoscope.

4 Mori, Arte e Astrologia, 62–63. The catalogue of ‘Italian cosmographies’ has been greatly extended in Götze, Der öffentliche Kosmos.
5 Technically, a paranatellon is an extra-zodiacal constellation rising with a particular zodiacal sign. In general, it is used in literature to designate an extra-zodiacal constellation.
6 Among many possible examples, the Jupiter in Sagittarius on the ‘Nemesis’ medal of Isabella d’Este (Bonoldi and Centanni, ‘La Medaglia di Isabella d’Este,’ 53–70) may be cited, as well as the Mercury ‘supra montes’ of Agostino Chigi’s coat of arms (Gnoli, ‘Il banco di Agostino Chigi,’ 174).
7 Mantegna’s Parnassus and Bellini’s Feast of the Gods, again in the studiolo of Isabella d’Este (see nn. 26 and 27 below), are excellent examples.
A similar combination of planetary gods and zodiacal symbols composes the famous nativity of Agostino Chigi in Peruzzi’s vault of the Sala di Galatea in the Roman Villa Farnesina8 (Fig. 1). Albeit lacking an explicit narrative, it represents in a sense the archetype of illustrated horoscopes. This decoration perfectly translates the whole birth-chart of the patron in the language of classical mythology, even preserving exact information about the coordinates of planets and angles in the technical diagram.9 The same nature of illustrated horoscope may be acknowledged to the hemisphere in the Sagrestia Vecchia of San Lorenzo in Florence.10 Here the allegorical character is completely missing.

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8 The classical astrological study of the Loggia di Galatea is that by Saxl, La fede astrologica di Agostino Chigi.

9 For a critical analysis of the different readings of the vault and for an updated bibliography, see Gandolfi and Calabresi, ‘Et Summis Surgentia Tecta sub Astris.’

10 The first scholar to discuss the hemisphere in the Sagrestia Vecchia was Aby Warburg in ‘Die astronomische Himmelsdarstellung.’ The different interpretations and dates proposed through the decades for both the artefacts are reviewed in Gandolfi, ‘Gli Emisferi Celesti.’
but a celestial map with a graduated ecliptic shows with realism and elegance the superior half of an accurate astral chart,\textsuperscript{11} representing the part of the ecliptic over the horizon during a morning of July of the second quarter of the fifteenth century.

An extreme case, which eludes the definition and is not a complete planetary horoscope but mimics very well an astrological diagram, may be found in the vault of the Sala dei Cinquecento in the Florentine Palazzo Vecchio: it is the \textit{Glorification of Cosimo I} by Giorgio Vasari (Fig. 2), a circular birth-chart around the portrait of the patron composed by twenty-one shields bearing the devices of the Arti.\textsuperscript{12} Among them, in geometrical correspondence with the Ascendant

\textsuperscript{11} However, the date represented astronomically is still hotly debated (depending upon which planets the scholars identify among the stars): 6 July 1439 or 4 July 1442.

\textsuperscript{12} Vasari’s tondo is discussed from the astrological point of view in Rousseau, \textit{Cosimo I de’ Medici and Astrology}. 

\textbf{FIGURE 2} Giorgio Vasari, \textit{The Glorification of Cosimo I de’ Medici}, 1565, oil, central ceiling painting in the Sala dei Cinquecento. Palazzo Vecchio, Florence

\textsc{Photo credit: Wikimedia}
and the First House, may be found a shield with a goat, standing for Capricorn, while near the top of the circle the oak wreath with eight leaves (one for each star) offered by Flora to the Duke stands for the Crown of Ariadne, the Corona Borealis constellation in southern culmination, located at the Medium Caeli in the Tenth House. Without planets, Vasari recalls here the structure of a birthchart using only the circular shape of the ecliptic and two objects alluding to a zodiacal sign and to a paranatellon of Scorpio placed in the correct position.

The difficulty in discerning and interpreting an illustrated horoscope is manifest: there is no certainty about the astronomical nature of the planetary gods, and even more of other generic allegories with planetary attributes. The chart proposed by Linda Carroll in an innovative reading of Giorgione’s Tempesta (Fig. 3) in 1992 is a good example of this kind of deadlock: nothing guarantees the presence of astral allusions in the painting, even if a familiarity with astrological diagrams is assumed on the part of the beholder.  

In the following pages I will propose two new cases of illustrated horoscopes in paintings, trying to substantiate the elements that authorize a technical astrological reading and comparing them to primary written sources.

2  The Giorgionesque Dresden Horoscope: An Astrological Homage to Ercole II d’Este?

Catalogued at the end of World War II among the lost paintings of the Royal Gallery in Dresden, the so-called Horoscope (Fig. 4) in the Venetian school

13 Such a horoscope would pinpoint the moment in 1509 in which the Venetian army set out to retake the mainland cities that had rebelled after Venice’s defeat at Agnadello, according to the scholar an astrological election decided based on a favorable chart cast by Ramberto Malatesta— the Count of Sogliano—for the Serenissima government. In Carroll’s interpretation, the chart is disposed on an imaginary wheel superimposed on the scene and mixes allusions to planets (the gypsy woman as the moon, the lightning as Jupiter), inferences on the position of the Sun through the shadows, and zodiacal signs read in feebble details (the Lion and the Carrarese Cart as, respectively, the homonymous constellation and a decan of Libra, both represented on the towers along the walls of Padua). Notwithstanding the interesting astrological analysis connected to the war with the League of Cambrai, I consider such an interpretation too far-fetched and completely disconnected from the appearance of the landscape, which contains no bona fide references to astrology or celestial bodies. See Carroll, ‘Giorgione’s Tempest.’

14 For a brief account of the post-war hardships of the Royal collection in the hands of Russian troops, see the anonymous editorial in the Burlington Magazine, ‘The Dresden Pictures.’ The Dresden Horoscope painting remained until 1856 in that same Venetian collection in Palazzo Manfrin that hosted Giorgione’s Tempesta, then in 1874 it was sold in
section nonetheless still exists in storage at the Gallery. It has been poorly studied in literature although universally recognized as a work strongly influenced by Giorgione da Castelfranco and often attributed to Zorzi himself, Girolamo da Treviso, Palma the Elder, or Vincenzo Catena.\textsuperscript{16} In the words of Armand Baschet:

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\textsuperscript{15} a Christie and Meason auction to the Director of the Dresden Gallery Print Cabinet and since that year has remained in possession of the Gallery, notwithstanding its alleged loss. \\
\textsuperscript{16} Hartlaub, ‘Zu den Bildmotiven des Giorgione,’ and Berenson, \textit{Pitture Italiane del Rinasci-}
\end{flushright}
le tableau en question, qui a été peint pour la maison d' Este, dont il porte les armes, représente un astrologue assis, à droite, dans un beau paysage et y étudiant la sphère, un compas à la main; à gauche, une femme vêtue de de blanc, légèrement penchée vers un enfant couché par terre, le montre à l'asto logue qui tire son horoscope: c'est Lucrèce [Borgia] avec son fils, qui fut depuis Hercule II de Ferrare et devint le mari de Renée de France, fille de Louis XII.17

As shown by Charles Yriarte,18 the 1876 catalogue of the Gallery19 described the painting as a 'capriccio' from the Orlando Furioso, representing Ruggiero, the

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17 De Conches and Baschet, Les Femmes Blondes, 5.
18 Yriarte, 'Les Portraits de Lucrèce Borgia,' 224.
19 'Cat. 2389: Ruggiero, Stammvater der Familie Este, wird als Kind von der Fee Logistilla zu
forefather of the d’Este dynasty, as an infant presented to the magician Atlante by the fairy Logistilla, a character introduced in order to avoid the inconsistency of Lucrezia Borgia’s identification with another very different portrait attested in the same collection.

Both the readings—the portrait of an infant nobleman with his mother and the legendary scene derived from the coeval chivalric poetry—can easily coexist, and the Estense heraldic device, the white eagle in the foreground, appears to connect the two narratives. In fact, recent investigations on Lucrezia Borgia’s portraiture and the profile in a Mantuan medal and in an allegory by Dosso Dossi seem to make more plausible the identification of the noblewoman, reinforcing the idea that the painting must be considered an astrological tribute to the new-born Ercole II d’Este, realized in 1508 in a Giorgionesque milieu.

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dem Zauberer Atlante gebracht welcher ihm das Horoskop steller soll. Unten ein wiserer Adler, Wappenthiere des Hauses Este-Ferrara. (S. Ariosto’s Orlando furioso); in: Hübner, Verzeichniss der Königlichen Gemälde-Gallerie zu Dresden, 461. There are no other interpretations of the iconography proposed in literature, nor any attempts to identify the general theme of the painting.

This scene is absent from the Orlando Furioso and seems completely invented by the curator of the Gallery. Ruggiero, the son of Ruggiero II of Reggio Calabria and the African lady Galaciella, both murdered, was found, raised, and protected by the Islamic magician Atlante but did not have any infantile connection with the fairy Logistilla, benign sister of Morgana and Alcina. As previously revealed in the Orlando Innamorato by Matteo Boiardo, Atlante read in the stars the destiny of Ruggiero: converted to Christianity and married to Bradamante, the distant heir of the trojan Ettore would have established the Este dynasty before being killed by a traitor.

Yriarte, ‘Les Portraits de Lucrèce Borgia,’ 222, points to n. 250 of the same catalogue, a supposed early Titian representing the Virgin, the Child, St. Joseph, and Alfonso I’s family, that he dismisses as a second-rate work of the second half of the sixteenth century based on the fashion of the Venetian dresses. Refusing that contrasting portrait of Lucretia Borgia, Yriarte feels free to identify the woman in the Horoscope, but the identification remains problematic.

Lucrezia Borgia, cat. of the exhibition, 78 and 196.


Anyway, the portrait of Lucrezia is accessory in the present reading: the woman may as well represent a generic nanny of the noble baby. Regarding identification of the child, the first son of Alfonso and Lucrezia, Alessandro, was born in September 1505 and died in October. His birth-chart, calculated at the time by an astrologer at the request of Pietro Bembo, does not correspond in any meaningful way to the disposition of the figures in the painting. However, the premature death left no time for an artistic commission. The subsequent male children of the couple (Ippolito II, 1509–1572, Alessandro, 1514–1516, and...
The horoscope appears to hide a complex astral subtext indeed, which is perfectly in line with other dynastic masterpieces commissioned by the d’Este family, such as the Parnassus by Andrea Mantegna, with its nuptial allegories associated to Mars, Mercury, and Venus in Aquarius in the celestial chart of the marriage between Isabella d’Este and Francesco Gonzaga;\(^{26}\) and the Feast of the Gods by Giovanni Bellini, probably dedicated to the marriage between Alfonso I and the same Lucrezia Borgia, which is full of mythical and calendrical references to the Halcion Days of the winter solstice, used for pinpointing the wedding date of 30 December 1501.\(^{27}\)

The game in this case is more subtle and technical, because it seems to correlate the natal chart with the spatial, arc-shaped disposition of the figures around the infant—to be read as the relevant planets of the theme (Fig. 5): the Ascendant would be located on the left margin, the Medium Caeli at the center of the composition, and the Descendant on the right. The result is a veiled horoscope disguised as a pastoral scene or, if one prefers, an allegory derived from the poetical world of Orlando and the Paladins that contains contemporary portraits and a favorable astral prognostication for the Estense scion. Ercole, the naked baby on the ground that is reminiscent of so many children in Giorgionesque paintings,\(^{28}\) stands for Ruggiero, the founder of the dynasty, the hero who—as Atlas the magician foretells with his astrolabe—will die after marrying Bradamante, having converted to Christianity and generated new heirs.\(^{29}\)

A birth-chart\(^{30}\) of Ercole II in a manuscript collection of nativities of the end of the sixteenth century, in the Biblioteca Estense Universitaria in Modena.

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26 Williams Lehmann, ‘The Sources and Meanings of Mantegna’s Parnassus.’
27 Colantuono, ‘Dies Alcyonae.’
28 To name a few: the infant in the Tempesta, the one in the lost Finding of Paris copied by David Teniers, and the boys in the cited Idyl in Philadelphia (n. 2). For an interesting discussion of the topic, see Joannides, ‘Titian, Giorgione and the Mystery of Paris.’
29 While the woman in white cannot represent Logistilla, but perhaps the infant’s mother Galaciella or an anonymous nurse, the scene could still be read on a literary level as a free interpretation of Atlante’s prophecy about the destiny of Ruggiero. In 1538, the first cantos of Orlando Furioso were probably written and presented to the Ferrarese court, but not published. At the same time, Atlante’s prophecy is cited in Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso iv, 105–112, but also in Boiardo’s Orlando Innamorato, ii, 16, 53; therefore, it was well known since the last decade of the fifteenth century.
30 The horoscope is part of a mixed collection of genitures in a sixteenth-century manuscript: ‘Raccolta di Oroscopi di Uomini Grandi’ and ‘Principum, Ducum, Regum, Imperatorum, Episcoporum, Cardinalium, Summorum Pontificum ortus,’ Camp. 412=ɣ.i.7.i.11. A discussion of the chart by Grazia Mirti is published in Bini, Astrologia, 258–259.
allows an accurate astrological reading, confirmed by modern calculations\(^{31}\) (Fig. 6). The woman at the center of the scene with the infant, wearing a pale dress and possibly portraying Lucrezia Borgia, should represent for shape and color the benign moon in Gemini in the ninth house, while the Venus statue\(^{32}\) in the background certainly indicates the relative planet in Taurus in the same house. The latter configuration is particularly noteworthy because Venus in Taurus was the dominant feature in Lucrezia Borgia’s theme.\(^{33}\)

On the left of the picture, a couple of armed soldiers are lurking among the trees: they are very probably the malignant planets Mars and Saturn (which are usually associated with war, famine, and difficulties of all kinds when in

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\(^{31}\) Performed with the desktop software *Galiastro*, version 5.1–00.

\(^{32}\) This Venus, probably a copy from an ancient Roman or Hellenistic original, recalls the acephalous statue that appears in a niche in the background of the *Portrait of a Young Man* at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Male_portrait_by_Domenico_Capriolo_(Hermitage)_by_shakko.jpg, a painting usually attributed to Domenico Capriolo. See Ludemann, "“Un giovinetto con pelliccia [...] estimato singolare.”"

conjunction) located in Virgo in the twelfth house, near the Ascendant. The Sun in Aries in the eighth house seems to be represented by the golden disk of the astrolabe in the hands of the magician in oriental dress, strangely devoid of technical signs on its polished surface but characterized by a conspicuous central bolt recalling the classical sun glyph. Thus, in this case it would be the attribute that identifies the planet, and not the bearded old wizard, who cannot be associated in any possible way to solar mythologies.

Finally, I suggest for the central young man (or woman-warrior?) in armor—who recalls the *Portrait of a Young Man*[^34] in the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana in Milan and the *David with the Head of Goliath*[^35] in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Wien, both after Giorgione—a tentative correlation with Mercury, due to the striking red hat that he holds in the right hand in strange contrast with the military armor. The same characteristic headgear is painted by Carpaccio in the *Ambassadors Depart*[^36] of the Sant’Orsola cycle at the Accademia in Venice, as an accessory that seems to symbolize the diplomatic role: the god Mercury is a messenger, hence the archetype of the ambassadors. Furthermore,

[^36]: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/68/Carpaccio%2C_storie_di_s.orsola_02%2C_Commiato_degli_ambasciatori%2C_1495_circa_02.JPG.
[^37]: This headgear, in the hands of the kneeling English ambassador but even on the heads of those of the king of Brittany, seems to be a precursor of the eighteenth-century two-cornered hat typical of diplomats (Italian *feluca*).
on the right side of the androgynous diplomat-soldier—which could possibly be read as a portrait of Bradamante contemplating the prophecy of Atlas regarding Ruggiero—a shepherd lies in the background, playing a wind instrument that seems an ancient ‘shawm.’ The shawm is a well-attested attribute of Mercury, as can be inferred by the well-known Rubens painting *Mercury and Argus*38 in the Prado collection and especially by the coeval Ferrarese trio of reeds players in the June fresco39 of Schifanoia Palace at Ferrara, in a scene associated to the Triumph of that god. Again, the spatial proximity of the two figures (and the fact that the shawm seems to point in the direction of the young person in armor) reinforces again the association of that position in the chart (more than the figure represented) with Mercury, the swiftest planet. An easy objection to this identification is its more western placement in the eighth house according to the Modena chart and to modern calculations with respect to the southern/eastern quadrant that it occupies in the painting, but it is possible that a different version of the chart with an imprecise ephemeris40 of the planet was used to compose the illustrated horoscope.

If my reading is right, this painting anticipates by a decade the controversial horoscope in the Pontormo fresco *Vertumnus and Pomona* in the Medicean villa of Poggio a Caiano,41 an evocation of Leo x’s birth-chart hidden under an alle-

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38 https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/mercury-and-argus/b0edf098-9-0-52-4442-92bo-2d4e095a6cef. The shawm (Italian *ciaramella*) is the instrument used by the god to make Argus sleep in Rubens’s interpretation.


40 Such imprecisions are very diffuse in medieval and Renaissance astronomical tables, and especially in the case of the Moon and Mercury, the most fast-moving celestial bodies and those with the largest anomalies in the orbital motion.

41 The fresco has been extensively analyzed by Rousseau, *Cosimo I de Medici and Astrology*, 145–152, and by Cox-Rearick, *Dynasty and Destiny in Medici Art*, 199–220, with a slightly different reading. A criticism of these horoscopic interpretations (too harsh in my opinion) can be found in Morel, *Le Parnasse Astrologique*, 165, n. 53. Morel dismisses them based on the circular disposition of the chart divided into sectors corresponding to houses imagined by Rousseau and Cox-Rearick, considering it a modern convention, inconsistent with the standard square diagrams in use during the Renaissance. But he misses the great ingenuity and heterogeneity of the astrological programs in artworks of the time. The disposition of the planets in the sky along the ecliptic is, in fact, naturally circular, and the symbolism used to suggest astral configurations tends to reflect this circularity more than the abstract and angular geometry of the conventional diagrams, as in the case of Vasari’s chart for Cosimo I in Palazzo Vecchio. The uncontested natal sky of Agostino Chigi in Villa Farnesina is another good example of distance from a standard astrological chart: the dis-
gorical arc of figures arranged east–west from the ascendant to the descendant (Fig. 7), an artwork that can be considered another possible important example of illustrated horoscope. The undiscriminating use of human figures of different relevance and scales and of tiny details in transcribing planets and angles of a chart (in that case the nativity of Cosimo I, superimposed onto a giant Libra glyph representing the Medium Caelum of Leo) closely recalls the Dresden Horoscope.

Even though the enigmatic painting I discussed could be easily belittled as a second-rate outcome of the Giorgionesque frenzy of the first decade of the sixteenth century, it should be appreciated as a highly inventive puzzle and one of the first pictorial works attempting an almost complete translation of an astrological diagram in an allegorical scene, instead of the usual and simple allusion to a relevant planet or zodiacal sign.

I would like to conclude my brief investigation of this rather overlooked but intriguing painting with a further suggestion. As we have seen, its attribution is very uncertain, but the author should probably be looked for among the few

position of zodiac and planets transposes its square shape in the rectangular vault of the Loggia di Galatea, maintaining the ‘angularity’ but missing the equal number of constellations for each side. Again, this is certainly not a sufficient reason to discard the horoscopic interpretation of the vault decoration.

42 The Villa Farnesina horoscope is accurately dated to 1511, three years after the Dresden Horoscope.
painters orbiting around Giorgione in his last years in Venice. One cannot avoid suspecting a direct commission from the d’Este family, indicating a connection with the rich and illustrious Ferrarese milieu that could possibly have evolved with time into a more stable and mature artistic relationship with the same patrons and in a penchant for scenes related to the epic of the Carolingian Cycle. There is one Giorgionesque painter (Giorgionesque at least in those early years) that seems to fit this profile and would have become later the friend of Ludovico Ariosto and, since 1514, an official court painter of Lucrezia Borgia and Alfonso I, a very important figure whose juvenile efforts in the Lagoon around 1508 are not well known despite being essential; this artist is Giovanni Francesco Luteri, alias Dosso Dossi. I leave to art connoisseurs the difficult analysis of the compatibility of his hand with that of the author of the Dresden Horoscope.

3 The Assembly of the Gods by Jacopo Zucchi: The Disguised Chart of Cardinal/Grand Duke Ferdinando I de Medici?

The second work I will consider is a small copper panel in the Yale University Art Gallery, representing a crowded Concilio degli Dei under a zodiacal band (Fig. 8), which in the convincing opinion of Edmund Pillsbury was the central piece of an elaborate Studiolo in Noce, realized by Jacopo Zucchi for his patron Ferdinando de’ Medici between 1575 and 1576. The walnut chest is described in both the 1598 and 1680 inventories of Villa Medici on the Pincian Hill in Rome and was part of the rich decoration and furniture commissioned by the Cardinal, in an environment full of astrological and dynastic allusions perfectly in line with the tradition of the Medici family.

PHOTO CREDIT: YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY
On a superficial level, the reunion of the gods appears as a very conventional mythological scene, but it is full of curious details. Jupiter gives birth from the head to a fully grown woman in armor (Pallas Athena-Minerva, a recurring figure in Medicean art); on the clouds below Saturn, two Satyrs, Flora and Ceres, represent the four Seasons, but only Ceres seems to indicate planets and Zodiac, alluding to a Summer scene; at the center of the panel stands Juno, who is the protagonist of the vault in a hall of the Villa, surrounded by Vulcan and Neptune; in the foreground on the right, an old giant emerges from the earth with two putti of different colors: he is the spurious primordial deity Demogorgone, probably with two of the four ages (Golden, Silver, Bronze, and Iron) painted also in a vault of Palazzo Firenze; on the left, the Goddess Roma in armor (identified by the protome of a wolf on the arm and by the red tunic) accompanies a gorgeous lady in transparent attire who spurts liquid from the breast just over the god Pluto; she is probably the Virgo met by Agrippa when he discovered the spring of Aqua Virginis, alluding to the aqueduct arriving on the Pincian Hill and maintained by Ferdinando as an official superintendent, but at the same time the dame probably portrays Clelia Farnese or another of the Cardinal's mistresses of the time. Furthermore, the presence of incorporeal, naked figures that spring from the Cancer region of the Zodiac and incarnated around the Sun, refers to the Neoplatonic theory of the descent of the souls through the superior zodiacal gate, an unusual detail.

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48 Pillsbury, 'The Cabinet Paintings of Jacopo Zucchi,' 192, offers a complete description of the scene but mistakes Demogorgone for Atlas (inexplicable without the Earth on the shoulders and near the contrasting putti) and proposes Flora instead of the Virgo (associated to the aqueduct Aqua Virginis) near the goddess Roma.

49 Agnoletto, 'La Pallade con lancia da giostra,' 9–21.

50 The Hall of the Elements, characterized by Zucchi's marriage of Jupiter and Juno, encircled by her nymphs. See Morel, Le Parnasse Astrologique, 93–119.

51 This convincing identification is proposed by Morel, 'Chaos et Démogorgon.'

52 The feminine figure is like the personification of Nature near the Demogorgone in the vault of Palazzo Firenze (she is springing liquid, too) but lacks fauna and flora around her.

53 Butters, 'Princely Waters.'


55 The ascent and descent of the souls respectively through the gates of Cancer and Capricorn is a typical Pythagoric theme present in Plutarch and Macrobius and particularly

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in paintings indeed, which reveals the sophisticated mix between Myth, Philosophy, and Natural Science typical of the Medicean milieu.

Although the panel could be read as a harmless parade of literary mythography, especially appropriate for a Roman villa (as Pillsbury ostensibly considers it), the configuration of the gods points to a more sophisticated game. Their relative positions with respect to the stars, very discreetly painted on the zodiacal band, aimed at celebrating the patron of the artist, blessed by a very favorable horoscope worthy of a leader.56

Philippe Morel has extensively interpreted and explained the astrological program of the main building and of the park, conceived by the humanist courtier Pietro Angeli da Barga in order to exalt the luminous destiny of Ferdinando as future ruler of Tuscany after his brother Francesco,57 but he has missed this direct representation of his birth-chart. The assembly, in fact, gathers among others some gods explicitly accompanied by their associated celestial body (Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Apollo, Venus, Mercury, and the Moon repre-

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56 The original horoscope of the Grand-Duke is lost. Usimbardi (in Saltini, ‘Istoria del Gran Duca Ferdinando I,’ 371), relates that ‘L’anno 1549 della salute nostra nacque a Cosimo de’ Medici duca di Firenze, di Leonora di Toledo sua moglie, il quinto figliuolo maschio chiamato poi nel battesimo Ferdinando; il quale certo è che nascesse del mese di luglio, ma del giorno furono ne’ tempi futuri varie l’opinioni, non trovandosene scritta in luogo alcuno certa memoria, come del金刚 others. Il che dette occasione ad alcuni di credere, ne’ seguenti tempi, ciò fatto dal padre con prudente consiglio, et d’affermare che il medesimo maestro Giuliano carmelita, astrologo, di quei tempi usato da lui nel pigliare il punto della natività dell’altri figliuoli, gli havesse tanto certa predetta in Ferdinando la successione dell’ stati, che Cosimo proibisse a lui di farne memoria; per liberario, quanto cosi potesse, dall’odio et invidia de’ fratelli maggiori; se bene neanco questo li successe, come mostrò il tempo seguente. […] Egli s’attenne all’opinione d’esser nato alli 19, et in quel di perciò volse celebrarsi poi il suo natale, quando per la morte di Francesco successse nelli stati’ [In the year 1549 of our Salvation a fifth son was born to Cosimo de’ Medici duke of Florence, by Leonora of Toledo his wife, called in baptism Ferdinand; that certainly happened during the month of July, but there were various opinions about the day in subsequent times, as no certain testimony was found written in any place. The circumstances gave occasion for some to believe, in later times, that the father did it with prudent advice, and to affirm that the same master Giuliano Carmelita, astrologer, in those times used by him in calculating the geniture of his other children, had predicted with so much certainty the succession of Ferdinando to the Dukedom, that Cosimo forbade him to preserve memory [of the chart] in order to save the child, as far as he could, from the hatred and envy of his older brothers; but even this was not spared to him, as the following times proved. He stuck to the opinion that he was born on the 19th, and therefore he decided to celebrate on that day his birthday, when after the death of Francesco I he succeeded to the Dukedom].

57 Morel, Le Parnasse Astrologique, especially 120–218.
sented over the head of the human figures or in their hands). These astronomical planets are aligned with specific constellations of the Zodiac above them. A close look confirms that zodiacal stars and shapes decorate the band, from the Virgo on the extreme right to the Gemini on the top, very near the Medium Caeli, establishing an ecliptical reference in precise connection with the planets.

It is true that the planetary order from the top to the bottom of the panel is the classical Chaldean one, but at the same time the disposition reflects along the zodiac the particular distribution they had at the end of July 1549 (Fig. 9), composing approximately the birth-chart of Ferdinando as described in a posthumous chart of the Cardinal/Grand-Duke in the National Library in Florence\(^58\) (Fig. 10). The modern calculation\(^59\) confirms the configuration: Saturn in the direction of Capricorn (not represented, outside the visible part of the band), Jupiter in Taurus, Apollo-Sun in Leo (recalling the extraordinary nativity of his grand-uncle Giovanni di Lorenzo), Venus too in Leo, Mercury in Virgo, and Diana-Moon in the direction of Scorpio (not represented, beyond the visible part of the band). Mars is here an exception: in Ferdinando’s horoscope it should be positioned in Virgo; instead we find it in Cancer, an error probably tolerated in order to disguise the chart, maintaining the neutral appearance of the Chaldean order. The translucent globe of the Moon raised by Diana and hit by Apollo’s sunray is particularly worthy of attention: our satellite has the clear shape of a crescent, which is coherent with the approximate first-quarter phase of July 30.

Urania (?) sitting on the top of the divine gathering at the left of the painting, together with a putto playing a stringed instrument, celebrates the perfect concord of this planetary symphony for the birth of a Grand-Duke.

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58 The chart has been recovered by Butters, ‘Magnifico, non senza eccesso,’ 24 (BNCF, 11.III.450 fol. 4\(^v\)). As explained in n. 56 above, the absence of the original document and of a precise date and hour stimulated different hypotheses, analyzed in detail by Galileo himself on request of Christine of Lorraine (Galilei, Le Opere, vi, Florence, 1847, 66–67). The Pisan scientist inclined towards the 30 of July, the same date of the anonymous and posthumous horoscope in Biblioteca Nazionale, and it is perfectly possible that Pietro Angeli as astrologer and Jacopo Zucchi as painter adopted it for the panel. The difference of 10 days with 19 July (considering the Italian convention of calculating the time starting from dusk) could have been generated by a confusion between calendars (Julian and Gregorian) in the years of Gregorius XIII’s Reform.

59 Performed again with the desktop software Galiastro, version 5.1–00.
Jacopo Zucchi, *The Assembly of the Gods* read as the illustrated horoscope of Ferdinando I de’ Medici
4 Conclusion

The two paintings I have discussed above are almost complete transcriptions of nativity charts in the pictorial language of the sixteenth century and represent excellent examples of what I have defined as ‘Illustrated Horoscopes,’ aimed in this case at exalting the qualities and political prospects of the patrons in relatively private spaces (studiolos, courtly residences). They show at the same time the ingenuity and creativity of the artists and courtiers of the time, dealing with complex astrological allegories. There were no fixed and strict rules in this game, except for the spatial disposition of the planetary configuration that in both the examples is carefully preserved. The incorporation of celestial bodies along the landscape, which may be partial (not all the planets and the angles of a chart need to be represented) and not to exact scale, appears to be ancillary to the narrative and to the allegorical values of the representation, which may be grounded in Greek-Roman mythology as well as in extraneous but fashionable material, as the reference to the chivalric epic in the Ferrarese painting shows.

The good (but not perfect) correspondence between the depictions and the diagrams seems, in both artworks, confirmed by the charts of the patrons that circulated among contemporaries, and the lack of precision is ascribable to the existence of alternative horoscopes or to misreading or to errors of calculation.

The Horoscope and the Council of the Gods are extreme cases—for complexity and completeness of the horoscopic transcription—of the large spectrum of astral representations that I mentioned in the introduction, and in their
sophistication they should be considered a significant extension of the courtly
iconography solicited by an elite particularly focused on dynastic succession, as
demonstrated by the sheer quantity of simpler astrological allusions in dynas-
tic paintings, frescoes, and impresas discussed in literature.60

A cautionary note is in order: absolute certainty in the identification of
an intentional complex astrological configuration is always difficult to attain. There
remains in fact a marginal possibility that an apparently well-conceived
conundrum could be just a Rorschach test for fanciful astrological scholars
and that chance mixed with a biased willfulness on the part of the beholder
could generate an implausible interpretation. In the cases analyzed, however,
the narrative frame of the representations is a good guarantee of the astrologi-
cal reading.

The artists intentionally and very clearly alert the reader to the possibility
of an astral exegesis: in the Dresden painting, portraying the very act of casting
the horoscope of a newborn at the center of the scene; while in Zucchi's panel,
gathering the whole array of planetary gods and juxtaposing their celestial bod-
ies with recognizable zodiacal constellations. We are here a long way off from
the cryptic decoding of Giorgione's Tempesta, although the astrological puzzle
would anyway be insoluble in the absence of a known patron with a known
birthday. And that is the main problem with many astral representations and
possible illustrated horoscopes of the Italian Renaissance, still existing and
well concealed in a rich cultural heritage that lies until now partly unexplored:
anonymous patrons, patrons without preserved birth-charts, and undefined
electoral dates are a nearly insuperable obstacle to identifying and system-
atically decoding such complex astrological depictions. Tens of undetected or
unnoticed horoscopes could at present populate museums, art galleries, vil-
las, and private collections, beyond any possibility of recovery, especially in the
case of works of art associated with minor noble families, and that surely dis-
torts our perception of the diffusion, use, and abuse of astrology in European
Renaissance culture.

60 See nn. 6 and 7 above, but the list could be vastly larger considering the many studies
about Tuscan, Ferrarese, and Mantuan astral iconographies. The number of Medicean
artworks (e.g., Botticelli's allegories) interpreted in terms of astrology, with one or more
planets dressed up with mythological material, is impressive. See, for a first recognition,
the 'Medici and Astrology' section in Cox-Rearick, Dynasty and Destiny, 159–177. But astral
representations imbued with technical astrology may be motivated also by celestial div-
ination about human history and apocalyptic prognostications or by the use of talismanic
magic; see Gandolfi, 'Astrology, Prophecy and the Birth of Modern Science,' and Gandolfi,
'L'Astrologia Rinascimentale.'
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