CHAPTER 12

The Grottesche Part 2. Signs, Topography and the Dream of Painting

Grotesque Decorations in the Workshop of Raphael

In the grotesque decorations executed by Giovanni da Udine under Raphael, the rendering of light, suspension and growth is given a topographical orientation of some importance for the subsequent articulation of architectural decoration. These decorations appear in pensile architecture and play on the dual nature of the grottesche as chthonic and ethereal.1 Their three major experiments are however quite distinct in character, each working with a particular aspect or potential of the decoration. The Stufetta of Cardinal Bibbiena (1516) reproduces the vault compartments of the Volta Dorata and the aediculae of the Domus Aurea; with its red, black and gold grounds and its imitation of ancient encaustic, it comes closest to a recreation of an ancient painted room.2 The Loggetta of Cardinal Bibiena (1516) is a playful paradox—a subterranean cryptoporticus transformed into a loggia hanging in the light, peopled with the nocturnal creatures may allude to the animals and insects which infested the grottoes, commemorated in the comic rhyme about early explorations of the Domus Aurea.3 Dacos links the punning details of the decoration, where

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1 Giovanni de Udine produced more conservative imitations of the vaults of the Domus Aurea, such as his work with Perino del Vaga in the Sala dei Pontifici, 1521, similar to Volta dorata as shown in the drawing of Francisco de Holanda.

2 The Stufetta was rediscovered in the nineteenth century, the Loggetta in the twentieth. See Dacos, Logge (2008), 31–32; Giovanni da Udine, 35–43; idem “La Loggetta du Cardinal Bibbiena: Décor à l’antique et rôle de l’atelier”, in Raffaello a Roma, 225–36; D. Redig de Campos, “Una Loggetta di Raffaello ritrovata in Vaticano”, in idem, Raffaello e Michelangelo. Studi di storia dell’arte (Rome: Bardi, 1946), 29–59. The programme, mostly with erotic scenes, was devised by Bibbiena, as noted in Bembo’s letter to him of 19 April, 1516. The lunettes depict barber’s scenes without antique precedent where river gods have their hair washed and trimmed; see Dacos, Giovanni da Udine, 39. The motif of putti racing chariots in the lower register of the decoration is taken from the Maritime Theatre of the Hadrian’s Villa; see ibid., 40.

3 Antiquarie prospettiche romane composte per prospettivo Melanese depictore, c. 1500, describes the artists who descend the grottoes with picnics and, “piu bizarri alle grottesche”, crawl along the passages with toads, frogs, owls and bats. See Antonio M. Adorisio, “Un enigma romano. Sulle Antiquarie Prospettiche Romane e il loro autore”, in Roma nella svolta, 464–80; Dacos, Découverte, 9–10. On the various hands in the Loggetta, see Dacos, Giovanni da Udine,
potbellied old men stand on delicate stems and cupids carry poles to keep
their balance, with Bibbiena’s delight in comedy, and Leo X’s letter on the “joy
and rejoicing” of Bibbiena’s residence.4

The combination of brilliant ground and the insect-like delicacy of the
forms plays with the duality of darkness and light associated with renovation
of antiquity, its layered temporality concerning splendour or illumination
and obscurity or decay. The delicate grotesques against their brilliant white
background suggest nocturnal forms as though dissolved by the white light in
which they hang.5

The Loggetta displays the coincidence between the chthonic and the efful-
gent, monstrosity and delicacy; this display also usurps the place of dramatic
illusion. The pendant character of the dainty chimeras mirrors the pensile
architecture of the loggia and their volatile, fugitive nature is echoed in the
proliferation of frames so that the search for an organising central frame con-
stantly moves from one area to another.

In place of an ornament that frames and ‘discovers’ an illusionistic history,
here a series of analogies are created between figuration, disposition and archi-
tectural situation. These analogies provide the framework for a miscellany of
images, including ancient cameos or plaques, stemma and animals from the
menagerie of Leo X. Full size trompe d’œil painted statues in niches punctu-
ate the corridor, denoting the Loggetta as a sculpture gallery. Dominating the
framework and its content is the reference to the fantasy which invents, com-
bines and orders the metamorphic figurations that hang like a veil of meta-
phor over a field of light.

The Vatican Logge are, as Dacos observed, less experimental, as they return
to the candelabrum disposition of the grottesche as pilasters framing vistas—
painted and real gardens in what is now the Cortile di San Damaso.6 The

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5 On this aspect of the grottesche, see Carl, “Ornament and Time”, 53: “it is as if the resources of
the chthonic were immolated in light, and the effort to recover an orientation to origins has
produced its opposite”.
6 Dacos, Logge (2008), 37. See idem, Logge (1977), for numbering, description of the articulation
of the scheme and photographic documentation, engravings and sources; Logge (2008), 12, 22, pl. 13. On the architecture of the Logge and Cortile di San Damaso, see Frommel in
Raffaello architetto, 357–78; Ackerman, Belvedere, 54, notes confusion in sixteenth century
descriptions between the Logge and the lower part of the Belvedere Cortile, both of which
shared a three storey portico. The garden appears in van Heemskerck’s view of c. 1535–36
(Osterreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna).