chapter 4

Defining Ducal Dominion: Giovanni Stradano’s City Views in the Apartment of Leo X

Vasari and Stradano worked together to visually implement Borghini’s historiographic practice and its required rhetoric in the Apartment of Leo X. The apartment consists of six rooms, each named after a Medici family patriarch and decorated by Vasari’s workshop between 1556 and 1561. Three of those rooms—those named after Giovanni delle Bande Nere (Duke Cosimo I’s father), Pope Clement VII, and Cosimo I—are decorated with Stradano’s city views. The views cover ceilings and walls, presenting panoramas that fill the viewer’s sight with a multiplicity of natural detail and historical events. According to Vasari, the ceiling paintings are done in oil on panel, while the wall and vault paintings are oil on plaster, his own innovation to harmonize the apartment.1 In these paintings, Vasari fashioned his visual history that would justify the ducal rule of Cosimo I.

That history tells of the Medici and their position within Florentine, Italian, and European affairs, particularly during the Habsburg-Valois wars of the 1520s and ’30s. Pope Clement VII’s support of the French against Charles V, in the form of Giovanni delle Bande Nere’s soldiers, led to the imperial sack of Rome in 1527. Clement’s difficulties during the sack enabled the Florentines to expel his hegemony and establish the so-called Last Republic that year. Upon making peace with Charles V, pope and emperor reconquered Florence in 1530 after a months-long siege. Together the rulers reestablished the Medici as its now-imperially decreed rulers. Alessandro served as Florence’s initial Medici duke, a tenuous position given simmering republican sympathies and a lack of hereditary right. Alessandro’s assassination in 1537 paved the way for Cosimo’s election and then appointment as duke, which he proceeded to make permanent by marrying a distant relation of the emperor, providing for the safety and security of the Tuscan state, and establishing the Medici ducal lineage for his heir.

Throughout this history, Vasari placed the responsibility for historical judgment on the viewer. The visual experience of perceived eyewitnessing persuades the viewer of the truth of the events and the virtues of the Medici and their imperial support, manipulating the viewer into determining the fitness of

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1 Vasari, Opere, 8:88.
Medici rule over Florence. Vasari employed the rhetorical technique of *enargeia* through Stradano’s city and siege views, and their consequent analogues of judgment, cosmos, and rule. The Lucretian simulacric mode encourages that judgment, while enabling Vasari to present a not-quite-false, but deliberately manipulated, history with a truthful appearance. Vasari’s argument concludes by illustrating Cosimo’s freshly fortified borders of the newly defined state of Tuscany, the cosmic analogy now metaphor for ducal dominion.

1 The Room of Giovanni delle Bande Nere

Giovanni delle Bande Nere, whose death paved the way for Rome’s sack, represents the manifestation of Clement’s diplomatic policies. It is Giovanni’s causal role in the events of the 1520s, and the military virtues he passed on to his son Duke Cosimo I, that are depicted in his room. Giovanni de’ Medici was a young condottiere, or captain of mercenary troops, famous for his bravery and military prowess. He became known as Giovanni delle Bande Nere ostensibly after adopting black armbands for his troops to mourn the death of Pope Leo X, another Medici Pope for whom he worked. From 1521 until his death in 1526, Giovanni fought primarily in the wars between the French and the Holy Roman Empire, focused in northern Italy. He frequently switched sides between the two powers at the behest of his papal relative, Clement VII, the second Medici pope. Vasari and Stradano painted on the ceiling of the Room of Giovanni five scenes from the namesake’s life in Vasari’s mannered, heroic style. On the walls below appear eight more scenes illustrating further events from Giovanni’s life set in Antwerp school views.

While Vasari identified all of the ceiling paintings of Giovanni’s room in the *Ragionamenti*, he mentioned only three of the wall paintings. The previously unknown subjects identified here further our knowledge of the room’s narrative, and also offer greater insight into Vasari’s panegyric and historiographic practice throughout the palace. Vasari’s written account of the wall paintings begins by describing Giovanni’s first military action. The referenced

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3 Vasari, *Opere*, 8:183–88, the wall paintings are on 187.