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## Festoons in Villa Farnesina Loggia: Complexity beyond Decoration

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### Abstract:

*The Villa Farnesina Loggia is a resting and meeting place in the Villa Farnesina, used to be called the Villa Chigi, owned by the wealthiest man in Renaissance Rome, Agostino Chigi. The frescoes are the story of Cupid and Psyche painted by Raphael Sanzio, from the Metamorphoses, and they have long been visitors' and experts' focus. Nevertheless, the festoons surrounding the frescoes created by Giovanni Udine, the team member of Raphael, are sometimes disregarded by art historians. The inclusion of 170 botanical species, including those introduced from the New World just twenty years before the commission of Villa Farnesina, may infer that these festoons mean more than decoration. This paper will merely target on the festoons and to prove how the artist masters these fruits and vegetables, artistically and contextually.*

**Keywords:** *Villa Farnesina, loggia, festoons, new world, Raphael Sanzio, Giovanni martini da Udine, agostino chigi, exoticism*

### 1. Introduction

On the ceiling of the Villa Farnesina loggia remain a series of frescoes designed and painted by the High Renaissance master Raphael Sanzio, depicting the adventure of Cupid and Psyche adapted from the *Metamorphoses* written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD by Lucius Apuleius Madaurensis (Lewis, 2017, p. 356). Surrounding the frescoes are pergola-like pavilion with decorative festoons painted by Giovanni Martini da Udine, the artist in Raphael's team. At first sight, these fruits, vegetables, and flowers may seem merely for framing purpose and secondary to the composition of the entire frescoes; nevertheless, the 'systematic presentation in painting of a large number of botanical species was the first of its kind in the Renaissance' (Nonaka, 2017, p. 54). The loggia in a villa usually acts as an intermediate space between the interior meeting place and the exterior garden. In Villa Farnesina, the pergola, decorated with garlands, transforms the inside into an exterior-like open ceremonial space. Thus, the pergola represents much more than supporting details to the main frescoes.

On one side of the vaults below the center of the main two frescoes, we could see one vault-section of the whole pergola in the Villa Farnesina loggia. Although the fruits, vegetables, or flowers on the two radians are for decoration purposes, the distribution of them and the inclusion of certain fruits require more consideration into the intention of the artist and the patron. First, the radians are spread out accordingly to the center Cucurbitaceae surrounded by grapes on the top. Even though species on two sides vary, the sizes of them reflect the symmetrical distribution. The first wheat appeared on the left matches the first maize on the right side; going down on each side further, we could see how the second wheat on the left close to the birds is also horizontally parallel to the second maize by the bird on the right. The symmetry is beyond size. Interestingly, both the upper wheat and the maize are immature, while the lower one on either side blooms. Besides symmetry, the inclusion of maize is believed to be among the earliest images of this newly introduced grain in Europe (Janick& Caneva, 2005, p. 1). Their presence directly reflects the evidence of the rapid diffusion of maize into Europe, 'as early as 22 to 24 years after Columbus' return from the first voyage to the New World' (Janick& Paris, 2006, p. 165). Therefore, it is apparent that the design of the garlands is much more than pure decoration.

Although the vault discussed above only occupies one small section of the entire pergola, a number of questions may be posed due to this observation: Why would the artists design the botanical species in a unique way artistically? What's the importance of including these newly introduced fruits and vegetables on the pergola? Is there any deeper connection among the garlands and the frescoes or the patrons? It is hard to answer these questions without concrete discussion, but I will suggest that the position and inclusion of all variety of plants, particularly the New World ones, indicate how the artist and the patron desire to show their mastery of these botanical species. The term 'mastery' may seem vague, but throughout this paper, I will demonstrate 'mastery' in three parts: 1) Artistic quality reflected from the clear understanding of the colors and shapes of the species, and the complex placement of them 2) Knowledge of deeper meaning of each fruit, and their relationship with the frescoes 3) Ability to present the intentions of the patron from the pergola in a larger historical context.

## 2. Festoons Becoming Art

In Vasari's account of the Loggia, he praised the florals as follows: 'a border of large festoons right around the groins and squares of the vaulting, making there all the kinds of fruits, flowers, and leaves, season by season, and fashioning them with such artistry, that everything may be seen; their living and standing out from the wall' (Vasari, 1923, p. 124). All types of fruits, not only those available to be seen in daily life or those exotic ones introduced from elsewhere in the world, are not presented in a plain way. Rather, as Vasari emphasizes, the 'artistry' marks its significance and success to be recognized as an unprecedented artwork depicting florals. The perfect presentation of each fruit's color and shape, and the arrangement that is not random, neither provides viewer a pure sense of order, nor merely an imagined piece of art. This realism and vividness shown from the pergola is due to the artist's artistic mastery of these botanical species.

During the Renaissance, realism became the focus of artists. It may not be surprising that Udine accurately and realistically depicts the colors and shapes of fruits, vegetables, and flowers that were already accessible in Europe in the 1500s. Nevertheless, the knowledge of the colors and shapes of the newly introduced festoons, represented by *Cucurbita pepo* (squash), *Zea mays* (maize), and *Cucurbita maxima* (yellow pumpkin), means the artist's ability to adapt to the quickly changing world ('The Colors,' n.d.). Therefore, to show the artist's mastery of certain qualities of these three species will conclude the artist's thorough understanding of the festoons.

*Cucurbita pepo* is a native vegetable to North America and wild plants of this species can be found in present day Mexico and United States (Janick&ParisTh, 2006, p. 174). *Cucurbita maxima*, which is a larger category under the same family with *C. pepo*, is also indigenous to South America and there is no evidence that it was planted in Europe prior to Columbus' voyage (Merrick, 1995). They were thus first brought back by the first several voyages conducted by the Spanish Empire in the 1490s. I therefore will discuss both fruits together and how their different colors indicate that the artist masters the complexity of the species.

When painting *Cucurbita maxima*, in the selected images from the festoons, Udine depicted the species in three different colors. These large pumpkins are believed to be fast-growing fruits which have spherical or elongated shape, with skin colors varying among yellow, orange, and green ('The Colors,' n.d.). Not counting the Villa Farnesina, one of the official earliest depictions of the *C. maxima* appeared in the illustrations from the *Commentaries* by Matthioli in 1568. The same plant was again depicted roughly ten years later on the head of *Autumn* by Giuseppe Acimboldo. Both works identify the *C. maxima* as having stripes radiating out from the top and relatively circular. Among the *C. maxima* painted by Udine, we are able to see them vary from each other. Even between ones that are both orange in color, Udine chose to depict one that is more uniformly furrowed, thus more aesthetically pleasing (Janick&ParisTh, 2006, p. 167). In addition, in another example the pumpkin turns into much smaller and grey in color compared to the ordinary type of *C. Maxima*, which are usually orange and circular. In the other four cases we see the white, furrowed pumpkins. More precisely, on these white *C. maxima*, Udine even painted ten secondary furrows in addition to the ten primary furrows, is a familiar trait among the show pumpkins of *C. maxima* (Caneva, 1992). The depiction of fruits in Europe mostly appeared in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century and early 17<sup>th</sup> century in Italy and mostly in the Flanders. The various colors, shapes, and outside features demonstrated from these several examples of *C. Maxima* point to the fact that Udine must have seen and studied the fruit in life transported from Spain.

In the case of *Cucurbita pepo*, the various colors and furrows among the examples of the same species indicate the different stages of maturity of the fruit. In the same family of *C. maxima*, *C. pepo*, as shown in an example nearby a large pumpkin, is usually a smaller and either green or yellow or mixed, striped fruit. Most of the *C. pepos* are mature, indicated by their 'oval shapes, slightly lobed and furrowed body feature, and mostly light orange-yellow through partly grey-green in color' (Janick & ParisTh, 2006, p. 173), according to Janick and Paris. In the other two examples, one has the two *C. pepo* that are even smaller and have certain dark markings or fractions on the body, thus showing their immaturity. The other example features the *C. pepos* that were from a different place, Texas, than the other examples mentioned above, which are from Mexico (Janick & ParisTh, 2006, p. 174). These *C. pepos* are much whiter and thinner, but still remain in oval shape. The complexity of colors, shapes, maturity, and even origin places reflects the insightful knowledge Udine possesses in depicting festoons.

While the accurate capture of these festoons' colors and shapes represents one aspect of artistic mastery, the unique arrangement also points out that these botanical species do much more than decoration. Returning to the example mentioned in the introduction, we can see that the matching placement of the maize and the wheat is no coincidence. Maize was also newly introduced and the depiction of one being immature and one being mature accordingly to the wheats on the opposite side, indeed reflects Udine's understanding of the similarity between maize and wheat. The symmetry according to species family here in the example thus indicates the complexity of the festoon's creation. Even though in other places on the pergola the symmetry may not be apparent, whenever there are two spirals meeting together, we can see a fruit or vegetable that is much larger in size and is surrounded by grapes. This idea of a larger theme expanding into smaller sections matches with the entire frescoes. All the small stories in each vault seems to be supplementing the major two scenes on the center: the banquet and the wedding; all the fruits on the spirals also act as secondary support to the major fruit, either watermelon or pumpkin or cabbage, at the meeting point of the spirals. Moreover, this organized distribution evokes a sense of order rather than random quality of the artwork. The arrangement thus indicates the sophistication of the artist's design.

In addition to the order revealed from certain symmetry and major plants, on the spirals surrounding the banquet scene and the wedding scene, seem to have directions that are not coincident. If we look at the horizontal spiral, we are easily able to discover that these species have directions. The flowers on the top of Venus seem to be the center; on the left

side, the sorghum, the long melon, together with other smaller fruits including quince and oranges all seem to point towards the flowers; on the right side, the white flowers, the long melon, and the oranges also seem to incline to the center flowers. Interestingly, the white flowers in the center are also on the top of the goddess. We thus may infer that the festoons on spirals like the example I provide, helps viewers to focus on the surrounding frescoes story. Even if viewer loses track in the variety of fruits, one can still return back to the paintings in each vault.

The same pattern could be found on the spirals above the fresco depicting Zeus and Psyche. On either side of the white flowers at the center of the horizontal spiral, the vegetables and fruits are pointing towards the center. Same as in the previous example, the white flowers at the center are on the top of the bellowing fresco story, guiding viewers to appreciate the depictions in the vault. More interestingly, vertically higher than the white flowers, there is a globe depicted underneath the owl. It may pose more questions about the deeper meaning that the artist is hoping to address from the festoons, which will be discussed in the next section. From the precise depiction of certain newly introduced plants, to the unique arrangement of them, and to the artistic meaning of the distribution, festoons on the pergola reveal the complexity among them. For the past several centuries, these florals have not attracted enough attention, apart from the botanical study of the genetics or origins of certain new fruits or vegetables. Here in this section, I prove to you that the presentation of these festoons indicates the artist's mastery of their artistic quality, and more questions need to be addressed about the deeper meanings and contextual reasons behind the depiction of the festoons.

### 3. Art Tells a Story

When painting decorations surrounding the main artwork, the most challenging work is not only to make the decorations appealing, but also to make it meaningful and in relation to the main subject. In the case of Villa Farnesina Loggia, as emphasized in previous section, the festoons support viewers to better understand the frescoes. However, besides the supplementing factor, the selection of certain fruits doesn't seem to be random and the arrangement may reveal the complex nature of the artist. To resolve the puzzle, we need to first perceive what the frescoes are telling the viewers.

The series of frescoes describe the love story of Psyche and Eros. It derives from a 'second-century fairy tale by Lucius Apuleius, picturing the trials Psyche was made to endure in her love for Cupid, which finally culminated in their marriage feast and a child, named Pleasure' (Masinter, 1993, p. 12). Echoing the entire banquet atmosphere, the variety of festoons apparently enhances the tone expressed by the frescoes scene. Besides the thematic similarity, the inclusion of certain species also returns to the classical world, where the stories of the frescoes took place. It was believed that during the appointment under the Pope to be the Superintendent of Roman Antiquities, Raphael intensified his passion for classical knowledge, thus broadening his understanding of the ancient culture. Masinter mentioned in his paper 'Agostino Chigi's Villa Suburbana' that many of the flowers and fruits were old Roman favorites (1993, p. 12), including the flowers of blossoming trees for example elderflowers, hawthorn, pomegranates, and lemon and orange citrus blossoms (Masson, 2011, p. 124). But I want to go further than merely proving how these species match the historical periods when the stories became popular. I will thus use an example to show that the artist masters the deeper meanings of the species, and their appearances are never coincidence.

In one of the vaults beneath the council scene was Venus standing with birds surrounded. Above the head of Venus is a horizontal spiral full of fruits and vegetables. Among them, Udine included two fruits, quince and apple, and both are closely related to Venus. The name of Quince derived from the ancient Cretan city of Kydonia, where this species was introduced (Basan, 2006, p. 88). The fruits of quince, which resemble the golden apples, were dedicated to Venus and considered a symbol of love and happiness ('The Colors,' n.d.). Similar to the meaning of quince, apple in the classical world is believed to be the 'apple of discord and judgement of Paris' (Littlewood, 1968, p. 149), thus also being an emblem of Venus and of love in general ('The Colors,' n.d.). It is true that in other spirals there are also apples and quince, but the inclusion of them close to Venus reveals the thorough knowledge of these fruits the artist has. Not only in this one example but almost in most of the fruits or vegetables the artist included we see that they reveal the love or unity that the story of Cupid and Psyche is narrating. Peach, which is the symbol of prosperity and of marriage, the bloomed muskmelon, which is a symbol of fertility or prosperity, and bitter orange, which was dedicated to Venus ('The Colors,' n.d.), all help viewers acknowledge the deeper meaning that the frescoes are expressing: love and marriage.

Besides the love and marriage theme, the selection of some fruits and vegetables that are not originated from Europe reveals the emphasis on the secular culture. In fact, the interest in the eastern world is not unfamiliar in the art of Raphael and his team. In his *School of Athens*, in addition to the Greek philosophy, mathematics and music, we see 'Ancient Egyptian geometry and astrology, Islamic theology and medicine and Italian Renaissance painting, sculpture and architecture' (Alkholy, 2008, p. 56). Deriving out from the name *School of Athens*, Raphael included philosophers that were not European. Ibn Rushd (Gabrieli, 1974), for example, was placed in the painting to represent Muslim science and knowledge. The curiosity for far East also appears in Raphael's famous painting the *Marriage of the Virgin*, where the temple on the back seems to resemble the *Dome of the Rock* in the Islamic World (Burckhardt, 1986, p. 86). Thus, it is possible and reasonable to assume that the artist admires or is appealed by the mystery of the far East.

It is not surprising that the artist included a great number of fruits and vegetables from the far east. The appearances of peaches, originated from China (Faust & Timon, 1995, p. 331), plums, also being domesticated in China more than 2000 years ago (Strawn, 2016), and cherries, which are said to originate from Armenia or near Black Sea ('Cherry,' n.d.), may be all due to the marvel of Eastern culture to the artist. Questions may then be raised on why the artist included species from America. To understand this question, we need to be clear about the Europeans' view of the world in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, professor Alexander Nagel and professor Elizabeth Horodowich mentioned in their paper

'Amerasia: European Reflections of an Emergent World, 1492-ca. 1700' that 'between 1500 and 1700, Europeans developed and maintained a locally formed concept of global geography in which Asia and America overlapped' (Horodowich& Nagel, 2019, p. 259). As a result, believing that maize, *C. pepos*, and *C. maxima* from the New World are all Asian species, Udine just proves again his and Raphael's interest in Eastern secular culture.

Besides mastering the deeper meaning and the origin of each fruit, certain arrangement of these species also contributes to some further inference of the artist's intention. Pointed out in the first section, on the spirals surrounding the main frescoes, the festoons seem to have direction. In the same example mentioned previously, on the spiral under the council scene and above the vault depicting Jupiter and Psyche, the three white flowers remain the center. Besides supporting viewers to focus on the scene depicted underneath in the vault, the center flowers are also under a globe, which is stepped on by Jupiter, depicted in the council scene. The idea of globe is modern, but in 1492, Behaim's *Erdapfel* globe was made, which may be the first terrestrial globe ever built ('Behaim's *Erdapfel*,' n.d.). There were maps being updated after 1492, but the *Erdapfel* globe remained official, as it reveals an enlarged Eurasian continent, including the New World, and an empty ocean between Europe and Asia, which is believed to be the Pacific Ocean. However, placing a globe, which never existed in classical time, in a council scene of a myth seems to be abrupt. Interestingly, the part of the globe that can be seen by viewers reveals the Italian peninsular as the center, surrounded by Africa and Asia. The other parts of the globe are hidden by other figures. This choice of presenting Italy to us seems to express an idea of Eurocentrism. The idea in fact 'took root in Renaissance,' that everything spins around Europe (Wallerstein, 2003, p. 172). As a result, Udine's depiction of the white flowers at the center of the spirals below directs the viewers to focus on the mysterious globe above, which clearly reflects the idea of Eurocentrism.

In this section, I choose not to describe every single vegetable's or fruit's meaning and relationship to the major frescoes because that will be unnecessary. By demonstrating how certain fruits match the atmosphere and, most importantly, the theme of the frescoes, by showing how the inclusion of certain fruits reveal an interest of the secular Eastern culture, and by revealing how some arrangements of the festoons act as sign-post to some deeper ideas expressed in the frescoes, I successfully address that these festoons never tell a simple stories. More than knowing how to present them artistically, the artist clearly masters the hidden meaning of these festoons, and the depiction and distribution of these species indicate the complexity of the decoration.

#### 4. Art and the Patron

As I laid out in the introduction, mastery of the subject by an artist includes both presenting the subject artistically and, understanding the deeper meaning of the subject and being able to use the subject to reveal the artist's intention. During the Renaissance, most artists were limited by patrons while creating artworks. Therefore, in order to create a masterpiece, the subject needs to reflect the intention of the patron, but not to lose the appreciating quality at the same time. In Villa Farnesina, the festoons play a similar role as the main frescoes. To understand the relationship between the festoons and the patron, we thus need to first provide a basic historical context of the patron and his commission of the loggia.

Before becoming the property of the Farnese family in 1577, the villa remained a private leisure place for the wealthy Siense banker and the later treasurer of Pope Julius II (Hunt, 2012), Agostino Chigi. Born in Siena, Agostino Chigi followed the family business as a merchant banker. Nevertheless, most of his wealth was gained after moving to Rome in 1487 (Rowland, 1986, p. 673). Scholars believe that Chigi's rise to power 'rests on massive sums of money and material wealth that he attained through monopolies over trade and imports' (Cherichello, 2016, p. 44). Therefore, we may infer that after 1492, with the discovery of the New World and introduction of new species through trade from Spain to Italy, Agostino Chigi had access to these newly introduced fruits and vegetables like maize. In Rome, with the decline of the Medici family, the Chigi family became the papacy's financiers. 'Giuliano, who took the name of Julius II as pope, 1503-1513, appointed Chigi to treasurer in 1505' (Cherichello, 2016, p. 45). After gaining huge wealth and political influence, Chigi commissioned a Siense architect, Baldassare Peruzzi, to design and construct his villa, later known as the Villa Chigi. The Villa Chigi provided two purposes: 'a place for leisure and for business, for meeting his mistresses and for wooing a pope' (Cherichello, 2016, p. 46), and the loggia is the banquet or meeting place of Chigi and his guests.

Therefore, in order to amaze people who enter his villa, the festoons raise a feeling of wonder and power. As for wonder, the placement of about 170 kinds of botanical species will contribute to the immediate admiration of such an unprecedented pergola; at the same time, the power and wealth of the villa owner are 'expressed by the representation of every botanic species known at that time, included those never seen before' (*The Scientific*, 2017). Even on surface, these fruits and vegetables match the purpose of the whole villa. To understand the reason behind choosing certain fruits and demonstrating them in an erotic way, we need to look further into Chigi's personal life.

As mentioned previously, the villa also became a place for Chigi to meet his mistress, Francesca Ordeaschi. Chigi met Ordeaschi the first time in 1511 and immediately fell in love with her, even though she was still a shopkeeper's daughter at that time (Hunt, 2012). Prior to Ordeaschi, Chigi had a wife, but 'his first wife died childless when he was forty-two years old' (Quinlan-McGrath, 1984, p. 104), and the only children he had were born with Ordeaschi in 1518 (Hunt, 2012). As a result, during the period between his first wife's death and his mistress' pregnancy, we could assume that certain erotic features of the frescoes and the decoration festoons related to love or fertility. In one of John Varriano's papers 'Fruits and Vegetables as Sexual Metaphor in Late Renaissance Rome,' he pointed out that 'the first painted still lives to carry an erotic charge seem to have originated within the circle of Raphael, in the garlands of fruit and flowers surrounding the frescoes in the *Loggia di Psyche* at the former VillChigi' (Varriano, 2005, p. 8). I will thus provide several examples to show how the depiction of these fruits reveal a desire for fertility.

Among the festoons, there have been various places where Udine painted melons, and interestingly, some of these melons are mature and thus are open. Here is an example of a muskmelon surrounded by the vines. Melons have been recognized as plants that originated from western coast of Africa, and 'they were often seen as a symbol of fertility or prosperity' ('The Colors,' n.d.). Not only the melons, but the grapes surrounding it also symbolize fertility (Crook & Hung, 2018, p. 72). The sense of giving birth is even strengthened by the fact that the melons are open, representing blossoming and having seeds. This type of example where vegetables or fruits or flowers blossom is also apparent in other places among the festoons, for instance the matching maize and wheat on the two spirals mentioned in the introduction, that are both open up and being mature.

Besides the fact that the shape or presentation of these fruits or vegetables symbolize fertility, the interest in placing Poaceae family vegetables including maize and wheat may also relate to fertility. Above Chigi's name in the principal overdoor of the main salon in the Villa Farnesina pictures the goddess of grain, Ceres (Quinlan-McGrath, 1984, p. 103). Aside from the goddess of grain, 'Ceres' connection with fertility' (Spaeth, 1996, p. 47) was used in the classical period and obviously remained until Renaissance. Therefore, by placing wheat, maize, or even sorghum that are all kinds of grain related to Ceres, may also be a symbol for wanting fertility. From these instances, we can be clear that Udine understands completely what Chigi desired to address through the festoons. These fruits and vegetables are thus beyond pure decoration. They are also beyond echoing element to the frescoes and the stories depicted. By demonstrating the relationship between these festoons and the patron's intention, I again prove how the artist masters these fruits and vegetables on a complex level.

## 5. Conclusion

In 1519, Agostino Chigi finally married his mistress Francesca Ordeaschi with Pope Leo X's blessing, in a ceremonious style, the year before his death (Hunt, 2012). The festoons in the loggia thus enhanced the entire festive atmosphere. At the same time, the fertility inference of these species seems also to be effective as Francesca bore Chigi four children just three to four years later after the commission of the loggia frescoes and the festoons on the pergola. These festoons barely raise the attention of art historians, besides the fact that they represent marvel and power to visitors to the villa. Nevertheless, from an artistic perspective, successfully presenting these fruits and vegetables, particularly those from the New World, means how the artist masters all the physical qualities of these species. In the second and third section, I indicate that the mastery is beyond artistic feature. Not only does the artist understand how these festoons relate to the stories in the frescoes, but he uses these species to match with his own and the patron's intention. These three levels of mastery show the much deeper complexity behind this masterpiece.

In addition to the complexity, the mastery of these fruits also reflects the entire historic background. Just 20 years after the discovery of the New World, the new species, including maize (Janick & Caneva, 2005) and *Cucurbita*, became popular. This spread indicates how the world became connected the first time with each other, the outer world and Europe, and even among European city states themselves. Moreover, it was also during the Renaissance when the subjects of the frescoes can become secular. These festoons symbolize the patron's and the artist's ability to master new knowledge, but they also reflect that with the rise of wealthy families, entertainment became an indispensable component in the society. The variety of fruits and vegetables, new ones and old ones, show beyond the mastery of artist, but rather, a reflection of the culture and society in the 1500s.

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