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La tentation néoclassique: les plafonds peints romains de Panini à Mengs

In 1711 Giovanni Paolo Panini arrived in Rome from Piacenza; fifty years later in 1761 Anton Raphael Mengs left Rome for Madrid. The former, better known as a painter of architectural capricci and vedute, was the heir to the Bolognese Baroque tradition of quadratura, or illusionistic architectural painting; the latter at the Galleria Albani rejected Baroque illusionism for the strict quadro riportato, or fictive framed easel painting, and so produced the first Neoclassical ceiling. Their paths seem hardly to have crossed, yet both worked for Cardinal Alessandro Albani, and both had to accommodate themselves to the mainstream of Roman ceiling painting, the illusionistic tradition stemming from Pietro da Cortona and reformulated in the last quarter of the seventeenth century in terms of an opposition between Carlo Maratta and G.B. Gaulli, Il Baciccia. Common to the masterpieces of these artists—the ceiling of the Salone of the Palazzo Altieri and the vault of the Gesù—is the ceiling cartouche, or rectangular field with semicircular ends, a framing motif that played so conspicuous a part in subsequent Roman ceilings that the history of the eighteenth-century Roman ceiling can be written in terms of the history of the relationship between the cartouche and the rest of the ceiling.

The ceiling cartouche from Maratta to Mengs

In the Triumph of Clemency in the Palazzo Altieri (1674-75) (modelli, cats. 81, 82), Maratta adopted a di sotto in sù perspective, but suppressed the implied diagonal movement from low down inside the room to high up in the heavens implicit in such a scheme, as would be exploited to maximum illusionistic effect by Baciccio in the Gesù a year or two later (salle II). Any tendency for the lowest group to enter the viewer’s space is suppressed by the horizon, which almost physically reorients the spectator’s viewing away from a neck-craning verticality to a quadro riportato horizontality. Similarly the angels at the top of the field are tied tightly to the frame to stop them fizzing away into the heavens. Having thus firmly anchored his composition to the plane at the ends of the field, Maratta was free to develop the middle with illusionistic spatial developments, such as the downward plunge of Public Felicity, or the sharp foreshortening and downward gaze of Clemency. As the viewer’s attention approaches the sides the plane is reasserted; Prudence is almost frontal, while Fortitude, although steeply foreshortened, is tied to the frame by the long fold of his cloak. Outside the frame, illusionism is given fuller reign, but through the controlled illusionism of grisaille figures, roof beams and cornices distinct from the figured field.

Giuseppe Chiari, as Maratta’s closest follower, not unexpectedly followed his master closely in his Glory of St Clement at S. Clemente (1714)
(modello, cat. 85), even down to the stabilizing horizon, while further downplaying the di sotto in sù perspective. Being set into a flat coffered ceiling, an illusionistic relationship with the ceiling was necessarily precluded. In Luigi Garzi’s Glory of S. Catherine of Siena at S. Caterina a Magnanapoli (1713) (cf. cat. 92), Maratta’s High Baroque responsiveness to the illusionistic implications of the zig-zag composition and the volumes of figures in space is fading. Outside the frame, the Rococo swags and fictive stucco putti have lost the plasticity of the comparable elements in the Maratta, and are becoming reduced to surface decoration. The distinction between ceiling and figured field threatens to disappear, as would occur with French Rococo interiors.

The confrontation between Baroque illusionism and Rococo ornament is most acute in Aureliano Milano’s ceiling of 1735 in the Salone degli Specchi in the Palazzo Doria Pamphili. The cartouche containing the Battle of the Gods and Giants is set within a frescoed ceiling that must accommodate itself to a fully Rococo interior, complete with serpentine consoles, pier glasses and carved pelmets. The cartouche casts a fictive shadow like the lateral quadri riportati of the Galleria Farnese (Prelude B, Dessins), while the scene within, in contrast to Maratta’s, employs a Baciccesque diagonal thrust from within to without with fictive rocks plunging into the viewer’s space at the lower end. Yet the illusionism is devoid of the brio of Baccio or Cortona and the scene has a certain flatness that is reinforced by the other vault scenes, which are effectively quadri riportati. Packing more illusionistic punch are the framing figures, but while the Michelangesque spandrel grisailles are not ineffective, the ‘real’ figures are unnaturally placed, and the space against which they are set consists or ornamental strapwork that has little illusionistic logic. More effective are the putti playing games with the Pamphilj dove in the conched spandrels, which float plausibly in the fictive space of the spandrel and interact effectively with the carved and gilded window pelmets, anticipating the preference for this kind of contained illusionism of Mengs and Marchetti.

In Corrado Giaquinto’s S. Croce ceiling of 1744 the cartouche frame employs a Rococo complexity of contour, and its carved pearl grey and gilded ornaments play no illusionistic games. Within the frame Giaquinto disposes his forms effectively as surface pattern, making original use of S. Michael as a stabilising vertical at the bottom, while avoiding flatness by developing his figure composition fully in depth. Yet the whole turns its back on Baroque illusionism, and in this respect is less distant from Mengs’ Parnassus (1760-61) at the Villa Albani than might at first appear. Paradoxically, Mengs, while ruthlessly, and famously, returning the central figured field to the kind of strict quadro riportato that had not been seen since Reni’s Aurora (1613, Casino dell’Aurora, Palazzo Rospigliosi-Pallavicini, cf. cat. Prelude A, g) and returning the cartouche field to rectilinearity by filling the ends with shallow fictive reliefs, nevertheless permits illusionistic oculi at either end. In doing so, Mengs (or Carlo Marchionni, who probably designed the overall scheme of the ceiling) makes a polemical Neoclassical statement about the distinctions between forms. The oculi are devoid of decorative elaboration, and almost as rational in their perspective as Mantegna’s oculus in the Camera degli Sposi at Mantua. The rest of the vault is treated with fictive low relief grotesque ornament, and even in the spandrels fictive spatial development is confined to putti that project in high relief.
That such an extreme statement is owed as much to Cardinal Albani and the Neoclassical culture of his court centred on Winckelmann, is demonstrated by Mengs’ slightly earlier ceiling at S. Eusebio (1757-59), which is conceived as a segment of a Correggio dome glory fitted to the cartouche format. In its struggle with the flattening and framing effect of the cartouche, Correggesque illusionism wins: although the band of musical angels is tied to the step in the cartouche, winged cherub heads spill over the frame, which swells under pressure from the main group, while the angled ascent through to the glory centred in the upper semicircle is unimpeded. Even more than a decade later than the Villa Albani, Mengs’ ceiling in the Sala dei Papiri in the Vatican (1773) refuses to go so far, even as it acknowledges the Renaissance revitalism of the Villa Albani in Cristoforo Unterberger’s neo-Renaissance grotesques, in the sculptural thrones in the manner of Pinturicchio and Michelangelo, and in the Parmigianinesque flanking putti. The main field, no longer a cartouche but a rectangle with scalloped corners, likewise acknowledges the revival of the quadro riportato at the Villa Albani, but the scene within seems reluctant to be contained by its frame. The pictorial space, no longer the shallow, frieze-like classicism of the Villa Albani, nor yet an Albertian spatial box, tunnels back in layers until it reaches the Vatican Ariadne in a way reminiscent of the penetration of the vault by the glories in Baroque ceilings. And although the figure of Fame is clamped by its wing in a Marattesque way behind the frame, it manages to escape the space of the quadro riportato to join the putti and swans in the contained illusionistic spaces of the vault penetrations, spaces exploited by Milani at the Palazzo Doria but denied at the Villa Albani. The ceiling thus betrays a tension between the quadro riportato format and illusionistic space. This tension would be resolved in the next decade at the Villa Borghese, where, in the ceiling of the Stanza di Apollo e Daphne, the dogmatic quadro riportato of Pietro Angeletti’s central canvas of Apollo and Daphne (1780-85) is set into a quadratura setting by Giovanni Battista Marchetti (1786) which carves into the cove of the vault a series of powerfully illusionistic niches. It is as if such contained spaces were a permissible fiction because they accepted the principle of the separation of fictive space from pictorial field stated so dogmatically in the Galleria Albani, while permitting the enjoyment of the delights of illusionism that Rome was not yet ready to renounce.

Panini and quadratura in the Settecento.

The dominance of the Maratta cartouche meant that Roman ceiling painting in the eighteenth century resisted quadratura. Even during the later seventeenth century, mainstream Bolognese quadratura, with its teaming of figure painter and quadraturista, its complex fictive structures and fussy ornament, had little currency, the most important example being the Apotheosis of St Dominic by Domenico Maria Canuti and Enrico Haffner at SS. Domenico e Sisto in 1674-5. Andrea Pozzo at S. Ignazio (1685-94, cf. salle III) took quadratura firmly back several generations to the rationality of the fictive structure erected by Giovanni and Cherubino Alberti in the vault of the Sala Clementina in the Vatican (1596-98). No twisted and fantastic forms were permitted to impede the illusion of the reality of the fictive architecture in order to heighten the visionary reality of the figures.

The Seicento Bolognese tradition returned briefly in the early 1720s. The driving force seems to have been Cardinal Giovanni Battista Patrizi (1658-
1727). Based in Ferrara while building his Roman villa (Villa Patrizi, begun 1716), he was indifferent to Roman antiquities but responsive to the arts practiced in the main centres in northern Italy, especially Bologna and Venice. He bought Genoese fabrics, Venetian Rococo furniture, and Venetian chinoiserie panels, and noted the latest in interior decorating ideas practiced in Bologna, where the Seicento quadratura tradition of Colonna and Mitelli still flourished. The Bolognese stage designer and quadraturista Francesco Galli Bibiena, in Rome working at the Teatro Alibert, was considered for some of the major ceilings, and other painters employed on the villa were from Northern Italy, such as the Bolognese quadraturista Pompeo Aldrovandini, who arrived in Rome in 1718, or the Piacentine quadraturista Giovanni Paolo Panini, who had been established there since 1711. Panini made good use of his opportunities, in spite of the pressure of other work, eventually painting the most important rooms in the villa, including the decorative parts of the piano nobile Galleria, in which Grecolini (cf. Cat. 86) painted the figured fields. Some idea of what it must have been like can be gained from Panini’s ceiling for the Galleria at Palazzo Alberoni (1725), now installed in Palazzo Madama. The walls open through colonnades to fully developed fictive spaces beyond. On the ceiling, quadratura is employed with restraint, the surface of the vault being emphasised by fictive low-relief acanthus ornament. This is pierced by eight openings, the central circular one opening into a fictive balustrade with a di sotto in su group of Apollo and his chariot; the subsidiary spaces open to fictive secondary and tertiary ceilings above. The transition to the walls, made difficult by the shallowness of the vault, is effected by a plinth supporting seated figures in the Galleria Farnese tradition.

Panini’s most wholehearted quadratura ceiling was painted the year before in the library of S. Croce in Gerusalemme (1724). The springings of the vault are developed into paired brackets supporting a balustrade that swells out in a fictive horizontal plane to edge the curved ends of the vault penetrations, thus skilfully resolving the problem of disguising their sharp edges. On the gallery thus created is erected a fictive structure supported on columns and piers, with a serliana at each end, the plan of which is dictated by a D-ended field containing the Triumph of the Holy Cross. While this field derives from Bolognese (or Piacentine) precedent—such as the ceiling of the Salotto in the Palazzo Cospi-Ferretti, Bologna, by Angelo Michele Colonna and Giacomo Alboresi (1665)—it also functions as a Marattesque cartouche. Panini, like the Bolognese, but unlike Maratta and his followers, avoids compositional zig-zags, and employs figures that fill the field and hug the picture plane. The glory of angels pushes back into deep space like a wedge from a Correggio dome, a solution not unlike that later employed by Mengs at S. Eusebio.

This use of a wholly Bolognese quadratura scheme on a vault was exceptional. More indicative of future developments was another commission that Panini received in his early years, to decorate the vault of the gallery that Cardinal Alessandro Albani had created in 1721 from the loggia of his palazzo at Quattro Fontane (now Palazzo del Drago). Quadratura and fictive space are confined to a few restricted fields in which the spatial layers are compressed. Surface ornament prevails, predominantly real and fictive stucco, including fictive low relief scenes in the form of antique cameos that complement the real reliefs in the lunettes, originally installed here by a former owner with similar antiquarian tastes to Albani, Cardinal Camillo Massimi (1620-77). The
whole so strikingly anticipates the treatment of the vault of the Galleria Albani at the Villa Albani forty years later in 1761 that the taste of Cardinal Albani can clearly be discerned. The differences between the two ceilings are consequently all the more significant; the one representing the choices of an antiquarian at a moment when the North Italian and Rococo tastes of Cardinal Patrizi were in the ascendant, the other the same man’s tastes at the moment of the first triumph of Neoclassicism.
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