

Mantua And Sabbioneta PART II

BY JIM SANO

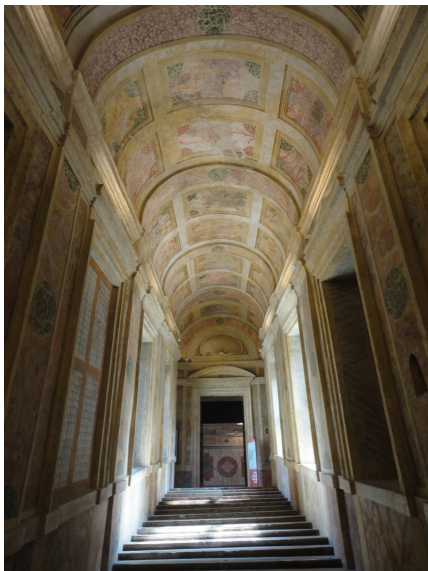


CONTINUATION FROM LAST ISSUE

CORTE VECCHIA

Between 1536 and 1539, Giulio Romano (a pupil of Raphael) created the so-called Corte Nuova for Federico II, the first Duke of Mantua, next to the Castle of San Giorgio. This historic nucleus consists of several 16th-century buildings connected to the older Castle over time and can be accessed via the **Aeneas Staircase**.

The main attraction of the Corte Nuova ("New Court") is the **Sala di Manto**, which was once the entrance to the "Apartment of Troy." This area is named after the frescoes (1538-1539) created by collaborators of Giulio Romano and commissioned by Federico II Gonzaga



to restore several rooms in the Palace. The current appearance of the Sala del Manto dates back to the intervention of Guglielmo X, who ordered the creation of the Appartamento Grande di Castello ("Large Apartment of the Castle"). The frescoes in the hall depict the story of Troy, preceded by Manto's arrival in Italy, the mythical founder of Mantua. The beautiful frescoes depicting scenes from mythology and history celebrate the legend,



Sala di Manto

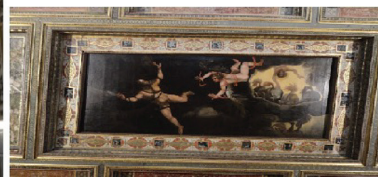
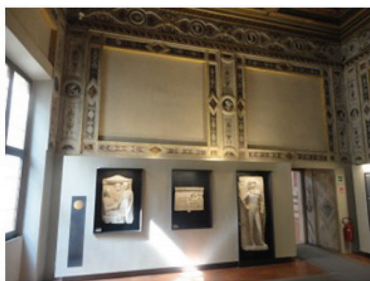
connecting the Gonzaga family to the city's mythological origins. The Sala di Manto emphasizes the grandeur and cultural sophistication of the Gonzaga court.

Duke Vincenzo used the Sala di Manto for receptions and parties. The King of France, Henry II, was received here in 1574, and it was also the venue for the marriages of Vincenzo Gonzaga with Eleonora de' Medici in 1584 and of Francesco IV and Margherita of Savoy in 1608.

The Sala di Manto also served as the entrance hall of the Troia Apartment, which was constructed between 1536 and 1539 by Giulio Romano for Federico II Gonzaga, the first Duke of Mantua. This Apartment was named after the depictions found in its main room, the audience hall. The decorations of this Apartment glorify the duke's power acquired from his marriage to Margherita Paleologo in 1531; Duke Federico gained control of Monferrato and became the heir to the descendants of the Byzantine emperors.



The Sala di Troia was Frederick II's audience room, which gives its name to the entire Apartment. Benedetto Lampridio of Cremona is credited with the iconographic program and the selection of scenes depicting the war between the Trojans and the Achaeans, which are taken from Homer's Iliad and Hyginus' Fabulae. The pavilion vault, dating back to 1537, was painted in 1538 by students of Giulio Romano based on his drawings.

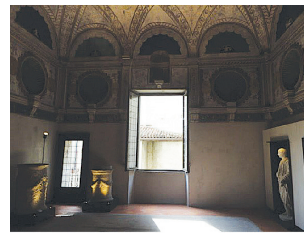


The first room in the Apartment is the Horse Room (Sala di Cavalli), which has a distinct irregular trapezoid shape.

At the center of the wooden coffered ceiling is the Fall of Icarus, taken from Ovid's Metamorphoses.

The walls' panels, now empty, used to have portraits of the duke's beloved horses.

The hanging garden visible from the Horse Room is known as **Cortile dei Cani** or the Dog Courtyard. It is a small area between the Troia Apartment and the Duke William Apartment. It's named after a plaque on the wall before the loggia commemorating "Oriana, the celestial dog."



The Chamber of Heads, also known as the Sala delle Teste, is named after the twelve busts of leaders and politicians from the time. These busts, known as "exempla virtutis," were created by Alfonso

Lombardi Cittadella from Ferrara. Only the inscriptions on the bases of the busts remain today.



The Room of the Caesars, also known as the Camerino dei Cesari, is adorned with grotesque decorations and stucco frames by Giulio Romano. From 1537 to 1538, it showcased paintings by Tiziano Vecellio depicting the Caesars. However, the paintings on display today are 16th-century replicas, as the original paintings were destroyed in a fire at the Alcazar of Madrid, where they were housed, in 1734.

The Basilica Palatina of Santa Barbara was built between 1562 and 1572 by Giovanni Battista Bertani and commissioned by Duke Guglielmo of the Gonzagas. It served as the palace chapel for the Gonzaga family. The church has a central plan with a square tiburium in the middle and a raised semicircular presbytery. The presbytery houses a painting of the Martyrdom of St.



Barbara by Domenico Brusasorci and an Annunciation by Fermo Ghisoni. The interior also features two lateral altars with large canvas altarpieces by Lorenzo Costa the Younger. The church's bell tower, which has a square plan, contains the remains of four dukes and other members of the Gonzaga family. The church was equipped with an organ by Graziadio Antegnati in 1565 and restored in 1995.

During the Habsburg rule in Mantua, the Refectory was renovated to include the Sala dei Fiumi, which showcased giant paintings of rivers in Mantuan territory. The Appartamento degli Arazzi, consisting of four halls, was also created. Three of these halls feature tapestries from the Raphael Cartoons, produced in Flanders and originally intended for the Sistine Chapel. Cardinal Ercole Gonzaga purchased them in the 16th century, and they were initially used to decorate the Green Apartment. After being stored in the Ducal Palace, the tapestries were restored and relocated in 1799. The Sala dello Zodiaco, also known as Napoleon I's Hall, underwent restoration during the Napoleonic Wars when the French emperor stayed there.

Torre dell'Orologio

At the heart of the old town center stands the Clock Tower, a prominent structure on Piazza Erbe located between Palazzo della Ragione and the old Roman church of St. Lawrence. The clock features two nineteenth-century wooden mechanisms behind small octagonal windows, which can be read at night. With a rectangular layout, the tower was commissioned by



Marquis Ludovico II and built in 1472-73 based on a design by Luca Fancelli. It is named after the ancient clock created by Bartolomeo Manfredi, a mechanic, mathematician, and astrologer at the Gonzaga court, also known as Bartolomeo dell'Orologio. Inaugurated in December 1473, the clock's dial indicates the hours with Roman numerals and is adorned with zodiac signs, planetary hours, and lunar days. The clock also tracks the position of the stars, indicating the influence of favorable planets at different times of the day.



The tower also houses the Museo del Tempo (Time Museum), where visitors can explore the history of the astronomical clock and discover the mechanisms that power it. The tour takes visitors through the tower's five floors, showcasing historical gears and the existing clockwork mechanism. Inside, you'll find an exhibition of original and replaced clock components, including the fifteenth-century crown, copper zodiac signs, and the Foucault pendulum. The top floor provides a breathtaking panoramic view of Mantua and the surrounding lakes.

The Torre della Gabbia, a medieval tower that is part of the Ducal Palace complex, symbolizes the Bonacolsi family's power, rulers of the city before the Gonzagas. The tower, known as "Gabbia," which means "cage" in Italian, is famous for its historical significance and unique architecture. It was initially built by the Acerbi family and later sold to Pinamonte Bonacolsi in 1281. The tower was neglected before being renovated and incorporated



into the Palazzo Guerrieri. In 1576, Duke Guglielmo Gonzaga had a large iron cage constructed as an "open-air prison," where the condemned were publicly displayed, sometimes for long periods. The iron cage, for which the building is known, was made of thick bars

and a narrow space intended to intensify the suffering of the imprisoned. The tower is fifty-five meters tall and was partially renovated in the sixteenth century, adding Renaissance-style elements to the façade. The tower was gifted to the municipality in 1850. Despite being damaged in the 2012 earthquake, restoration efforts now allow visitors to climb to the top and enjoy the city's panorama.



Palazzo Te, a grand villa and a masterpiece of Mannerist Villa architecture, is situated on an island near the city center called Tejeto or Te. It was commissioned in 1525 by Federico II Gonzaga and constructed between 1525 and 1535 by Giulio Romano. Palazzo Te's intended use was for parties, receptions, and leisure. This vast, square-shaped complex features exterior decorations, a large internal courtyard, and an architectural layout inspired by ancient designs. The design allows for panoramic views and harmonizes the architecture with its environment. Palazzo Te is renowned for its elaborate frescoes and stucco work, often described as "the dwelling place of the gods: a forbidden dream of mythology, politics, and eroticism." Its exquisite decor features the renowned Sala dei Giganti, Sala dei Cavalli, The Eagles Room, the loggias of David and the Muses, the Secret Garden, and the opulent Hall of Cupid and Psyche. The main spaces are on slightly raised ground level to protect against flooding from the Mincio River. The service areas are located on the upper level.

The Sala dei Giganti in the Palazzo Te features a famous fresco by painter Giulio Romano depicting the dramatic and chaotic battle between the Giants and the Gods' attempt to overthrow the gods of Mount Olympus from *Metamorphoses* by Ovid. The room's panoramic painting offers an entirely immersive experience, depicting the gods led by Jupiter hurling thunderbolts at the Giants, crushing them under falling rocks, collapsing walls, heavy clouds, and collapsing mountains. Jupiter is depicted on the ceiling, surrounded by the Roman cosmogony. He is capturing the moment when he



unleashes his lightning to vanquish the twisted faces of the desperate giants attempting to flee, thus capturing the chaos and violence of a mythological battle. The portrayal of the Fall of the Giants showcases the grandeur and artistic innovation of Mannerist art. It symbolizes the triumph of order over chaos and the power of the divine. This theme resonated with the Renaissance ideals of harmony, control, and celebrating classical mythology.

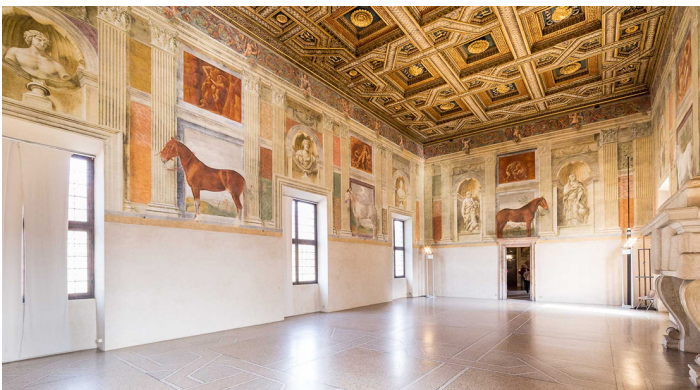
Sala di Amore e Psiche (Cupid's and Psyche's Hall) is the most opulent room in the Palace. This room, dedicated to Cupid and Psyche, was where banquets and social gatherings were held for prominent guests, making it a central space for the cultural and social life of the Gonzaga court. The elaborate decorations provided an impressive backdrop for the festivities and reflected the luxury and artistic sophistication of the Gonzaga family. The walls and ceiling of the Sala di Amore e Psiche are adorned with vibrant frescoes illustrating scenes from the myth of Cupid and Psyche, as recounted in Apuleius's *"Metamorphoses"* (also known as *"The Golden Ass"*). Cupid, the deity of love, erotic desire, and attraction, was the most powerful of all gods and was even feared by Jupiter. The myth was chosen for its love, beauty, and transformation themes, highly valued in Renaissance culture. It symbolizes the triumph of love and the soul's journey toward immortality, resonating with the humanist ideals of the period. These frescoes



illustrate the story of Cupid and Psyche, portraying love, betrayal, secret or unreciprocated love, and redemption. The detailed scenes emphasize the emotional and dramatic elements of the myth. The frescoes feature gods, goddesses, and fantastical creatures, blending human emotions with divine interventions. Giulio Romano's work in this hall is one of the most impressive masterpieces of the 16th century.



Diana in her chariot (bearing the Gonzaga motto "Unicuique suum"). It is believed that Duke Guglielmo commissioned this work around 1579, possibly from the painter Lorenzo Costa the Younger, as a birthday gift for his daughter, whose zodiac sign is celebrated in the fresco.



The Sala dei Cavalli, also known as the Hall of Horses, is a grand hall adorned with detailed life-size frescoes of six favorite horses set against natural landscapes. These frescoes pay tribute to the prized steeds of the Gonzaga family, surrounded by mythological divinities and scenic vistas, creating a rich visual narrative that blends elegance with classical mythology. Exemplifying the Renaissance artistic style, the frescoes are characterized by meticulous detail, realistic proportions, and the seamless integration of figures into their surroundings. The Sala dei Cavalli was a dance hall and an important venue for social events in the Ducal Palace. In 1530, Federico II Gonzaga hosted Emperor Charles V, highlighting Mantua's cultural and political importance.

The Zodiac Hall (Sala dello Zodiaco), also known as the "Dogs" room because of the animals that pulled Diana's chariot, is adorned with beautiful and evocative depictions of the zodiac on the ceiling. The vault of this pavilion is covered with stunning representations of the zodiac set against a night sky filled with countless stars. Mythological figures stand out in the artwork, including



Camera delle Aquile (The Eagles Room), named for the four intricate frescoes of eagles spread on the vault corners, was Federico II Gonzaga's private room. This eagle motif represents the Gonzaga family's strength, nobility, divine connection, and Renaissance fascination with heraldry and classical mythology. Its abundant decorations, which include frescoes, stucco, and marble, are awe-inspiring.

Loggia Delle Muse (The Muses Loggia) is the Palace's entrance hall, dedicated to the Muses, goddesses who inspire and protect art, literature, and science. It is adorned with frescoes that pay tribute to the nine Muses of Greek mythology, the guardians of the arts and sciences. The vibrant frescoes depict each Muse representing a distinct domain of the arts and sciences. The figures are shown in dynamic poses with symbols of their art, such as Clio holding a scroll and Thalia with a comic mask. These depictions can be seen as bas-reliefs in the vault and lunette paintings illustrating mythological scenes related to the Muses. One of these paintings features a nymph, representing Mantua, reclining next to a fountain. Atop this fountain, a laurel crown refers to the poet Virgil, who was born near Mantua.

