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An Ancient Villa Keeping Its Secrets

Denis Ribouillault
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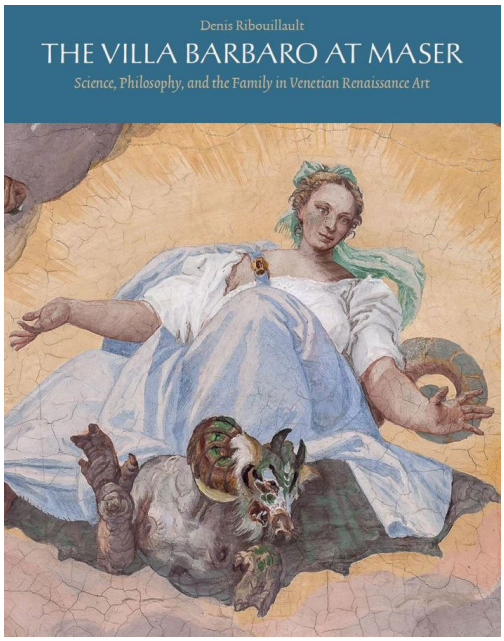

I. Villa Barbaro at Maser is one of the most unusual of the villas designed by Andrea Palladio. In terms of its design, the villa is an exception in the Palladian canon. In many ways, it defies understanding. This is due in part to its having been built over, englobing a pre-existing building, and to the involvement in all aspects of Daniele and Marcantonio Barbaro, the two brothers who commissioned the villa. Palladio did not have the freedom he had for most of his other commissions and clearly had to agree many compromises. Paolo Veronese was commissioned to paint a large fresco cycle to embellish the rooms on the *piano nobile* of the villa, and a series of stucco sculptures were created to adorn the façade of the building and the nymphaeum in the garden at the back. Although these awkward and eccentric statues and reliefs are often attributed to Alessandro Vittoria, he is unlikely to have had anything to do with them.

Not a single extant document provides historic grounding for the construction and decoration of the villa. There are no contracts, no letters, no contemporary descriptions (except for thirteen lines in Palladio's *Quattro Libri* of 1570, with no mention of any of the decorative aspects of the building). No preparatory drawings by Veronese have been convincingly linked to Maser, with the possible exception of one now in the Uffizi. In addition to this lack of documentary material, the villa underwent centuries of both neglect and transformation, until its purchase, in 1927, by Giuseppe Volpi di Misurata. In the 1930s, Volpi's daughter, Marina, made extensive restorations to both the structure and the decoration, guided by the architect and designer Tommaso Buzzi. Today, almost a hundred years after the Volpi acquired Villa Barbaro – which is still owned by the family – the building is a complex palimpsest shaped by different patrons and artists.

Notwithstanding two PhD theses on the villa – by Inge Jackson Reist (*Renaissance Harmony: The Villa Barbaro at Maser,* PhD diss., Columbia University 1985) and Sonia Holden Evers (*The Art of Paolo Veronese: Artistic Identity in Harmony with Patrician Ideology,* PhD diss., University of California at Berkeley 1994) – Denis Ribouillault's beautifully produced book is the first full monograph on Villa Barbaro, and it is a welcome addition to the studies. It is "as much a visual essay as a written one" as the author recognises. It was born, he writes, of the "general dissatisfaction with the existing literature. On the whole, studies of Villa Barbaro's iconography are confused and confusing". Ribouillault says that his "is the first monograph on the villa that provides a complete and, I hope,

| Fig. 1 | **Paolo Veronese, Vault of the Sala dell'Olimpo, ca. 1558–62. Fresco, Villa Barbaro, Maser**↗

coherent reading of its iconography." As made clear from the outset, Ribouillault's aim is not to address the full history of the villa but rather to focus on the primary patrons, the Barbaro brothers. The book also provides a useful appendix on the Volpi family, Buzzi and the 1930s restoration of the house. The author's main interest is in the decoration of the villa, the main purpose of which, he concludes, was "to welcome guests and to house a family".

II. An introduction with biographies of the brothers – as well as Marcantonio's wife, Giustiniana Giustiniani – and of Palladio and Veronese sets the scene for the villa. In this section, the voracious intellectual interests of the Barbaro brothers are discussed, as well as the influence of the scholarly accomplishments of two of their ancestors – Francesco the Elder and Ermolao the Younger – on the brothers and on the villa (as has been done by previous scholars). The book's two main parts address the iconology of Villa Barbaro. Ribouillault presents a fascinating, new reading of Veronese's fresco cycle and the sculptural decoration of the villa and the nymphaeum. Throughout the book, he expresses a certain caution, always accepting "the limits of interpretation" and often reminding the reader that his reading is based on the scant facts known about Villa Barbaro.

As a general point, we do not know exactly when the villa was built. It is assumed that it was completed by 1558, but there is little evidence for that. Art historians agree that work took place between the late 1550s and the early 1560s; nothing exact is known. Humidity made it impossible for fresco cycles on this scale to be executed effectively in autumn/winter, so Veronese, along with a team of workshop assistants, must have worked at Maser over a period of several springs/summers. We, therefore, assume that Veronese travelled from Venice to Maser for several (consecutive?) warm seasons. Ribouillault observes stylistic differences between the rooms in the southern part of the villa (the *Sala a Crociera* and the *Stanze di Bacco* and of the *Tribunale d'Amore*), which he dates to about 1558, and those in the northern part (the *Sala dell'Olimpo*, and *Stanze del Cane* and *della Lucerna*), which he dates to about 1561–62. To this reviewer, though, these differences are not evident, and the chronology proposed appears shaky.

III. Ribouillault's approach for his interpretation of the decoration at Maser follows previous models, with all the related pitfalls. Without any specific documentary basis, the scholars who have attempted to make sense of the frescoes and the sculptures at Maser have started with the Barbaro brothers' interests, supporting their theories with intricate scaffoldings based on contemporary scholarly texts and allegorical depictions in other buildings of the time. The main problem here is that while the frescoes represent straightforward allegorical subjects – the Seasons, the Elements, the Planets, a number of Greco-Roman divinities – they also include figures that have puzzled scholars over the past century. This is true of at least two other cycles of paintings by Veronese (and collaborators) in which Daniele Barbaro

probably played the role of iconographer: Palazzo Trevisan at Murano and the rooms of the Counsel of Ten in the Doge's Palace in Venice. Barbaro certainly produced complicated and elusive allegorical cycles. None of these cycles has ever been fully understood. It is fashionable today to propose a visual contest between patrons, painters, and viewers; Ribouillault states that the patrons and the artists were "no doubt aware that indeterminacy is part of the construction of meaning and reinforces the appeal of their work, inviting the viewer to engage in an exercise of visual exegesis". It is arduous for scholars to admit that what would have been clear to the Barbaro brothers and to Veronese eludes our understanding today.

Using "the more contextual and intermedial iconological method", Ribouillault's iconographical study of Maser is dense with information and material. Part One of the book focuses on the *Sala dell'Olimpo* – one of the two central rooms in the villa – and the mysterious "woman in white" at the centre of its painted ceiling, where she is surrounded by planetary gods and goddesses, Seasons and Elements. | Fig. 1 | While most of the allegorical figures in this room are easily understood, the "woman in white" evades interpretation. She has been variously viewed as "Earth, Eternity, Immortality, Thalia (the ninth Muse of Mount Helicon), Divine Wisdom, Divine Providence, Providential Fortune, the Muse of transcendent grace, Aristodama (in Pausanias's *Description of Greece* 2.10.3), the *donna di bontà*, Proserpina, Divine Love riding the dragon of Satan, Truth on the wings of Time, Isis (as the goddess who maintains the order of the cosmos), or Prudence". Ribouillault rightly states that "none of these identifications appears satisfactory, and scholars have repeatedly expressed their frustration with the elusive identity of this figure".

Ribouillault's great contribution is that he has come up with the most persuasive solution to the puzzle to date. By analysing Daniele Barbaro's interest in cosmology, astronomy and sundials, the author links the "woman in white" at Maser with the image on the quadrant of Bartolomeo Manfredi's 1473 clock in Mantua. The figure at the centre of the clock is Latona/Leto, the mythical mother of Apollo and Diana (and, therefore, of the Sun and the Moon). The reading of the "woman in white" as Latona/Leto falls into place when one realizes that the woman in the fresco is gesturing toward her two children: Apollo/Sun and Diana/Moon. Ribouillault identifies the dragon at Latona/Leto's feet as Python, advancing the meaning of the figure by drawing a link between the dragon and eclipses and connecting that to the reform of the Julian calendar. Daniele Barbaro was at the Council of Trent, in 1562, when calendar issues were discussed.

| Fig. 2 | Paolo Veronese, Giustiniana Giustiniani-Barbaro. Fresco, Sala dell'Olimpo, ca. 1558–62. Villa Barbaro, Maser

IV. Having resolved this thorny issue in the *Sala dell'Olimpo*, Ribouillault concludes that "all the pieces of the puzzle fall into place perfectly". He links Latona/Leto to the portrait of Marcantonio's wife, Giustiniana, in the same room | Fig. 2 | and then interprets the two adjoining rooms – the *Stanza della Lucerna* (which he renames Room of the Virtues) and the *Stanza del Cane* (rechristened by him Room of Fortune). In presenting the iconology of these rooms, the author relies on Luciana Crosato Larcher (Considerazioni sul programma iconografico di Maser, in: *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 26, 2, 1982, 211–256; Postille al programma iconografico di Maser, in: *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 45, 3, 2001, 495–502), whose interpretation – along with those of Thomas Puttfarken (Bacchus

| Fig. 3 | **Statue of a Lactating Nymph, ca. 1558–59. Nymphaeum, Villa Barbaro, Maser. Ribouillault, p. 172, fig. 175**

und Hymenaeus: Bemerkungen zu zwei Fresken von Veronese in der Villa Barbaro in Maser, in: *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 24, 1, 1980, 1–14) and, occasionally, Inge Reist and Michele Di Monte (Restituire le scarpe a Veronese, in: *Venezia Cinquecento* 24, 47, 2014, 129–207) of Maser – is referred to throughout the book. As with all iconological studies, there is the overarching question of whether a statement is subjective or objective. Ribouillault often refers to previous readings as being either "correct" or not. This is an individual view that may be more or less convincing to other readers. While his identification of the "woman in white" as Latona/Leto seems plausible to this reviewer (but may not be to others), other readings seem less convincing.

Two issues should be considered when reading this book. The first relates to the relevance or necessity of deciphering the meaning of each and every figure in the decoration. In the *Sala dell'Olimpo*, for example, the figures of divinities and allegories on the ceiling have clearly been included to provide an overall meaning (cosmological or astronomical), but does everything else in the room necessarily have a specific significance? Does the presence of Giustiniana Barbaro and her children under the ceiling figures necessarily have a meaning connected to the ceiling itself? Must it all be tied up in a tidy and complete way? Are the monkey, parrot and dog depicted with the family really symbols of vice, motherhood and fidelity? Could they not simply be family pets? When considering meaning, scholars often see things that are not apparent to others. This reviewer, for example, finds it difficult to see God the Father in the cloudy sky above the *ouroboros* in the Stanza della Lucerna.

V. The second important issue has to do with the overall meaning of the decoration of the villa. According to Ribouillault, Veronese's cycle of paintings

| Fig. 4 | **Facade, Villa Barbaro, Maser. Ribouillault, p. 8, fig. 1**

and the sculptures in the garden follow an inclusive, comprehensive and coherent programme. Part two of the book begins with an examination of the sculptures in the main garden and on the façade of the villa, moving on to southern rooms of the building – the *Stanze del Tribunale d'Amore* and of *Bacco* – and finishing with the nymphaeum. As if Latona/Leto in *Sala dell'Olimpo* is the sun illuminating the system around it, the author then proceeds to interpret the rest of the villa's decoration following the theme of the birth of Apollo and Diana on the island of Delos. Invariably, one of the major pitfalls of iconological studies is the lack of connection to attribution, dating and style – among the main tools for an art historian. Ribouillault discusses the stone statues in front of the villa and the stucco decoration of the façade. However, while the façade reliefs are stylistically consistent with the stucco sculptures of the nymphaeum at the back, the stone sculptures are certainly from a later date – possibly from the late 16th or, more likely, early 17th century – and probably date from after the death of the Barbaro brothers. Ribouillault accepts this: "it is probable, though not proven, that they were added later (perhaps in the 1580's when the Tempietto was built or in the late seventeenth century)" and concludes that they "cannot be attributed to Alessandro Vittoria". However, the captions of the images identify them in the book as "after a design by Alessandro Vittoria".

The stone statues of gods and goddesses – Neptune, Saturn, Fortune, Mars, Minerva, Juno, Vulcan, Venus – and putti, as well as the Lactating Nymph at the top of the nymphaeum | Fig. 3 |, are certainly a later addition to the villa, most likely by different hands and certainly not part of the original scheme. Ribouillault's statement that "in any case, they fit in harmoniously with the rest of the decoration and therefore deserve to be included in our reading of the villa" is surprising. He focuses in detail on the façade's iconography, agreeing with previous scholars that the figures on the tympanum | Fig. 4 | represent Neptune abducting Amphitrite (if so, why show the figures twice?), but,

| Fig. 5 | Eastern portico of Villa Barbaro, Maser↗

| Fig. 6 | Paolo Veronese, Marcantonio Barbaro Returning from the Hunt, ca. 1562. Villa Barbaro, Maser. Ribouillault, p. 12, fig. 5

surprisingly, barely mentions the eight stucco statues on the façades of the side pavilions. | Fig. 5 |

VI. Ribouillault's reading of the frescoes and the sculptures is certainly idiosyncratic. He questions the traditional identification of the figure of a hunter | Fig. 6 | depicted at Maser with Veronese's self-portrait. He rightly notices that this is "a very nineteenth-century idea". Nonetheless, he identifies the figure with a young, idealized portrait of Marcantonio Barbaro and sees the red hunting horn as linked to the family coat of arms – the *ciclamoro di rosso*. In the *Stanza del Tribunale d'Amore*, the figure on the ceiling identified as Hymen is also a younger, idealized Marcantonio and "looks very like the hunter". When it comes to the *Sala a Crociera*, Ribouillault follows in the footsteps of Franco Renzo Pesenti (La promessa della rinascita: Per l'indagine iconografica degli affreschi veronesiani a Maser, in: *Quaderni di Palazzo Te* 3, 1996, 39–53) and Mary E. Frank (The Power of Portraits: Reuniting the Family at Villa Barbaro, in: *Reflections on Renaissance Venice: A Celebration of Patricia Fortini Brown,* ed. Blake de Maria and Mary E. Frank, Milan 2013, 163–176), identifying the figures emerging from the fictive doors of the room with other Barbaro (more or less documented) children. But would it not be more rational to concur with Carlo Ridolfi's view that these figures are simply "valets and grooms"? Ribouillault discusses "the two *quadri riportati*" in the *Stanze della Lucerna* and *del Cane* | Fig. 7a | | Fig. 7b | as exceptional combinations of religious themes in a secular context. However, there is no mention in the book, notwithstanding its contextual approach, of similar religious scenes in *quadri riportati* combined with *all'antica* historical scenes and allegorical subjects, only about five miles away, in Giambattista Zelotti's frescoes at Villa Emo at Fanzolo. | Fig. 8 |

Ribouillault astutely sees the decoration at Maser as a "complex polyphony". His intricate iconological construction brings to the fore the subjects that the villa is meant to symbolize, among them, weddings, human and agrarian fertility, birth, hospitality, the clash between civilization and barbarism, the defeat of heresy and Venetian sea power. These can all be expected in a mid-16th-century villa on the Venetian *terraferma*. The central subject of the birth of Apollo and Diana in Delos transforms Villa Barbaro into "Delos in Terraferma, where the virtue and fertility of the women of the Barbaro family are celebrated by an assembly of gods and goddesses". One of the author's main points is that the frescoes and sculptures "were often addressed primarily to female viewers, although within the strict control of a male patron".

He focuses on the female members of the Barbaro family (essentially, Marcantonio's wife Giustiniana); for him, Maser, as a new Delos, is "a true nursery". The eight female figures in the *Sala a Crociera* – usually identified (questionably) as Muses – are the Deliades nymphs celebrating the "safe birth of the Barbaro children"; much of the room is dedicated to the "sym-

| Fig. 7a | **Stanza del Cane, Villa Barbaro, Maser**

| Fig. 7b | **Paolo Veronese, Ceiling of the Stanza della Lucerna, ca. 1558–62, Villa Barbaro, Maser. Ribouillault, p. 89, fig. 74**

metry between the male experience of warfare and the female experience of childbirth". The decoration of the rooms flanking the Crociera is interpreted as "an idealized echo" of the Barbaro–Giustiniani wedding in April 1543 and as dealing with the subjects of "the submission of the wife to her husband" and "the faithfulness and virtue of women as guardians of the sacred hearth-fire, which guarantees the family's place in society and its prosperity". This reading of Veronese's frescoes at Maser prompts the question of why two brothers (one of them a bachelor) would conceive such a complex scheme to celebrate a wife (or sister-in-law) and daughters, especially in a society such as Venice in the 16th century, which was well known for its misogyny – second only, in Italy, to Rome. As with all iconological interpretations, a good measure of 21st-century perspective goes into their reading, thereby colouring the purported "period eye" with which one attempts to approach the paintings and sculptures.

VII. Ribouillault argues for the idea that the frescoes and sculptures at Maser were conceived by the Barbaro brothers, by Veronese, and by the unidentified sculptor of the stucco works as a tight, unified scheme. Even though the meanings can be manifold and are more or less connected, he sees them as pervasive throughout the villa. While he discusses the frescoes in detail, many elements in the decoration (the many grisaille ovals, for example) are hardly mentioned. The author never attempts to discuss the use of the rooms or how they were originally furnished, though this is admittedly a difficult subject because of the lack of evidence. The open feeling of the spaces today misleads the reading of the rooms. All of them have doors that would have made them more or less visible to different family members and guests; even the arch between the *Crociera* and the *Sala dell'Olimpo*, as witnessed by the still-visible large hinges (never mentioned by scholars), would have been separated by a large set of doors. Would all the rooms, therefore, be part of a single reading, a voy-

age through the spaces of the villa as scholars seem to think? Or could they have been seen as individual spaces with distinct purposes and decorations?
And practically speaking, just how did Daniele Barbaro, a scholarly and ecclesiastical bachelor, share the villa with his brother, sister-in-law and their children? The two symmetrical wings of the villa suggest a division between the two parts of the building as would occur in the 17th century at, for example, Palazzo Barberini in Rome, where one wing was for the secular branch of the family and the other for the ecclesiastical one. As complete and bold as Ribouillault's study attempts to be, it has to be noted that the author only really tackles the six rooms in the villa currently opened to the public. There is no mention of the other four large rooms and two smaller ones that complete the *piano nobile* of the villa. These were also certainly frescoed by Veronese and his workshop. No trace exists, as has been previously assumed, of the work of Zelotti. Unfortunately, the much-restored frescoes (in one case, entirely repainted by Girolamo Pellegrini in the 1670s) have never been studied properly. Also not discussed in the book are two other fascinating spaces – small matching *camerini* accessible only from each side of the *Crociera*.
Villa Barbaro at Maser is certainly the product of the vision of the Barbaro brothers. Ribouillault brings to life their varied interests and connects, more or less successfully, the iconography of the villa to their publications and subjects they studied. Little space is given to the humour and mischievous family references that are present in the villa.
In recreating an ancient house for the 16th century, Daniele and Marcantonio Barbaro were interested in bringing the ancient world into their home. Exactly how this was done still eludes us. Denis Ribouillault's valiant attempt to interpret the villa's decoration brings its patrons and some of their choices to the fore in new and interesting ways. But Maser continues to hold its secrets.

| Fig. 8 | Giovanni Zelotti, Allegory of Astronomy and Architecture. Fresco. Villa Emo, Fanzolo