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Agostino Chigi's Benevolent Stars

Content

Agostino Chigi the “Magnificent”, a fabulously wealthy Sienese banker in the service of the popes, designed his sumptuous residence in Trastevere –now known as Villa Farnesina –reserving a very special function for the Loggia della Galatea, one that is unrivalled in Renaissance art. Frescoed with the collaboration of three great painters –Raphael, Sebastiano del Piombo and Baldassarre Peruzzi –the Loggia is conceived as an autobiography through images, reflecting and multiplying the figure of the patron in a play of mirrors, starting from his famous horoscope painted on the vault.

This research offers a new and comprehensive interpretation of the fresco cycle, identifying for the first time the relationship between the birth chart depicted on the vault and the myths of the air inspired by Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, painted by Sebastiano in the lunettes—an allegory of earthly existence subject to the whims of fortune and the passions. The main register reaches its climax with the theme of love represented by the couple Polyphemus and Galatea, the latter a famous masterpiece by Raphael. The unity of design between the various registers of the loggia, which has remained misunderstood until now, culminates in the depiction of Galatea, who enchants the uncouth Polyphemus with her beauty and elevates him to the conquest of the virtue of love. The patron's astrological and autobiographical device constitutes a perfect mechanism—with the addition of a minor astronomical adjustment, crucial to his favourable horoscope—to celebrate the exceptional destiny of the “Magnifico” written in the stars.

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