ZELOTTI’S EPIC FRESCOES AT CATADIO

THE OBIZZI SAGA

IRMA B. JAFFE

with

Gernando Colombardo
Zelotti’s Epic Frescoes at Cataio:  
The Obizzi Saga
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IRMA B. JAFFE is an art historian whose love affair with Italian art and culture became public at the beginning of her career, in her account of discovering previously unknown frescoes in a fourteenth-century Italian castle. Now, many books and articles later, her discovery and presentation of the frescoes at Cataio, also virtually unknown, bring her distinguished career full-circle. Jaffe established the Department of Art and Music at Fordham University, which she chaired for twelve years. A former cultural consultant to the Italian Encyclopedia Institute, she was awarded the title Cavaliere in the Order of Merit of the Republic of Italy for her contributions to Italian cultural history. In 2003, she received the Cornaro Award for her contributions to Italian-American relations. Her acclaimed books include Joseph Stella; Baroque Art: the Jesuit Contribution; The Italian Presence in American Art; Shining Eyes, Cruel Fortune: The Lives and Loves of Italian Renaissance Women Poets; and Giuseppe Betussi and Eleonora Falletti, Polygraph and Poet at the Dawn of Popular Literature. Based in New York City, Jaffe continues to research and write on Italian culture.

GERNANDO COLOMBARDO was formerly Professor of Art History at Fordham University. Now retired, he continues his research in Italian art and literature, dividing his time between New York City and his family home near Genoa.
For my mother,
    Estelle Blumenthal Levy

my daughter,
    Yvonne Korshak Ruben

my granddaughter,
    Karin Star Schwartz

and my son-in-law,
    Robert Ruben
How many ages hence
Shall this our lofty scene be acted over
In states unborn and accents yet unknown!

—Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*

The task of Courage:
to prolong one’s fame by acts.

—Virgil, *The Aeneid*
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In the course of carrying out research, Gernando Colombardo and I have had the generous assistance of the staffs of many libraries. In the United States, we want to thank particularly James McCabe, director of Fordham University Libraries; Linda Lo Schiavo, director of Fordham’s Quinn Library; and David Vassar, Charlotte Labbé, and Debbie Winkler, also on the Fordham University Library staff. Our thanks go to the New York Public Library, especially to George Fletcher, director of the Spencer Collection and Rare Books Division; to the Frick Art Reference Library, to Yale University, the Beinecke Library; to Harvard University, the Houghton Library. The staff of the Fordham University Press has given me the benefit of their expert professional knowledge and I must thank particularly Robert Oppedisano, director of the Press; Nicholas Frankovich, managing editor; and John Stahle for his superb book design.

In Italy, we wish to thank the Biblioteca Museo Archivio of Bassano del Grappa, and especially the chief of services, Renata del Sal. In Padua, we thank the Biblioteca Civica, and in Venice the Musei Civici Veneziani for their courtesies. Our profound appreciation goes to Giovanna Dalla Francesca, the castellana of the castle of Cataio, for her unfailing kindness in welcoming us to the castle many times and for permitting Gernando Colombardo to photograph as aides-memoire the frescoes of the castle. We thank also the other members of the Dalla Francesca family, proprietors of the castle, for their permission to illustrate this book with photographs taken by the professional photographer Mauro Magliani. In my author’s note, I describe the debt we owe to Paolo and Luisa Ambrosin for making us aware of the Castle of Cataio.

It is with deep personal gratitude that I thank one of Canada’s most distinguished artists, Mary Pratt, who visited Cataio in order to write the informative foreword for my book. I cannot hope to express fully my thanks to Aldo Scaglione, Professor of Italian Literature at New York University, a preeminent scholar, to Eugenio Viola, Distinguished Professor of Literature, Libera Università SS. Maria Assunta, Rome, for their continuing encouragement of my work in Italian studies and to Farhang Zabeeh, Professor of Philosophy, Roosevelt University, whose lively conversation has given me new insights into everything I read.

I am happy to thank Eduardo Saenz and Joel Auville, who generously offered me their computer expertise whenever I needed it. I thank my friends for their patient understanding. It has been my good fortune to enjoy my long life with my extraordinary family, identified on the dedication page of this book. I am delighted to thank Tullia and Tarquinia, who continue to take seriously their responsibility to hold down the chaotic pile of papers on my desk.
The cracks of history opened wide around the so-called castle of Cataio, built by Pio Enea Obizzi between 1570 and 1573 (illus. 2). The Obizzi name is no longer remembered, since the family became extinct in the early nineteenth century and the castle passed into other hands. The writer Giuseppe Betussi (ca. 1520–75), who conceived the saga on which is based the extraordinary cycle of forty frescoes on the walls of the castle’s six great galleries on the piano nobile, and the artist Battista Zelotti (1526–78), who painted the frescoes, have both all but disappeared in those unjust cracks. But cracks are open to the light, and, peering through them, one finds that what seemed to have been lost can be rediscovered. In 1993 the cracks began to widen when a glimpse of Cataio was included in Julian Kliemann’s fine book Gesta Dipinte: La grande decorazione nelle dimore Italiane dal Quattrocento al Seicento. It is thus in the spirit of rediscovery that I hope to bring into full scholarly light the unique nature of Betussi’s saga, and the writer and artist who created those dramatic, history-laden paintings, together with the ceiling and overdoor decorations that comment philosophically on the moral and social world that governed the Obizzi family.

I am fortunately indebted to Luisa and Paolo Ambrosin, who, in 2002, took Gernando Colombardo, visiting them in Padua, to the nearby castle of Cataio, where, they promised him, he would be surprised. As an art historian, he was indeed astonished when they mounted the spiral staircase to the piano nobile and entered the first of what proved to be six palatial rooms frescoed from ceiling to floor. A quick search the following day in the library in Padua revealed that this treasure of sixteenth-century Italian art was hardly known to exist. Certainly no serious study had been published. Gernando phoned me in New York to tell me about the castle and its frescoes, insisting, his voice full of excitement, that I must take the next plane to Venice, where he would meet me and take me to Cataio.

It was not the next day, but a few days later, when I had arranged for someone to visit and feed Tullia and Tarquinia, my beautiful cats, that I did in fact land in Venice. We went first to the Hotel Terme delle Nazioni in Montegrotto, where Gernando had reserved a room for me; we left my baggage there and took a taxi to the castle. We met the custodian, Giovanna Dalla Francesca, who told us we were the first Americans to visit Cataio.

This was the outstanding experience of my scholarly life, and now, at the age of ninety, I feel fortunate to end my career on such a high note. I want to thank again Luisa and Paolo Ambrosin for their part in starting us on this adventure, and again, Signora Dalla Francesca for her courteous welcome every time we visited the castle. Above all, I want to thank Gernando Colombardo, my colleague and dear friend, for sharing scholarly work for fifty years, and to remember the late Professor Meyer Schapiro, whose inspiring teaching is always present in my work.

AUTHOR’S NOTE
The smell of wet plaster is sharp. It catches the back of the throat with a metallic click. Plaster is not an inert substance. It is, in its damp state, an active mass of molecules, all arranging and rearranging themselves to eventually become the basis for the material that has for centuries been used to shape moldings or slide onto walls. When it eventually dries and is sanded, it glows with some inner light that separates it from mere white paint. In its cured and dry state, it may have ceased to be actively alive, but nevertheless, it retains a memory of its youth, and if one is fortunate enough to stand inside a room that has had it walls properly plastered—over lath and straw—the feeling of standing inside light is palpable. Maybe it is the same as standing inside an igloo lit by sun. The glow is at once soft and full of life.

Frescos are painted either into lime plaster when it is wet or on top of it when it has dried. Painting into wet plaster is by far the better way. The pigment in the paint meshes with the chemical structure of the plaster, and paint and plaster marry into one substance. This is known as buon or “true” fresco.

If, on the other hand, the dry plaster is merely used as a kind of canvas for the artist and painted upon, then the plaster and the paint never marry. This method, called secco, “dry,” allows the paint and plaster to exist together, each with its own chemical structure. Sadly, it is an unstable union, and eventually the paint begins to fall away, fade, or succumb to pollution or climate change. It is, however, a lot easier to paint on dry plaster than it is to paint into wet plaster, and because of this facility, buon fresco is often redefined or touched up by secco fresco.

The paint usually used, when fresco painting was at its height between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, was tempera. Tempera painting is difficult enough without having to deal with wet plaster. It does not lend itself easily to the blending of colors; since it has egg for its binding power, the edges of a brush stroke often dry too quickly to allow the artist to create an uninterrupted surface. It is frustrating and annoying. However, when done by a master, it allows the glow of the plaster to move through the paint, and the resulting glow is so full of life that the outcome seems well worth the effort.

Working into wet plaster is even more difficult. The plaster superficially dries very quickly, so it can only be painted into in small areas. The artist transfers the drawing of the proposed work by using a perforated cartoon through which powdered paint is “pounced” or sifted. This is then covered
with thin wet plaster, one small area at a time. The artist must consider each area as he goes along. Where must there be a flow of paint, as in a draped cloak, or an uninterrupted blue, as in the sky? The same tempera paint will be used with all its idiosyncrasies and stubborn refusal to “flow.” The resulting fresco must not indicate any of these problems. It must seem to have arrived on the wall as if it were a living tableau: flags flying, capes flowing, angels hovering, putti curling pink toes, dimpled and adorable.

Wall paintings have the ability to draw the viewer into the action. Not framed, except by architecture, they do not have the aloof “preciousness” of paintings. The liveliness of the plaster, the immediacy of the tempera paint, and the ability of the artist to paint quickly without any attempt to finesse the work too much—all these come together to give frescoes an unparalleled truth and beauty.

Unfortunately, we have few really fresh and relatively perfect such works to enjoy. Years of dirt and damp have taken their toll. However, this palace, owned continuously for so many centuries by the Obizzi family and for the last century by the Dalla Francesca family, has protected these frescoes. They surround us, glowing in untainted splendor, much as they must have been enjoyed five hundred years ago. It is a rare privilege to stand in their midst.

Born in New Brunswick, Canada, in 1938, Mary Pratt, one of Canada’s most distinguished artists, has been honored with the Companion of the Order of Canada award (C.C.) and, in addition to her B.F.A. from the prestigious Mount Allison University in New Brunswick, holds seven honorary doctorates from Canadian universities, including the University of Toronto and Dalhousie University. Her paintings have been exhibited nationally and internationally and are included in every major private and corporate collection in Canada. She is married to the artist James Rosen and lives in Newfoundland.
Zelotti’s Epic Frescoes at Cataio:
The Obizzi Saga
Illus. 2
The Castle of Cataio.

Illus. 3
(See bibliography, Priorato.)

Illus. 4
Floor plan of the six rooms.

| Sala di Firenze | Sala di San Marco | Sala della prudenza e della pace | Genealogy Room | Sala dei Papi | Sala di Ferrara | Sala del Veneto | Pio Enea | Condividere | Dignitatem et Clavem | Spiritual | Capitello | Motte | Firma | San Giovanni | Dalmazia | Zelotti's Epic Frescoes at Cataio |
Cataio lies within the borders of Battaglia Terme, a town about forty miles from Venice in the province of Padua (illus. 5). Documents show that “ca’ tajo” designated the cutoff where the land was excavated during the thirteenth century to make one of the canals that slice through the area. Legend had it that the name derived from Cathay, made famous in Italy by Marco Polo, and that the great castle that dominates the town was constructed from designs he described in his journal—a fancy doubtless owed to the similarities of sound and spelling in Italian. The down-to-earth reality, however, is also romantic.

The castle (illus. 2) was constructed by Pio Enea Obizzi (illus. 3), a wealthy condottiero, whose imagination transformed an already existing, modest villa into a medieval dream castle thrust into the rock of the Euganean Hills. The immense building was not constructed as a medieval feudal stronghold with towers and high walls for defense; it has some features that deliberately imitate the appearance of a castle, such as a battlement. It was Giuseppe Betussi, however (illus. 6), who conceived and wrote the program for the series of paintings that gave him the warranty to his family’s long and heroic history. Battista Zelotti (illus. 7) was the artist who, following Betussi’s explanation of the events, brought that history to life in the forty frescoes that seem to make the walls of the castle disappear so that the viewer looks out on a world in which men and horses are clashing in mortal struggles, in which crowds are gathered to celebrate the construction of a new bridge, in which beautiful women in fashionable clothes witness an Obizzi wedding, in which a pope is rescued, and in all of which one Obizzi or another participated, usually as hero.

The Obizzi family was established in Italy when two young noblemen, the brothers Frisco and Obizzi, arrived in Lombardy as soldiers of fortune in the service of Henry II of Saxony. Henry invaded the north of Italy at the bequest of the bishops to put down the rebellion of the rising mercantile communes against the authority of the church. As his reward, the bishops crowned him king of Lombardy. 1 When Henry went back north to continue his war against the Polish ruler Boleslav I, Frisco made his way to Genoa, where he founded the Fieschi family, while Obizzo went to Lucca as Henry’s lieutenant for Tuscany and started the Obizzi line. In 1251 the two families were further united with the marriage of Luigi degli Obizzi to Caterina Fieschi. In the early fourteenth century, Gherardo degli Obizzi, a scholar and knight of Rhodes, moved from Lucca to Ferrara, starting the Ferrara line, to which Pio Enea belonged. By the fifteenth century, the city’s
Illus. 6
Filippo Roberti (drawing),
Domenico Conte (engraving).
*Portrait of Giuseppe Betussi*, n.d.
Courtesy, the Museo Biblioteca Archivio, Bassano del Grappa, Italy.

Inset: Battista Zelotti.
*Portrait of Giuseppe Betussi* (from life, ca. 1573),
detail from illus. 18, *Monarchy*,
oil on canvas; see page 48.
Courtesy, The Dalla Francesca family.
Illus. 7
Battista Zelotti (?)
Self-Portrait (?), n.d.
Courtesy, The Correr Museum, Venice, Italy
Illus. 8
Title page of
Ragionamento Sopra Cataio. 1573.
Courtesy, The Frick Art
Reference Library

Illus. 9
The Castle of Cataio in the
eighteenth century.
Il Castello del Cataio e i suoi
Giardini. La Galivernerna Editrice,
governing council listed this Obizi branch among the noble families of Venice. Betusi mentions many details of the Obizi family history and genealogy in his *Ragionamento Sopra Cathaio* [sic] (illus. 8).

As a condottiero, Pio Enea (1525–88) had secured a lucrative contract (condotto) with Venice to defend the city and the Veneto with his private army, and he was already a wealthy man when he inherited all of the family property in Tuscany, in Ferrara, and in Padua, which had come into the family through the marriage of Antonio degli Obizzi and Negra de Negri in 1422. His marriage in 1563 to Eleonora Martinengo, who brought him an immense dowry, augmented his wealth considerably. In command of this fortune, he happened to ride out one day with two of his friends to climb the Euganean Hills behind the villa of his mother, Beatrice degli Obizzi, at Cataio. The men dismounted and stood in awe as they took in the view of the wide and deep plain at their feet and the hills extending east and west as far as the eye could see. It would be a beautiful place to build two or three small towers with a few small rooms, they agreed. By the time they had descended to the plain, Pio Enea had decided to undertake the project that developed into the grand palace with crenellated walls that would visually establish the feudal, noble, castle-dwelling ancestry that the family never had. 3

He built two stories partly on top and to the side of his mother’s villa (illus. 9) and blasted out the rock behind it; he laid out parks for deer and other wild animals, piazzas for entertainments, fields for tournaments, and courts for tennis and other ball games. A one-story arm extending northwest from the body of the palace was built to house barracks for his private army of about 350 soldiers. A princely domain that proclaimed a family whose roots were buried in time, the facade of the palace was once painted on the lower level with scenes drawn from mythology and ancient Roman history, while above there were depictions of modern victories of Christians over the “infidels,” as Betusi called the Turks. 4 A broad stairway with low risers for horses still leads up to the terrace where in Pio Enea’s time visitors would dismount on the piano nobile and enter the first of six salons to be immediately overwhelmed by the spectacle that surrounded them: scenes that create the illusion of three-dimensional figures in space that seems to be an extension of the room itself. It was Giuseppe Betusi who stirred Pio Enea’s imagination with the idea of memorializing his ancestors with a series of historical events painted on his great new walls.

Betusi was born into an ancient, illustrious, but not wealthy family of Bassano del Grappa, probably a few years before 1520. 5 His father died when he was a young child. His mother, Bianca, managed to send him to a good school, and his teachers reported that he was an exceptionally intelligent student. When his mother died, his inheritance proved to be too small to afford him the luxury of independence, and he moved to Venice in 1541 to find work to sustain himself. The following year he sent two sonnets to Pietro Aretino, who, highly impressed with his talent, set him on his professional career with letters of high praise to a number of wealthy men who might employ him as a secretary. It is matter for some speculation as to why his career was less successful than it promised to be.

Probably the clue can be found in a letter from Aretino in which he
warned his protégé, “stay away from fire; I tell you this with regard to women. . . . Your abundant talents will be sterile; let your lovers be paper and their pimps be your pens; the most reliable guard a man can have is prudence. . . . Without it, nothing else is of value. . . . Let reason mediate your senses if you wish to liberate yourself from the temptations of sex.”  

It was good, necessary advice, but there was a certain Camilla:

*I hoped in these few years we have to live  
to spend my time free, and liberated  
from the laces of love; but your face,  
Camilla, rouses in me that harsh excitement.*

And there was Livia, a nun, and the lovely young girls on the seaside at Savona, from where he wrote to Luca Contile,

*You who see the illness that will kill me  
Do not think me unworthy of your counsel  
For I know not how to save myself.*

Luca responded sympathetically but with an evident sense of helplessness,

*You make yourself the prey of a basilisk  
who throws stones at your entreaties;  
Seeing you suffer I can only say,  
If you do not stop chasing after good luck and love,  
Both will always flee from you, I warn you.*

And then there was Catea, who proved to be responsible for the first disaster in his professional life.

Betussi had been offered a position by Cardinal Salviati to serve as secretary to his brother, a prior, who at that time was in France. In the meantime, the cardinal required him to accompany him to Ferrara. He had to part from Catea. Then the cardinal insisted that he must go to Padua to augment his education while waiting for the return of his intended employer. In Padua he attended the great university and quickly became part of the intellectual circle, where he made friends with Sperone Speroni, through whom he was accepted as a member of the Accademia degli Infiammati, one of the new academies that were springing up in many cities in Italy because of the influence in the sixteenth century of Plato and his academy. Betussi was thus imbued with the spirit of humanism that by this time had been inflected by the sixteenth-century sensibility that created Mannerism, the style that arose in response to a number of circumstances pivotal among which must be counted the atmosphere of crisis created by the constant struggle on Italian soil between Francis I of France and Charles V, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire; the rise of Protestantism; and, I believe, by the felt but unrecognized threat posed by the loosening of the class structure as a book-reading middle class developed.

Studying the great Greek and Latin philosophers and writers, however,
could not take Betussi’s heart and mind away from his yearning for Catea, and he returned to Venice without the cardinal’s permission. His letter of apology pleading his enthrallment proved useless, and the promised employment was withdrawn. His need for love notwithstanding, he had to earn a living, and in Venice he supported himself as an editor for Giolito, the leading publisher in the city, while he brought out his first two books *Dialogo Amoroso* (1543) and *Il Raverta* (1544). These publications brought him recognition and established him as a significant writer. Aretino recommended him to the wealthy Count Collaltino di Collalto, who took Betussi into his employ. He evidently had a good deal of free time to work on his compositions, and in the space of years between 1544 and 1547 he produced, in addition to poetry, his translations into Italian of Boccaccio’s *De claris mulieribus* (Le Donne Illustri) (1545), *De casibus virorum* (I casi degli uomini illustri di Messer Giovanni Boccaccio) (1545), and *De genealogiis decorum* (La genealogia degli dei de’gentili di Messer Giovanni Boccaccio) (1547), as well as a version of book VII of the *Aeneid* (1546). His relationship with Collalto seems to have been ideal—he traveled with his employer to England and France—and yet in 1547 he left his employ without apparently having another position waiting for him.

For a few years Betussi wandered to Rome, Florence, and elsewhere, looking for employment. In 1549 Aretino suggested that he go to Milan, where he might meet potential employers who were there to attend the festivities surrounding the marriage of the Duke of Mantua. In Milan he did indeed meet a wealthy Milanese, Agusto di Adda, who offered to take him into his service, although he would have to wait a short time. It turned out that Adda was seriously ill, and soon the bad news came that his prospective employer had died. He left a large fortune, which he bequeathed to charities and his servants, among whom, it probably occurred to Betussi, he could have counted himself had destiny been kinder.

Almost penniless, Betussi moved back and forth across northern Italy looking for a connection and depending on his ability to make himself welcome among his well-situated acquaintances for food and shelter. That he had a pleasing manner in conversation and was quick-witted and witty is evident in his dialogue, *La Leonora, Ragionamento sopra la vera bellezza* (Leonora, A Dialogue on Beauty), in which he is one of the speakers; in the winter of 1552 he stopped at the castle of Melazzo, not far from Savona, to visit with Giovan Giorgio Falletti and his wife, the poet Eleonora de la Ravoire Falletti, and a few months later he returned to enjoy the company of this “happy couple,” as he referred to them in *La Leonora*, which he wrote to thank his hosts and in which Eleonora is the principal interlocutor. It was written in 1552, but not published until 1557.

One of Betussi’s most attractive features was his respect for women in general and for the particular women he came to know through his peripatetic life. He celebrates many of them in *Le Imagini del Tempio della Signora Donna Giovanna Aragona* (1556), a dialogue between Fame and Truth, who, Betussi writes with jocular irony, do not know each other at their first encounter. He praises those women for their beauty, which he emphasizes is spiritual, not physical, a principal theme underlying *La Leonora*. But it is in this book, *Le Imagini*, that one meets the dour, critical,
open-eyed writer whose life is narrowly circumscribed by his class and his
profession but who is sharply aware of the larger world. “Let me go on my
way,” Fame says, “carrying news of the intrigues of the world. I will make
people think about the present war in Italy, its consequences, and the pur-
poses of the princes who started it. . . how they are not driven by grandly
honest motives but by the desire for the Oriental riches of those who have
stolen the empire of Constantine. . . how moved by ambition, by iniquity,
they desert Christianity even the name of which is in danger of being
forgotten. . . . And I can prophesy that. . . poor Hungary will be so harshly
beaten by the fierce barbarians and Scythians, God forbid, that it will
become a stepping stone for the infidels who will oppress the remnants left
by the Goths and the Vandals and the other barbarians that pillaged Italy
and caused the decline of the Roman Empire.”

For sixteen years, Betussi published nothing new, although he had the
satisfaction of seeing his publications between 1542 and 1557, especially
his translations, reprinted several times; La genealogia degli dei de’ gentili
di M. Giovanni Boccaccio had fifteen editions, seven in his lifetime. However,
he did write a book during that time on the illustrious families of Italy
that was never published.13 He probably wrote a good deal of poetry
during those years, uncollected and now lost except for the few poems that
appear in some of his books and in volumes of poetry by others, as well as
the small volume L’Alessi.14 Most of that time he was without steady
employment. During 1560–63 he was in the service of a famous
condottiere, Gian Luigi Vitelli, living like a prince with a handsome salary,
food and lodging, personal servant, and a horse at his disposal. He accom-
panied Vitelli on a trip to Spain and France. Why he left this generous
employer in 1563 to accept an offer from a man thought to have been
Count Antonio Cicognia, and then left Cicogna in 1565, is, like his other
departures from luxurious service, unknown and must be attributed to a
need in him always to move on. For the next six years we may see him
restless, probably depressed, without a steady patron, moving from one
place to another across northern Italy, always a guest, hiding his depression
and repaying his hosts with lively, erudite conversation, uncommon in-
sights, and doubtless with amusing gossip about people “everybody” knew.
But finally destiny’s spin dropped the ball in Betussi’s slot.

Probably through Speroni, he met Pio Enea Obizzi, who was then
constructing his castle. Since Betussi had written a book on illustrious
families of Italy, he immediately saw his opportunity and proposed to Pio
Enea the idea of recording the history of his family in visual form with a
series of paintings on his new castle walls that would reveal to the world
the glorious deeds of the Obizzi family. Fortunately, Pio Enea could not
resist such a vision.

Betussi wrote the program for the series of forty scenes, which he pub-
lished under the title Ragionamento Sopra Cataio in 1573 (illus. 8), his
last publication; there is no record of him after that date, and it is supposed
that he died soon after.15 He chose Zelotti to execute the frescoes. Keeping
in mind Aldo Scaglione’s observation that, while showing analogies, each
art follows its own track, sometimes, as at Cataio, one finds a compelling
example of what John Shearman describes as the “sister arts” in literature

30 • Chapter One • Zelotti’s Epic Frescoes at Cataio
and painting. Both Betussi and Zelotti shared the sensibility of the decades of the sixteenth century in which the arts exhibit the characteristics of Mannerism, and their collaboration as writer and painter at Cataio gives ample evidence of the similar formative pressures to which both responded.

There was something bizarre, Giuseppe Zonta remarks, about Betussi “indulging himself in sensual pleasure, always restless, unsatisfied, with a passionate longing to be independent...a typical Italian intellectual of the mid-sixteenth century.” Indeed, a taste for the bizarre is a characteristic of Mannerism, as Aldo Scaglione describes that aspect of sixteenth-century style in literature and art, and as we learn more about Betussi’s writing, and about Zelotti’s art, we will see the cluster of Mannerist characteristics pointed out also by John Shearman, exhibited in the writing of the former and the painting of the latter.

While this is not the place to analyze all of Betussi’s literary oeuvre, I note that translation, as Shearman points out in defining and describing Mannerism, restricts the creative problem to matters of form rather than content. That Betussi spent considerable effort and time doing translations while he was employed by Collalto, as I have mentioned, signals his strong interest in formal problems. Taking up his Ragionamento Sopra Cataio, other mannerist features become evident, as Scaglione and Shearman point out.

First, the work is full of tangential details and it exaggerates the importance of its subject, the saga of the Obizzi for, while the historical events Betussi chose were actual, the presence and role of the particular Obizzi in those events are highly problematic. It is in a sense decorated history and thus artificial. Betussi’s invention of the series, moreover, reveals his sophistication, and in his guided tour he emphasizes to the tourists how difficult and painstaking his task was, thus self-consciously situating himself in the work itself. When we consider the collaboration of Betussi and Zelotti, we find a peculiar disconnection between Betussi’s informative language, in which the praise for the depicted hero is prosaic, and Zelotti’s bravura depiction of the hero in battle, a contrast between form and content that adds an unusual and unexpected pleasure to the viewing. The theatricality of the scenes also reduces their meaningful content in favor of their aesthetic content.

Born in Verona, Battista Zelotti grew up and lived all his life in the Veneto, where he was able to see—and to study—some of the greatest art created in the Western world since antiquity. In Padua there was Giotto’s peerless Arena Chapel (1305), Donatello’s majestic equestrian statue of a condottiero called Gattamelata (1450), and the marvels of Mantegna in the church of the Eremitani (ca. 1450–55) as well as in the ducal palace in Mantua (ca. 1460–75); in Venice were the glories of the Bellini—father Jacopo (ca. 1400–ca. 1470), son Gentile (1429–1507), and son Giovanni (1430–1515)—the ravishing delights of Giorgione (1478–1510), Titian (1490–1576), and the astonishing drama of Tintoretto (1518–94). And working beside him was his own almost exact contemporary Paolo Veronese (1528–88). Zelotti’s art was steeped in all of them, particularly that of Veronese, and yet he retained something of his own, as is evident in his frescoes at Cataio.
Very little is known of the life of Zelotti beyond his works. His supposed birth date in 1526 is not certain, although his death in 1578 is established in a letter of Teodoro San Giorgio, the steward of the castle of Mantua where Zelotti was in service to Duke Guglielmo Gonzaga. There has been confusion about his identity since he was known as Battista Farinato by some who confused him with an uncle, Farinato, also a painter, by others as Giambattista Zelotti, and since he was born in Verona and lived there, he was also identified as Battista da Verona by still others including, most unfortunately, Giorgio Vasari, who in a chapter on “Battista da Verona” unknowingly admired Zelotti for the infinite number of figures he painted and furthermore credited Battista Farinato as having been accepted into the Florence Academy of Design. Alas, the name Zelotti does not appear in the Vasari index, reason enough to account for his present obscurity.

From his youth on, Zelotti was closely associated with Veronese, who was also born in Verona, two years after Zelotti, but had the good sense to move to Venice, the great center of art. Both artists studied with Antonio Badile and they frequently worked on the same sites. Over the years and centuries Zelotti’s frescoes were often attributed to the more famous painter: even Francesco Berni in his 1669 edition of Betussi’s Ragionamento attributed the Cataio frescoes to Veronese, although he obviously knew better, since Betussi himself writes that Zelotti was the artist he chose. Some attributions to Veronese have been attributed once again to Zelotti, as, for example, the theatrical Annunciation in the Uffizi, which Bernard Berenson credited to him.

Following closely Carlo Ridolfi’s comments in his appraisal of Zelotti, Katia Brugnolo Meloncelli, in her magisterial catalogue raisonné of Zelotti’s oeuvre, remarks that Zelotti was responsible for his posthumous neglect because he worked almost exclusively in small towns that were not visited by upper-class patrons of art. This seems to me not entirely so: he worked on a number of commissions with Veronese for decorative works in some of the grandest villas of the Veneto; unfortunately, some of them were destroyed in the course of the centuries. Furthermore, his reputation suffered, with consequent neglect, because some of his best works were attributed to Veronese, as noted before. In fact, Zelotti’s esteem among his contemporaries brought him a commission for decorations in the Chamber of the Council of Ten in the ducal palace when he was still a relatively young artist in his twenties (illus. 10).

From Meloncelli’s pages on the critical history of Zelotti’s art, we learn of many articles devoted to him over the centuries: writing in the seventeenth century, Ridolfi, who lamented his relative obscurity, considered him one of the best painters of the sixteenth century. In the eighteenth century several writers included him appreciatively in their writing: Zanetti more than the others found Zelotti a worthy competitor of Veronese, comparing their various strengths: the latter elegant and more spirited in his brushwork than the former, whom he saw, with admiration, as more precise and studied. Writing in the following century tended to focus on identifying the works of the two artists, attempting to clarify attributions that had been given to one or the other, mostly to the detriment of Zelotti, although the
distinguished art historian Morelli, writing in 1897, “regretted the fog that surrounded this very interesting painter of Verona.”

As late as 1929, Zelotti won high praise from Adolfo Venturi, who devoted twenty-two pages to him in his *Storia dell’arte italiana*. Venturi sees Zelotti absorbing the influence of Parmigianino’s Mannerism in 1555–56 in the tondos in the salon of the library of San Marco and draws attention to a certain baroque tendency in the “fluttering” movement of the drapery that takes on aspects of the bizarre. After Venturi, however, interest in Zelotti disappeared. Books on art history used in colleges did not include him, so that several generations of students who became professional art historians never heard of him.

Zelotti’s early work in the Chamber of the Council of Ten in the Ducal Palace shows his characteristic full-bodied figures, which in later works become svelte while retaining their fullness. In *Venus between Mars and Neptune* (illus. 10) the contours are complex, and together with the rushing, turning, twisting movements of the figures they seem to anticipate the baroque style of the following century. As David Rosand points out, the image of the goddess, born of the sea and accompanied by her son Eros, is merged here with the personification of Venice who is accompanied by the lion of St Mark, symbol of the city of San Marco. Titian chose the seven artists who were commissioned to execute the paintings in the library of San Marco, of which six were painted by Zelotti. The great works of his maturity began around 1565 with frescoes in villas designed by Palladaio: the Villa Emo in Treviso, and the Villa Godi (now called Malinverni) near Vicenza. That he had achieved mastery is evident in complex spatial arrangements, in the confident mastery of single figures, and the sureness and variety of many figures in active poses. In the Villa Godi, his frescoes representing battle scenes anticipate the battle scenes he would soon paint in the castle of Cataio. Of particular note is his control of illusionistic
space, with figures seemingly protruding into the viewer’s space as they lean over illusionistic ledges and pediments. It seems very likely that Betussi’s choice of Zelotti to execute the events of his Obizzi saga with its many battle scenes at the castle of Cataio was influenced by the theatricality of Zelotti’s paintings of the battles between Alexander and Darius at Villa Godi. At Cataio one sees the full development of Zelotti’s art in the brightly colored, vigorously painted decorations that cover the walls and ceilings of the six great galleries so that the visitor is literally overwhelmed, a response that Mannerists typically hoped to elicit.

In 1575 Zelotti began his service to Guglielmo Gonzaga, duke of Mantua, as prefect of construction. There are no known paintings after Cataio and it appears that his duties at the castle consumed all of his time. He died, as mentioned, in 1578.

All forty paintings in the Saga series are attributed to Zelotti. Since it was probably in 1570 that Betussi presented his idea of decorating the reception rooms of the not-yet-finished castle with paintings honoring the Obizzi family and had then to begin his research, the actual painting probably began in 1572. His fictive guided tour recorded in his Ragionamento Sopra Cataio, in which he describes each scene, was published in 1573. Given such a sort span of time and the common practice of having a well-known artist carry out an extensive decorative program with lesser-known artists as assistants, it is obvious that Zelotti had assistants. However, Zelotti had also to depend on Betussi to describe the events that covered four hundred years of history, and there can be little question that Betussi was actively engaged in the composition and iconography of the forty scenes. Nevertheless, it was the artist’s hand that held the brush and created the vivid, dramatic world through which the visitor moves. The saga is Betussi’s; the frescoes belong to Zelotti.

NOTES
Key: R = Betussi, Ragionamento Sopra Cataio. 1573. The narrative program of the Obizzi Saga.

1. Henry invaded Lombardy in 1004 and was crowned king of Lombardy. He returned north to continue his war against King Boleslav I of Poland and returned to Italy in 1013. The next year, he was crowned Holy Roman Emperor. For dating the arrival of Frisco and Obizzi in Italy with Henry, see below, my discussion of the first fresco in the Saga series. The Obizzi, the Este, and the Guelph families all had Saxon or Bavarian connections and were interrelated. In the centuries-long struggle for power between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines, the Obizzi and Este families were allies of the Guelphs in support of the pope.

2. Published in 1573 as a dialogue, Betussi’s Ragionamento sopra Cathio [sic] is a richly descriptive guidebook in which Betussi invents tourists who ask convenient questions that allow him, as he guides them through the six galleries, to describe and explain the frescoes that recount the history and great deeds and achievements of the Obizzis from 1010 to 1420. Citations from this source are noted as R: plus the page number. A “second edition” written by Francesco Berni, with many changes and additions, was published in 1669; no citations are given from the Berni book. Other sources for the Obizzi family include Priorato, Scena d’huomini illustri d’Italia, and Scalco, Gli Obizzi ritrovati (see bibliography throughout).

3. R: VI left: The Ragionamento is printed with pages on the left and right, both carrying the same number. Descendants of Pio Enea made alterations to the grounds, but the castle stands today as he created it. See Paganini, “Sono Solo 350 Stanze,” 120–37. The Paganini article includes photographs by Luigino Visconti, with an informative labeled
pullout illustration indicating the various parts of the castle complex. See also Fantelli, *Il Castello del Cataio e i suoi giardini*.

4. R: XI left and right: Betussi does not name the artist who painted the scenes on the facade. They are no longer visible. The scene he refers to represents the Battle of Lepanto (October 7, 1571), the naval battle between an enormous fleet of Venetian, Spanish, and Papal ships and a great Turkish armada. The historically decisive battle, fought in the waters off southern Greece, ended with the crushing defeat of the Ottoman Turks. It became subject matter for paintings by Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese, and many other artists.


7. *L’Alessi* is a small anthology of Betussi’s verse, written on the occasion of the death of Alessandro del Carretto. The date is unknown. It is held in the collection of the Biblioteca Civile of Bassano del Grappa. It is not included in Verci’s bibliography of Betussi’s works.


11. Jaffe (with Colombardo), Giuseppe Betussi and Eleonora Falletti.


13. On the first page of the preface of *Ragionamento Sopra Cataio*, Betussi tells his invented tourists that the frescoes they are about to see present the genealogy of the Obizzi family, which is like the other illustrious families he has written about: “va insieme con le altre Case Illustri d’Italia da me descritte.” Zonta, “Note Betussiane,” 352–53, quotes a letter of Betussi to Cesare Gonzaga (1568) in which he writes that he expects his book *Case Illustri d’Italia* will be out before the end of winter. That book never came out, or rather, Zonta writes indignantly, never came out under Betussi’s name. Zonta believes it was plagiarized by Francesco Sansovino: “I fear that I fatti delle famiglie illustri d’Italia [1582] is actually by Betussi.”

14. See note 7. Bassani, *Il Poligrafo Veneto*, 93–99, gives a list of Betussi’s poems, with their first lines, that can be found in various publications.


16. R: XVI right, Betussi tells the tourists that the artist was Battista Zelotti, “even though many call him Veronese.” He uses the subjunctive chiamino, “many people might call him Veronese,” which creates some ambiguity: did Betussi think Zelotti and Paolo Veronese were one and the same, or did he mean some people might consider him as excellent a painter as Veronese? Scaglione, “Cinquecento Mannerism,” 97; Shearman, Mannerism, 30–48.


20. R: XVIII. Berni “corrected” himself in his second edition the following year.


Illus. 11
Bertoia
(a.k.a. Jacopo Zanguidi)
with collaborators.
The Doge Francesco Dandolo Names Pietro Rossi General of the League against Mastino della Scala in 1336.
ca. 1570.
Fresco. The Rossi Family Castle, San Secondo.

Illus. 12
Taddeo Zuccari.
Pope Paul III Blesses Charles V after His Return from Tunisia. ca. 1565.
Fresco. Palazzo Farnese.
Art Resource.
CHAPTER TWO: FORERUNNERS OF BETUSSI’S OBIZZI SAGA

Betussi did not exaggerate when he told his fictive tourists that the frescoed galleries of the castle at Cataio were unique.¹ It was true, he explained as he guided them through the six great salons painted by Zelotti and assistants between 1570 and 1573, that many princes had brought their ancestors to life with portrait statues and paintings, and true, he acknowledged, that Cosimo I commissioned decorations that honored his family in the Palazzo Vecchio (illus. 14), that Marquis Trolo Rossi honored his ancestors with frescoes in the Castle of San Secondo (illus. 11), as had Cardinal Alessandro Farnese in the Palazzo Farnese at Caprarola (illus. 12), and that there were others “that he couldn’t bother to think of.” Still, no one had represented their deeds as fully and systematically, going back as many centuries as he had, in carrying out Pio Enea Obizzi’s commission for depicting the triumphs and heroic deeds of the Obizzi family.²

Indeed, the frescoes on the walls of Cataio constitute the only saga among the countless decorations of villas and palaces of Italy painted between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries; before the decorations at Cataio, none equaled in number of frescoes the forty scenes Betussi programmed, none equaled the four hundred years represented in that series, and only at Cataio were the historical events that the frescoes memorialized presented in a strictly chronological order so that progressing from scene to scene one could “read” in the painted accounts, aided by scroll-shaped descriptions inscribed at the sides of the scenes, the momentous history of the family created by its heroes as reconstructed by Betussi. That he was not entirely accurate hardly has to be said, given the tools of research to which he had recourse. Betussi himself raised the issue of authenticity by attempting to fend off criticism with a question that he has his scholarly fictive tourist ask: since he had not heard of this family elsewhere, had the author of this project because of his affection for the owner and to show off his own intelligence and knowledge perhaps wanted to exalt the family and in a sense create its greatness? Betussi tells him that he is not the first to ask about this; there were ignorant and malicious people who have impugned his motives out of jealousy and denied the glory of this family. He had consulted archives, however. He had read books by distinguished historians such as Giovanni Villani, author of a twelve-volume history of Florence; Polydore Vergil, author of Anglicaes historicae XXVI (Twenty-six books of English history); Giovanni Battista Pigna, author of Il Principe (The Prince) and secretary to the Duke of Ferrara, and others. And he was certain that he had given a true account of the events represented in the paintings. True, the events were
factual; the presence and role of an Obizzi were not necessarily so.3

Various historians who have criticized the accuracy of Betussi’s *Ragionamento Sopra Cataio* believed he had not intentionally falsified, as Giuseppe Zonta remarks in his “Note Betussiane.”4 Some of the errors that have been criticized—who was the son of whom, who inherited what, incorrect dates, and so forth—are of interest to genealogical historians, but they have little interest for those who are concerned with aesthetic or iconographical issues, as I am. However, in his desire to glorify the family of Pio Enea Obizzi, he did make historical errors that I will point out in various frescoes. Nevertheless, considering that the Obizzi had amassed great wealth, which must have come from their successful participation in important military and political victories, it seems that there is good reason to imagine an Obizzi presence in at least one of the crusades, and in more than one clash between the Guelphs and Ghibellines. I believe, therefore, that we do not have to accuse Betussi of falsifying; I will take a solution suggested by Diotima, a mean between Truth and Falsehood that I propose as Poetic License.5 It is in this spirit that I will follow Betussi’s stories of the Obizzi, exercising an editor’s prerogative to comment where it seems appropriate.

The origin of the idea of depicting and thus celebrating heroes is lost in unrecorded time and is evidently a deeply felt human need. In the ancient world, leaders in physical, intellectual, and artistic fields were memorialized in stone and other media. Interest in representing such leaders was stirred in the Renaissance with its newly aroused attention to the ruins of ancient monuments in Rome such as the *Ara Pacis Augustae* frieze (9 BCE), which celebrated the successful pacification of Spain and Gaul four years earlier by the Emperor Augustus, and the *Column of Trajan* (113 CE), on which there are carved in relief thousands of figures and episodes depicting the emperor’s victories over the Dacians, bringing the empire to its greatest expansion to date.6 The walls of feudal castles were decorated with paintings or hung with ornamental fabrics, but a new wealthy class emerged in the burgeoning mercantile economy of Europe as feudalism disappeared and grand, new-style palaces and villas arose. The new buildings created a more extensive opportunity for secular wall decoration. The newly rich, such as the Medici, and even the older rich—the Farnese, for example—wanted to see themselves and to have others see them represented in paintings that gave visual and permanent evidence of the eminent status they had attained. The medium of choice for these decorations was fresco, which, as Vasari wrote, was “the most manly, most certain, most resolute and durable of all methods, and as time goes on it continually acquires infinitely more beauty and harmony than do other methods.”7

Also among the newly rich and powerful were the military commanders, *condottieri*, who fought for Italian cities and states under a military contract (*condotto*). Luigi Gonzaga (1267–1360) became captain general of Mantua in 1328 and founded the family’s great fortune; in the fifteenth century one of his *condottieri* descendants became marquis of Mantua, and in the sixteenth century Francesco II Gonzaga became duke of Mantua. However, although the Gonzagas won their power as military leaders, Ludovico II (1412–78) favored scenes of their familiar life, their customary pursuits such as banqueting, hunting, tourneys, and ceremonial welcoming of important visitors, all
offering the opportunity for portraits of themselves and their important guests. The famous Camera degli Sposi (Room of the Married Couple), painted from 1465 to 1474 by Andrea Mantegna (1431–1506), depicts the courtly life of the Gonzaga family, with such scenes and portraits of family members that are meant to convey the ease and peace of life in the palace (illus. 13). In this room Mantegna created the first completely illusionistic decoration of a room, which emphasizes the immediacy of the moment. Its influence in Italian art over the following two centuries cannot be overstated.8

While the early frescoes in the palace at Mantua celebrate the everyday court life of an illustrious family,9 the decorations carried out mainly by Giorgio Vasari (1511–74) in the Palazzo Vecchio, mentioned by Betussi in his guided tour as one of the “other” historical series, celebrate the achievements of the Medici family that made Renaissance Florence a political and military power as well as the greatest repository of Western culture since Periclean Athens. This decorating took place over many years, eventually making the Palazzo Vecchio the most heavily frescoed building in Italy. The importance of family is evident in the idea of dedicating a series of rooms in this palace to each of six members of the family, covering a period of about one hundred years. The six are the founder of the Medici fortune, Cosimo il Vecchio (1389–1464); Lorenzo il Magnifico (1449–92); Giovanni de’ Medici (1474–1513), who became Pope Leo X (1513–21); Giuliano de’ Medici (1475–1534), who became Pope Clemente VII (1523–34); Giovanni delle Bande Nere (1498–1526); and Cosimo I (1519–74), the living ruler of Florence and patron of this enterprise. The theme of Medici family magnificence is stated in six salons that were painted ca. 1556–57, where it is evident that Cosimo intended to make his claim on posterity’s wonderment, gratitude, and applause for himself and his family rest not on painted reminders of military glory but on their unrivaled aesthetic and intellectual achievements. The only military scenes are those in the salon of Giovanni delle Bande Nere.

Cosimo il Vecchio is represented as benefactor for the construction of the Church of San Lorenzo; Lorenzo il Magnifico is depicted surrounded by the philosophers and writers of the academy he established, modeled in the spirit of the academy founded by Plato; Pope Leo X is remembered in his ecclesiastical role, for having created many cardinals; and Pope Clemente VII, also in his ecclesiastical role, is shown officiating at the crowning event of his life: what might have been meant as a monumental put-on and even a secret joke between the artist and patron is Vasari’s representation of the pope crowning Charles V (illus. 14). Vasari’s Mannerist composition with its twists and turns, its dramatic use of steps, its placing of principal figures at some distance from the picture plane are all characteristics of this artist. However, in this coronation scene viewers must travel visually up over the group of dignitaries in the foreground, up through a bewildering crush of horses and riders, continue up the steps where they are blocked a little past midway by the unbroken edge of step that extends through the width of the picture plane, blocked further by a ring of figures, and travel on in front of the heavy-robed cardinals to find at last the raison d’être of the painting. Or is this crowning of the emperor the true raison d’être of this operatic performance? Is it just a Mannerist trick to place the pope and emperor in the distant
background on a visual line that is directly above the hog in the foreground being prepared for roasting? I believe there is more than Mannerism at work here, considering, among other peculiarities, the rhyme of the bowed head of the about-to-be-crowned Charles with the decapitated hog, whose position suggests that its head had also been bowed as the executioner struck.

The second of the three fresco series mentioned by Betussi as forerunners of his own work at Cataio is the celebratory series commissioned by Troilo Rossi for his palace of San Secondo at Parma. The Rossi family was invested with San Secondo as a feudality by papal bull in 1365, and in 1502 Troilo I was elevated to the title of marquis. In the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries they intermarried with the leading families of Italy, including the Sforza and Gonzaga, and they, too, became known as patrons of art and literature. Troilo II became head of the family in 1547, and it was he who commissioned the frescoes that were meant to rival the decorations at Caprarola and the Palazzo Vecchio. A team of painters under the direction of Jacopo Zanguidi, called Bertoia, decorated fifteen rooms with scenes of triumphant Rossi family heroes dating from 1199 to 1542. However, the paintings are small-scale and embedded in an ornamental scheme composed of a variety of curvilinear, graceful decorative motifs, so that the unified, coherent effect is achieved at the cost of reducing the impact of the historical narratives.

The Medici family had started its rise to wealth and power as bankers and merchants, and the frescoes that vaunt its family history go back only about one hundred years. The Farnese, on the other hand, were aristocrats with roots in medieval Italy. They maintained close ties with the church, and in 1534 Alessandro Farnese (1468–1549) became Pope Paul III. Sympathetic to the need for reform within the church, he attempted to find grounds of reconciliation with the Protestants, and he is depicted as a peacemaker in the military/political area in the Palazzo Farnese, with recognizable portraits of Charles V and Francis I at the Peace of Nice (1538). Deeply interested in the arts, he was a patron of both writers and painters. Another Alessandro Farnese (1520–89) became a cardinal, and it was he who commissioned for the palace at Caprarola—the third of the decorations mentioned by Betussi—the most extensive representations of the Farnese family history. Twenty-three frescoes painted by Taddeo Zuccari (1529–66) emphasize the family’s close and constant loyalty to the church as seen in the fresco Paul III Blesses Charles V on His Return from Tunisia (illus. 12).

The general influence on Betussi of these and other fresco series was to spur his competitive ambition to go beyond anything others had accomplished in programming such a series, although some compositions, such as those where an award is being bestowed, show specific influence. However, as he took stock of himself as an intellectual and a poet with a deep interest in history, the underlying influence that created the concept of his program was inevitably the authority of the ancient writers who had linked poetry and painting as governed by the same aesthetic demands. Plutarch (ca. 46–120 CE) attributed to Simonides (ca. 556–468 BCE) the aphorism that painting is mute poetry and poetry a speaking picture, and Horace had made the simile ut pictura poesis, “as is painting so is poetry”; Cicero and other rhetoricians characterized both arts as tripartite, composed of inventio (invention;
interpretation of a subject), *dispositio* (composition; orderly arrangement of parts), and *elocutio* (execution; the manner or style). In his *Ragionamento*, Betussi tells his visitors that they should be aware that in devising the program of the frescoes he has been “guided by Plato, Aristotle, and M. Tullio [Cicero] where they speak of painting which must be silent poetry, and thus they should view the frescoes as silent history.”

Contemporary with Betussi, Lodovico Dolce had translated Horace and written his *Dialogue on Painting* (1557) in which he held that all writers are painters—indeed, all compositions of learned men are paintings. Thus we might read Betussi’s program as an illustrated volume of history, with each room a chapter recounting events that exemplify the underlying themes of courage and loyalty, and the whole history unified between the covers provided by Betussi’s ideology. The program he conceived envisioned human actions in the real world governed by the individualistic ideals of the chivalrous knight, but nevertheless subject to the social virtues of an aristocratic elite. The Obizzi saga as told by Betussi was a history of triumphant events in the multigenerational life of a single family presented in the context of the large ideas that shaped human history.

NOTES


1. Fictive tourists: see chapter 1, note 2.
2. R: XIII right. Julian Kliemann’s authoritative as well as beautiful book *Gesta Dipinte: La grande decorazione nelle dimore italiane dal quattrocento al seicento*, is indispensable reading for anyone interested in fresco painting. It includes discussion and illustrations of the decorations to which Betussi refers and calls attention to Vasari’s *Ragionamento di Giorgio Vasari pittore aretino sopra le invenzioni delle storie dipinte nelle stanze nuove del Palazzo Ducale*, which was begun around 1558 but not published until 1588. See also Kliemann and Rohlmann, *Italian Frescoes: High Renaissance and Mannerism*.
3. Giuseppe Betussi, R: XVI right. In translation, the full title of Pigna’s book is *The Prince, in which is described what a prince must be under whose government a happy populace can live a peaceful and blessed life*. Pigna exalts the Este family of Ferrara, and his book should be counted as a model for Betussi’s *Ragionamento*. There is no mention of an Obizzi in the sources Betussi gives, but the Este name occurs, and Obizzo was the name given to a number of Este descendants.
6. Parts of the *Ara Pacis* were found in the sixteenth century. The monument was not reintegrated until 1938.
7. Kliemann shows the development of wall decorations in the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in three stages: in the fifteenth century the theme of the decorations rested on what Kliemann calls “chronicles,” scenes of everyday family life in the great courts of the nobility, with some emphasis on portraits; the second stage, in the first half of the sixteenth century, moves toward dynastic history with themes that emphasize humanist values; living members of the family are featured together with recent ancestors. The third stage, “genealogical-dynastic,” (*Gesta Dipinte*, 101) coincides with the second half of the sixteenth century and sees the spread of the dynastic history that celebrates a family over centuries and introduces the theme of loyalty.
8. Vasari, *Vasari on Technique*, 222.
10. For a survey of the ideas that governed painting in the Renaissance, Rensselaer W. Lee’s *Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting* has never been superseded.
11. R: XIII right and left.
12. Aldo Scaglione, in *Knights at Court*, gives a penetrating analysis of the feudal, knightly mindset and its evolution into the social views of the Renaissance aristocracy.

**Illus. 14**

Giorgio Vasari.
Fresco. Palazzo Vecchio, Florence Room of Clement VII.
Art Resource.
CHAPTER THREE: ZELOTTI’S FRESCOES AT THE CASTLE OF CATAIO

ROOM ONE: THE GENEALOGY ROOM

At the entrance to the Grand Salon (illus. 17), Betussi establishes the context immediately, bringing to visitors’ attention three oil paintings on the ceiling that he identified as Democracy, Aristocracy, and Monarchy, “the three kinds of government.” In each painting a group of figures in meaningful poses—standing, sitting, kneeling, reclining, turning this way and that—surround a principal figure at the center, personifications, respectively, of Democracy, Aristocracy, and Monarchy. Small oval paintings on either side represent their attributes. Democracy (illus. 15) is personified by the enthroned figure of Roma, whose face is that of Leonora Martinengo, the wife of Pio Enea. She holds a lance upright in her left hand and a winged figure of Victory on her extended right hand. Rome flourished as a democracy ruled by the Senate and the people of Rome, Betussi explains, until the two ugly figures flanking Roma, Avarice and a Harpy whose name is Discord, contaminated and finally destroyed her with greed and a monstrous hunger for gold. In the ovals accompanying Democracy are figures that made Rome great and maintained her greatness for a long time. One represents Bellona, goddess of war, her left hand resting on her shield, the other holding a flaming torch; the other, Eloquence, described by Betussi as a characteristic of Romans, is depicted as aging; she holds a crown in her right hand and a figurine of Victory in her left. She wears a black dress, denoting high seriousness, over which she wears a long apron of flowery green fabric as a symbol of the fertile effect of eloquence joined with the art of oratory. As with Eloquence, every figure, every detail of costume, accessories, color, pose, and gesture depicted in the Grand Salon and throughout all the decorations of the six rooms was given an iconographic significance, thought out by Betussi with some ideas probably contributed by Zelotti.

Continuing his explanation of the paintings on the ceiling of the Grand Salon, Betussi points to Aristocracy (illus. 16) identified as the Venetian Republic and represented by the doge, who at the time when the Cataio frescoes were underway was Alvigi Mocenigo, under whose government Venice and her allies, Spain and the papacy, won the great sea battle at Lepanto (see chapter one, note 4). The doge is portrayed at his coronation, kneeling as he is crowned by female personifications of Prudence and Opportunity. In the foreground below him, to right and left are senators and members of the ruling council, friends of Pio Enea, all of whom had been painted from (Text continues on page 48)
Monarchy (illus. 18) is personified by an enthroned male figure wearing a crown of laurel and olive leaves bestowed by two figures symbolizing the virtues of Happiness and Good Fortune. These figures are female, Betussi explains, because almost all the virtues that accompany high rank and honor are feminine. To the left, but on a lower level, stand male figures representing crowned emperors and kings under two banners: one, closest to Monarchy, bearing the image of Christ, the other a red cross. On Monarchy’s right, opposite the crowned rulers—but standing at a higher level and closer to Monarchy—stands Pio Enea, while Betussi himself is portrayed close by but standing appropriately some distance away at the margin of the picture plane (illus. 18, inset). At the foot of the throne, defeated Turkish and Moorish infidels sit or lie, their military arms scattered beside them. In the accompanying ovals, Clemency is portrayed holding a broken yoke between her hands, symbolizing gentleness and humane regard, while Courage is
FAMAE
EXTENDERE
FACTIS HOC
VIRTUIS OPVS

DEO
QVAS CERNIS HOSPES IN HIST AEDIBVS
GENTILITIAS QVID OECLAVM DEPINCTA IMAGIN
EORQ PRAECLAR
CLARA FACINORA ET
STEMMATA BREVI ET
LOGIO AC LONGA SERIE VIROR
ILLUSTRA
DECORATA PIVS AN
MAIORVM SORUM
GLORIE НОN IMMEMOR ET POSTERIT
CONSULS IN HVNC
ORDINEM REDIGI
CRVAVIT
ANNO M D L X X
AVTH ET INDAGAT
IOS BET VS S BASS

MIHI FACTI
FAMA SAT EST
personified as a figure of Mars clad in an ancient Roman cuirass, wearing a
pumed helmet and holding aloft a figure of Victory.

Overdoors and Windows

With civilization in its three forms shown governing the human world from
above, Betussi’s program established the Obizzi family in the context of
world history and sublime aspiration. On the next level, over the four doors,
he placed personifications of human ideals, understood to be Obizzi ideals:
Victory is crowned with laurel, while at her feet are helmets and military
armor; a shining halo of light radiates from her head. Honor, “not soft and
delicate but robust,” is dressed in military habit and holds a lance; at his feet
are “vessels of gold and jewels so desired by commoners but scorned by
Honor, whose crown is but oak leaves,” Betussi remarks to the tourists.1

Over the third door is the seated winged figure of Fame (illus. 19), who holds
a trumpet with her right hand around which a scroll of ribbon bears the
words *Famam extendere factis hoc virtutis opus* (“The task of courage: to
prolong one’s fame by acts”). She supports a large tablet with her left hand
that informs visitors that the images they are looking at are portrayals of the
Obizzi family and their splendid deeds and lineage, with brief explanations
that Pio Enea built this castle and that he chose Betussi of Bassano as the
author. At her feet are the words, *Mibi facti fama sat est* (“For myself the
glory is enough”).2 Over the fourth door a regal figure points with one hand
to a representation of a city as the other embraces a panther, the ancient em-
blem of Lucca and the “mother” city of the family descended from Obizzi I.

Moving from abstractions to specifics, Betussi’s next objective was to
show how the Obizzi were related to other great families of Italy. Thus, over
the six windows of this Grand Salon are painted the coat of arms of six
families that became interrelated through marriage: the Malaspini, the
Fieschi (through a descendant of Frisco, brother of Obizzi I, who arrived in
Italy with him in 1004), the Malatesta, the San Bonifacio, the di Correggio,
and the del Carretto.

The introduction to the Obizzi saga is completed on the third level, the
*piano nobile* (illus. 17). Over the fireplace of the Grand Salon is the fresco
*The Genealogy Tree*, which grows from Obizzi I straight up through twenty-
one generations to Pio Enea, with branches growing out of the trunk on
both sides (illus. 20). On the ground in front of the tree a plaque carries a
eulogistic inscription in Latin stating the arrival of Obizzo and Frisco with
the army of Henry II in 1007 (that date being incorrect, as we will see). To
the left of the tree, Lucca is again personified, as on the overdoor decora-
tion, by a female figure accompanied by a panther and holding a caduceus,
with the city buildings visible in the distance; to the right a female figure per-
sonifies Padua, the Obizzi family’s “second mother,” identified by the over-
turned urn at her feet from which water is pouring, symbolizing the Brenta,
the main river of Padua. She leans her elbow on several books and holds up
a crown of laurel, which refers to the city as the “mother of scholarship and
literature,” thereby identifying the Obizzi as an educated family with
intellectual values. Balancing the distant view of Lucca on the left side of
the tree, a distant view of Padua is visible on the right side. The tree thus

*Illus. 20
*The Genealogy Tree*
The Genealogy Room, wall.
The Castle of Cataio.
The Saga Begins

1, I, 1010 (illus. 21).

Henry II on Leaving Italy Commissions Obizzo I His Lieutenant General of Tuscany and Genoa

The Obizzi saga begins with the arrival of the two young noblemen in the service of Henry II (973–1024), making Obizzo I responsible for protecting the coasts of Tuscany and Genoa against the marauding Saracen pirates. Betussi dates this event to 1010 in the cartouche at the top of the fresco. However, modern history does not support this date. Henry II was elected king of Germany in 1002. He entered Lombardy in 1004, where he was crowned king of Lombardy by the bishops, and returned north to continue his war with Boleslav I of Poland. He succeeded in expelling Boleslav from Bohemia that same year. Henry did not return to Italy until 1013, when Pope Benedict VIII (r. 1012–24) called on him for help against the rebellious Lombards. The following year he was crowned emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. In this fresco Betussi portrays the monarch wearing the crown of the Holy Roman Empire, which would put the actual date of the event in 1014 (or after), probably because he wished to give the event the most exalted meaning. Henry’s third and last Italian campaign occurred during 1021–22. Frisco and Obizzo could thus have arrived in Italy in 1004, 1013, or 1021.

The tonality of this scene and throughout the forty paintings is dominated by a golden yellow that carries an obvious iconographical significance. Aesthetically, its effect is of splendor and vivacity. Henry dominates the symmetrical composition at the center, facing forward, seated on his grandly caparisoned horse as he proffers the baton of command to Obizzo, who, wearing the blue and white colors of his family arms, kneels to accept it. His back is to the viewer and his face slightly turned so that little of it can be seen, compared with that of the emperor, whose head is at the exact vertical, horizontal, and diagonal center of the picture plane. Since Obizzo’s head is also on this diagonal, his important relationship with the emperor is triply emphasized: his right hand and the emperor’s right hand both hold the baton of command, while his left hand is holding a lance to which is attached the gold-colored standard of the emperor, emblazoned with the arms of Saxony and Bavaria. The meaning of the painting is thus expressed iconographically through the uninterrupted visual line that moves our eyes from the emperor’s head through his arm, the baton, and Obizzo’s arm, across his back, through his left arm, his hand on the lance up through the hands of the emperor’s squire, who is also holding the lance, to the royal house represented by the standard. The eye moves across the picture plane with the standard flying in the breeze pointing to the red-colored standard, that of the Musterburg family, related to the Sforza-Pallavicini, one of whom was at that time governor general of Venice and a particular friend of Pio
Il Obizzo il de gli Obizzi
provocato a battaglia dal
vallaco generale dello eser
cito del Saladino chette
va assediata. La citta di Tiro
combate et felicemente
vince.
Enea. This standard blows over the men in the right-hand corner, and the composition comes full circle with the blue of their garments leading back to Obizzo’s skirt. The emphasis on centrality and symmetry is characteristic of classical composition; contradicting this classicism, the composition is crowded with figures pushed close together and into the very front edge of the picture plane, almost invading the space of the viewer, who is not looking upward into the painting but is almost on the same ground level. Further to involve the viewer, one of the two principal figures, Obizzo, is turned facing the emperor so that his position relative to the emperor is the same as the viewer’s. The scene is thrust forward by the screen of upheld lances, which brings to mind the screen of lances in Tintoretto’s Crucifixion (ca. 1568) in San Cassiano, Venice.

There is no way to account for the distance between the foreground figures and the background in the Tintoretto or in the Zelotti. These Mannerist devices in this first of the Saga frescoes can be noticed in most of them. Although the actual execution of the paintings was carried out with the help of assistants, I am assuming that the compositions were devised by Zelotti in accordance with Betussi’s iconographic conceptions.

1, II, 1172 (illus. 22).

Obizzo II degli Obizzi Provoked into a Duel by Vallaco, a General in the Army of Saladin Which Was Besieging Tyre, Fought and Won

Zizimo Vallaco (Zizimo from Wallachia, in present-day Romania) was said to be a giant of a man who nevertheless fell at Obizzo’s first fierce blow, as Betussi recounts. He has fallen back, Obizzo’s lance having pierced through his body, but is still on his horse, his hand grasping the top of his lance, which was broken off, the viewer understands, when he thrust his long weapon against Obizzo’s blue-and-white striped shield as the two men raced into each other. On the left, the Tartar Empire, with its shield showing sunrays on a sky-blue field, the Kingdom of India, identified by its shield decorated with three red eagles on a green field, and the Kingdom of Ethiopia, its shield with two clubs topped by confronting animal heads on a gold ground, are represented foremost among the allies and tributaries of Saladin, whose standard appears at the left margin over their heads. The knights on the right are led by Conrad of Monferrato, credited with defending Tyre from the Saracens, holding his shield with the white cross on a red field; his standard waves over the heads of his paladins. At the center of the composition is Obizzo’s oval shield, inscribed Conculabis Leonem et Draconem, from Psalm 91:13: “The young lions and the dragon shalt thou trample under feet.” In the middle ground is the camp of the besieging armies, with its tents; in the background is the fortified city of Tyre. This is one of the surprisingly few scenes that allude to the Crusades. Tyre, in Lebanon, was an early Christian city until the rise of Islam, when it came under Muslim rule; it was conquered by the Crusaders in 1124, and they held it until 1291. Strongly fortified as the city is depicted, the architecture does not close the background, as in a classical composition, but is pushed to the side, allowing the eye to gaze into infinite distance, in accordance with Mannerist preference."

Illus. 22
1, II, 1172.
Obizzo II Duels with Vallaco.
The Genealogy Room.
The Castle of Cataio.

55 • Chapter Three • Zelotti’s Epic Frescoes at Cataio
Nella giornata di Christiani contra Infeli nel Mar di Licia Nino Capitano delle Galee LVCH Chesi combattendo conquista dve Navi de nemici et le condusce ad aciei.
The date is given in the scroll on the right. That such a battle took place is probable, and the account of Nino degli Obizzi as hero and commander of the ships that Lucca contributed to the Crusades is surely possible, but Betussi’s date for this event is problematic: he refers to Clement III as pope, but Clement did not attain that office until 1187; the pope in 1179 was Alexander III. The most interesting feature of Betussi’s description of this battle is his reference to “fuochi artificiali” (fireworks). This seems to indicate that he knew some treatise on gunpowder, possibly the work of Mariano di Jacopo (called il Taccola, “the Crow”), De machinis, completed in 1449, which is largely devoted to military technology and has illustrations of battleships showing the use of trebuchets, slings that propelled explosive material that would burst into flame on impact. In the fresco, smoke is shown blowing over the ships.
Nicolò de' Obizzi
creato da Papa Gregorio
IX. Capitano delle genti
della Chiesa da esser manda-
te in Terra Santa 
contrain fedeli quelle imbarca
in Ancona.
The Latin inscription on the scroll at the right gives the date 1233. On the way to the East, Nicolò’s ship was attacked and the entire army was “dispersed,” Betussi tells his listeners; Nicolò was killed in the battle and brought back to Italy, where he was buried next to his brother, Obizzo II, in Ascalona. Nicolò, dressed in armor, stands in the foreground of the picture plane with his back turned away, but his face seen in profile. He is identified by the shield with blue and white stripes next to him. In his right hand he holds a baton of command, which he points over the head of the rower toward the ships that will carry him on his mission and, by extension, to the faraway Holy Land, a Mannerist infinite distance. The slanted relationship between the three main figures in the foreground, Nicolò at the center between the rower and a military aid, is distantly echoed by the triangular shape of the mountain near the center of the background, giving some centrality to this highly asymmetrical composition. Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II (1194–1250) led what is called the Sixth Crusade in 1227. He turned back when he became ill, which angered the aged but still vigorous Pope Gregory IX (1143?–1241), who then punished him with excommunication. In 1228 Frederick did lead a crusade, which turned out to be a successful diplomatic expedition. He made a truce with the Muslims and succeeded in securing the partial surrender of Jerusalem and having himself crowned king of Jerusalem. The pope denounced this treaty, and Frederick remained under excommunication until 1230. For the rest of his life he was more or less at war with the papacy, and by the time of his death the power of the house of Hohenstaufen was destroyed and the papacy severely weakened. The expedition on which Nicolò embarked was not actually a crusade.
In the ongoing struggle for power between the Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Empire—the Guelphs and the Ghibellines, respectively—the most powerful opponent of the Church was Frederick II, who, after the death of Gregory IX, continued his strife with Gregory’s successor, Innocent IV. The new pope was Sinibaldo Fieschi, descendant of Frisco, Obizzo’s brother, who had established the Fieschi line in Genoa. His entire pontificate was one long war in which all the spiritual and temporal resources of the Church were mobilized to serve the overriding purpose of defeating Frederick II.16 In the beginning of his reign as Innocent IV, Fieschi and Frederick went through some motions of negotiation, but when Frederick invited him for a conference he feared a trap. At night, in disguise, he fled from the papal seat at Sutri to Civitavecchia, where ships were waiting to take him to Genoa and from thence over the Alps to Lyons, where he could rely on King Louis IX for protection against an imperial attack. In 1245 he convened the Council of Lyons, where Frederick was again excommunicated. He remained in Lyons until the emperor’s death.

Betussi’s account, while not quite correct, is more pictorially interesting. Here Innocent IV is not escaping in disguise at night, but in full daylight is riding out of his citadel in the fortified city of Sutri, the Patrimonium Petri, identified as the Fieschi pope’s residence by the blue-and-white striped shield over the portals from which the pope and his retinue of cardinals have just issued (see detail below).17

As they cross the bridge leading out of the castle, we see, the pope has turned his head as if to address the fully armored knight riding beside him, thus calling attention to him. The knight is identified as an Obizzi by the blue crest on his helmet and the blue-and-white caparison of his horse. In the foreground are the troops of Frederick II, who had been besieging Sutri but were defeated by Luigi Obizzi and his soldiers, thus liberating the pope. Note the Mannerist contrast between the large foreground figures and the small figures of the procession crossing the bridge, without any clues to the distance between them.
Illus. 26
Insignia of the Church.
Room Two, the Room of the Popes, overdoor.
The Castle of Cataio.
ROOM TWO: THE ROOM OF THE POPES

Overdoors

As we enter the second of the great rooms in the Obizzi Saga series, our attention is drawn to the main portal, which is surmounted by a grand insignia of the Church, a gold-painted, open umbrella standing on its vertically placed handle crossed by the two keys of Peter, enclosed in a roundel (illus. 26). To the right of the insignia, a personification of Religion as an old woman wrapped in a blue mantle studded with gold stars reclines against the roundel, supporting with her left hand tablets inscribed with Hebrew lettering, meant to suggest the tablets of Moses with the Ten Commandments; behind the tablet is a volume that, Betussi explains, is the Old Testament. Her right arm leans on a book, which, he explains, is the New Testament. To the left of the insignia is the personification of Faith. She wears a white gown spotted with blood and holds in her right hand a chalice with a cross, while in the other she holds the palm of martyrdom.

Over the other door, Virtue (illus. 27) is depicted as a seated, partially draped young woman. She is crowned with flowers and holds in her right hand a thorny branch that nevertheless blooms, and around her left arm a coil of ribbon carries the Latin words meaning, “Virtue transcends all.” She sits on a low plinth with a Latin inscription that means, “There is no glory without virtue.”
The Saga Paintings

2, VI, 1250 (illus. 28).

At the Urging of the Pope, Luigi Leads an Army to Restore the Guelphs in Florence and Drives Out the Imperial Army of Frederick

Luigi degli Obizzi, who had lifted the siege of Sutri and liberated Pope Innocent IV, is represented in three of the frescoes in the Room of the Popes. In this fresco the papal standard with the emblem of the umbrella and crossed keys on a red ground dominates the center of the painting. Next to it but slightly behind is the Obizzi banner, decorated with the papal crown and key and the blue-and-white striped Obizzi coat of arms. In the foreground, Luigi, identified by his blue and white sash, has pierced the chest armor of a Ghibelline warrior, who has fallen to the ground holding the toppling imperial standard. Luigi is set in the composition on the axis of the papal banner, which continues the slant of his forward-thrusting figure, and by the curve of the succession of helmets behind him and the responding curve of the fallen warrior’s figure; he is further associated with the pope by the color of his red hose, which matches the papal standard. With the center axis weakened by the slant of the red flag, the eye moves on the diagonal from lower left through the figure of Luigi to the top of the red building at the right and along the diagonal from lower right through the fallen warrior, whose hand on the shaft of the yellow banner leads the eye to the upper left-hand corner. Characteristic of Mannerist compositions, the space between the foreground figures and the background architecture cannot be reckoned.
When Luigi degli Obizzi married Caterina Fieschi, niece of Innocent IV, who officiated at the ceremony, the two families, originally sprung from the brothers Frisco and Obizzi, were thus reunited. Betussi apparently considered that this traditional occasion demanded classical decorum, and we see in this marriage scene one of the two, perhaps three, classically designed compositions in the series with strict symmetry around a central axis and a closed background. Classical columns express the significance of the event depicted in this fresco, which is placed over the fireplace, thus denoting its prime importance in the Room of the Popes.

This is the first of nine scenes in the Saga in which an honor or commission is being bestowed. Betussi explains that Luigi is the one receiving the standard of the pope, while Obizzo III holds the standard of the Obizzi. Surprisingly, he goes on to relate that the pope was in Avignon, “where at the time he was residing.” He was confused, apparently, about the period of ...
the “Babylonian Captivity,” which occurred in the fourteenth century (1309–78). The Obizzi/Fieschi blue-and-white striped shield is prominent, high on the wall behind the pope, reminding the viewer that Innocent IV belonged to that family.

The composition is conventionally Mannerist, with motifs often seen in palatial decorations such as the steps that provide the viewer entry into the scene, a compliment once removed that permits the viewer to participate in the important event. Vasari uses this device more dramatically in the Palazzo Vecchio, as does Taddeo Zuccari at Caprarola and Jacopo Zanguidi (known as Bertoia) at San Secondo, the three palaces Betussi mentions to the tourists that did not compare with his own decorations at Cataio.

2, IX, after 1260 (illus. 31).
Anfrione and Thomaso degli Obizzi Drove the Imperial Party from Lucca and Now Receive the Keys to the City

As Betussi describes the situation, the Malaspina family and the Ghibelline faction had “tyrannized” Lucca. The two Obizzis, cousins, went to Florence, where they rallied troops whom they led to Lucca. They defeated the Ghibellines and became masters themselves of the city. Betussi emphasizes his assertion that the citizens of Lucca gave the rule of the city to the Obizzi “voluntarily.” The painting represents the two heroes being given the keys to the city on a silver platter, the standard of Lucca decorated with the panther and the word Libertas, and a large book containing the city’s statutes and regulations. The date given in the Latin inscription at the left is 1260, which raises a question, since Betussi specifically identifies Thomaso as the son of Luigi who married Catherina Fieschi. That marriage, however, took place in 1251, according to fresco VII (illus. 29). Their son Thomaso, then, must have been born quite a few years before the marriage, which I doubt, or this event took place so long after 1260 that the date is meaningless, or this was another Thomaso, not the son of Luigi, or the son of a different Luigi. The next fresco confirms the date of ca. 1260, though we will never know which Thomaso to credit as the hero of Lucca.
As Betussi explains, the Ghibelline forces had been expelled from Lucca in 1261 by Guelph forces commanded by Thomaso degli Obizzi. The Ghibellines appealed to King Manfred for help to retake the city, and under the leadership of one Count Guido Novello, they undertook a siege of Lucca. The city successfully defended itself, and the besiegers were dispersed. When Thomaso died in 1265, the city erected a statue in memory of this defense. The statue was destroyed in 1314 when Lucca came under the rule of Castruccio Castracani, who with his family had been driven into exile by the Guelphs in retaliation for the assassination of Obizzo IV in 1300, depicted in the Ferrara Room (3, XV, illus. 38). The statue as painted by Zelotti is thus an invention based on Betussi’s research.
The scene represents the cardinal kneeling before Pope Urban IV (r. 1261–64), from whom he is receiving a cross and a papal seal, insignia of his authority. Anfrione is squeezed in at the left margin. The historical background, according to Betussi, goes back to the reign of King John of England (r. 1199–1216), who at the time of Pope Innocent III agreed to pay a tribute to the Church of one hundred gold marks per year. This tribute was honored until about 1263, when the struggle of Henry III (r. 1216–72) against the barons over the power to appoint councilors broke out into the so-called Baron’s War. Henry sought support from the pope, who, on his part, wanted the resumption of the tribute, which had been repudiated by the barons. He thus sent his emissaries. According to Betussi, Anfrione died in London and was buried in a tomb that he himself saw when he went to England with Collaltino di Collalto around 1546, “when he was twenty-six years old.”
Bonifacio Orselli cappiano delle genti di tos cana in aiuto di carlo l'ire di napoli contra corradino combein/ sodo mort a taglia cozzo

[Image of a medieval battle scene with knights and horses]
After his coronation as Holy Roman Emperor in 1220, Frederick II took Sicily, then including southern Italy, as the seat of his kingdom. When he died in 1250, his son, Conrad IV, continued the struggle with Pope Innocent IV (r. 1243–54), but Conrad died in 1254. Manfredo became regent for Conrad’s son Conrado (1252–68). The papal forces of Pope Alexander IV (r. 1254–61) invaded Sicily, and Manfredo was temporarily forced out. He reconquered Sicily and southern Italy and had himself crowned in 1258, but the papacy continued the struggle. Finally, in 1266, Pope Clement IV (r. 1265–68) invested Charles of Anjou, brother of King Louis IX of France, as King Charles I. That year Charles defeated Manfredo at Benevento.

Manfredo died in the battle. Conrado attempted to recover his kingdom, but in 1268 he was defeated by Charles at Tagliacozzo and executed at Naples, bringing to an end the power of the Hohenstaufen family. In the fresco, Boniface is identified by the Obizzi arms on the chest of the fallen horse on which he is still mounted, blood pouring from his helmet. The forces fighting for Conrado are identified by the shield surmounted by a crown on the red banner and the red striped garment over the armor of the warrior who has defeated Boniface. The Mannerist features are evident in the crowded bunching of figures in the foreground, and the shocking arrangement of the figures with a fallen knight in armor depicted upside down, head first in the picture plane, and the hind parts of the horse looming at the center foreground.
ROOM THREE: THE FERRARA ROOM

Ceiling and Overdoor

The gallery adjoining the Room of the Popes is called the Ferrara Room to honor the Este family, lords of Ferrara, with whom the Obizzi had close ties, particularly because of their mutual interests in the conflict between Guelphs and Ghibellines. Over the entrance, the Este family arms with its motto “Peace and War” is painted, with Kindness on the right, personified as a young boy spreading flowers while he stands on the lightning of Jupiter, symbol of anger which he has controlled, and Mars on the left, the god of war represented as a young man with a shield on which is figured a scorpion and a helmet topped with his mythological attribute, the ram. On the ceiling, Time, a winged old man, flies through the air holding by her arm naked Truth, a lovely young girl whom he has rescued from the grave; flying nearby, the equally lovely Falsehood tries to beat them with a whip made of vipers (illus. 35). Over the windows are the arms of five families related to the Obizzi: the Rangoni, Boiardi, Pii, Bentivoglio, and San Vitali.

Illus. 35

Time, with Truth and Falsehood.
Room Three, the Ferrara Room, oil on canvas, ceiling.
The Castle of Cataio.
The Saga Paintings

3, XIII, 1265 (illus. 36).
*Lodovico degli Obizzi with the Standard of Pope Clement IV*

The subject of the last painting in the previous room (2, XII), the battle of Tagliacozzo, is recalled now in the Ferrara room with this single figure of a warrior holding a standard decorated with the arms of Clement IV, a white field figured with a red eagle holding in its claws a green dragon. Betussi claims that Lodovico was killed when he led the charge against Conradin.

3, XIV, 1285 (illus. 37).
*Guglielmo Malaspina degli Obizzi, Mayor of Padua, Orders the Construction of the Bridge of St. John*

In the left foreground, the bridge work is shown to be in progress with scaffolding under the new arch. On the right a sculptor is hammering the arms of the Obizzi in stone; he has finished the stone with the coat of arms of Padua, which lies directly in the center foreground. Guglielmo, mayor of Padua, stands in the middle ground. He stands in the middle ground, a large, commanding figure, elaborately dressed, his importance further stressed by the large flag of Padua over his head. He is speaking with a richly dressed man whose back is turned from the viewer, whom we take to be the architect. Both men are pointing toward the bridge, the subject of their conversation. Next to Guglielmo, on his right, stands a man holding the bridge plans under his right arm, assistant to the architect. At the far left of the composition a man is working with a lathe, while a man behind him holds a tub of material, probably plaster. Watching the activity are the Elders of Padua, who are standing in front of their Council Hall, which is next to City Hall. Near the top of the Elders’ building is a plaque bearing the Obizzi family arms.
With this fresco the Saga enters into the fourteenth century violently, depicting a conspiracy in Lucca that killed a number of people, including Obizzo IV degli Obizzi. The victim lies on the ground between two assailants who hold him down, the one on the left thrusting a sword through his neck. Betussi points out that he is dressed as a *cavaliere* (knight) in the old style of Tuscany with a hood on his head, watchful as he was of opportunities to suggest the longtime nobility of the family. In the background, men are fighting on the roof of a house that is being demolished. Lucca at this time was a free commune that had been governed by a succession of Obizzi: Anfrione I, his son Luigi, and his grandson Lodovico II. The Interminelli family had joined with a group of noble families of the Ghibelline faction who formed what Betussi calls a conspiracy to oust the Obizzi; Obizzo IV was killed by hired assassins of this faction. In retaliation, these Ghibelline families were driven into exile, among them the family of Castruccio Castracani, who appears again in the Saga (see 3, XIX, illus. 42).

[3, XV, 1300 (illus. 38).]

*Obizzo IV degli Obizzi, Governor of Lucca, Is Assassinated by the Interminelli Faction*
The brother of Obizzo IV, Nicolò, had gone to France in the service of King Philip IV (Philip the Fair). In 1300 Philip overran Flanders and the following year decisively defeated the Count of Flanders, Guy de Dampierre, who had made an alliance with Philip’s enemy, King Edward I of England. With a remarkable series of actions compacted into a single moment, the painting depicts King Philip, the victor, on a white horse that faces forward, and Nicolò, less important, on a brown horse seen from the back: the Count of Flanders has been forced to surrender and thus has knelt down, still holding forth the platter from which the king has taken the keys of the city and turned away to give them to Nicolò. A screen of lances closes off half of the background, allowing some of the captured city to be seen in the far distance. Note that Nicolò’s secondary importance is more than made up for by his extravagantly spread-out dark blue cape at the center of the scene. The deliberate anticlassicism of the composition is stressed by the overloaded weight on the left, contrasted with the largely empty space on the right. Zelotti’s skill in composition is especially evident here in the way he has separated the figure in white at the edge of the massed group and slightly bent him toward the background, which compresses the space between the actors and the pale-colored city that is in fact what the action is all about.
Illus. 40
3, XVII, 1314.
Gherardo degli Obizzi
Rules Ferrara and
Establishes the
Family There.
The Ferrara Room.
The Castle of Cataio.

Illus. 41
3, XVIII, 1310.
Roberto degli Obizzi,
Commander of a Galley
of Knights of Malta,
Dies in the Sea Battle
against the Infidels.
The Ferrara Room.
The Castle of Cataio.
Azzo d’Este II (996–1097) established the wealth and power of the Este family. One of his sons, Guelph IV, was adopted by his Swabian uncle, became Duke of Bavaria, and established the German line of this family. For two centuries the German and Italian lines fought for control of Ferrara, which was a fief of the papacy. In 1314 Azzo attempted to gain control for his line but was thwarted by Gherardo degli Obizzi, who gained the support of the King of Naples. Gherardo’s intervention resulted in establishing the Obizzi family in Ferrara.

The battle took place in the Gulf of Rhodes, where Mount St. Peter overlooks the sea. Betussi describes the scene as a naval battle between the knights of the Order of St. John and the “infidels,” as he called the “Moors, Turks, and others of that kind” who had laid siege to the island, which the knights had conquered in 1309. The composition of the scene is highly interesting as it places in the foreground a wounded Turk who has fallen into the sea and is struggling to keep his head above water by clinging to an emerged rock, and in the background, the fortress of the knights built on the rock of Mount St. Peter, identified with the banner of the Order, a white cross on a red field, flying from the top; the battle is thus being fought between the two rocks with the outcome suggested by the drowning enemy clinging to a partly submerged rock, while a triumphantly flying flag waves over the rock of the knights’ stronghold. The middle ground is occupied by the battle. The knights had descended from their galley, decorated with the blue and white Obizzi shield surmounted by the insignia of the Order on the side of the poop tent covering the deck, and the banner of the Order flying above it, and fought their way onto the galley of the Turks, identified by the crescents. Roberto, at the center of the scene, has been pierced by several arrows but fights on, still holding his sword and his shield with the Obizzi blue and white stripes.
Lucio degli Obizzi, Representing the Church and King Robert of Naples, Defends Lucca against Castruccio, but, Abandoned, Yields to His Destiny

As seen in my commentary for illustration 32 (page 71), Castruccio Castracani, driven out of Lucca by the Guelphs, returned in 1314, conquered the city, and destroyed the statue of the supposed Thomaso degli Obizzi. That same year imperial (Ghibelline) forces invaded the city with the secret connivance of Castruccio with Uguccione, ruler of Pisa and Pistoia, who sought to take over Lucca himself. Lucio degli Obizzi, Lord of Lucca, was killed in the battle, and the power of the Obizzi family in Lucca came to an end after about fifty-four years (see illus. 42). In the foreground, Lucio, fallen on the staff of his lance, is set off from the battle, which occupies the entire middle ground, similar to the composition of the naval battle (illus. 41). The middle ground is divided with the figures below in a plane forward of those on the roof, the two groups separated by the great flag bearing Castruccio’s motto, “It is as God wills and will be as God wills.” The prominent lances function differently in this composition from those we have previously noticed; here, instead of screening off the background, the vertical lances carry the eye upward along the vertical side of a building to the roof, where a fighter wielding his lance downward is driving the defenders off of it. The lances therefore connect the figures on the ground with those on the roof, thus compacting space between them and thrusting the entire scene forward.
ROOM FOUR:
THE ROOM OF PRUDENCE AND PEACE

Overdoors and Windows

From the Ferrara room, Betussi’s visitors had to retrace their steps back to the Genealogy Room to enter through its west portal the Room of Prudence and Peace. Here Betussi points out first the personifications of Prudence (illus. 43), Peace (illus. 69), and Good Fortune (illus. 70) painted above the doors. The illustrious families of Italy (Betussi’s favorite subject) are celebrated with illustrations, painted above the windows, that feature their family arms. These decorations are meant to imply that the Obizzi family was connected with these eminent families who themselves personify the virtues of prudence and peace and enjoy good fortune. He then turns to the wall paintings.
The Funeral of Luti degli Obizzi, Killed in 1316 during the Siege of Trapani
Led by King Roberto of Naples

Driven from Lucca, the Obizzi knights offered their service to Florence in order to continue their fight against Castruccio and Ugguccione—and the emperor—who held the stronghold of Montecatini. When King Robert put Trapani, a gateway to Montecatini, under siege they went to help him. Luti was killed in the ensuing battle. His coffin is readily recognized by the blue and white shield painted on its side. The funeral procession crosses the foreground with King Robert leading the mourners on foot while two mounted companions follow carrying the standard of Florence and the Obizzi. The upright lances of the besieging army separate the middle ground from the background, which separation is dramatized by the flags, the red flag of the king decorated with his crown and shield, which rhymes with the red of his drapery so that our eye looks diagonally across and back into the composition, closed off by the fortress dominated by the high flying gold flag of Holy Roman Emperor Louis IV.
4, XXI, 1330 (illus. 45).

4, XXI, 1330 (illus. 45).

*Alemanno degli Obizzi Leads the Siege of Montecatini in 1330*.16

In this extraordinary painting, one is reminded of images seen in present-day media of soldiers at war nevertheless enjoying a moment of leisure. In the foreground, two men in a tent are playing a game of dice, using the surface of an upturned drum as a tabletop. One of the players, wearing the now familiar blue and white garments, has thrown the dice while others watch. On a battlefield, life is a gamble. The flags of Florence and the Obizzi stand behind the tent. Meanwhile, a great army has assembled in front of the fortress. A waving red standard decorated with the papal arms pulls our attention to the left margin of the painting, where we discover an armored warrior on a white horse wearing a helmet with a blue and white plume (see detail below). This is Alemanno, who looks upward across the picture plane to the castellated wall, where a very small figure stands with his right arm extended as if in conversation with the warrior below. The white flag above him tells us that he is negotiating a surrender. Behind the white flag and below the gold flag of the emperor we see the defeated defenders of the stronghold that Betussi, in extravagant praise of Alemanno, likens to the supposedly impregnable Alesia held by Vercingetorix, which was taken nevertheless by Julius Caesar in 46 BCE.
The scene records the completion of a substantial real estate deal. Azzo di Correggio ousted his brother Guido as Lord of Parma, which title he took over. He then sold it to Obizzo, marquis of Este, for sixty thousand florins. Alemanno degli Obizzi, governor of the city, “persuaded the people of Parma to accept the Marquis as Lord,” and it is Alemanno on a white horse dressed in gold brocade who is handing over the keys of the city to the buyer, Obizzo d’Este. The new proprietor, perhaps to be assured of his welcome by the citizens, is accompanied by a goodly company of knights over whom wave the standards of the Este family and the city of Parma. The drama of the moment is underplayed, like the surrender of Montecatini; directly over the head of Obizzo, looking almost as if it is part of his headdress, is the firmly curled fist of a knight who holds the shaft of the waving flag of Parma, a red cross on a white field; at the right margin of the picture another knight holds in his also firmly curled fist the shaft of the red flag of the Este family showing a white eagle on a blue ground. The two knights are looking across to each other, as if in communication, suggesting that they are ready to take joint action in the event of some untoward and possibly unfriendly movement of the citizens of whom, however, there are few in evidence.
4, XXIII, 1346 (illus. 47)

Alemanno degli Obizzi Battles against the Gonzaga Forces

Although eleven years have passed, the event depicted in this painting is a consequence of the Este buyout of Parma in 1335 (4, XXII, illus. 46). The Gonzaga, Visconti, and Scaglie families were angered by that takeover and together determined to force the Obizzi and Este families out. Under the leadership of Filippo Gonzaga they formed an alliance, recruited an army, and marched against Parma. Alemanno, still governor of Parma, assembled Obizzi and Este followers and met the opposing army between Modena and Reggio. The battle went to the Este and Obizzi forces, as is clear in their victoriously waving flags. This is one of the least successful compositions in the series; there are no visual clues for the viewer’s eyes to follow, to bring aesthetic order to the compressed mass of figures, horses, and flags. The eyes are drawn to the waving banners and have no place else to go.

**Illus. 47**

4, XXIII, 1346.

Alemanno degli Obizzi

Battles against the Gonzaga Forces.

The Room of Prudence and Peace.

The Castle of Cataio.
Giovanni degli Obizzi, Commander of the Florentine Troops.
The Room of Prudence and Peace.
The Castle of Cataio.

Thomaso degli Obizzi Receiving a Seal from King John of Bohemia.
The Room of Prudence and Peace.
The Castle of Cataio.
Originally the north wall of this room had a portal leading onto the spiral stairway, allowing only five wall spaces for frescoes. However, Betussi considered Giovanni too important to be omitted from the family history, he explained to the tourists, so to keep the chronological order correct, he directed Zelotti to squeeze Giovanni’s image into a narrow corner even though he deserved more than one fresco to do him justice. Giovanni is portrayed in his position as general of Florence, holding the staff of the flag of Florence in his left hand and the baton of command in his right hand, pressed against his right side. His helmet with its identifying blue plume lies at his feet. Framed by classical columns, his image as a commanding figure is strongly reinforced.

In his Ragionamento, Betussi calls this Thomaso not only the greatest hero of the Obizzi family but also “the greatest warrior of his time,” praises him for defending Lucca from the Visconti and others that sought to tyrannize the city, and recounts that Thomaso went to Germany to seek the aid of Charles IV, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, and then his son John, king of Bohemia. In 1360, Betussi continues, the Commune of Lucca was liberated by Thomaso, fighting under King John, and was awarded with a seal as a sign of special privilege and gratitude. Thomaso is shown kneeling before the king, who hands him the sealed document. Betussi’s account is not supported by history. King John of Bohemia reigned from 1310 until his death at the Battle of Crécy in 1346. His son Charles became king of Bohemia at John’s death, and in 1355 became Charles IV of the Holy Roman Empire.
ROOM FIVE: THE ROOM OF SAN MARCO

Overdoors and Windows

Entering the adjacent Room of San Marco, visitors are immediately aware of its special importance. It is equal in size to the Room of the Popes, thus expressing the equal significance of Venice, the city of St. Mark, in the saga of the Obizzi family and particularly in the life of Pio Enea. Over the first portal is figured the shield of the winged Lion of St. Mark supported on the right side by Neptune, god of the sea, on the left by Minerva, goddess of wisdom (illus. 51). Over the next door broods the figure of Envy (illus. 50), not surprisingly the most arresting image in the entire suite of rooms: Evil has often been recognized as more interesting than virtue. Betussi describes her with gusto: “See how she is puckered and wrinkled, how she eats the flesh of vipers and devours worms, how her hair is thin and hoary and messy under that veil that hangs from her shoulder; she is nude from the belly up, with hanging breasts between which there is a serpent that is biting her heart. Her drapery is spotted with blood. . . . She is the daughter of hate and malice. . . . always the enemy of virtue and always the tormentor of men of distinction. . . . She holds her motto, ‘Virtue Aroused Hatred.’”

Over the windows are the arms of illustrious families related to the Obizzi, which include the Gambara, Angevin (House of Anjou), Colleoni, Martinenghi, and Portia families.

(Text continues on page 105)
The Saga Paintings

5, XXVI, 1368 (illus. 52).

The Great and Most Famous English Captain Giovanni Acuto
Defeated in Battle and Taken by Thomaso degli Obizzi,
General of the Church and Florence

The most famous military triumph recorded in the Obizzi Saga was Thomaso’s victory over Sir John Hawkwood (ca. 1320–94), Italianized as Giovanni Acuto, in the Battle of Arezzo.

Hawkwood was considered by allies and foes the most formidable military leader of his time. He is said to have served in France in the army of King Edward III during the Hundred Years War, but finding himself unemployed after the Treaty of Brétigny (1360), which temporarily stopped the hostilities, he gathered a company of free lances who maintained themselves by pillage as they made their way south, terrorizing the countryside. They stopped in Avignon, where they extracted a substantial contribution from Pope Innocent VI, said to have been 100,000 florins. In Italy they entered the service of the marquis of Monferrato, who was at war with the Visconti of Milan and ravaged Lombardy, stopping on the way to raid the towns of Piedmont and hold the count of Savoy and his barons for ransom, collecting 180,000 florins for their release. In 1363 Hawkwood’s company was employed by Pisa, at war with Florence, for 10,000 gold florins per month. For the next two years this unconquerable knight was occupied with hostilities between Pisa and Florence, but in 1365 he joined his forces with a Visconti company and a German company, and they ravaged the country between Genoa and Siena, bursting into towns where they massacred the men, raped the women, and appropriated all portable valuables.

Little of Hawkwood’s life seems to have been spent out of armor, although he managed to marry twice and have a number of sons and daughters, some in marriage, others under circumstances we may call “free lance.” In 1368 he attended the wedding of a Visconti daughter soon after he entered the service of Bernabò, viscount of Pisa. It was in the following year that he had his encounter with Thomaso Obizzi.

Perugia was in conflict with Pope Urban V and sought the aid of Bernabò, who obliged him by placing at his disposal his new employee, Giovanni Acuto, with four thousand lances, as cavalry was counted. However, he was surprised by the Pope’s mercenaries near Arezzo, defeated in the ensuing battle, and taken prisoner. The Cataio fresco depicts the moment when Acuto, his horse having fallen, is now hors de combat and for the first time is forced to surrender. He offers his sword to the mounted knight who defeated him, the knight we recognize as an Obizzi from his blue helmet plume and the blue-and-white striped shield attached to the chest ornament of his horse. However, there is no mention of Thomaso in our source regarding his surrender, which places the event in 1369, not 1368, as Betussi has it, and furthermore records that Acuto was immediately ransomed by the Pisan Republic, contrary to Betussi’s assertion that he was liberated by the pope. The story has its sequel in the next two scenes.

Hawkwood’s final years were spent in the service of Florence, where
his former battles against the city were totally forgiven: the population of the republic mourned his death in 1394 and honored him with a great funeral in the cathedral. Forty years later, Paolo Uccello portrayed him in an equestrian portrait that is ironically famous now not for its subject but for the artist who painted it (illus. 54).43

5, XXVII, 1366 (illus. 53).
*The Battle Between King Edward of England and King David of Scotland, in Which Thomaso degli Obizzi Was a Major Force in Defeating and Taking Prisoner the King of Scotland*44

Betussi writes that Thomaso’s victory at Arezzo (illus. 52) allowed Italy to breathe again and restored the dignity of the Church; that Thomaso expected to be rewarded financially and promoted in the ecclesiastical army; and that, instead, Hawkwood was freed by the pope, who then made him captain of that army. That, Betussi explains, is why the figure of Envy appears in this room (illus. 50). Angered by this intolerable snub, Thomaso went to England, where he fought for Edward III against David II of Scotland, winning the gratitude of the former, who then dubbed him a knight in the Order of the Garter. Whether Thomaso actually went to England is uncertain, but the discrepancy of the date raises questions. The inscription gives the date as 1266 (MCCLXVI), which we can assume was the fault of the carver, since Betussi in his *Ragionamento* prints the date as 1366. However, he gives the date of 1368 for the capture of Acuto (which our source gives as 1369) so that the story of Thomaso’s anger over the Acuto affair and consequent travel to England is totally compromised. If Thomaso went to England after the Battle of Arezzo, this would have to have been between 1369 and 1371. David died in 1371. In those years England was stricken by the plague, and I believe Thomaso would not have traveled to England when the plague was raging. Even so, the rest of Betussi’s account is incorrect. David II invaded England in 1346, was captured, and remained a prisoner until 1357, when he was ransomed on the promise to pay 100,000 marks, which, as it turned out, was never paid in full. There is no historical account of any military engagement between David and Edward in the years when Thomaso would have had to be there between the Battle of Arezzo (1369), after which he was snubbed, and the death of David (1371), and I believe that the sources Betussi followed with great confidence were nevertheless misleading. I regret having to reduce Thomaso’s legendary triumphs, but worse is yet to come.
5, XXVIII, 1370.
Thomaso degli Obizzi Created Knight of St. George with the Order of the Garter. The Room of San Marco. The Castle of Cataio.

5, XXIX, 1373.
Pope Gregory XI Names Thomaso degli Obizzi Captain General of the Papal Troops in Italy. The Room of San Marco. The Castle of Cataio.
Chapter Three

Zelotti’s Epic Frescoes at Cataio

5, XXVIII, 1370 (illus. 55).
*Thomaso degli Obizzi Created Knight of St. George with the Order of the Garter*\(^{45}\)

This fresco occupies the place of honor on the wall over the chimney and is similar in composition to the marriage of Catherina Fieschi and Luigi degli Obizzi (illus. 29). In the center of its wide, shallow space, Thomaso, wearing an Obizzi-blue armless cape, kneels before King Edward III, who places the honorary chain of the Knight of St. George around his shoulders. In attendance are two kings whom Betussi identifies as, on the right, Rupert, king of Norway, and on the left, Wilhelm, king of Denmark, together with the dukes of York, Lancaster, Northumberland, and Somerset. Three rows of arms of previously ordained knights—with the Obizzi arms already represented second from the left in the middle row—provide an effective and imposing decoration spread across the top of the background of this tightly knit composition, while two foreground figures, left and right, gesture toward the center, reinforcing the central action. The image is glamorous, but the event, alas, never took place: the official list of Knights of the Garter does not include Thomaso degli Obizzi.

5, XXIX, 1373 (illus. 56).
*Pope Gregory XI Names Thomaso degli Obizzi Captain General of the Papal Troops in Italy*\(^{46}\)

When Thomaso returned to Italy (if indeed he went), he found widespread discord. The papacy had been moved from Rome to Avignon in 1309 as a consequence of clerical dissension and of conflicts with King Philip of France. The absence of the popes from Italy contributed to several decades of general disorder in the Papal States, provoked by communal and regional rivalries and challenges to the authority of the Church, but order and a semblance of obedience had been restored under the command of a Spanish cardinal, Gil de Albornoz, when he was put in charge of the armies in 1353. When he died in 1367, Italy was again plunged into the chaos that Thomaso found on his return from England. Florence, Milan, and Perugia revolted against papal authority. Thomaso thus determined to go to Avignon to ask Pope Gregory XI to give Italy his “protection” by bringing the rebellious states back into obedience. According to Betussi, he was so successful that Gregory not only promised to protect Italy but also named Thomaso captain of the papal army in Italy. Betussi might not have known that he fulfilled his promise to protect Italy by sending an army to bring the rebels back into devotion to the Church, and that Gregory sent Robert of Geneva as his legate, who put down a rebellion at Cesena with notable cruelty. Robert became Clement VII, the antipope (r. 1378–94), when Gregory returned the papacy to Rome in 1377.

Thomaso, dressed in civilian garb, kneels with his back to the viewer as he takes the papal bull from Pope Gregory, who is seated under a canopy with his papal coat of arms on the wall behind him. A cardinal sits prominently at the right, with other cardinals in the background, making this event official, and an armored warrior holds the standard of the Church to which he points, another indication of the official nature of Thomaso’s visit.
In 1386, Betussi recounts, Giovanni Galeazzo Visconti, Duke of Milan, attacked Verona and succeeded in taking it from Antonio della Scala, the lord of Verona. Although Betussi does not say so, we infer that because of Thomaso’s great reputation, Antonio has taken him on as his general in order to attack Giovanni Galeazzo and win back Verona.

Antonio is magnificently attired with a long golden cape hanging from his shoulders so that the edge is turned back revealing its ermine lining; ermine also trims his red beret. He stands atop two steps that presumably lead to a chair behind him from which he has risen in respect to his honoree: this is one of eleven “reward” scenes in which steps and poses function prominently to establish careful distinctions of social rank, a characteristic of Mannerist taste. Antonio is slightly bent forward toward his newly made general as he proffers the baton of command. Next to him is a woman who just barely touches Antonio’s ermine-trimmed gown, most likely his wife. Thomaso, in half-armor, kneels with both legs bent so that his knees are on the same step as Antonio’s foot. Behind him a page dressed in Obizzi blue and white stoops on the bottom step, holding Thomaso’s helmet. Standing near to Thomaso on his left and holding the Scagliere standard decorated with a ladder (in Italian, scala) on a blue ground is a young woman, probably a daughter, since the fabric of her dress has horizontal gold stripes, ladder-like, on a blue ground. It is strange that Betussi does not mention the two women in his description of the scene; his writing is full of praise for women, and it is not surprising that he would find place for women to appear in the Obizzi Saga in addition to the two marriage scenes. His description has another discrepancy: he writes that Antonio offers the baton of command with one hand and holds the Scagliere standard with the other. It is perfectly evident that the standard is held by the young woman. I have been unable to think of a satisfactory solution to this puzzle.

5, XXX, 1386 (illus. 57).
Antonio della Scala Commissions Thomaso degli Obizzi as His General

5, XXX, 1386.
Antonio della Scala
Commissions
Thomaso degli Obizzi as His General.
The Room of San Marco.
The Castle of Cataio.
The story represented by this fresco is similar to that of the previous scene, with similar adjustments of poses in accordance with rank. Francesco di Carrara belonged to one of the greatest families of Padua and was lord of the city. In a conflict between Venice and Padua, the latter city was captured, and Francesco engaged Giovanni to lead his army against the Venetians to recapture the city, which he did. In a lordly hall, in the presence of a bishop, Francesco, dressed in a gold robe, holds his right hand on the staff of the standard of the Carrara family (carriage wheels on a white ground). He kneels on the step on which the bishop stands. Giovanni, in half-armor, holds the baton of command in his left hand while his right hand is curled around the staff of the standard. His right knee rests just on the edge of the step where the bishop stands while his left foot is planted on the floor. Giovanni’s page stands beside him, showing the Obizzi colors on his clothes and holding Giovanni’s blue-plumed helmet.
5, XXXII, 1394 (illus. 59).

_Thomaso degli Obizzi Appointed Tutor of Nicolò d’Este by His Father Alberto d’Este on His Deathbed_49

Thomaso, the once great warrior, now an elderly man, had finally settled down in Ferrara, ruled by the Este family. The Obizzi had long family ties with them, and Thomaso had become Alberto d’Este’s highly esteemed councilor. Thomaso, dressed in solemn black and wearing the famous chain of the Company of St. George (illus. 55), sits at the bedside of the dying man, who touches the shoulder of his son, the subject of their conversation. The boy, Nicolò, is toylike, the only child portrayed in the series, which reminds us that the training of Italian artists at that time was largely based on conceptualized figures; men and women were drawn according to established proportions depending on such factors as age and rank (an important man could only be tall; nude male figures were muscular; female personifications of a virtue reflected the taste of the times, which admired full-breasted, plump women; spiritual women were slender). How to draw a child in comparison with an adult was apparently not in the curriculum: Mantegna’s children in the _Camera degli Sposi_ (illus. 13) are exceptional.
ROOM SIX: THE ROOM OF FLORENCE

The Ceiling and Overdoors

The sixth room is dedicated to the city of Florence, which Betussi places under the protection of Virtue, on the ceiling (illus. 60). Unlike the overdoor decoration in Room Two, where Virtue is portrayed as a seated, almost nude figure with a crown of flowers (illus. 27), here she is crowned as the Queen of Queens, her torso covered in armor. Her resplendent face radiates golden light as she contemplates herself in her mirror—virtue is its own reward—while she actively tramples on the male figure of Vice, seen from behind but whose hideous face with its menacing teeth can be glimpsed under his outstretched right arm. Merit, on Virtue’s left, upholds two crowns of laurel (poetry and imagination) and one of myrtle (fidelity) that belong to Virtue. Opposite is the avenging figure of Punishment with a sword and chains in her left hand and a flail in her right hand; a pole rises over her head with a ribbon wound around it on which are the words of Virgil, castigato audito dolos subigitque fateri (“The cries of the punished are heard”).

The three overdoors of the Room of Florence include the arms of the Medici, a female personification of Florence with a mantle of flowers, and a personification of the Arno, an old poet with a water urn inscribed “Fortunate and Brilliant.” Over the windows are the arms of prominent families of Florence.
The Saga Paintings

6, XXXIII, 1382 (illus. 61).
Nino degli Obizzi

An unusual hero, this Nino. He is depicted, Betussi writes, as “an old man with a solemn appearance, dressed in the antique clothes of a Tuscan Knight.” Because of jealousy, he had been accused by the people of Lucca, a free republic, of wanting to seize power as lord of the city, and had been exiled. Lucca then lost its liberty to the (uncrowned) Holy Roman Emperor Wenceslas (r. 1378–1400). Despite the treatment he had received, Nino, with the help of Pope Boniface IX (r. 1389–1404), went to Bohemia to see Emperor Wenceslas, who was also King of Bohemia (r. 1378–1419). By paying an enormous “ransom” for his city, he persuaded the emperor to give up Lucca, which was then restored as a free republic. Nino is said to have spent his entire fortune to restore Lucca’s freedom. There is a discrepancy in Betussi’s account, since Boniface did not become pope until 1389. Betussi writes that he asked Boniface to intervene, and then went to Bohemia to bribe Wenceslas to give up Lucca, but in the inscription he puts the date of rejoicing over Lucca’s restored liberty as 1382. It should be noted that the scroll seems to be numbered XXXII; the final number I is higher than the preceding I, which means it is to be read as plus I. This occurs elsewhere in the carved numbers. In his Ragionamento, the date in the inscription is 1382 (MCCLXXXII), and his description matches the fresco.

6, XXXIV, before 1390 (illus. 62).
Lodovico degli Obizzi

Betussi identifies Lodovico as a general in the Florentine army who died ca. 1390. He is depicted in armor, half-sitting against a plinth, with his blue-and-white plumed helmet resting on the floor beside him. Almost as if growing out of the helmet, the staff of a standard rises to the top of the fresco; decorated with a red lily on a white field and the lettering R. P. Fiorenzia (Res Publica Fiorenzia), it represents the banner of the Republic of Florence. Lodovico’s right hand holds a baton of command. Betussi writes that he was depicted in an equestrian statue that was still to be seen in the Church of the Annunziata in Florence at the time of his writing.
This is a strange painting: in a series that celebrates the triumphs, honors, and sacrifices of a family, one does not expect a scene that records an event that seems shameful and in which, moreover, the family suffered abject defeat. The title tells the climax of a long story that seems to explain this anomaly. Giovanni had been exiled from Lucca. Betussi does not tell us why, but we may guess, from what we have seen of the grasping ambitions of some of the great families in the late Middle Ages, that Giovanni might have tried to make himself lord of the free Republic of Lucca. Exiled, he went to Florence, where he became a general in the Florentine army. However, unwilling to tolerate exile, Giovanni marched against Lucca in an attempt to conquer the city. He was defeated, but two years later he tried again, this time with a calamitous result: he was taken prisoner and had to be ransomed at a cost of ten thousand scudi. He retreated to a castle at Moriano, a former possession of the Obizzi family, where he entrenched his army, but the people of Lucca attacked him there. Thus we see Giovanni and his army fleeing, their lances pointing back to the flag of Lucca and the bastion they had to abandon; Giovanni is looking back as the castle is being demolished.
The scene records the end of a war between two branches of the Este family, for many generations lords of Ferrara: on one side there was Azzo d’Este, on the other Nicolò III, marquis of Ferrara. Fighting for Nicolò were the brothers Anfrione and Antonio d’Este. In an earlier, particularly bloody conflict, Azzo had defeated Anfrione and taken him prisoner. In order to liberate his brother and restore his honor, Antonio rebuilt Nicolò’s army and attacked Azzo. This time the battle went against Azzo, whom we see surrounded by Antonio’s army, head down, without a helmet, mounted on a brown horse behind the victorious Antonio, in full armor, on a white horse. Antonio’s head is turned away while he gestures with his right hand to take Azzo away as his prisoner. At the left margin, reaching to the top of the picture plane, is Nicolò’s banner, with his insignia on a red field bearing the words, “Nicol. Esten. March Ferraraie.” Behind it flies the Obizzi banner. The foreground, separated from the background by a screen of upheld lances, as we have seen previously, is thrust so forcefully toward the viewer that one may well have the impulse to step back.
Zelotti has been ingenious in creating this extraordinary pose for Nicolò. He stands in shining armor holding the standard of Nicolò III d’Este. The left side of his figure is a straight line from shoulder to foot, partly covered by the drapery over his left arm, while the right side of his figure creates a zigzag design. His head, centered in the narrow space, tilts to the zigzag side, but he looks downward and across to the blue-plumed helmet on the floor, which calls attention to his identity. His right arm is bent at the elbow in a vertical vee shape, and his right hand holds the baton of command pressed against his right thigh; his right leg is bent downward at the knee, making a horizontal vee shape. He rests his right foot on a plinth. We understand from the contrasting shapes of the two sides of his figure that the man has two separate but unified missions: in serving Nicolò d’Este, Nicolò degli Obizzi is unwavering in upholding the Este banner, while as commander of the army, he is in command of himself, versatile and flexible in his strategy and tactics. In the Ragionamento he is credited with many successful battles against his employer’s enemies; among his triumphs were the capture of a fortress, the putting down of a rebellion, and the defeat of Ottobuono III, who “attempted to tyrannize Parma.”

With peace restored in Ferrara thanks to Nicolò degli Obizzi, Nicolò III d’Este decided to visit the Holy Land, and especially the Holy Sepulcher, with some of the other noblemen who had been his allies, and to arrange a grand knighting for all. The scene represents the marquis wearing his ducal garments of gold brocade and a beret in the act of dubbing Nicolò. Looking on is a man representing the local Arab population. The religious iconography is carried by the broken column with foliage atop it and elsewhere, which identifies the scene as the destroyed temple of the Jews on the ruins of which new growth has sprouted, expressing symbolically the destroyed Mosaic covenant of the Jews, which was replaced by the Christian covenant. Nicolò kneels on a broken-off piece of the column, which provides the base of his own personal Christianity. The place of this fresco over the chimney affirms its deep significance.
The setting of the scene is pontifical, with the canopy above the hanging drapery decorated with the insignia of the papacy in front of which there would normally have been the papal throne. That space is now occupied by clergymen who stand ready to participate in the ceremony that will make Jacopo degli Obizzi the archbishop of Pisa. A deacon holds high a processional cross; a clergyman behind him holds the miter that he is prepared to place on Jacopo’s head. Sigismund, king of Hungary, Germany, and Bohemia and emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, who is to officiate at the ceremony, sits presumably on a chair (hidden by the voluminous drapery of his clothes), atop a stepped-up platform, his head turned toward a clergyman with whom he is speaking. Jacopo, bishop of Adria and candidate for promotion, kneels on the base of the platform that supports the seat of the emperor but is not actually in front of him. That they are not communicating at that moment seems emphatically pointed: Jacopo’s back is to the viewer; his head is turned away from the emperor, but the left side of his face is visible so that it is evident that his eyes are directed toward the processional cross. What seems strange, in fact, is that although the title of the scene leads us to expect to see a ceremony depicted, no ceremony is as yet taking place. The emperor is paying no attention to the man he is there to honor. The honoree himself is simply looking up at the cross; he is still separated from the headdress that will affirm his new dignity.

To understand this peculiar non-ceremony, we must recall that because of the great schism (1378–1417) when there were two popes, one in Rome, the other in Avignon, there was a period when there was no pope in Rome, between the resignation of the Roman Pope Gregory XII (1415) and the election of Martin V (1417), which ended the schism. In 1416 Sigismund forced the Avignon Pope John XXIII to convolve a council on Lake Constance in order to reunify the Church, and it was here that Jacopo received his promotion to archbishop. However, Sigismund, who officiated at this event, did not technically have the authority to do so because he was not officially crowned emperor until 1433; Jacopo’s promotion could not therefore be considered confirmed until Sigismund’s confirmation seventeen years later. In 1416 the situation was ambiguous, and Zelotti, following Betussi’s explanation of the events, thus evaded depicting the actual ceremony, which, one infers in viewing the picture, was to take place later. The clergyman behind the deacon was left holding the miter until seventeen years later.
This marriage of Antonio di Roberto, grandson of the great Thomaso degli Obizzi, into one of the greatest and wealthiest families of Padua established the Obizzi family there. Since it happened that Negra had no brothers, she became the sole heir of this Paduan family’s great wealth. With her marriage to Antonio, this wealth passed into the possession of the Obizzi family. The son of this marriage was Girolamo, who married Laura Martinengo. Their grandson was Pio Enea through their son Gasparo and his wife Beatrice Pia. Pio Enea’s wife, Leonora Martinengo, belonged to a branch of his grandmother’s family.

Unfortunately, Betussi had not calculated the available space as carefully as he had chosen which events to record in fresco. This grand marriage had to be squeezed into a space much smaller than the earlier wedding scene of Luigi and Catherina Fieschi (illus. 29). Nevertheless, the setting is unmistakably palatial. The bride is splendidly dressed in gold brocade and adorned with several jewels, creating a dramatic contrast with the somber attire of her groom. Antonio and Negra kneel before the bishop, who blesses their marriage with outstretched arms as he glances at the open book held by a kneeling clergyman. The bride is attended by three women, bringing to nine the number of women represented in the forty frescoes. Although few in number, it may be noted that they are all portrayed as tall. This does not seem to be accidental: since tall women were exceptional, and since exceptional height in men was admired, and given furthermore that Betussi wrote often in praise of women, this can possibly be interpreted as Betussi’s contribution to Zelotti’s composition as a way of giving women importance in a series dominated by men.

The Obizzi Saga ends with this marriage. Betussi could have continued, he tells the tourists, but he believed he had gone far enough. In the concluding pages of the Ragionamento, he takes the visitors on a brief tour of the castle.

The Saga is indeed a monumental accomplishment for Zelotti and for Betussi, who hoped it would bring him enduring fame. They both deserved it, and perhaps Justice may enjoy the same relationship with Time that Truth is said to have. Tyrants and heroes often tend to overlook the power of the brush and the pen over the sword, but artists have confidence in Time. I believe that Betussi had that confidence when the great work was done and he could imagine tourists in “ages hence,” from all over the world, moving through those rooms with awe and astonishment as they viewed each “lofty scene.” He reckoned without the cracks of history that Time sometimes inflicts on human achievements, but perhaps Time will come around with Truth and win her endorsement. Then it will be up to Justice to bring him Fame.
NOTES

Key: R = Betussi, Ragionamento Sopra Cataio. 1573. The narrative program of the Obizzi Saga.

1. R: XVI left.
2. R: XIX left.
3. R: XXII left.
5. R: XXXI left and right.
6. R: XXXIII left. Both aphorisms come from Virgil’s Aeneid: “the task of courage,” Book 10, lines 468–69, and “for myself the glory,” Book 9, lines 194–95, in Allen Mandelbaum’s translation (in which the lines are 650 and 258, respectively).
7. R: XXXIII left.
8. The first number designates the room; the second, in roman form, is the number Betussi assigned each fresco in the series of forty; the third is the date as given by Betussi. I add corrected dates in the discussion of each painting. I have drawn the titles from the elaborate Latin descriptions of the subjects given as “Inscriptions” in Betussi’s Ragionamento.
9. I credit Betussi with the actual content of all the images, Zelotti with their execution.
10. R: XLVI left and right. Saladin (1138–93) conquered almost all of North Africa and became the most powerful ruler in the Near East. He was the greatest opponent of the Crusaders, and in 1187 he conquered Jerusalem.
11. Tyre was known for its textiles manufacture, and especially for a color it produced called “Tyrian purple,” coveted as a royal color for textiles.
12. R: I left and right.
13. R: I left.
14. LIII left.
15. R: LIII right.
17. Sutri was the papacy’s first possession, given to Pope Gregory II in 728 by the Lombard king, who had invaded the south of Italy. Betussi writes that the pope went from Genoa to Marseille, but otherwise reports correctly.
18. R: LX left and right.
19. R: LXI right, LXII left.
20. R: LXIII left and right.
21. R: LXVI right. Although Betussi gives Giuseppe Civitale, born in Lucca in 1511, as one of his sources in his research, Civitale does not mention the Obizzi in his monumental Historie di Lucca. The book was not published in the sixteenth century but the manuscript was available. See the version edited by Marco F. Leonardi (1983), who writes that this is the first publication of the entire book.
22. LXVII left and right.
23. R: LXIX left.
24. R: LXXI left and right. The number of the page is misprinted.
25. R: LXX right.
26. R: LXXIII left.
27. R: LXXVII left and right.
28. R: LXXVIII left and right.
29. R: LXXX left.
30. R: LXXXI right.
31. R: LXXXIII left.
32. R: LXXXV left.
33. R: LXXXVI right, LXXXVII left.
34. Uguccione was doubtless related to Count Uguccione of Pisa, whose miserable fate is recounted in Dante’s Inferno, Canto XXXIII, lines 1–88. The conspirators fell out and fought each other for the rule of Lucca; Castruccio finally won.
35. R: XCI left and right.
36. R: XCII right and XCI left.
37. R: XCV left.
38. R: XCVI right.
39. R: XCVIII left.
40. R: XCIX left and right.
41. R: CVIII right.
42. I have drawn the following account from *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 9:236–42. The bibliography following the article cites Leader and Marcotti’s *Giovanni Acuto* as the only approximately complete account of the great warrior that has as yet appeared. This source was not available to me.

43. Originally in fresco, the painting was transferred to canvas in the middle of the nineteenth century; it is still in the Cathedral of Florence.

44. R: CX right.
45. R: CXVII right.
46. CX left.
47. R: CXX right, CXXI left.
48. R: CXXIII left.
49. R: CXXIII right.
51. R: CXXXIII left.
52. R: CXXXIII right.
53. R: CXXXIII right.
54. R: CXXXV left.
55. R: CXXXVII left.
56. R: CXXXIX left.
57. R: CXLIII left and right.
58. R: CXLVI left and right.
59. R: CXLVIII left and right.
60. See 2, VII, illus. 30, the bride with one woman; 5, XXX, illus. 37, wife of Antonio della Scala and daughter of Thomaso degli Obizzi; and this one, 6, XXX, illus. 68, the bride with three women.


——. Le imagini del tempio della Signora Giovanna d’Aragona. Florence, 1556.

——. La Leonora, Ragionamento Sopra l’ vera bellezza. Lucca, 1557.

——. Ragionamento di M. Giuseppe Betussi Sopra il Cataio. Padua, 1573.


Facchini, Guido Angelo. La storia di Ferrara illustrata nei fatti e nei luoghi. Ferrara, 1933.


Illus. 69

Peace.

Ex Pacem Opulentia (Virgil, The Aeneid, bk. 1, l. 294).

Room Four, the Room of Prudence and Peace.

The Castle of Cataio.
Ridolfi, Carlo. Le Meraviglie dell’arte. 2 vols. Venice, 1648.


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