

**ALLEGORY AND TOPOGRAPHICAL LANDSCAPE :**

**THE FRESCOES IN THE SALONE SISTINO OF VILLA PERETTI MONTALTO, ROME**

**(1589)**

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The presentation I will give today is the synthesis of part of a book that is currently being published, on the decoration of Villa Peretti Montalto alle Terme in Rome, which is now destroyed. Here, I will only provide a brief summary of what we know about this huge property totally disappeared, and then focus on the only cycle of frescoes that had survived from the residence in question, and try to propose a new reconstruction, an iconographic interpretation and a consideration, albeit premature, on the frescoed views of Sistine Rome which once decorated the Sistine Hall (the so-called Salone Sistino).

*1. Brief history of Villa Peretti Montalto alle Terme*

Villa Montalto Peretti at Termini was built between 1576 and 1588 by Cardinal Felice Peretti, who later became Pope Sixtus V (1585-90)<sup>1</sup>.

The villa spanned the area between the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, the Terme di Diocleziano and Porta San Lorenzo, on the *Altissimus Romae Locus*, that is the

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<sup>1</sup> This text is a summary of a chapter in an ongoing book (TOSINI 2014B). Therefore, for obvious necessity of space, the quotations and bibliography of this contribute have been limited to the essentials. On Villa Peretti, see, in general, QUAST 1991 and CULATTI 2009, with previous complete bibliography.

most prominent spot in Rome, according to a sixteenth century tradition. The residence was surrounded by a large park, laid out in a rigorous system of radial paths and scattered with ancient fountains and sculptures<sup>2</sup>. The property centered around two main buildings, both designed by the papal architect Domenico Fontana: one was the building known as the Casino Felice – formerly built for Cardinal Peretti between 1578 and 1581 – and the other was the Palazzo alle Terme (or di Termini), the splendid façade of the villa looking towards the Terme di Diocleziano (Baths of Diocletian), built between 1586 and 1588.

Cardinal Peretti was extremely fond of this residence, where he had spent the years of the papacy of his predecessor, Pope Gregory XIII, choosing it as his ‘Buen Retiro’: here, in summertime, he led a ‘rustic’ life, in tune with nature and the gardening<sup>3</sup>.

From 1581 on, Felice Peretti committed to have both buildings decorated: during his cardinalate, the Casino Felice was painted with frescoes, as was the Palazzo alle Terme, following his election as Pope, between 1587 and 1589. In both cases, the painting work was coordinated by Cesare Nebbia and Giovanni Guerra, a long-standing artistic duo always appointed by Peretti to supervise similar projects, heading a large and eclectic team of artists<sup>4</sup>. So, in the space of a few years, the walls of both residences were completely decorated and the most prestigious area was with no doubt the great Hall

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<sup>2</sup> On the gardens of the villa see QUAST 1989; BENOCCHI 1995; EADEM 1996. On 21th October 1586 Sixtus V fulfilled the dream of seeing water springing inside his property from the sources of Pantano dei Glifi, near Montecompatri, through the reactivated Alessandrino aqueduct (BENEDETTI 1992, p. 96). For the sculpture collection see BARBERINI 1991.

<sup>3</sup> On the rural meaning of the villa see RIBOUILLAULT 2011, pp. 33-42.

<sup>4</sup> S. Epp, R. Torchetti in *Roma di Sisto V...* 1993, pp. 152-155; M. Bevilacqua, in *ibidem*, pp. 156-161.

(the Salone Sistino) in Palazzo alle Terme, the true emblematic focal point of the entire cycle of frescoes. The paintings in this room were executed at high speed, between March and July 1589, in line with the procedure most commonly adopted by artists active in the Sistine fresco cycles<sup>5</sup>.

The villa, and its various buildings, experienced an extremely tormented existence: upon the death of Pope Sixtus V's great-nephew, Cardinal Alessandro Peretti Montalto, in 1623, it fell into the hands of various owners, finally becoming the property of the Massimo family in 1789<sup>6</sup>.

When the Massimo's purchased the property, it was in extremely poor condition, starting from the wonderful gardens that had been devastated by the carelessness of the villa's previous owners<sup>7</sup>. The passion of the Massimo family for this residence left a notable, indelible mark in the famous description by Camillo Vittorio Massimo, *Notizie storiche della villa Massimo alle Terme di Diocleziano* (published in Rome, in 1836), which is still the main printed source of information available today, to reconstruct the history of the villa and the details of its appearance.

However, the unlucky events suffered by the Villa Peretti were not yet over: between 1860 and 1870 the complex was dispossessed by the Municipal authority to

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<sup>5</sup> The date infers from the roles of Sixtus V's nephews, mentioned in the inscriptions below the coats of arms, and from the "misura e stima" provided at the conclusion of the works. For the chronology see QUAST 1991, p. 135; BEVILACQUA 1992, pp. 721-722.

<sup>6</sup> Alessandro Peretti Montalto was the son of Fabio Damasceni and Maria Felice (daughter of Camilla Peretti): on his activity of patron and collector see lately GRANATA 2003; EADEM 2012 (with prev. Bibl.). The Villa, before passing to the Massimo family, was the property of Savelli (1655), Negroni (1696), and Staderini (1784).

make space for the first Rome railway station, Termini, and in 1873, the last heir of the villa, the Jesuit Massimiliano Massimo, turned Palazzo alle Terme into a school<sup>8</sup>.

The fate of the villa was definitively set in stone by the works for Roma Capitale: in 1886 the Casino Felice was razed to the ground and, two years later, the Palazzo alle Terme met the same fate<sup>9</sup>. In the meantime, Massimiliano Massimo had appointed the architect Camillo Pistrucci to build a new building for the school, between 1883 and 1886, which today houses the Museo Nazionale Romano<sup>10</sup>.

So, the frescoes in Casino Felice had been completely lost, and when Palazzo alle Terme was demolished, in 1888, only the frescoes coming from the Salone Sistino were saved<sup>11</sup>. Thirty-six pictorial fragments—fourteen landscapes (views of Sistine Rome), twenty female allegories of the Virtues and two Montalto Peretti coats of arms—were therefore detached, remounted on canvas and hung in the new scholastic building. The paintings all remained in this ancient location since 1889 until 1960, when the school was moved to the EUR, a district in South of Rome: but during the move, the Jesuits decided that only the fourteen landscapes would be kept and that the twenty frescoes

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<sup>7</sup> L. VON PASTOR 1955, X, p. 425.

<sup>8</sup> An accurate reconstruction of the expropriation can be found in ANGELERI-MARGOTTI BIANCHI, 1983. On Massimiliano Massimo, see *Alla memoria...* 1911.

<sup>9</sup> On the demolition of the Villa see CAIOLA 1996-97, pp. 191-210; BENOCCHI 1995, pp. 261-281; EADEM 1996, pp. 117-131; CULATTI 2009; QUINTAVALLE 2013, pp. 515-530, part. p. 522. In 1887, the school was moved to the new location, presently the Museo Nazionale Romano, fronting Piazza dei Cinquecento.

<sup>10</sup> The Rome town plan of 1883, in effect, scheduled the extension of Via del Viminale, by expropriating the buildings in that area. See *L'Istituto Massimo ...* 1930, p. 72.

<sup>11</sup> On the detachment of the frescoes, see PICCIRILLO 1963; QUINTAVALLE 2013, p. 523.

with the female allegories and the two coats of arms would be sold: the paintings were therefore divided, going their separate ways.

Thirty years on, thirteen of these female figures were identified in the Roman building Ricci Paracciani, in via del Monserrato, where they had been remounted as a frieze beneath the ceiling; two more were also traced to the Roman collection of the famous American photographer Milton Gendel<sup>12</sup>. Recently, I was able to identify two more Virtues, which had been considered lost until now, in a Roman private collection. This then means there are only three female allegories missing to complete the whole series<sup>13</sup>.

*2. The pictorial frieze of the Salone Sistino in Palazzo alle Terme and its definitive reconstruction*

But what did the painted frieze look like before it was detached?

Based on evidence obtained from sources, it was a pictorial decoration of large dimensions, extending along the walls of a room of about 150 square meters, with a ceiling over 7 meters in height<sup>14</sup>. The frieze, around 2.5 meters high, was composed – as already mentioned – of twenty allegorical figures of Virtue, with their names written on labels, alternated with fourteen landscapes, which were in turn accompanied by Latin verses.

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<sup>12</sup> BEVILACQUA 1992.

<sup>13</sup> TOSINI 2012.

<sup>14</sup> The main source for the reconstruction is the description, already mentioned, of the Villa by Camillo Vittorio Massimo (MASSIMO 1836).

The landscape paintings portray views of Rome under Sixtus V: however, these are not generic images but true Sistine *tòpoi*, that is, extremely precise topographical illustrations of the places in the city that had been transformed on the Pope's initiative. As is known, Pope Peretti changed the *Urbe* significantly, modifying the layout and the architecture of the city: the best known of these interventions obviously are the erection of the ancient obelisks in some of the main city squares and the construction of a new road system which has its hub in the *rione* Esquilino<sup>15</sup>. Moreover, it is also well-known that the Pope dedicated a great deal of his energy to the 'welfare', ensuring the wellness of the Roman people, and his efforts included reclaiming the Pontine marshes, building the harbor and aqueduct in Civitavecchia and setting up the Congregation *Pro Ubertate annonae*, which regulated the supply of wheat to the city.

In 1992, based on the surviving fragments and the nineteenth century description by Vittorio Massimo, Mario Bevilacqua offered the first reconstruction of the frieze: the main problem with this first attempt was that when the frescoes had been detached, the titles of almost all of them had disappeared; for this reason, many of the titles attributed to the Virtues by Bevilacqua on the basis of Massimo's description were later revealed to be wrong<sup>16</sup>.

In the publication in which I presented the last two fragments rediscovered, I proposed a new reconstruction of the frieze, based on an unpublished nineteenth

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<sup>15</sup> On the pontificate of Sixtus V's, under a historic profile, refer to the classic VON PASTOR 1955. For the artistic enterprises of the pontificate, see *Roma di Sisto V...* 1993.

<sup>16</sup> BEVILACQUA 1992.

century drawing, dated to the period when the frescoes were detached, and bearing the transcription of almost all of the titles of the Virtues<sup>17</sup>.

Subsequently, the additional lucky discovery of an unpublished collection of photographs from the late nineteenth century, taken just before the villa was destroyed, has allowed me to take a crucial step forward: indeed, this collection of images is an extraordinary, unquestionable visual evidence of how the frieze was originally arranged<sup>18</sup>.

Therefore, the combination of these last new iconographic evidences finally allows us to clearly identify all the female allegories, also accompanied by their original titles in other unpublished photos from the twentieth century<sup>19</sup>.

The collection of images from the nineteenth century has faded over the years, but it remains a seminal testimony, because it recomposes the frescoes together with their original frame, in a vision that finally has the correct proportions. The most surprising effect is the convincing three-dimensional appearance of the painted frieze, which appears to be more carefully laid out than other Sistine cycles and is therefore more visually effective. This “architectural” quality should also make us consider the possibility that Domenico Fontana participated in designing the layout of the decoration<sup>20</sup>.

The allegorical figures lean out of the protruding bases of the frame into real space, invading the field of the landscape paintings, which are therefore designed to

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<sup>17</sup> TOSINI 2012.

<sup>18</sup> TOSINI 2014B (forthcoming).

<sup>19</sup> On the iconographic meaning of these Virtues, see my forthcoming contribute (TOSINI 2014B, in press).

offer a dual perception: on one hand, as true “windows” opening up over the outside area, and on the other hand as “quadri riportati” (like paintings hanging on the walls).

Furthermore, this last reconstruction now offers us the opportunity of identifying the correct sequence of the Virtues and the landscapes, and of re-establishing the right relationship between the two systems of images.

Indeed, it would appear evident that the views of Sistine Rome should not only be interpreted for their intrinsic value as a topographical document of the city, but also considered in relation to the allegorical figures that flank them.

I provide you the complete sequence of the Virtues and the views of Sistine Rome in the Appendix I<sup>21</sup>.

### *3. Virtues and papal works in the Salone Sistino : A possible iconographic interpretation*

At this point, based on the new reconstruction of the frieze, I would like to comment briefly on its overall iconographic significance. In fact, even if the connections between the allegories and the “portraits” of the great Sistine works are not immediately clear, it would seem obvious that they were paired off for a precise symbolic reason<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> On Domenico Fontana, architect, see *Studi sui Fontana...* 2008; *Studi su Domenico Fontana...* 2011.

<sup>21</sup> On the iconographic meaning of these Virtues see my forthcoming contribute (TOSINI 2014B, in press).

<sup>22</sup> The same connection subsists in the Salone of the Sistine Library between the Virtues and the views of Rome: cf. FRASCARELLI 2012, pp. 371-374 (with previous bibliography). The Vatican cycle of the Sistine Rome views, was already published by STEVENSON 1887; for a more recent examination see SILVAN-MORELLO 1997.



For example, the *Iustitia* is positioned beside Trajan's column, a monument dedicated to the emperor who in medieval tradition was associated with a famous legend that exalted none other than the virtue of Justice<sup>23</sup>.

On the same principle, the *Modestia* accompanies the fountain of Moses, the prophet who was proverbially endowed with this virtue, and to whom Sixtus V – as a Franciscan – loved to be compared, as *alter Moyses*<sup>24</sup>. There is also the *Iustificatio*, on the opposite side, seen as the absolution of sins in the form of divine justice, showing the tablets bearing the Law, like Moses. *Iustificatio* is a concept that is often associated with Moses in Biblical sources and in the patristic exegesis<sup>25</sup>.

The *Auctoritas* is obviously placed alongside the Vatican Basilica, the supreme seat of the spiritual and temporal powers of the Church, and the *Intrepiditas* is positioned mid-way between the reclamation of the Pontine marshes and the erection of the Vatican obelisk, both challenges perceived as extremely daring and decidedly impossible at that time.

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<sup>23</sup> On the rehabilitation of Trajanus *optimus princeps* in Modern age, through the legend of his “justice” and his salvation by the intercession of Gregory the Great, see WHATLEY 1984; ZECCHINI 1993, pp. 127- 148 (with prev. bibliography). Trajanus embodies, in the bargain, a perfect *alter ego* of Sixtus V, having devoted many efforts to the arrangement of the Civitavecchia, Terracina and Ancona harbors, places interested, as we have seen, by the Sistine enterprises.

<sup>24</sup> For Sixtus V “Alter Moyses” (in turn, *Typus Christi* in the biblical exegesis), see BLANCUS 1587, strophe XXX; MANDEL 1988, p. 29-52, part. p. 34-35; MARDER 1992, footnote 3, pp. 521-543; MANDEL 1995, p. 110.

<sup>25</sup> Numeri 27,7-11: *Et erit haec filiis Israhel iustificatio iudiciorum secundum quae constituit Dominus Moysi*. On the theological concept di *Iustificatio* vedi MCGRATH 1998.

The *Electio* and the *Gratia* are linked to the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore with the Esquilin obelisk, a crucial location for Cardinal Peretti, as this was where he had begun his extraordinary ecclesiastical career<sup>26</sup>.

The *Gratitudo* and the *Fidelitas*, both flank the allegory of the papal *Abundance* (the *Annona pontificia*), as if to ratify the pact of reciprocity that the Pope had signed with the Roman people – symbolized by the flock of sheep at the foot of a tree groaning with pears –, guaranteeing the continuous supply of wheat to the city and the struggle against famine<sup>27</sup>.

Therefore, the frieze inventor laid out the sequence of the images – Virtues and views – in close conceptual continuity, to allow them to be considered as a sole unit by the intellectually sophisticated spectator visiting the Salone Sistino: indeed, we should not forget that, unlike the Lateran Palace or the Sistine Library, only a few intimate acquaintances of the Pope would have visited this area in his private residence, a circle of humanists and theologians who would have been perfectly capable of picking up on such nuances in the meaning<sup>28</sup>.

Furthermore, the hall was not used for public ends, but was exclusively for the Pope and his family: this explains the sense of celebration evident in the pope's single

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<sup>26</sup> Crucial considerations on the countless connections of Felice Peretti with the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, already at the time of his cardinalate, have been pointed out by OSTROW 1987; IDEM 1992.

<sup>27</sup> On the role of the Cardinal Congregation *Pro ubertate annonae*, funded by Sixtus V in 1588, see FALCHI 1990.

<sup>28</sup> I proposed the cardinal Silvio Antoniano, as the possible inventor of the iconography of the frieze instead of Torquato Tasso, as affirmed by several scholars (TOSINI 2014A, in press).

human, spiritual Virtues, rather than those linked to his political leadership (as in the case of the *Salone dei Papi* in the Lateran Palace).

#### 4. *The views of Sistine Rome: a new approach to the topographical landscape*

As already mentioned, these “landscapes” are not purely evocative illustrations of Rome, but topographical views in the strictest sense of the word, portraits which perfectly resembled the reality of the places represented therein.

If we look back at the examples of decorations created in Rome from the 1550s onwards, the views of the Papal city, even when they include monuments or sites truly existing, are always general representations, in which the emblematic locations of Rome are imaginatively transfigured<sup>29</sup>.

In Sistine age, on the contrary, almost for the first time the landscape of Rome is presented as the exact ‘snapshot’ of a place, a stylistic turning point certainly induced by the desire to celebrate the “fasti” of Sistine five-year papacy, marked by the pope’s great urban and architectural activism. The extreme accuracy displayed in the illustrations of the sites and monuments of Rome restored by Sixtus (such as the obelisks and coelide columns), or those built *ex novo* (such as the Fountain of Moses, the public wash houses of Termini, the harbor of Civitavecchia), is precisely designed to restore the objectivity of the places and their modern transformation.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See, for instance, the examples of the Sala dei Sette colli at Villa Giulia (1550-55), the Gallery of the Maps (1581-82) and the Tower of the winds in the Vatican (1580-1582).

<sup>30</sup> The two scenes in the frieze with allegorical subjects are also strongly anchored to concrete events, as an expression of the Sistine “Buon Governo”: the Sistine Leo, who is shaking the branch of the pear

So, which models were used in this case by the Sistine artists in order to render such an exact illustration of these views? My research on this aspect is still in the early stages, so I can only offer you a few quick considerations.

For sure, in many cases engraved models provided artists not particularly specialized in this kind of painting a strict control over the perspective and topographical details.<sup>31</sup> But painters did not always turn to these repertoires to draw the views. If we compare the images of Palazzo alle Terme with the other two similar pictorial cycles that celebrate the urban enterprises of Pope Peretti, in the Sistine Library of the Vatican Palaces and in the *Salone dei Papi* in the Lateran Palace, we can see completely different visual approaches<sup>32</sup>.

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tree, symbolizes the institution of the *Annona* Cardinal Congregation, and the Leo who is brandishing a thunder bolt from the top of the trimonzio Peretti, to protect the flock at his feet, is directly linked with the drastic measures introduced by Sixtus against banditry and criminality.

<sup>31</sup> I do not believe – as recently supposed by RIBOUILLAUD 2013, p. 168 – that the views of the Sistine Hall inspired the prints in the book by Giovanni Guerra *Vari Hemblemi hieroglyphici* (1589), but, on the contrary, that the prints made for this volume were reused as a guide for the frescoes. In fact, the Salone was painted in 1589, when the book had already been published (and of course the drawings for the prints had been completed previously).

<sup>32</sup> The *salone dei Papi* in the palazzo Lateranense was brilliantly studied from an iconographic viewpoint by Corinne Mandel (1995, pp. 93-135). His execution is exactly simultaneous with the Salone of the Palazzo alle Terme (started in April 1589). There are eleven views, framed as tapestries: five of them correspond with those in the Salone alle Terme: (*The harbor of Civitavecchia, The reclamation of the Pontine marshes, The Fountain of Moses and the villa alle Terme, The Sistine Abundance, The Sistine Leo on the trimonzio protects the flock*). The tapestry motif of the frame recalls Raphael's tapestries in the Sistine chapel, as already pointed out by Mandel (1995, pp. 95-96). In the Salone of the Sistine Library, nine of the eighteen views are the same as those in the Salone in the Palazzo alle Terme. For a systematic description of the Roman views in the Vatican Library, see MORELLO-SILVAN 1997.

I will limit myself here to making only one comparison: the Fountain of Moses, the Acqua Felice, formerly located in the area of Villa Peretti, now at the end of Via XX Settembre in Rome. In the *Salone dei Papi*, this monument is illustrated with a weak method of execution, and a feeble perspective that does not correspond to the reality of the places: the purpose of the image is mainly that of showing the route followed by the Alexandrine aqueduct from the Roman Castles and part of Villa Peretti in the background<sup>33</sup>. It is clear that in this case the artist has assembled sketches and personal memories, without paying too much attention to the truthfulness of the image. It is also clear that the painter is not specialized in perspective views, but has only been 'lent' to this role in a large collective workshop.

On the contrary, in the frescoes of the Vatican Library and Palazzo alle Terme, the approach to the perspective and the topographic rendering are extremely accurate, showing not only that we are in presence of artists of a different quality, but we can see also the intention of its author to represent the great Sistine creation, the Fountain of the Acqua Felice, in an objective and visibly authentic manner.

It is possible that the author of the fresco in Palazzo alle Terme may have used engraving to obtain such a high degree of resemblance to the original: in particular, there are three prints of this monument which date approximately to the same period, one illustrated in the book by Giovan Francesco Bordini *De rebus preclaræ gestis a Sixto V Pont. Max.* (1588), one by Nicolas Van Aelst (1589), and one by Natale Bonifacio, based on a drawing by Giovanni Guerra, for the volume *Della Trasportatione dell'obelisco Vaticano*

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<sup>33</sup> For instance, the round church on the right side of the fountain, San Bernardo alle Terme, is

(1590). It is likely that the print taken from Bordini's book or that of Giovanni Guerra's drawing could be one of the sources used by the artist for the view of the Moses Fountain at Palazzo alle Terme—let us not forget that Giovanni Guerra himself, together with Cesare Nebbia, was one of the coordinators and contractors of the frescoes—, but the engraved model have been embellished by details of the urban context taken from real life and perfectly described, as we can see in later images of the site<sup>34</sup>.

In conclusion, this “documentary” and “pragmatic” approach to the topographical landscape remains almost an isolated case in the pontificate of Peretti, exceeded, at the close of the century, by the free interpretation of the “ideal” landscape of the Carraccis. It is no coincidence that to see urban views described with similar precision we have to wait for the frescoes of Paolo V in the Vatican Library (1611-1612), but especially for those by Marco Tullio Montagna and Simone Lagi in the Quirinal Palace (1633-35), commissioned by another pontiff who considerably transformed the image and the urban fabric of the city, Pope Urban VIII Barberini.

#### Appendix I: Sequence of the subjects in the frieze

(Wall A, West):

OPERATIO / *The Sistine Leo on the Peretti trimonzio protects the flock* (Sixtus V fights against

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allocated in a different position from where it effectively stands.

<sup>34</sup> The famous print with the *Erection of the Vatican Obelisk* by Guerra and Bonifacio (1586), was utilized to paint the corresponding fresco in the Vatican Library (see *Libri di immagini...* 1978, pp. 87-89).

the banditry) / ELECTIO / *The Esquilino obelisk and the apse of Santa Maria Maggiore* /  
GRATIA / *Coat of arms of Cardinal Alessandro Peretti Montalto* / AU[C]TORITAS / *The Vatican  
obelisk and San Pietro* / GRATITUDO / *The Sistine Abundance* (The institution of the  
Congregation *Pro Ubertate annonae*) / FIDELITAS /

(Wall B, North):

MODESTIA / *The Fountain of the Acqua Felice (The Moses fountain)* / IUSTIFICATIO / *The  
Antonina column* / VOLUNTAS DEI / *The laundries of Termini* / INNOCENTIA /

(Wall D, East):

FELICITAS / *The harbor and the aqueduct of Civitavecchia* / SUBSIDIUM / *The Flaminio obelisk* /  
RECOGNITIO VIRTUTIS / *Coat of arms of Michele Peretti* / TENTATIO / *The Lateran obelisk  
with a view toward the Colosseum* / INTREPIDITAS / *The reclamation of the Pontine marshes* /  
CORROBORATIO /

(Wall C, South):

STANIMITAS / *The Scala Santa* / DISTINCTIO / *Trajan's column* / IUSTITIA / *The Loggia delle  
Benedizioni in San Giovanni in Laterano in front of the Lateran obelisk* / MANSUETUDO /

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