

Palazzo Portinari Salviati

History

Towards the end of the thirteenth century, Palazzo Portinari Salviati in Florence was no more than a modest complex of houses on the Corso di Por San Piero, an important artery of medieval Florence, today simply called the Corso. The houses belonged to the banker Folco Portinari, father of Beatrice, Dante Alighieri's famous muse, and founder in 1286 of the Spedale di Santa Maria Nuova, which still exists near Florence's Duomo. However, it was the fifteenth-century members of the Portinari family who determined the fate of this splendid Florentine palace. Bernardo di Giovanni di Sandro worked in the Medici banks in Venice (1418-1430) and Bruges (1437), accumulating wealth and property that are already recorded in the land register of 1427. His brother Folco, also linked in business with the Medici, lived in one of the houses on the Corso in Por San Piero. The construction of Palazzo Portinari was undertaken by the latter's sons, the brothers Pigello, Acerrito and Tommaso, and made use of the fortunes they had acquired with the Medici banks; the building is said to have been lived in already between 1470 and 1480, although its definitive completion dates from 1489. Tommaso (1428 - 1501), who was only twenty years old, was already working for the Medici bank in Bruges and in 1465, after the death of Cosimo I, he was appointed director, a position that was later confirmed by Lorenzo II Magnifico. Using the wealth he had built up, Tommaso commissioned the Flemish painter Hugo van der Goes to paint the famous triptych depicting the *Adoration of the shepherds* for the family chapel in the church of Sant'Egidio within the hospital of Sant Maria Nuova in Florence, now in the Uffizi. At that time the residence must have already been of considerable size, as revealed in a plan by Bonsignori at the end of the sixteenth century, with two floors above the ground floor, seven large stone-framed windows on the façade and two monumental halls on the first floor with wooden ceilings, which are still today decorated with a frieze showing a recurring motif of lions holding up the door, alluding to the Portinari coat of arms.

A few years later, in 1504, as a result of the rapid economic decline of the Portinari family, the palazzo was partly given over to the officials of the Monte di Pietà (pawnshop) and in 1538 the entire property passed to the Ospedale di Santa Maria Nuova. In 1546, Jacopo Salviati (a nobleman and patron of the arts), who was related to Cosimo I de' Medici through his father Alamanno, took possession of the building and, in 1571, of some adjoining houses that were included in the extension project completed in 1577. Testimonies of the time, such as that of the painter Alessandro Allori, who was commissioned to decorate various rooms, show that the palace must have been magnificent both in terms of its architecture and the excellence of the pictorial cycles and the rarity of the collections. One of the marvels of the Salviati residence was a grotto, now lost, decorated by Alessandro Allori with sponges, mother-of-pearl, snails and precious corals. Of the sixteenth-century alterations, there remain today some rooms frescoed by Allori, the splendid Emperors' Court (which housed a series of busts believed to be by Giambologna) and the Chapel dedicated to Saint Mary Magdalene, consecrated in 1581.

The *palazzo* was so celebrated that in the sixteenth century the French queen, Maria de' Medici, recommended her gentlemen sent on missions to Florence to the Salviati, and in the following century the palace hosted illustrious personages such as the king of Denmark, Frederick IV. In 1768, Duke Anton Maria Salviati sold the palace to Cavalier Niccolò Serguidi for 18,000 scudi. The new owners made further enlargements and

frescoed the ceiling of the Gallery and the rooms on the first floor. In the following centuries the complex changed hands several times. During the years when Florence was the capital of the newly unified Italy, it became the seat of the Ministry of Justice, then of the Municipality of Florence and the Cassa di Risparmio, and from 1881 of the Piarists, who made it the seat of the Scuole Pie Fiorentine. In 1921, the building passed into the hands of Credito Toscano to become the headquarters of Banca Toscana. Then came years of neglect until the recent purchase and conservative restoration by the LDC Hotels & Resorts group.

THE DECORATIONS ON THE GROUND FLOOR

While the succession of historical events and changes of ownership have modified the building over time, the splendid wall decorations in the Emperors' Court and in an adjacent room, featuring the Labours of Hercules, frequently illustrated in fifteenth and sixteenth-century Florentine art, date back to the Salviati era. The work was commissioned from the famed painter Alessandro Allori, a pupil of Bronzino, with Giovanni Maria Butteri, Giovanni Fiammingo, Alessandro di Benedetto and Giovanni Bizzelli as his assistants. Documents show that Alessandro Allori began working in these rooms of the Palazzo between April 1574 and June 1575 and remained until October 1576; this was just a few years before he worked on the vaults of the first corridor of the Uffizi in 1581. Allori executed the drawings and some of the figures.

Room with the *Labours of Hercules*

In the room with the Labours of Hercules, which overlooks the Emperors' Court, ten lunettes depict episodes from the life of Hercules, while the vault is dominated by grotesques that combine with the emblems, merging the figure of Hercules and that of the Salviati family in a single glorification. In the two ovals at the ends of the vault are represented *Fortune* and *Fame*, while in the other medallions there are six landscapes, perhaps alluding to the hero's wanderings. The two shields on the sides must certainly have contained the Salviati coat of arms, later replaced by the Ricciardi on the left and the Serguidi on the right. Originally it must have been conceived as a secluded room, suitable for reflection and talks on important subjects.

Ceiling of the room with the Labours of Hercules





The medallion in the centre of the vault depicts the pyre that Hercules himself prepared and on which he climbed; a cloud enveloped him like a shroud and carried him to Olympus. While the motto “Ultimus Ardor” alludes to this deathly episode, the new constellation bearing his name is depicted in the sky. At the foot of the altar, we see the hero’s spoils in the shape of the Nemean lion’s skin and the club. In the band framing the medallion one can see some rings with a pearl, an element of the Salviati family crest that returns in the decoration of the vault.

One of the scenes showing the Labours of Hercules depicted in the lunettes; here the hero strangles the Nemean lion.



The Salviati family crest: an eagle with a gold ring in its beak. Woven around the ring is a ribbon with the motto JAMES AULTRE. This crest is depicted twice in Florence: in Palazzo Portinari Salviati and on the facade of Palazzo Gerini, in Via Ricasoli, purchased in 1579 by the sons of Senator Filippo Salviati.



Documents show that the series of six landscapes on the ceiling of the *Labours of Hercules* room were commissioned from a “Giovanni Fiammingo”, who we know to be Giovanni Ponsi. The backgrounds of the ten lunettes with the *Labours of Hercules* are also certainly attributable to him also, while the figures are probably by another painter (the picture shows one of the six landscapes).

The Emperors' Court

The Emperors' Court takes its name from the twelve missing bronze heads of Roman emperors that once adorned the niches (now empty), and were believed to have been executed to a design by Giambologna. However, documents show that they arrived from Venice in 1575 and were gilded by Bastiano di Benedetto. In the courtyard, there are two barrel-vaulted loggias, each decorated with six episodes from the *Odyssey*. Alessandro Allori and his assistants produced these following an allegorical programme that coherently linked Hercules and Ulysses, who had been linked since antiquity for their wanderings and the difficult trials they endured and heroically overcame. Broad bands decorated with grotesques frame the scenes, while at the base of the vault runs a frieze with fish and birds shown within cartouches. Two lunettes close the decoration of the vaults. As art historian Mina Gregori writes in her book *Banca Toscana. Storia e Collezioni, 1982*, these frescos seem to be the work above all of Allori, who was certainly responsible for the composition of the various stories, but we can also recognise the significant intervention of Butteri. The Emperors' Court is protected from the elements by a nineteenth-century polychrome stained-glass window depicting the allegory of Abundance.



Emperors' Court, one of the two loggias painted by Allori and helpers



Closing scene of the story of Ulysses stories in the Emperors' Court: *Ulysses embracing Penelope after regaining his human form*, Alessandro Allori and helpers

Batrachomyomachia: the Battle of Mice and Frogs

Of particular interest is the decoration in another small room overlooking the Emperors' Court, which in the sixteenth century was used as a dressing room. Between 1575 and 1576, a frieze was painted with grotesque decorations and episodes from the *Batrachomyomachia*, or the Battle of Mice and Frogs, a poem attributed to Homer. Interest in this Greek poem and its political significance dates back to the fifteenth century in Florence. We know that the painter Andrea del Sarto had borrowed from it freely and recited it on six consecutive evenings to the Compagnia del Paiolo.

This decoration was entrusted to Allori but it is difficult to establish whether it was he who actually painted it or an assistant specialising in animals (Mina Gregori suggests Alessandro di Benedetto). They were restored after a short time by Giovanni Maria Butteri. Lake landscapes form the backdrop to the events in which the **mouse-prince Psycharpax** encounters the **frog-king Physignathus**, king of the pond, on the shore of a lake and is invited to his palace. But in the face of danger, the frog-king dives below the water and the mouse-prince drowns. In order to avenge his son, the mouse-king gathers his subjects and incites them to arm themselves with needles and walnut shells.



The chapel dedicated to Saint Mary Magdalene

Accessible from inside the Palazzo and from outside, the Chapel dedicated to Saint Mary Magdalene was decorated by Alessandro Allori from 25 January 1579 to May 1580 and consecrated in 1581. The painter accurately described the iconographic programme in his "Ricordi" (Memories), specifying that he personally executed the heads of the termini and the four small figures in frames on the faux marble base, while for the rest he was helped by Giovanni Maria Butteri and Alessandro Pieroni. The small chapel's pictorial cycle includes *Prophets* and *Sibyls* on the vault, flanked by cherubs holding scrolls with passages from the Holy Scriptures alternating, in the corners, with allusions to the four sacrifices mentioned in the Old Testament. Further down, below the frieze with an elegant vine shoot, there are three episodes from the life of Mary Magdalene (*Mary Magdalene drying Christ's feet in the house of Simon*, *Noli me tangere*, *Communion of Mary Magdalene*), painted as though on imitation tapestries. These are completed by the altarpiece showing *Christ in the house of Martha and Mary*, and a predella, now lost, which contained the *Resurrection of Lazarus*. A rich decoration, enhanced by the abundant use of gold, covers the remaining spaces of the small room, including, above the entrance door, the depiction of *Christ supported by two angels* and, on the nearby walls, *Saints James, Francis and Laurence*. The art historian Carlo Sisi writes in his book *Invito a Palazzo Portinari Salviati*, "The frescoes of the Salviati Chapel are an important document, at the beginning of the 1580s, of the process of transformation affecting the painting of sacred subjects precisely as a result of the work of Allori, Santi di Tito and other minor artists, who were engaged not only in the decoration of churches but also of

places intended for domestic devotion, such as the Salviati Chapel, which is a precious example of those that were realised in Florentine palaces between the mid-sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries”.

The Cosimo I Courtyard

Entering the palace, on the ground floor, we come to the Cosimo I Courtyard, which takes its name from the statue at the centre of the space. The sculpture consists of a fragmentary Roman statue in *lorica* armour, to which was added – at a much later date – the head of the Grand Duke by Giovanni di Francesco di Pietro Susini, who restored and added to the antique part and was paid for this work in 1631.

On one of the walls of the courtyard there is a fresco, off-centre with regard to the seventeenth-century bay in which it is inserted, depicting the *Madonna and Child enthroned*. The fresco has a fourteenth-century iconography, but the extensive repainting is quite recent, perhaps from the nineteenth century or later, and perhaps carried out to restore an underlying or damaged work.

DECORATIONS ON THE PIANO NOBILE

A plaque dated 1785, with a dedication to Grand Duke Pietro Leopoldo, provides information about some extension and decoration work on the palazzo commissioned by Niccolò Maria Ricciardi Serguidi, with the installation of statues and paintings in the rooms of the piano nobile. The frescoes in some of the rooms date back to the years immediately preceding the plaque. The vault of the gallery with the great fresco of *Olympus* between the allegories of *Day* and *Night*, painted by Tommaso Gherardini, is dated 1783. Also on the piano nobile, we find the original coffered ceilings with a fifteenth-century upper frieze depicting the two figures of the Portinari coat of arms: the lion and the door, while the band below was painted in the sixteenth century. The motif of the two facing lions can be found in Benedetto da Maiano’s frieze in the Sala dei Gigli in Palazzo Vecchio.

Bibliography

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