

CHAPTER 1

TROMPE L'ŒIL ON WALLS

1.1. Expansions of rooms in antiquity

In this chapter we shall look at trompe l'œil painted as wall decorations. Our main emphasis is on works by Baldassare Peruzzi. But we begin by drawing a line back to antiquity. In preserved ancient villas, for example in Pompeii and the Palatine Hill in Rome, one often finds rooms with decorated walls. Countless of these are trompe l'œil that visually expand the room—some being painted windows showing panoramic views, others being painted architecture. The House of Augustus on the Palatine Hill is particularly rich in wall decorations. Here one encounters frescoes depicting freestanding pillars and doorways. Unfortunately it is not easy to get access to the House of Augustus; so, without luck, one may have to make do with the photos here and in other books about the villa.

One room has become known as the Room of the Masks. Three of the walls are decorated with a kind of display case containing masks ([Figure 1.01](#))—it truly looks as if the display cases are part of the

room. The manner in which the displays are painted contribute strongly to giving this realistic impression.

There is however one place in Rome where one can easily get access to a painted optical illusion from antiquity, namely at the Museo Massimo alle Terme, which exhibits painted wall decorations from the House of Livia (who was Augustus' wife) and from the Casa Farnesina which is also from Augustus' time.

It is natural to ask whether ancient choices of subject and painting techniques influenced Renaissance painters, but there is no easy answer to this question. There is no doubt that Renaissance artists were inspired by the remains of antiquity, such as sculptures and painted vases. It is therefore very likely that the manner of rendering the human form in Renaissance art has its roots in antiquity. But it is not clear whether ancient examples were followed also in the rendering of rooms. Examples of efforts to make paintings appear three-dimensional, as found in the House of Augustus and other places, were

< A very typical view from the Sala delle prospettive in Villa Farnesina.



Figure 1.01. The southern wall of the Room of the Masks in the House of Augustus. 1st century BCE. Palatine Hill, Rome.

generally not yet excavated and hence not available in the Renaissance. Casa Farnesia, for example, was discovered only in 1880 and excavated thereafter. Before this some shafts were dug into the Palatine Hill, where one could rappel down and get a glimpse of what the old Romans were capable of. It is however not known where these shafts were, or hence which images were known in Renaissance times.

For my part, though I have no conclusive evidence, I believe that the experiments undertaken by artists in ancient Rome to visually create a three-dimensional

space on a plane surface did not influence later Italian artists; rather the latter independently developed the same techniques in the first half of the 14th century. On the other hand, I find it probable that Renaissance architects and painters may have taken inspiration from antiquity for decorating walls in such a manner that they appear to create an expansion of the room. In other words, I do not believe Renaissance artists got the actual technique for making things appear three-dimensional from antiquity, but they may well



Figure 1.02. The pillars in this picture are painted on the wall. Museo Massimo alle Terme, Rome, second floor.

have taken from their ancient predecessors the idea of painting illusory images on walls.

1.2. Expansions of rooms in the Renaissance

Regardless of whether they owe a debt to ancient sources of inspiration or not, many room-expanding frescoes are preserved in Italian Renaissance palaces. They are, however, not easily accessible. It is fortunate, therefore, that some of the most daring and elegant room-expanding trompe l'œil are found in a villa that is open to visitors, namely Baldassare Peruzzi's

Sala delle prospettive (the hall of perspectives) in the Villa Farnesina.

1.3. Peruzzi and the Villa Farnesina

Baldassare Peruzzi was born in 1481 and grew up in Siena, where he probably studied painting and architecture. From about 1503 until his death in 1536 he spent most of his time in Rome, apart from an interruption of about five years. The latter came about dramatically when he was taken prisoner by the mutinous troops of Charles V who attacked Rome

in 1527. This event is known as *Sacco di Rome* (the sack or plunder of Rome). Also in connection with this event, a soldier drew graffiti on one of Peruzzi's works, as we shall see below. Peruzzi was bought out by the government of Siena and he thus returned for a while to his childhood hometown.

In Rome, Peruzzi was involved in many construction and decoration projects—occasionally in cooperation with the famous painter Rafael. Following Rafael's death in 1520, Peruzzi and one of his colleagues took over Rafael's position as lead architect for St. Peter's Basilica, but he did not have a notable impact on its design.

Peruzzi was widely known in his own time for his great interest in perspective. He is often referenced in 16th-century books on the subject. This must be due to his conversations with colleagues, for there is no indication that he left behind any writings on perspective. We therefore do not know anything about his approach to perspective theory, but his paintings show that he was very adept at applying it.

Around 1506 Peruzzi was entrusted with the task of building a large villa for a rich client, Agostino Chigi, who through fortuitous investments had amassed such a large fortune that he could not keep track of all his money. He used some of his funds to sponsor talented artists and academics—among them the aforementioned Rafael and the writer Pietro Aretino, whom we shall encounter below. Chigi hosted many lavish social gatherings and desired

a suitable setting for them. This is what he asked Peruzzi to create at a massive piece of land by the Tiber (of which much was later sold off). In 1510, the resulting villa was named in a list of the wonders of Rome. The halls of the villa are filled with frescoes by the foremost artists of the time; among others, Rafael and Peruzzi himself. Altogether Chigi secured for himself a palace representative of the very best that Italian Renaissance art had to offer.

The hall that became known as the Sala delle prospettive was painted by Peruzzi, probably in the years 1517 and 1518. The following year it was the setting for an event that would have received much press had it taken place today—namely a grandiose wedding. After having lived as a bachelor for many years, Chigi married a young woman of modest ancestry, whose education at a convent school he had personally arranged. The wedding was all the more a celebrity affair since the very Pope led the ceremony in person, while a great number of cardinals were among the guests.

The bridegroom did not get much time to savor memories of his grand wedding, for he died in 1520, whereupon his villa fell into disuse. It was put up for sale in 1577 and was bought by cardinal Alessandro Farnese. Henceforth it became known as Villa Farnesina—not to be confused with the Palazzo Farnese, which was also in the possession of the Farnese family.



Figure 1.03. View of the east wall of the Sala delle prospettive. Villa Farnesina.

1.4. The virtual expansion of the Sala delle prospettive

The Sala delle prospettive is outfitted with ten frescoes that visually expand the room. In some of these Peruzzi extended the architecture of the room; in others he opened the walls by painting illusory views of Rome and distant landscapes. Peruzzi's vistas are imaginary, although he did reproduce a few famous buildings in them.

In his virtual architectural extension of the Sala delle prospettive (Figures 1.03 and 1.04), Peruzzi let the tiled floor of the room continue into the frescoes, but he made the tiles in the frescoes smaller than the real ones. Furthermore the paintings supplied the room with virtual marble pillars. Above these there



Figure 1.04. The west wall with pillars.

is a ceiling that he made lower than the actual ceiling of the room. Beyond the pillars he painted bannisters, through and above which landscapes are visible. Lastly he worked with effects of light to make it appear as if the fictional pillars are illuminated from the actual windows of the room. We shall now study the trompe l'œil of the room more closely. To keep a clear overview, we shall refer to them in terms of their position in the room (see the plan in [Figure 1.05](#)).

One enters the room through a door in the western wall, so let us first look more closely at the fresco on this wall (Figures 1.06 and 1.07). It shows a view of a landscape and a village. If one compares Figures 1.07 and 1.04, it is clear that the illusion that the pillars

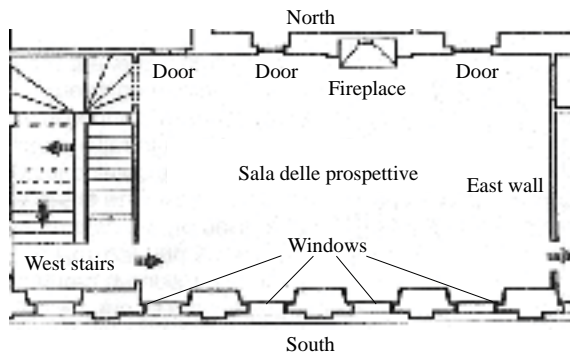


Figure 1.05. Sala delle prospettive.

extend beyond the room is broken in [Figure 1.07](#). The reason is that the photo of [Figure 1.04](#) is taken close to the eye point of the painting (see [Section 5.5](#)), whereas this is not the case for the photo of [Figure 1.07](#).

The north wall has four narrow frescoes showing views opening toward a cityscape ([Figure 1.08](#)). The view of the opening farthest to the west includes a part of an aqueduct ([Figure 1.09](#)). In the opening farthest to the east ([Figure 1.10](#)) one can see, among other things, the *Torre delle Milizie* (tower of the militia) as it appeared in Peruzzi's time. This was one of the countless towers erected in Rome during the Middle Ages. The Torre delle Milizie was particularly famous because it was erroneously believed that it dated back to antiquity and that the emperor Nero had watched the fire of Rome in year 64 from atop this tower.

In the painting on the east wall ([Figure 1.11](#)), on the right, one can see the church Santo Spirito in Sassia. It is located near the Vatican and was so heavily



Figure 1.06. The western wall with fresco.



Figure 1.07. View of the western wall from up close (cf. [Figure 1.04](#)).



Figure 1.08. View of the northern wall.



Figure 1.09. Peruzzi's aqueduct.



Figure 1.10. Torre delle Milizie.

damaged during the Sacco di Roma in 1527 that a major renovation was needed, whence its appearance has changed since Peruzzi painted it. Between the two rows of columns the mountain Monte Mario is depicted (best seen in [Figure 1.12](#)), where in Peruzzi's time there was a building called *Villa Milline*; it was later rebuilt into an observatory. The same view also contains the graffiti mentioned above, written by a soldier during the Sacco di Roma: "Was sol ich Schreibers ... nd nit lachen di Landsknecht haben den Babst lauffen mache" (in the 16th century there were

not yet any firm rules for spelling in German or other European languages). Freely translated: Why should I, scribe, not smile: the mercenaries have driven the pope to flee.

The south wall has four virtual openings. In the second fresco from the east ([Figure 1.13](#)) one can see, among other things, a view of the Teatro Marcello. This theatre, which stems from antiquity and can still be seen in Rome, interested Peruzzi so much that he painted it together with his student Sebastiano Serlio, to whom we shall return.



Figure 1.11. The eastern wall from up close (cf. [Figure 1.03](#)).



Figure 1.12. The graffiti from 1527.

Above the perspective works in the Sala delle prospettive there is a series of images with subjects from ancient mythology. It is not known who the artist was; perhaps one or more of them were from Peruzzi's workshop.

To my knowledge, no measurements of the perspective trompe l'œil in the Villa Farnesina, with a view to analyse their perspective geometry, have ever been published. The following is therefore based solely on my observations, which have not involved measuring tape. Without measurements one cannot accurately determine the distance that is associated with a trompe l'œil. Although I do not have strong evidence, I hazard the hypothesis that Peruzzi chose the eye points of the eastern, western, and northern trompe l'œil in such a way that they are close to one another and are located approximately midway through the 15-meter path between the entrance door in the west and the eastern door of the Sala delle prospettive.

1.5. The Renaissance impact of Peruzzi's Sala delle prospettive

Peruzzi's aforementioned apprentice Serlio eventually became a famous architectural theorist and author of a big work on architecture. In connection with a discussion of pillars, Serlio discussed the pillars and other architectural details painted by Peruzzi in the Sala delle prospettive. Serlio argued that Peruzzi's frescoes were executed with great talent. He emphasised that this was not just his own opinion; rather he referred to a comment by Arentino (the

author supported by Chigi) about Peruzzi's pictures in the Sala delle prospettive: "... the great Pietro Arentino—who was as good in judging paintings as poetry—had occasion to remark that there were no more perfect paintings in the house [Villa Farnesina], despite the fact that some of them were by the divine Rafael of Urbino."

Great acclaim for the Sala delle prospettive also came from other quarters, namely from the highly regarded Italian painter Tizian. He visited the Sala delle prospettive together with another Italian painter,



Figure 1.13. The fresco between the two eastern windows in the south wall, showing the Teatro Marcello and a section of an aqueduct. In the top part of the picture another graffiti is seen.



Figure 1.14. Teatro olimpico, opened in 1585. The name “olympic” derives from the association that commissioned the theatre, the *Accademia olimpico*, which was founded by Palladio to revive Roman theatre.

Giorgio Vasari, who is best known for his book on the most famous painters and architectures from the 13th century until the mid-16th century. In his article on Peruzzi, Vasari mentioned that Tizian refused to believe that the room expansions were mere paintings.

1.6. Theatre decors

Theatre decorations and decors also belong in the history of trompe l’œil in the Renaissance. There are

no longer any remaining ones on exhibit in Rome, so we shall not dwell on the subject. Nevertheless it would be unnatural to say nothing about it. Elsa Gerlini compared Peruzzi’s Sala delle prospettive to a theatre stage arrangement, and in fact, Peruzzi was involved in the design of the first perspective theatre decors.

The most famous Renaissance theatre, the *teatro olimpico* (olympic theatre), was designed by one of the many famous Italian architects, Andrea Palladio.

It was built in the city of Vicenza. Palladio died before the construction was complete, and the architectural leadership was taken over by Vincenzo Scamozzi. For the decoration of the stage Scamozzi added a new element, namely a three-dimensional visual expansion, shown in [Figure 1.14](#). Here we see the back wall of the stage area, with three openings with views down alleyways. These street views are not painted perspective images; they are truly three-dimensional. They are, however, not as long as they appear: they are constructed so that the street is tilting upwards and the houses become smaller and smaller. If a person walked down one of the streets they would soon seem like a giant. In the next chapter we shall turn to the geometrical details of such constructions.

