

Article

Petrified Beholders: The Interactive Materiality of Baldassarre Peruzzi's *Perseus and Medusa*

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Abstract: Baldassarre Peruzzi's cosmological vault fresco (1510–11) in the Villa Farnesina in Rome, prominently featuring a scene of Perseus and Medusa, showcases a dynamic operation that was often at work in the early modern period between the beholder and an immobile work of art. These types of representational objects participate in the discourse around *materiality*, not by employing the signifying powers of their constituent materials, but by encouraging thought about their material presence. I explore the process of haptic engagement that the fresco painting urges in its beholders, raising the possibility that the trope of petrification, made popular by Dante and other Italian writers of amorous poems, unlocks the work's layered meaning.

Keywords: Loggia of Galatea; Villa Farnesina; Baldassarre Peruzzi; Agostino Chigi; Dante; *rime petrose*; materiality; performance; fresco painting; haptic viewing

1. Introduction

There is a memorable anecdote in Giorgio Vasari's biography of the Sieneese painter-architect Baldassarre Peruzzi (1481–1536). In his *Lives of the Artists*, Vasari (1511–74) shared a story about the time when he personally accompanied Titian (c. 1490–1576) to visit the Sieneese banker Agostino Chigi's (1466–1520) suburban villa in Rome, which Peruzzi had designed and decorated (Figures 1 and 2).¹ As they looked upon the vault fresco in the Loggia of Galatea on the villa's ground floor, the Venetian painter, who Vasari often criticized for his ignorance over the art of *disegno*, refused to believe that the brilliant ceiling painting was a fictive projection.

And what is of stupendous marvel [at the villa Chigi] is a loggia that may be seen over the garden, painted by Baldassarre with scenes of the Medusa turning men into stone, such that nothing more beautiful can be imagined; and then there is Perseus cutting off her head, with many other scenes in the spandrels of that vaulting, while the ornamentation, drawn in perspective, simulated [*contrafatto*] in color and in stucco, is so natural and lifelike, that even to excellent craftsmen it appears to be in relief. And I remember that when I took the cavalier Titian, a most excellent and honored painter, to see that work, he would by no means believe that it was painted until he had changed his point of view [*mutando veduta*], when he was struck with amazement.²

This friendly site-visit to the Chigi villa, now called the Villa Farnesina, would have taken place some decades after Peruzzi had completed the ceiling fresco (1510–1511), even sometime after his death (1536). But readers familiar with classical literature on art will recognize the artistic competition that Vasari has the two painters engage in here. The anecdote deliberately recalls the popular Plinian legend of the Greek painter Zeuxis who was fooled by his rival Parrhasius' fictive curtain. Pliny tells us in his *Natural History* how Zeuxis visited Parrhasius' studio. In order to take a closer look at Parrhasius' most recent work, he attempted to pull aside a curtain that partially covered it, only to realize that the curtain itself was a painting.³ In Vasari's retelling of that archetypal contest about the



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hand fooling the eye, Titian and Peruzzi become modern stand-ins reenacting the same one-upmanship in virtual realism.

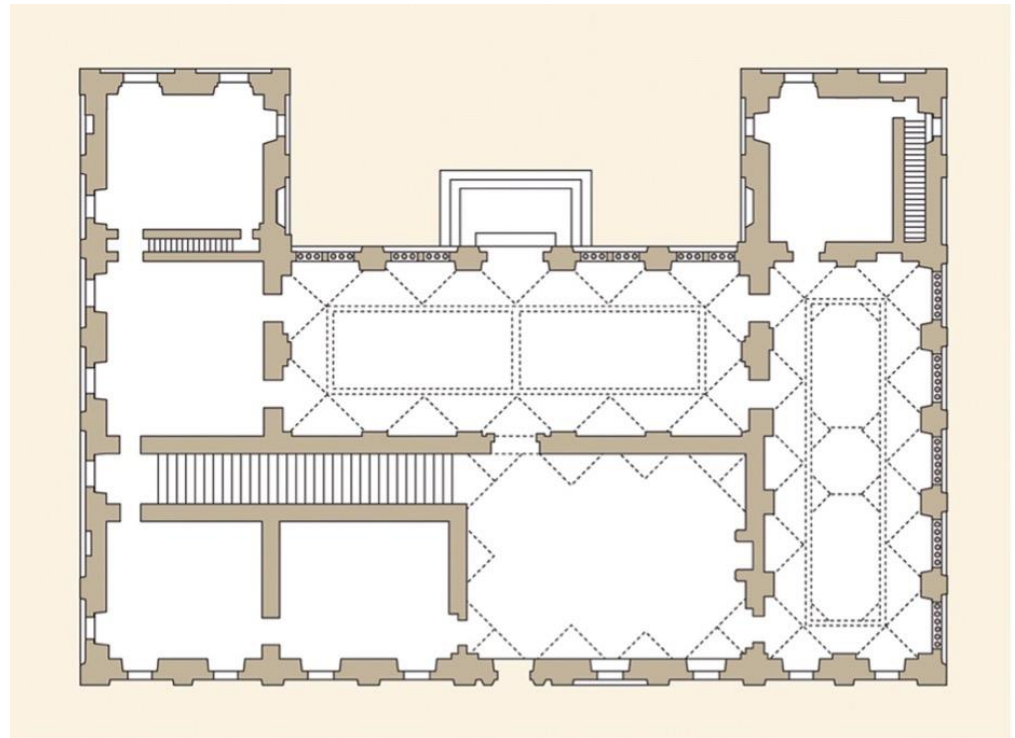


Figure 1. Ground-floor plan of the Villa Farnesina. The Loggia of Galatea is found in the bottom right corner. © Treccani Giunti TVP.

It is easy to appreciate Titian's response today looking up at the impressive *tromp-l'oeil* effect of Peruzzi's ceiling painting. The vault fresco unmistakably showcases the artist's advanced skills in pictorial techniques such as *rilievo* modelling and perspective drawing. It depicts an illusionistic architectural frame that consists of gently curved hexagons and triangles made to look like coffered spandrels and pendentives of intricately carved marble. These realistically shaded fictive frames virtually lift the vault higher than the room's true ceiling, greatly enhancing the vertical expanse of the space. We see Peruzzi exhibiting his pictorial skills further in the putti and fantastical beasts that he painted in *tromp-l'oeil* marble relief, interspersed throughout the vault with such convincing three-dimensionality (Figure 3).

In Vasari's account, Titian's initial incredulity about the painting's illusionistic projection and later recognition of the work's artifice elevates Peruzzi's artistic skills to something resembling Medusa's superhuman powers to turn people into stone—a subject depicted conspicuously in the vault's summit. Vasari has Titian momentarily stupefied with marvel and forever defeated by Peruzzi's artifice in a play between flesh and stone, cleverly evoking Medusa's myth. While the brief account gives heightened thematic attention to material properties such as flesh and stone, Vasari discusses them at the same time as highly fluid mutable matters, susceptible to transformations through advanced artistic skill.⁴ Vasari, however, also gives the beholder the capacity to enact such powerful material transformations. The moment of encounter between observer and work of art is crucial in this respect. Titian's physical acts of viewing—his stupefaction and shifting of viewpoint (*mutando veduta*) is what reveals the striking marvel of Peruzzi's hand.



Figure 2. Loggia of Galatea, Villa Farnesina, Rome, Italy. Photo by the author.

Vasari's anecdote is particularly valuable for the rare historical testimony it provides about the kinds of embodied encounters early modern viewers had with situated works of art. The story suggestively lays out the ideal mode of viewing for these types of paintings that are firmly fixed in place. Every beholder visiting the Loggia of Galatea is to empathize with Titian's experience, taken in initially by the awe-inspiring illusion whose admirable artifice is gradually revealed through physical motion and shifting points of view. Vasari clearly understands how the act of looking involves the body. Haptic viewing, or the viewer's material presence and movement through space, was crucial for the work to achieve its full effect. Renaissance artists like Peruzzi deliberately choreographed such viewing experiences, intentionally employing processes of haptic engagement to raise their audience's somatic experiences to the level of consciousness and to spark their imagination. Today we might call these communication strategies "interactive *materiality*." In what follows, I will explore the beholder's haptic encounter with Peruzzi's vault fresco as a

material work of art. In examining that encounter taking shape within a distinct spatial context, I will argue that Renaissance artists like him not only understood the semantic powers of the material substances that comprised their works, but they also considered the material presence of the viewer's body as an essential medium in constructing and activating their artwork.



Figure 3. Baldassarre Peruzzi, *Virgo with Diana*, detail from the vault fresco of the Loggia of Galatea, 1510–11. Fresco painting, Villa Farnesina, Rome, Italy. © SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

2. Interactive Materiality

In the March 2013 issue of *The Art Bulletin* that invited twelve scholars from across the humanities to critically discuss the “material turn”, art historian Michael Ann Holly offered a working definition for the term *materiality*.⁵ The study of *materiality*, she argued, should be distinct from a practical history of materials—that type of scholarship that traces how natural material substances were gathered, catalogued, sold, physically manipulated, or put on display. Instead, Holly proposed that we understand *materiality* as “the meeting of matter and imagination.”⁶ Stressing a phenomenological approach, she suggested that the art-historical study of *materiality* must do more than merely attend to an artefact’s physical components; it must wrestle with the work’s “material presence” and with the ways in which “embodied spectators respond” to such presences.⁷

While few trends in early modern historical scholarship have thrived in recent decades more than the so-called “material turn”, the two approaches that Holly identified have continued to move apart along separate paths.⁸ On the one hand, interest in the cultural, scientific, and economic histories of materials continues to flourish. Committed focus on the practical history of materials has encouraged scholars to pursue lines of inquiry that are interdisciplinary and transcultural in nature, broadening our understanding of the early modern world in new and meaningful ways. Attention to the practical history of materials has also stimulated a deeper exploration of “facture”—the cultures and techniques of making artifacts—through both artistic and scientific lenses.⁹ But Holly’s call to consider how the viewers’ physical encounters with material works of art generated meaning

involved theoretical questions having to do with reception. Her working definition of *materiality* leaned on reader-response theory in literary studies and on notions of material agency that originated in anthropology.¹⁰ She connected the emergent study of material history to a long line of art-historical scholarship that explored the “beholder’s share”, or the reciprocal dialogue between material artifact and viewer.¹¹ This philosophically oriented approach also thrives today, generating vital conversations on the nature of inanimate matters’ agency via new methodologies such as actor network theory and object-oriented ontology.¹² In an attempt to theorize materials, however, such discussions step away from the emphasis Holly placed on the beholder’s real-spatial presence, and on the formation of their inner imaginative vision. What Holly’s definition of *materiality* did was to challenge us to take seriously the interactive and performative aspects of viewing as integral components of works of art.

The observer’s physical encounter with material works of art was often a central concern for early modern artists. Renaissance artists often planned their audience’s haptic processes of situated viewing and crafted their works to convey meaning that would be revealed through acts of beholding. Benvenuto Cellini (1500–71) furnishes a great example of such interactive *materiality* through his full-length bronze statue of *Perseus* in Florence, which dramatically extends its left arm into the Piazza della Signoria from the Loggia dei Lanzi to present the severed head of Medusa (Figure 4).¹³ With this small gesture, pre-existing works in marble carved by leading Florentine artists like Baccio Bandinelli (1493–1560) and Michelangelo (1475–1564) standing in the same public square are suddenly conscripted into a dramatic re-enactment of the classical myth, where the head of the Gorgon petrifies their colossal bodies right before our eyes. Cellini’s *Perseus*, with its darker hue and metallic glow, looks as if it is alive and breathing in contrast to the pale and frozen figures made of cold white marble. We are meant to find humor in this exchange, I think. Perseus’ victory over David and Hercules implied Cellini’s triumph over Michelangelo and Bandinelli. Cellini’s “owning” of his competitors and critics possesses the unmistakable qualities of an inside-joke. The artist calls on the metaphor of petrification as a weapon to subdue his predecessors and to showcase his superior virtuosity in a highly self-conscious fashion. The artist enlists in this performance not only the works of marble already in place, but also the beholders happening upon his work. The beholders re-enact the petrification every time they stand in the Piazza della Signoria and look up toward his bronze figure. Again, the encounter is carefully scripted so that the viewers come to complete the work by participating in its narrative production.¹⁴

Cellini claimed in his autobiography to have spent his early years in Rome studying the fresco paintings of the Villa Farnesina under the Chigi family’s patronage. He was certainly acquainted personally with Peruzzi, with whom he seems to have discussed at some length, for example, the wisdom of Vitruvius.¹⁵ Could Cellini have had Peruzzi’s vault fresco in mind when he took up the subject of Perseus and Medusa himself for his ambitious work in bronze? Was Vasari then inspired by Cellini’s Florentine practical joke a few years later when he colored his own account about Titian’s contest against Peruzzi? What seems clear is that these works mutually take part in a shared dialogue across media. Even more importantly, they strategically utilize the physical acts of spectatorship to incite the beholder’s inner imaginative vision.



N.º 44235 Firenze – Piazza della Signoria. Il Perseo con l'ingresso di Palazzo Vecchio e pilastro della Loggia. F.lli Alinari 1935

Figure 4. Benvenuto Cellini, *Perseus and Medusa*, 1545, bronze. Photography from 1935. © Alinari Archives, Florence/Bridgeman Images.

3. Iconography of Peruzzi's Vault Fresco

Cellini's *Perseus* exemplifies the way in which early modern artists employed the signifying powers of materials, or the notion that materials make meaning. The constituent material was often central to a sculptural work's significance; the choice of substance, such as bronze, marble, ivory, or wood, would be conspicuous and suggestive.¹⁶ In comparison to sculpture, fresco paintings speak less readily through their materials. The presence of ultramarine, lapis lazuli, or gold on the plastered surface sometimes could connote preciousness or opulence in a fresco painting. Yet, as a general rule, this genre of art tends to hide its physical properties and techniques of production.¹⁷ Fresco painters did their best to mask their pigment minerals, stucco layers, surface texture, and brush strokes from view, deliberately concealing their traces to create seamless, mimetic representations that were fused together completely with an architectural structure. Such works deny their "thingness" altogether, striving instead to conjure up the representational subject in a credible illusion. This perhaps explains why historians of Peruzzi's vault fresco have devoted their attention almost entirely to subject matter. Since the 1880s, questions of iconography have dominated the painting cycle's scholarship.¹⁸

It is essential that we understand the subject of Peruzzi's program in order to analyze its interactive *materiality*. For instance, we now know that Peruzzi depicted an arrangement of stars within the fictive vault construction (Figure 5). The vault fresco shows a combination of constellations personified into elegantly classicizing figures. First, the artist filled the ten blue hexagonal spandrels with the twelve signs of the standard zodiac whose depictions reference Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Leo and Aquarius occupy the shorter walls, while the other ten zodiac symbols fill the remaining eight positions. Some of the hexagonal compartments additionally accommodate mythological figures that represent the seven known planets—Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Apollo (the sun), and Diana (the moon), which were understood in this time period to be orbiting the Earth.¹⁹ The pairing

of planet-deity plus zodiac symbol therefore indicates specific orbital positions of those planets as they occupied particular zodiacal houses in the sky.



Figure 5. Baldassarre Peruzzi, vault fresco in the Loggia of Galatea, 1510–11. Villa Farnesina, Rome, Italy. © SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

Peruzzi additionally filled fourteen golden triangular compartments in the ceiling with an assortment of non-zodiacal constellations whose personifications and attributes again allude to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. According to Mary Quinlan-McGrath, Peruzzi's selection of these extra-zodiacal constellations depended on the work of Manilius and Aratus, both classical authorities on astronomy, whose writings were published in the *Scriptores astronomici veteres* printed by Aldus Manutius in Venice in 1499 with wood-block illustrations (Figure 6).²⁰ Couching the science of astronomy in recognizable figures from classical mythology, the vault fresco in the Loggia of Galatea offers a quintessential expression of a humanistic approach to natural history.²¹

To complete the cycle, Peruzzi gave visual prominence to four additional non-zodiacal constellations in the two large horizontal panels in the vault's center: Ursa Minor on one end, represented as a maiden driving a chariot pulled by plough oxen, and, on the other, Perseus, Pegasus, and Andromeda (Figure 7). Perseus is depicted as the Ovidian hero beheading Medusa, surrounded, in turn, by the petrified victims the Gorgon had turned to stone. Pegasus, who Ovid tells us had sprung from the blood of Medusa, rises from the horizon. Andromeda, a constellation always found near to Perseus and Pegasus in the night's sky, is depicted as a winged figure of Fame, flying above the whole composition as she makes triumphant music.

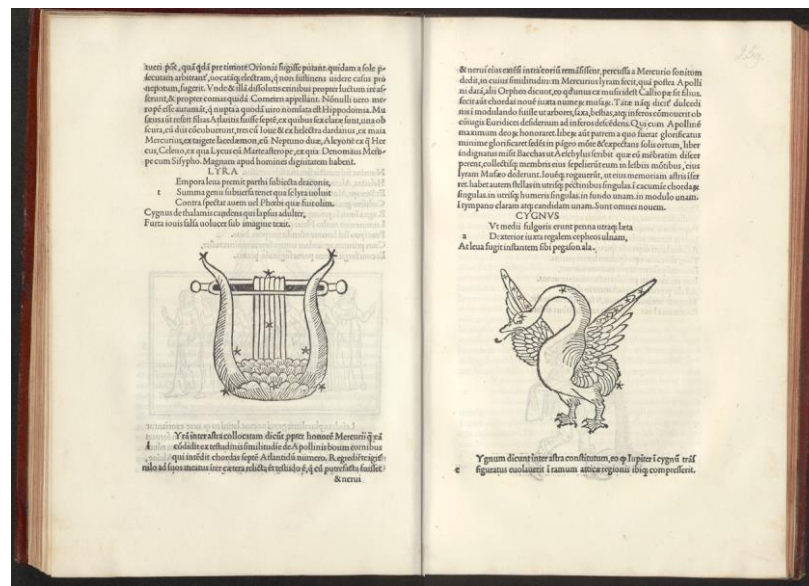


Figure 6. Aldus Manutius, *Scriptores astronomici veteres* (Venice, 1499), Rare Book and Special Collections, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. [Incun. 1499 F57 QB41]. Image in the public domain.



Figure 7. Baldassarre Peruzzi, *Perseus and Medusa, Pegasus, and Andromeda (Fame)*, detail from the vault fresco in the Loggia of Galatea. © SCALA/ Art Resource, NY.

To represent stellar bodies in a vault fresco like this was not unusual in the Italian context. The night’s sky is a recurring decorative motif in medieval and early modern art, and examples abound in the Byzantine tradition as well. The vault mosaic of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna is one early instance from the fifth century. Much later, in the fourteenth century, Giotto (d. 1337) painted an eternal starry night with lapis lazuli and gold in the Scrovegni chapel in Padova (Figure 8). His eight-pointed stars symbolize the eighth day (eternity) and shimmer like gems in a jewel-box against the ultramarine background. Closer to Peruzzi’s time and place, we may point to the original ceiling decoration of the Sistine chapel that Piermatteo d’Amelia (1445–1508) completed in 1481, decades before Michelangelo painted over it (Figure 9). The original Sistine ceiling

showed a starry sky in blue and gold, but unlike Giotto's chapel, its stellar bodies were arranged to reflect the visible material cosmos. As Florian Métral recently proposed, Piermatteo d'Amelia's pictorial cycle likely represented highly specific constellations such as Cancer, Leo, Virgo, and Libra that, together in their particular arrangement, showed the heavens visible in Rome on August 15th, the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary to whom the papal chapel was dedicated.²² Peruzzi's first recorded pictorial commission was a celestial vault fresco. Although the work is no longer extant, we know that the cupola he painted in 1502 in the chapel of Saint John the Baptist inside Siena cathedral was "entirely colored in blue, adorned with stars and the twelve signs of the Zodiac, in semi-relief and gilded."²³

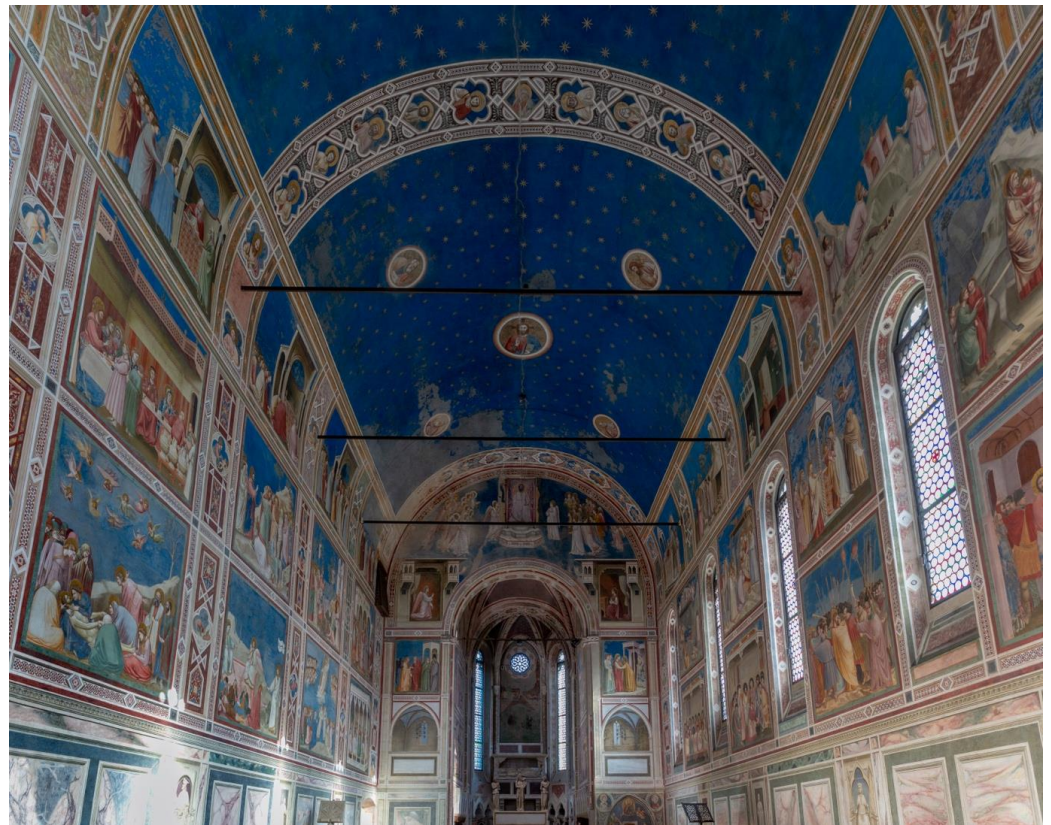


Figure 8. Giotto, Scrovegni Chapel, 1305. Padova, Italy. © Steven Zucker <https://www.smarthistory.org>. [Accessed 1 September 2023].

Piermatteo d'Amelia's vault fresco from the Sistine chapel offers a particularly meaningful precedent for interpreting Peruzzi's later project at the Chigi villa. Previous investigations of the astrological vault fresco in the Chigi villa have determined how the arrangement of stars in this celestial chart, too, captures a unique moment in time and place. Aby Warburg, Richard Förster, Fritz Saxl, and Mary Quinlan-McGrath, among others, have identified how the constellations that Peruzzi represented in fact pinpoint the birthday of the villa's owner, Agostino Chigi, an event that took place in Siena around 9:30 p.m. on 29 November 1466.²⁴ This astonishing hypothesis that the vault fresco was a personalized star-chart was solidified further when Ingrid Rowland discovered Chigi's baptismal record in the handwriting of his father Mariano listing the exact date and time of the child's birth.²⁵



Figure 9. Piermatteo d’Amelia (attr.), Design for the Sistine chapel ceiling, ca. 1481. Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe, inv. 711A. Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy © SCALA/ Art Resource, NY.

So how exactly does Peruzzi’s vault painting act as a natal horoscope? Historical positions of stellar bodies are easy to calculate and visualize now thanks to mobile phone applications like *Stellarium*, which is the program I have used here to simulate the night’s sky over Siena at the date and time in question. Central Italian astronomers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries would have used stellar tables and instruments like the astrolabe to divine the same. Facing due South, one immediately notices how the constellation of Perseus is at the sky’s zenith right at this moment (9:30pm), clutching the severed head of Medusa in his hand (Figure 10a). Algol, the brightest star in the Perseus constellation that forms one of Medusa’s two eyes, is closest to the Meridian line as well as the sky’s zenith at this time, which probably explains why Peruzzi gave it such prominence in the vault fresco’s overall composition. Turning around and facing due North now, we see along the same Meridian line the constellation of Ursa Minor, which includes the North Star *Polaris* (Figure 10b).²⁶ The logic behind Peruzzi giving this constellation, too, such a place of prominence in the vault fresco seems understandable given its dominant position in the northern sky. Together, the central panels in the vault form abstract representations of the Meridian line as it appeared in this time and place, implicitly echoing the loggia’s North-South orientation in the architectural plan. In addition to these two dominant constellations dotting the Meridian line, the central panels depict Pegasus and the winged figure of Fame, which I believe represents Andromeda. These constellations are not only associated closely with Perseus and Medusa in classical mythology, but they are also found nearby Perseus in the night’s sky when we turn due West (Figure 10c). Andromeda is just below Perseus, and Pegasus is closer to the horizon line. Peruzzi’s stylized depictions in the vault’s large central panels then mirror the actual arrangements of constellations that were observable at the recorded time and place of Agostino Chigi’s birth.

Peruzzi’s celestial map specifies time and place further by distributing the figures of the planets in particular zodiacal houses. The figures representing the seven known planets are paired carefully with zodiacal symbols to indicate their orbital positions in the sky. Jupiter is paired with Taurus in the hexagonal spandrel, for example, reflecting the planet’s true location in the night’s sky at the time and place of Chigi’s birth (Figure 11, see also Figure 10a).

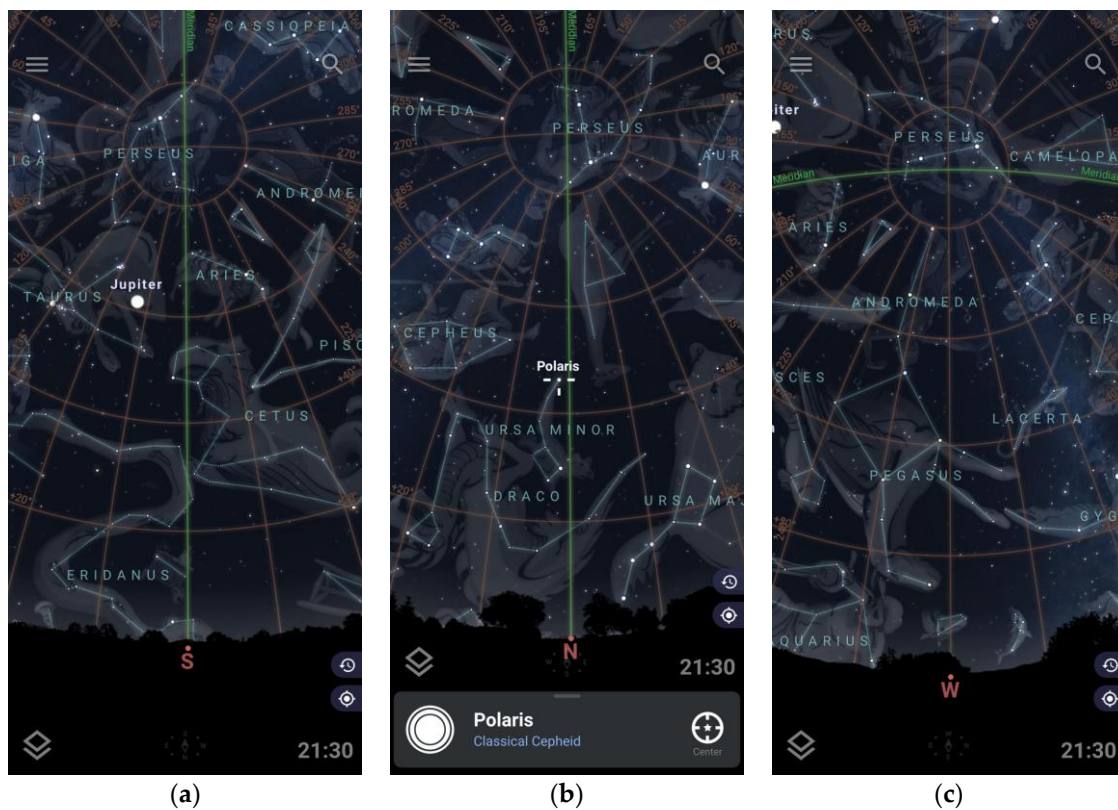


Figure 10. Constellations above Siena at 9:30 p.m. on 29 November 1466. (a) Facing South; (b) facing North, with the north star Polaris highlighted; (c) facing West. © Stellarium.

One notable anomaly in this otherwise meticulous mapping of the observable heavens is the figure of Diana (the Moon). The goddess is shown in the house of Virgo, which is not actually where the moon would have been seen at the time of Chigi’s birth (see Figure 3). This scientific “inaccuracy” was in all probability a reference to Chigi’s astrological Ascendant (conception horoscope), traditionally concerned with the position of the moon not at the time of the child’s birth, but at the time of their conception.²⁷ Virgo was considered a particularly auspicious Ascendant sign, conventionally tied to the figure of *Fortuna* (Fortune) in this time period.²⁸

The vault fresco’s star-chart as a whole, then, expresses more than the patron’s academic interests in the science of astronomy. The composition was not just a stylized copy of the observable night’s sky above Siena at the time of Chigi’s birth—it was a personalized horoscope meant to celebrate the good fortune of Agostino Chigi, produced in a time and in a culture that took astrology and classical learning very seriously.

While the author of the star-chart’s program remains unknown to date, the artist himself likely provided some input, as Peruzzi is said to have possessed a working knowledge of astronomy.²⁹ It is highly likely however, that he also consulted with Cornelio Benigno da Viterbo, Agostino Chigi’s personal secretary, respected for his deep expertise in Greek texts and astronomy.³⁰ Another candidate is Francesco Priuli (d. 1515), a Venetian intellectual who had written a treatise on the horoscope of Pope Leo X (1475–1521), who was under Agostino Chigi’s personal care when he died in Rome just a few years later.³¹ A third name often considered is Giorgio Benigno Salviati (1445–1520), a Bosnian humanist scholar in the employ of Agostino Chigi, studying the reform of the Roman calendar.³² In truth, any number of well-educated visitors to the villa in this time period would have been able to understand the painting’s overall subject matter, even if they were unable to identify the image as Chigi’s birth horoscope without any guidance from the patron. This is a kind of work that invites slow looking, a pattern of viewing that involves careful consultation of

scientific sources as well as sources on classical mythology. The fresco asks that one lingers, stares, and considers the imagery with care.



Figure 11. Baldassarre Peruzzi, Jupiter in the house of Taurus, detail from the vault fresco in the Loggia of Galatea. © Alamy Stock Photo.

The painting cycle's extraordinary representational content has, understandably, led modern scholars, too, to set out on an iconographically driven path, focusing on the scientific accuracy of Peruzzi's astronomical projections. One result of this singular attention to subject matter has been the advancement of interdisciplinary dialogue. Important points of connections have emerged between this work and Renaissance celestial mapping, time-keeping methods, scientific knowledge, and beliefs in astrology.³³ Yet, as Vasari's first-person testimony revealed, seeing the vault fresco involves not only perceiving its subject matter intellectually, but also confronting the material work of art in a physical way. The interactive *materiality* of this Peruzzian project disrupts the progressive contemplation of the image's iconography, offering an additional set of interpretive possibilities. In what follows, I take seriously the work's real-spatial presence. I aim to show how the beholder's embodied experience of metaphoric petrification occupied a much larger part of the artwork's overall aim than was previously recognized.

4. The Petrified Beholder

To understand how Peruzzi's vault fresco in the Loggia of Galatea contends with the haptic experiences of the situated viewer, I'd like to explore further the fresco's unfolding spatial presence and the theme of petrification, especially as it recurs in Italian literary culture. In describing the stupefying effect that the vault fresco had on Titian, Vasari made use of the metaphor of petrification to further his own narrative agenda, elevating Tuscan *disegno* above the Venetian *colore* in painting methodology. But the viewer's somatic encounter with the vault fresco in the loggia reveals more than just an artist's skillful use of *disegno*. The metaphor of petrification traditionally held another connotation in Renaissance culture, especially in Italian poetry, where it long served a highly specific purpose.

The petrified victims of the Gorgon Medusa frequently appear as stand-ins for unrequited love in Tuscan poetry. Examples abound in the works of authors such as Guido Cavalcanti (1250–1300) and Petrarch (1304–74).³⁴ But the amorous songs by Dante (d. 1321)

deserve special attention here for their pioneering creativity and influence. In four innovative lyric poems known together as the *rime petrose* (stony rhymes), Dante portrayed a frustrated suitor whose heart was turned to cold, hard stone by rejections from his beloved—a beautiful unyielding woman whom he simply calls *donna Petra*.³⁵ Although he makes no explicit reference to Medusa or Perseus, Dante invokes their legend and employs it as the basic idea underlying the entire sequence of his four compositions as he compares *donna Petra*'s indifference to the powers of Medusa's petrifying gaze. Stony puns and metaphors of petrification dominate the *rime petrose*, but we see the analogy most concretely in the third poem, "*Amor, tu vedi ben che questa donna*". To illustrate their general tenor, here are the first three *stanze* that open that work:

Love, you see perfectly well that this lady
cares nothing for your power at any time,
though you be accustomed to lord it over other ladies:
and since she has been aware of being my lady
because of your light that shines in my face,
she has made herself Lady Cruelty,
so that she does not seem to have the heart of a woman
but of whatever beast keeps its love coldest:
for in the warm weather and in the cold
she seems to me exactly like a lady
carved from some lovely precious stone
by the hand of some master carver of stone

And I, who am constant (even more than a stone)
in obeying you, for the beauty of a lady,
I carry hidden away the wound from that stone
with which you struck me as if I had been a stone
that had caused you pain for a long time,
so that the blow reached my heart, where I have turned to stone.
And never was there found any precious stone
that from the brightness of the sun or its own light
had so much virtue or light
that it could help me against this stone,
that she not lead me with her coldness
to a place where I will be dead and cold.

Lord, you know that in the freezing cold
water becomes crystalline stone
under the mountain wind where the great cold is,
and the air always turns into the cold
element there, so that water is queen
there, because of the cold.
Just so, before her expression that is all cold,
my blood freezes over always, in all weather,
and the care that so shortens my time for me
turns everything into fluid cold

that issues from me through the lights
where her pitiless light came in. (. . .)

*Amor, tu vedi ben che questa donna
la tua virtù non cura in alcun tempo
che suol de l'altre belle farsi donna;
e poi s'accorse ch'ell'era mia donna
per lo tuo raggio ch'al volto mi luce,
d'ogne crudelità si fece donna;
sì che non par ch'ell'abbia cor di donna
ma di qual fiera l'ha d'amor più freddo;
ché per lo tempo caldo e per lo freddo
mi fa semblante pur come una donna
che fosse fatta d'una bella petra
per man di quei che me' intagliasse in petra.*

*E io, che son costante più che petra
in ubidirti per bieltà di donna,
porto nascoso il colpo de la petra,
con la qual tu mi desti come a petra
che t'avesse innoiato lungo tempo,
tal che m'andò al core ov'io son petra.
E mai non si scoperse alcuna petra
o da splendor di sole o da sua luce,
che tanta avesse né virtù né luce
che mi potesse atar da questa petra,
sì ch'ella non mi meni col suo freddo
colà dov'io sarò di morte freddo.*

*Segnor, tu sai che per argente freddo
l'acqua diventa cristallina petra
là sotto tramontana ov'è il gran freddo
e l'aere sempre in elemento freddo
vi si converte, sì che l'acqua è donna
in quella parte per cagion del freddo:
così dinanzi dal semblante freddo
mi ghiaccia sopra il sangue d'ogne tempo,
e quel pensiero che m'accorcchia il tempo
mi si converte tutto in corpo freddo,
che m'esce poi per mezzo de la luce
là ond'entrò la dispietata luce. (. . .)³⁶*

Through works like this filled with lapidary imagery, Dante's *rime petrose* firmly established the trope of unrequited love and the petrified body of the suitor subdued by his beloved's cold indifference. This usage becomes almost commonplace in Renaissance love poetry, thanks to the rhymes of many other writers such as Cavalcanti, Petrarch, Angelo

Poliziano (1454–94), and Serafino Ciminelli dall’Aquila (1466–1500), men who were equally inspired by the sense of frustrated passion that Dante depicted in the *rime petrose*.³⁷ Among these poets who profited from the petrification metaphor in their work, the improvisational rhymes by Serafino Ciminelli dall’Aquila may have been most familiar to Agostino Chigi, who is documented to have paid personally for the poet’s funeral in Rome in 1500, held in the church of Santa Maria del Popolo, possibly inside the Chigi family chapel.³⁸ Sonnet eleven by Serafino, for example, includes overt references to the Medusa effect:

That mortal enemy of nature
 who dared to hurt all and the gods several times
 is here converted to marble by her
 with a sweet gaze that rages souls:
 One day she decided to hurt without care
 with those ardent Medusan gazes
 and those high mountains, which because of her
 men are transformed into hard stone.
 Oh how love has varied its style
 here it lies cold, and there was such fierce ardor,
 there was a light spirit, now heavy and vile.
 But such an example terrifies everyone
 and there is never anyone so fine
 who does not presume to be superior.

*Quel nimico mortal de la natura
 Che ardí ferir piú volte omni e dei
 In marmo è qui converso da costei,
 Che col dolce mirar gli animi fura,
 Ferir la volse un dì senza aver cura
 A quelli ardenti sguardi medusei,
 Et a questi alti monti, che per lei
 d’omini son conversi in pietra dura.
 O quanto amore ha variato stile
 qui freddo iace, e fu sì fiero ardore,
 fu lieve spirito, or ponderosa e vile.
 Ma un tale exempio a ognun metta terrore
 né sia già mai nissun tanto sottile
 che non presume aver superiore.*³⁹

Dante’s *rime petrose* series is relevant for our analysis of Peruzzi’s vault fresco not only because of its evocation of the Medusan myth, but also because it juxtaposes the petrification scene against a starry sky. The first poem in the *petrose* series, “*io son venuto al punto dela rota*”, opens, for example, with a vivid description of the heavenly bodies in their astronomical motions:

I have come to the point on the wheel
 where the horizon gives birth at sunset to the twinned heaven,
 and the star of love is kept from us
 by the sun’s ray that straddles her so transversely
 that she is veiled; and that planet

that strengthens the frost shows itself to us entirely,
 along the great arc
 where each of the seven casts little shadow:
 and yet my mind casts off
 not one of the thoughts of love that burden me,
 mind harder than stone to hold fast an image of stone. (...)

*Io son venuto al punto de la rota
 che l'orizzonte, quando il sol si corca,
 ci partorisce il geminato cielo,
 e la stella d'amor ci sta remota
 per lo raggio lucente che la 'nforca
 sì di traverso, che le si fa velo;
 e quel pianeta che conforta il gelo
 si mostra tutto a noi per lo grand'arco
 nel qual ciascun di sette fa poca ombra:
 e però non disgombra
 un sol penser d'amore, ond'io son carco,
 la mente mia, ch'è più dura che petra
 in tener forte imagine di petra. (...)*⁴⁰

Dante describes the motions of the seven planets against a starry early-evening sky in strong contrast to the burdened poet's metaphoric petrification; his stiffly immobilized body is at odds with his mind filled with passion and disturbed energy. It was this petrified body situated against the heavens that the vault fresco by Peruzzi arguably invited its viewers to inhabit. The carefully divined star-chart becomes a backdrop to this performative encounter. Stupefied by the virtual realism of Peruzzi's illusionistic construction, the beholder is encouraged to connect their haptic experiences with the petrification suffered by Medusa's victims. In this "meeting of matter and imagination", the viewer comes to complete the work by becoming a participant in the narrative.

The subjects of failed love and the pursuit of an unattainable woman happened to be brutally relevant to the patron and primary viewer of the fresco, Agostino Chigi, precisely in these months when work on the Loggia of Galatea was in progress. For some time, Chigi had been courting to marry Margherita Gonzaga (1487–1537), the daughter of marquis Francesco Gonzaga of Mantua (1466–1519).⁴¹ This would have been Chigi's second marriage to a much younger woman, having lost his first wife Margherita Saracini (d. 1508) some years earlier. But the wedding was ultimately not to be. The courtship ended definitively by 1513 when the Gonzaga family concluded that Chigi's merchant-banker status was unworthy of their circle, no matter how great his wealth.

Historians have long suspected that the Loggia of Galatea's decorative program was closely tied to this humiliating event in the patron's personal life. Michael Hirst and Christof Thoenes have drawn connections between the wall paintings in the Loggia of Galatea and this failed attempt at social ascent through marriage on the part of Chigi.⁴² The *Triumph of Galatea* by Raphael (1483–1520) and *Polyphemus* by Sebastiano del Piombo (1485–1547) both touch upon the theme of unrequited love—the clumsy giant Polyphemus sings a love song to the beautiful sea-nymph Galatea as she rides away across the waves in a chariot drawn by dolphins, cruelly laughing at his uncouth song (Figure 12). The scenes in the lunettes below the vault painted by Sebastiano del Piombo around 1512 also participate in this conversation. They depict moralizing Ovidian allegories about passions and vices that are difficult to resist. Scenes in the lunettes caution against actions and desires that could upset human lives for the worse.⁴³ Visitors to the loggia confronting these works are

meant empathize and perhaps even find humor in the patron's self-effacing confessions of failed love. Painted soon after Peruzzi completed his ceiling fresco, these murals build on and strengthen the poetic metaphor of the petrified lover.



Figure 12. Raphael's *Triumph of Galatea* (1511–12) and Sebastiano del Piombo's *Polyphemus* (1512) in the Loggia of Galatea. Photo by the author.

Attendant objects in the Chigi collection on display in the immediate environment of the loggia further participate in this amorous dialogue. Immediately outside of the Loggia of Galatea in the villa's garden, for example, Chigi had installed a prized ancient sculpture group that depicted *Pan Seducing Daphnis* (Figure 13).⁴⁴ In classical mythology, Pan (Faun) was the half-man half-goat god of the wilderness who lived in Arcadia, the chief of the satyrs who often lusted after nymphs and beautiful mortals. The shepherd Daphnis was the son of Hermes (Mercury), praised for his youthful beauty.⁴⁵ Here, Pan instructs Daphnis on how to play the panpipe, but the gesture is only a thinly veiled sexual advance in the guise of musical instruction. The real subject is the unwelcome attention and the unreciprocated feelings of attraction, very much in keeping with the paintings depicted in the Loggia of Galatea. The significant age gap between the two figures implicitly recalls Chigi's personal story also. Peruzzi quotes this sculptural work in the vault fresco, painting the distinct face of Pan below Perseus' feet, inserting him among the group of petrified men (Figure 14). Compounding the thematic continuity between this sculpture group and the loggia's pictorial program is another story about Daphnis that Ovid shared in the *Metamorphoses*, where the young shepherd, having spurned the advances of a jealous nymph, is turned to stone himself.⁴⁶



Figure 13. *Pan Seducing Daphnis*, 2nd century CE. marble, Museo Nazionale Romano Palazzo Altemps, inv. 8571, Rome. Formerly in Agostino Chigi's private collection. Photo by the author.



Figure 14. Baldassarre Peruzzi, detail from the vault fresco in the Loggia of Galatea. © SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

The classical and contemporary works of art placed in and around the loggia, then, couch the patron's autobiography in mythological terms. Peruzzi's ceiling fresco provides the punchline of this inside-joke. The image of Perseus and Medusa suspended above at the summit of the hall against a starry background is meant to solicit a somatic consciousness in the beholder, petrifying and immobilizing their bodies as they shift their gaze to look

upon the nymph Galatea taking flight away from the giant Polyphemus. We are made to reflexively perceive the “thingness” of our own bodies and become aware of our very own acts of seeing—recalling Dante’s petrified lover in a humorous play between flesh and stone. Together, the works displayed in the Loggia of Galatea offer an intimate portrait of the patron, showcasing at once his financial wealth, artistic taste, classical learning, scientific knowledge, astrological fate, sense of humor, and even his misfortunes in love.

5. Conclusions

Highlighting the haptic visuality of Peruzzi’s fresco cycle, my goal was to underscore historic viewing practices that helped shape the multi-faceted discourse around *materiality* in the early modern period. Artists like Peruzzi were deeply invested in strategies of interactive display, apprehending the beholder’s body as a material medium that they could mold, move, and hold in place. The scene of Perseus and Medusa in the summit of the Loggia of Galatea must be understood as an unfolding spatial presence that heightens the beholder’s haptic sensibilities by creating a strong connection between their body and the representational content, activating an inner imaginative vision concerning metaphors of petrification. The viewing experience evokes “stoniness”—or the material properties and characteristics of stone—not through the display of natural substances literally, but indirectly via a visual rendering skillfully crafted. Literary allusions, too, color the audience’s understanding of “stoniness.” The interactive *materiality* of Peruzzi’s vault fresco, then, disrupts the progressive contemplation of the image’s astronomical iconography, offering an additional set of interpretive possibilities. This, too, was how early modern artists grappled with *materiality*. Meaning may be inherent sometimes in their artwork’s physical substance, but sometimes it may be found also in the complex interaction between the work of art and beholder, in the meeting of matter and imagination.

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Notes

- ¹ On the Villa Farnesina and its notorious patron, see (Hermanin 1927; Frommel 1961; Coffin 1979; Frommel 2003; Rowland 1986, 2005; Turner 2022; Barbieri and Zuccari 2023).
- ² (Vasari 1976), IV: 318. “E quello che è di stupenda maraviglia, vi si vede una loggia in sul giardino dipinta da Baldassarre con le storie di Medusa quando ella converte gl’uomini in sasso, che non può immaginarsi più bella, et appresso quando Perseo le taglia la testa, con molte altre storie né peducci di quella volta: e l’ornamento tirato in prospettiva di stucchi e colori contraffatti è tanto naturale e vivo, che anco agl’artefici eccellenti pare di rilievo. E mi ricorda che menando il cavaliere Tiziano, pittore eccellentissimo et onorato, a vedere quella opera, egli per niun modo voleva credere che quella fusse pittura: per che, mutato veduta, ne rimase maravigliato.” Unless otherwise noted, all English translations hereafter are mine.
- ³ (Pliny 1855), XXXV: 36. According to Pliny, Parrhasius “entered into a pictorial contest with Zeuxis, who represented some grapes, painted so naturally that the birds flew towards the spot where the picture was exhibited. Parrhasius, on the other hand, exhibited a curtain, drawn with such singular truthfulness, that Zeuxis, elated with the judgment which had been passed upon his work by the birds, haughtily demanded that the curtain should be drawn aside to let the picture be seen. Upon finding his mistake, with a great degree of ingenuous candor he admitted that he had been surpassed, for that whereas he himself had only deceived the birds, Parrhasius had deceived him, an artist.” Translation by John Bostock.
- ⁴ Leonard Barkan has suggested the notion of mutability as one of the main points of appeal of Ovid for Renaissance readers. (Barkan 1986), p. 172.
- ⁵ See (Holly 2013), pp. 15–17.
- ⁶ See (Holly 2013), p. 15.
- ⁷ See (Holly 2013), pp. 15–16.
- ⁸ On how the material turn overhauled art historical scholarship, see (Athanasoglou-Kallmyer 2019), pp. 6–7.
- ⁹ See for instance the work by Pamela Smith and her Making and Knowing Project collaborative research team. www.makingandknowing.org, accessed on 1 September 2023. See also (Cook et al. 2014; Anderson et al. 2015).
- ¹⁰ For example, (Iser 1980; Gell 1998).

- 11 (Gombrich 1960; Baxandall 1972; Kemp 1985; Fried 1980; Shearman 1992; Belting 1997; Frangenberg and Williams 2006).
12 (Latour 2005; Law and Hassard 1999). See also (Ingold 2007; Weinryb 2013).
13 (Campbell and Cole 2012), pp. 480–81. See also (Weil Garris 1983; Gardner Coates 2000; Corretti 2015; Cieri Via 2021).
14 (Shearman 1992), pp. 44–58. As Shearman noted, Renaissance art was often “transitive” in this way, just as a transitive verb
requires an object.
15 (Cellini 2002), pp. 30–31. Cellini mentions his conversations with Peruzzi in his *Discorso dell’architettura* (1776), a work initially
written to be included in his *Trattati dell’oreficeria e della scultura* (1568). On the popularity of Perseus and Medusa as a subject
matter in Renaissance art, see (Cieri Via 2021; van Eck 2016).
16 (Cole 2010). On iconological approaches to artistic materials, see also (Gramaccini and Raff 2003). On the use of bronze more
specifically, see (Weinryb 2016).
17 (Walker Bynum 2011), p. 28; (Kumler 2019).
18 (Warburg 1920), pp. 33–34. (Quinlan-McGrath 2013), esp. pp. 114–18 and pp. 173–80. See also (Förster 1880; Saxl 1934; Beer 1967;
Hartner 1967; Quinlan-McGrath 1984; Lippincott 1990, 1991; Quinlan-McGrath 1995; Dekker 2018; Barbieri 2022).
19 See (Durling and Martinez 1990), p. 8.
20 See (Quinlan-McGrath 1995), pp. 66–69.
21 (Blume 2014), pp. 333–98, especially pp. 380–83. An important precedent for this type of stylized astrological representation was
the Sala dei Mesi in Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara by Ercole Roberti from circa 1470.
22 See (Métal 2021), pp. 196, 207.
23 “(…) la Tribuna fabbricata a volta rotonda tutta colorata d’azzurro, ornata di stelle, e de’ dodici segni del Zodiaco a mezzo rilievo,
e indorati.” Alfonso Landi, *Racconto di pitture, di statue, e d’altre opera eccellenti, che si ritrovano nel tempo della cattedrale di Siena*
(1655), pp. 30–38. Biblioteca Comunale, Siena (MS C.II.30). The paintings do not survive. Payment records to Peruzzi for this
commission are found in Siena, Archivio del Opera del Duomo di Siena 718, *Debitori e Creditori*, 593. See also (Huppert 2015),
pp. 30–31.
24 Saxl and Beer were the first to determine that the ceiling represented Chigi’s personal horoscope. (Saxl 1934), pp. 61–67.
25 (Rowland 1984a). The baptismal record is in the Archivio di Stato di Siena, Pieve di San Giovanni 2 fol. 69r. “Agostino Andrea di
Mariano Chigi si batezo a di 30 di novembre 1466 e naque a di 29 di deto messe a ore 21 1/2 e fu compare Giovanni Salvani”.
26 Peruzzi’s choice to show Ursa Minor as a maiden driving a chariot recalls an association that ancient Roman authors frequently
made when discussing the constellation. (Quinlan-McGrath 1984), pp. 97–98.
27 See (Quinlan-McGrath 1995), pp. 65–69.
28 See (Quinlan-McGrath 2013), pp. 177–80.
29 Peruzzi would later put his knowledge to use when he collaborated on the publication of Sigismondo Fanti’s curious little fortune
telling book called *Triumpho di Fortuna* (Fanti 1527) dedicated to Pope Clement VII. On Peruzzi’s studies in mathematics and
astronomy, see also (Vasari 1879), IV: 604.
30 See (Rowland 1986), pp. 714–15; (Turner 2022), p. 25.
31 See (Coffin 1979), p. 99.
32 (Quinlan-McGrath 2013), p. 170. On Salviati, see also, <https://800anniunipd.it/en/storia/dragisic-juraj-giorgio-benigno-salviati/>
[consulted 1 August 2023].
33 See note 18 above.
34 Petrarch made much use of the petrification metaphor for the convenient opportunities it offered to create puns on his name. His
beloved Laura is also compared frequently to Medusa. Poem 37 of his *Rime sparse*. “(…) *Andrei non altramente/a veder lei che ‘l*
volto di Medusa,/che fecea marmo diventar la gente” [“I would not go to see her otherwise than to see the face of Medusa, which
made people become marble.”] (*Rime sparse* 179, 9–11). (Sturm-Maddox 1985), pp. 86–94.
35 (Webb 2003; Durling and Martinez 1990; Comens 1986; Freccero 1972, 1979, pp. 33–46; Mazzotta 1979; Sheehan 1967).
36 English translation and Italian text from (Durling and Martinez 1990), pp. 282–85.
37 See for example, Petrarch’s *Canzone* 179. (Durling 1979), pp. 324–25.
38 (Cugnoni 1883), VI: 149–50. See also (Ciminelli 1894; Ciminelli and Rossi 2002).
39 (Ciminelli 1894), p. 49. Translation is mine.
40 (Durling and Martinez 1990), pp. 278–79.
41 On Agostino Chigi’s failed courtship of Margherita Gonzaga, see (Rowland 1984b), p. 195; (Dudley 1995; Luchterhand 1996).
42 (Hirst 1981), p. 34, note 10; (Thoenes 1986, 2005).
43 For the lunette scenes by Sebastiano, treated all too hastily here, see (Barbieri 2022).

- ⁴⁴ (Barbieri and Zuccari 2023), pp. 507–9; (Barbieri 2014), pp. 199–211. Several ancient Roman marble copies of this sculpture group exist. While scholars generally assume that the copy housed in the Palazzo Altemps is the one from the former Chigi collection, the Uffizi museum’s version is also a candidate.
- ⁴⁵ This sculptural group is possibly an ancient Roman copy of a lost work by the Greek sculptor Heliodorus, mentioned by Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History* XXXVI: 29.
- ⁴⁶ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* IV:275.

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