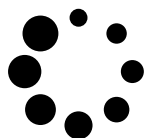


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by Lucia Corrain

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Art and Artifice: The Machine of Immersivity in the Camera dei Giganti/ Chamber Of The Giants



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Abstract

Art in general, more than other fields, appears to lie at the heart of immersivity. As argued by Oliver Grau, it is art that still deploys a considerable genealogy with examples that resonate with the immersivity as proposed in contemporaneity. It is the current immersivity that constructs “constellations” which, as Benjamin put it, dynamically enact “the history of art [as] the history of prophesies [...] which can be written only starting from the point of view of an immediate present,” where “every present is determined by those images that are synchronous to it: each now is the now of a given knowability.” In the art history field, however, it is almost mandatory to re-evoke a fully mannerist ambience where “painting” creates – without the aid of particular instruments – the near-total immersion, acting fully on the passional dimension. The case in point is the Camera dei Giganti/Chamber of the Giants, made by Giulio Romano between 1532 and 1536 in Palazzo Te in Mantua. A stunning illusionist artifice that catapults the viewers into the heart of the ongoing event, to produce in them a sense of awe and estrangement beyond the “frame.”

Keywords [Image](#) [Immersivity](#) [Giulio Romano](#) [Painting](#) [Fiction](#)

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A piece many years
in doing and now newly performed by that rare
Italian master, Julio Romano, who, had he himself
eternity and could put breath into his work, would
beguile Nature of her custom, so perfectly he is her
ape.¹

By way of introduction

Undoubtedly – in a chronological field conventionally defined as Mannerism – the Camera dei Giganti/ Chamber of the Giants, frescoed between 1532 and 1536 by Giulio Romano and his collaborators in Palazzo Te in Mantua, occupies a position of great importance. The highly original solution adopted by the Roman artist, already acknowledged in his day and age, in the light of today's immersive technologies, can indeed manifest all its extraordinary innovative force.²

Virtual reality, as we know it today, is obtained by means of a digital instrument capable of generating “three-dimensional” scenes, narratives and landscapes within which subjects have the impression of actually moving and interacting with the ambience surrounding them. Thanks to the evolution in computer graphics and the implementation of the computational power, representations ever

1 W. Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale* (1611) (New York-London-Toronto-Sydney: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1998): V.II.95-100, 219.

2 The bibliography concerning Palazzo Te is currently rather substantial, but it was Ernst Gombrich who took this whole building outside of the shadows in which it found itself. In 1933 he dedicated to it his graduation thesis at the University of Vienna, E. Gombrich, “Der Palazzo del Te,” *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien*, no. 8 (1934): 79-104; “Versuch einer Deutung,” *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien*, no. 9 (1936): 121-150; it. trans. A.M. Conforti, *Giulio Romano. Il palazzo del Te* (Mantua: Tre Lune, 1984). Cfr. among the many others F. Hart, *Giulio Romano* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958); K.W. Forster, R.J. Tuttle, “The Palazzo del Te,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 30, no. 4 (1971): 267-293; A. Belluzzi, W. Capezzali, *Il palazzo dei lucidi inganni: Palazzo Te a Mantova* (Florence: Centro Studi Architettura Ouroboros, 1976); E. Verheyen, *The Palazzo del Te in Mantua: Images of Love and Politics* (Baltimore-London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1977); A. Belluzzi, M. Tafuri, eds., *Giulio Romano* (Milan: Electa, 1989, exhibition catalogue); A. Belluzzi, *Palazzo Te a Mantova*, 2 vols. (Modena: Cosimo Panini, 1998). About the Camera dei Giganti/Chamber of Giants specifically, cfr. R. Piccinelli, *I Giganti: Palazzo Te* (Milan: Skira, 2020).

closer to reality can be obtained. Nonetheless, so-called “reality media” are not yet a “perfect” *mimesis* of the real.³

The relationship between the current immersive devices and the more dated optical instruments of the so-called pre-cinematographic phase has already been widely brought to light: it is the case of the scene of the eighteenth century⁴ and the stereoscope of the subsequent century⁵ that share, with the more recent immersive technologies, the question of a “channelled aesthetic perception.”⁶ In rather similar fashion, at the pictorial level, the *Quadraturismo* and the *trompe-l’œil* raise questions relating to both the continuity between the space of experience and the space represented, and to the methods of construction of a gaze “from the inside” in which proximity allows for the perception of estheses, verdicts and passion.

Oliver Grau⁷ – the scholar who perhaps more than any other has outlined a genealogy of immersivity – has identified a possible origin even in Pompeian painting, to then look to the Renaissance and Baroque illusionist spaces, all the way down to the more recent scenarios

3 E. Modena, *Nelle storie: Arte, cinema e media immersivi* (Rome: Carocci, 2022); A. Pinotti, “VR, AR, MR, XR,” in *Enciclopedia dell’Arte Contemporanea*, vol. 4 (Rome: Istituto dell’Enciclopedia Italiana “Giovanni Treccani,” 2021): 685-686.

4 O. Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion* (2001), trans. G. Custance (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2003).

5 J. Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press 1992).

6 P. Montani, *Tecnologie della sensibilità: Estetica e immaginazione interattiva* (Milan: Raffaello Cortina, 2014): 25.

7 O. Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, opens his reconnaissance on the Pompeian frescoes, where the creation of a pictorial surface with the simulation of depth generates the effect of an ambience of greater extension than what it is in reality, capturing the gaze of the observer who does not seem to perceive the actual distinction between real space and the space of the image. Grau then lists the subsequent examples: the *Chamber of the Deer* in the Avignon Palace of the Popes (1343); the *Hall of Perspectives* by Baldassare Peruzzi in villa Farnesina (1516), the neoclassical “village rooms” or “sylvans.” The latter is a kind that, “while it dilates to the extreme the portrait of landscape taking it to the dimensions of the environmental room, it applies at the same time scenic criteria relevant to organising the decorations unitarily, with the illusionist effect of the *plein air*,” R. Roli, *Pittura bolognese 1650-1800: Dal Cignani ai Gandolfi* (Bologna: Alfa Edizioni, 1977): 70 [my translation].

(panorama).⁸ Grau, however, does not refer specifically to the striking example of the Chamber of the Giants, where the immersivity reaches a very high level of passionate involvement on the part of the spectator, moreover without resorting to an auxiliary devices (as is the case today with headsets, overalls). A stunning illusionistic artifice defined by Frederick Hart as “surely the most fantastic and frightening creation of the entire Italian Renaissance in any medium”⁹ capable of catapulting the spectator into the heart of the event portrayed; as stated in 1934 by Ernst Gombrich: “into the deafening vortex of a frightening catastrophe,”¹⁰ capable of engendering astonishment and awe.¹¹

Harking back to the renowned words of Walter Benjamin: “the history of art is a history of prophecies” which “can only be written from the standpoint of the immediate, actual present,”¹² where “every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each “now” is the now of a particular recognizability.”¹³ It can be stated that the case we wish to investigate here can be considered in the light of a premise. In short, the machine frescoed in the Chamber of the Giants in Palazzo Te appears to be the height of an illusion that involves the spectator in a dimension that can be defined as being fully immersive.

Moreover, if we carefully observe, in the chamber in question of Palazzo Te, all the “instructions [...] which

8 In 1792 Robert Baker, in London, made the first Panorama, which consists in a circular shaped ambience, where on the interior walls are projected images of times of distant places, offering the chance to the spectators of having a travel experience whilst being “stationary.” Cfr., besides O. Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, also S. Bordini, *Storia del panorama: La visione totale della pittura nel XIX secolo* (Rome: Nuova Cultura, 2009); M. Cometa, *La scrittura delle immagini: Letteratura e cultura visuale* (Milan: Raffaello Cortina, 2012); M. Cometa, *Cultura visuale* (Milan: Raffaello Cortina, 2021). E. Gombrich, *Giulio Romano*: 94, in 1934 had already related the Chamber of the Giants with the nineteenth century panoramas, stating: “that indeed Giulio, and he alone, was the first to try out in a work of art that which is called the hall of the Giants” [my translation].

9 F. Hart, *Giulio Romano*: 32.

10 E. Gombrich, *Giulio Romano*: 79.

11 A. Pinotti, *Alla soglia dell'immagine: Da Narciso alla realtà virtuale* (Turin: Einaudi, 2021): 107-109, in the chapter dedicated to the environment-image states that the Chamber of the Giants is a paradigmatic example, “an illusionistic machine that invites one to reflect on the viewer’s visual act as a participative response to the iconic act.”

12 W. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1991), vol. 1, no. 2:1046-7. Quoted in English in B. Doherty, “Between the Artwork and its ‘Actualization’: A Footnote to Art History in Benjamin’s *Work of Art*,” *Paragraph* 32, no. 3 (2009): 331-358, 336.

13 W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (1982), trans. H. Eiland, K. McLaughlin (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2003): 462-463.

[in the planar paintings] direct the gaze, guide the reading, intimidate and can, at times, seduce the viewer subjecting them to the representation,”¹⁴ have been completely disavowed.¹⁵ They have been totally cancelled. And, not by chance, in their place some decidedly more cogent ones have been created in an interplay of different disciplines, taking one another by the hand, offering a wholly original reading of the Chamber in question that can fully manifest the active nature of perception.

An exceptional visitor

Let us now try to enter the Chamber of the Giants, highlighting its most salient characteristics. And we shall do so starting from an exceptional witness, Giorgio Vasari (Arezzo, 1511-1574), the art historian who was able to visit the Mantuan Palazzo Te on two occasions: the first time when the Chamber of the Giants was under construction; the second when the works had already been completed. His testimony can to all intents and purposes be considered an *ekphrasis* of great efficacy that “overlaps with the pictorial [story], and at times gives the impression of eclipsing it.”¹⁶ Here is the description Vasari gives of the space created and painted by Giulio Romano:

After laying deep, double foundations in that corner, which was in a swampy spot, Giulio had built over that angle a large, round room with extremely thick walls, so that the four corners of the outside walls would be stronger and could support a double vault rounded like an oven. And having done this, since the room had corners, he built here and there all the way around it the doors, windows, and a fireplace of rusticated stones with worn-away edges, which

14 G. Careri, “Prefazione,” in L. Marin, *Opacità della pittura: Sulla rappresentazione nel Quattrocento* (Florence: La Casa Usher, 2012): 7-13.

15 On the role of the frame in the work of art see D. Ferrari, A. Pinotti, eds., *La cornice: Storie, teorie, testi* (Milan: Johan & Levi, 2018) and S. Zuliani, *Spazi e tempi dell’installazione* (Rome: Arshake, 2015).

16 A. Belluzzi, *Giulio Romano*: 446 [my translation]. On the text/image problem cfr. W.J.T. Mitchell, *Image Science: Iconology, Visual Culture, and Media Aesthetics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

were disjointed and crooked almost to the extent that they even seemed to lean over on one side and actually to collapse.¹⁷

Giulio Romano – as can be inferred – gave a particular form to the environment: it is not a “round room,” as Vasari might lead us to believe, but a “a double vault rounded like an oven,” which did not have sharp corners and whose doors and windows were “disjointed and crooked,” which almost certainly means that the windows were closed by painted blinds and the doors were in continuity with respect to the frescoes.

A singular space, which also disposed of a particular flooring, as confirmed by Vasari himself:

He had made the floor with polished river slingstones that ran around the walls, and those on the painting plane, which fell downwards had counterfeited: for a part those painted inwards escaped, and at times were occupied and adorned by grass and at times by larger stones.¹⁸

But, as can well be imagined, it was, in those days, a cobbled floor with slingstones that, albeit creating seamless continuity with the upright walls, did not represent an assurance of a steady support for the visitor.¹⁹

It is not possible, however, to be outside the space to talk about it; you need to traverse it to know it, for

17 G. Vasari, “Giulio Romano,” in *The Lives of the Artists* (1568), trans. J.C. Bondanella, P. Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991): 370. In the first edition by types of Lorenzo Torrentino (Florence, 1550), the historiographer was even more articulate: “He therefore had double foundations of great depth sunk at that corner, which was in a marshy place, and over that angle he constructed a large round room, with very thick walls, to the end that the four external corners of the masonry might be strong enough to be able to support a double vault, round after the manner of an oven. This done, he caused to be built at the corners right round the room, in the proper places, the doors, windows, and fireplace, all of rustic stones rough-hewn as if by chance, and, as it were, disjointed and awry, insomuch that they appeared to be really hanging over to one side and falling down).” G. Vasari, “Giulio Romano pittore e architetto,” in *Le vite de’ più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani* (1550) (Turin: Einaudi, 1986): 833 [my translation].

18 Ibidem: 834 [my translation].

19 The flooring was made anew by Paolo Pozzo in the eighteenth-century restoration of the palazzo, in which very likely the fireplace of which Vasari speaks was bricked up, and which is testified to in some drawings preserved at the Louvre, Windsor and Palazzo Te (donated in 2015 by Monroe Warshaw), cfr. R. Piccinelli, *I Giganti*: 27. Furthermore, in 1781, the archduke Ferdinand of Habsburg commissioned Giovanni Bottani to “have made a picket fence in the hall of the Giants [...]. Also, he would promptly have the fireplace sealed and walled up,” citation reported in A. Belluzzi, *Giulio Romano*: 236.

it to become a true object of analysis. The analysts must become an integral part of the space, immerse themselves in it like a percipient body, like the users of the place, going through it and letting themselves be guided by the logic imposed by the context in which they find themselves. The visitors are, so to speak, literally “manipulated” by this unusual spatial environment.

The system of the spatial expression is in itself meaningful, that here acquires an even more complete meaning with what is portrayed on the walls: the significance of the space is “the final result of a stratified and complex series of procedures, articulations and sub-articulations, where an element is meaningful only if related to the others.”²⁰

The spatial configurations prefigure, that is, the virtuality, of the possible ways of using the morphology itself of the places. In this sense, a semiotic reading can come to our aid which – as Giannitrapani writes – “considers space not as a straightforward container of subjects, objects, events, but as a meaningful structure capable of speaking of a multiplicity of aspects of life.”²¹ This means that: “The significance of the space lies in the efficacious action that it provokes on the subjects coming into contact with it.” And in order for space to completely “influence the body it must work on the ambience, it must give a shape to the architecture of the space.”²²

The Fall of the Giants

There is no doubt that the space of the Chambers of the Giants, already in itself significant, finds fulfillment with what it portrayed on the ceiling and on the walls. Although this interest of this analysis is focused on the immersive dimension, it is necessary to briefly go over the

20 G. Marrone, “Efficacia simbolica dello spazio: Azioni e passioni,” in P. Bertetti, G. Manetti, eds., *Forme della testualità: Teoria, modelli, storia e prospettive* (Turin: Testo&immagine, 2001): 85-96.

21 A. Giannitrapani, *Introduzione alla semiotica dello spazio* (Rome: Carrocci, 2013): 45.

22 On the space cfr. also M. Hammad, *Lire l'espace, comprendre l'architecture* (Limoges: Presses Universitaires, 2001), trans. G. Festi (Rome: Meltemi, 2003).

iconography of the whole figurative apparatus because– as we shall see – it is closely related to Federico II Gonzaga, the patron, and Charles V over whose empire the sun never set. The whole room, as is well-known, portrays the fall of the Giants drawn from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.²³ The myth tells of the giants' attempted attack on the gods: with the intent to reach Mount Olympus, the vicious inhabitants of the earth superimpose one another on two mountains, that of Pelion and that of Ossa.

Portrayed on the ceiling (Fig. 1) is the gods' ire against the giants' attempt to scale the mountains, with Jupiter who abandons his throne to place himself alongside Juno, who, with her gaze and index finger, points to the direction towards which to cast the thunderbolts. The plot hatched by the giants fails, of course, and Jupiter's intervention makes the mountains collapse; by tumbling precipitously, they overwhelm the giants burying them beneath the heavy boulders. A daring view from the bottom upwards, always on the ceiling, portrays a circular temple with twelve columns from whose balustrade some characters, concerned and awestruck by what is happening beneath them, look out; in the same way the numerous other divinities display impassioned states of agitation. The throne, left vacant by Jupiter, is occupied by the imperial eagle with its wings outspread, while the menacing clouds surround the whole empyrean in a role of transition from the world of the gods to the terrestrial terrain of the common mortals.

On the walls, above the fireplace, the giant Typhon (monstruous son of Gaia – Fig. 2) is depicted: for having tried to depose Jupiter, he is struck by lightning and sinks under Etna, and here, crushed by the boulders, in an attempt to defend himself he spews fire and lapilli causing an earthquake.²⁴ The fireplace, in turn, was supposed to suggest the illusion of the youth condemned by the flames: the flames that issue from the mouth of the giant Typhon,

23 Ovid, *Metamorphoses* I vv. 151-154 (l A.D), trans. A.D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 5.

24 Ovid, *Metamorphoses* V: 109.



Fig. 1. G. Romano, *Camera dei Giganti/Chamber of the Giants*, ceiling, 1532-1536, Mantua, Palazzo Te.

in the pictorial fiction, thus ended up “conversing” with the real fire of the fireplace.

Examining more closely the remaining frescoed parts, Vasari took note of further details:

the entire world is upside-down and almost at its final end [...] many giants can be seen in flight, all struck down by Jove’s thunderbolts and on the verge of being overwhelmed by the landslides from the mountains just like the others. In another part, Giulio represented other giants upon whom are crashing down temples, columns, and other parts of buildings, creating among these arrogant creatures great havoc and loss of life.²⁵

And, in actual fact, three walls propose landscapes (Figg. 3-4) and another one proposes an architecture – a *serliana* – that too about to collapse under the fire of the lightning bolts of the gods (Fig. 5).

25 G. Vasari, “Giulio Romano,” in *The Lives of the Artists* (1568), trans. J.C. Bondanella, P. Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991): 372.



Fig. 2. G. Romano,
Camera dei Giganti/Chamber of the Giants,
wall est, 1532-1536, Mantua, Palazzo Te.

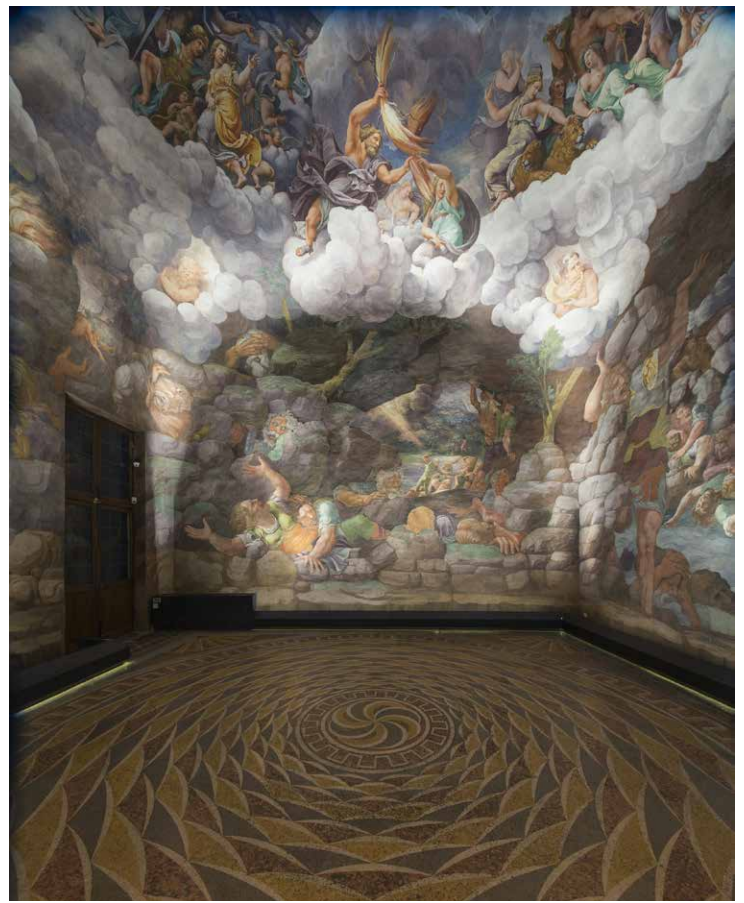


Fig. 3. G. Romano,
Camera dei Giganti/Chamber of the Giants,
wall sud, 1532-1536, Mantua, Palazzo Te.



Fig. 4. G. Romano,
Camera dei Giganti/Chamber of the Giants,
wall ovest, 1532-1536, Mantua, Palazzo Te.

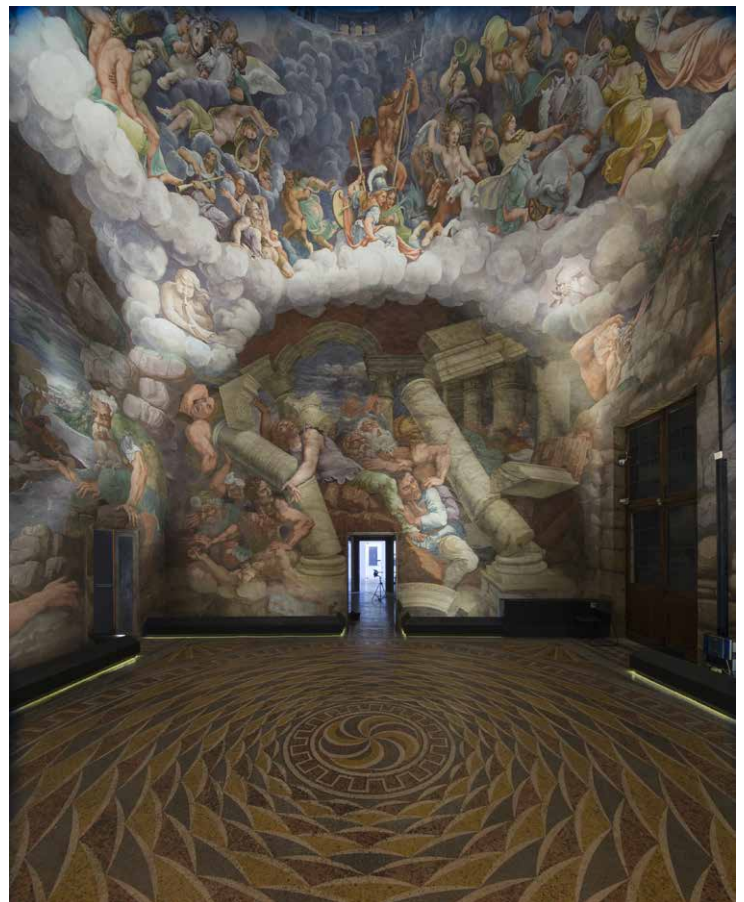


Fig. 5. G. Romano,
Camera dei Giganti/Chamber of the Giants,
wall nord, 1532-1536, Mantua, Palazzo Te.

At this point it is worthwhile turning our attention to the time when the action portrayed takes place. The time in itself is not representable, it is represented by means of movement and transformation: it is a function of the movement and the last is a function of space. Any action, which is never a perpetual motion, contains phases: a beginning, a climax and an end. In the course of each one of those, every action leads to the memory of what had come before and what will come afterwards. In short, the climax is the moment of utmost tension. In the Chamber of the Giants it corresponds to the phase when everything collapses: the technique is that of breaking down natural and architectural elements into parts that gradually lose their natural order to follow one that has gone completely haywire. If it is true that the rendering of the fatal moment is accentuated in mannerism, it can be said that here it has touched some very elevated heights.

The particularity of the fatal instant had been highlighted, once again, by Vasari (Fig. 6):



Fig. 6. G. Romano, *Camera dei Giganti/ Chamber of the Giants*, detail of the Giant, 1532-1536, Mantua, Palazzo Te.

Giulio [...] made plans to build a corner-room [...] in which the walls would correspond with the paintings, in order to deceive the people who would see it as much as he could.²⁶

a marvellous work where

the entire painting has neither beginning nor end, and that it is all tied together and runs on continuously without boundary or decoration.²⁷

This is a room completely without frames,²⁸ of any delimitation, with an enveloping continuity, in which the space – as Gombrich points out –

runs homogeneous to the floor as far as the apex of the roof with not edges and no frame to interrupt the seamlessness of the surfaces, it is completely transformed into a pictorial scene: it is part of a single action, animated by the same emotional impetus.²⁹

But, Vasari adds, it is a horrible scene:

Therefore, let no one ever imagine seeing a work from the brush that is more horrible or frightening or more realistic than this one. And anyone who enters that room and sees the windows, doors, and other such details all distorted and almost on the verge of crashing down, as well as the mountains and buildings collapsing, can only fear that everything is toppling down upon him. Especially when he sees all the gods in that heaven running this way and that in flight.³⁰

In short, a stunning illusionistic artifice that seeks to catapult the viewer into the throbbing heart of the event in progress, where “the boundaries of space

26 Ibid.: 370.

27 Ibid.: 373.

28 Cfr. P. Carabell, “Breaking the Frame: Transgression and Transformation in Giulio Romano’s Sala dei Giganti,” *Artibus et Historiae* 18, no. 36 (1997): 87-100.

29 E. Gombrich, *Giulio Romano*: 81.

30 G. Vasari, “Giulio Romano,” in *The Lives of the Artists* (1568), trans. J.C. Bondanella, P. Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991): 372-373.

disappear [...] and the laws of statics, in which the eye can find tranquillizing points of reference, are completely lacking.”³¹ Inside the environment: “the walls themselves move and, soon, everything is disarranged and collapses upon the viewer” who, in this way, shares “the same fate that submits and destroys the very powerful giants that tried in vain to sustain the walls.”³² (Figg. 7-8)



Fig. 7. G. Romano, *Camera dei Giganti/ Chamber of the Giants*, detail of the Giant, 1532-1536, Mantua, Palazzo Te.



Fig. 8. G. Romano, copy of, *Disegno della parete con il camino*, Paris, Louvre, Département des Arts graphiques, inv. 3636, recto

31 E. Gombrich, *Giulio Romano*: 79.

32 Ibid.

Being at the end of the world

At this point – and to delve once more into the immersivity that generates the environment – it comes natural to wonder why the patron, duke Federico II Gonzaga, decided to make such a particular and unique ambience in what is considered to be his villa of pleasures. What role would the Chamber of the Giants play in that precise historical moment?³³ We should not try to imagine the visitor guided by the Lord of Mantua in the palazzo: Federico II leads his guest in a space whose boundaries are well defined, through ambiances of different sizes, decorated with specific iconographic themes, in a crescendo that takes him gradually as far as the Chamber of the Giants. An initiatory pathway through which the duke proposes to his guest a sort of progressive estrangement with respect to the real world and that reaches its climax in the immense “catastrophe” of the dark cave, with the doors and windows shut and only the flickering light coming from the lit fireplace. A status of anguish and terror, apparently with no exit, in which the guest “with the highest mastery is deprived of every chance to take a distance, to evaluate the actual spaces.”³⁴ In this regard, Ernst Gombrich’s personal experience seems truly exemplary:

The kind of oppression that we have experienced is absolutely new and the sentiment from which it is born and which Giulio has been able to give shape to, is that of anguish. [...] There, we have experienced directly and in an absolutely new way the anguished nightmare of our involvement in an ineluctable catastrophe.³⁵

33 The Duke of Mantua invested colossal amounts and a special interest in the project for Palazzo Te: a work that had no residential function, which was not a fortress and in which even a room, that of the Giants, was in no way inhabitable.

34 E. Gombrich, *Giulio Romano*: 81 [my translation].

35 Ibid.: 111 [my translation].

Who is behind the enormous cave remains, therefore, captured by the representation, perceiving step by step that everything is being twisted, being destroyed: in the room lit up only by the fire burning in the fireplace, the visitor “experiences” the end of the world just as it is taking place, he experiences the torment – as Vasari writes – “that everything [...] is toppling down upon him.”³⁶

It is important to understand what happens to the viewer’s body and how the space substantiated in the representation is capable of triggering sensorial perceptions. As seems obvious, one’s eyesight is the first sense brought into play, and not only because the visitor’s eye is engaged by the enormous eyes of the Giants, but rather by the particular luminosity of the environment: indeed, one’s eyes must adapt to the light conditions produced by the fire in the fireplace; entering the ambience from conditions of full light, the adaptation to the poor light comes about slowly, one’s pupils must dilate as much as possible to be able to embrace the vision. The fireplace fire, moreover, is also responsible for the arousal of other senses: the sense of smell, because the burning wood diffuses its smell in all of the room; the sense of hearing, owing to the crackling and the rustling of the burning wood; the sense of touch, in that the fire warms up the ambience and consequently the visitor. Even the flooring can fall within the tactile sensoriality – in “small, round stones,” but “set in with a knife” –³⁷ which make the visitor’s movements unstable, reinforcing the precipice effect that is the central theme of the ambience.

Amongst those who in the course of time have had the chance to live a sensorial experience inside the Chamber of the Giants we can also name a scientist like Ulisse Aldrovandi (Bologna, 1522-1605): his interest, in particular, is addressed to the sonorous refraction of the ambience on the basis of which a word whispered in one

36 G. Vasari, “Giulio Romano,” in *The Lives of the Artists* (1568), trans. J.C. Bondanella, P. Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991): 372.

37 G. Vasari, “Giulio Romano:” 373.

corner is perfectly heard in the opposite corner.³⁸ Ultimately, the tremulous, mobile and never total illumination produced by the flames in the fireplace, the sonority itself of the fire, the amplified voice, the insecurity that the visitor experiences owing to the “stones set in edge” of the flooring, are all aspects that confer a powerful dynamicity to the whole, generating what can be defined a proto-cinematographic effect or, paradoxically, a distressing *trompe-l’œil* that at length deceives the feelings of the viewer.³⁹

In practice, what did this exceptional spatial and sensorial machine which acts with such terrifying efficacy on the viewer try to convey? Undoubtedly, the iconographic subject was not chosen by chance; in fact, the mythological fable is accompanied by an interpretative tradition of a moral sort: the *Gigantomachia* is an example of chastised pride, with Jupiter who performs an act of supremacy to restore justice. And in Mantua, in the early Cinquecento, the imperial ideology resorted to the fall of the Giants to celebrate the victories of Charles V against the infidels; Jupiter thus prefigures Charles V who, in the guise of Jupiter, leads to the demise of the Italian princes who rebelled against his sovereignty.⁴⁰ Alongside this reading of international politics, however, another one of a purely local sort gains headway: “Jupiter would be the ambitious Federico who, amongst other things, chooses to insert in the family coat of arms precisely the feat of Mount Olympus.”⁴¹ Whoever enters the Chamber of the Giants, in short, is put in contact with the ineluctability of the sovereignty of the gods against the “bestiality” of the

38 D.A. Franchini, C. Tellini Perina, A. Zanca, R. Margonari, G. Olmi, R. Signorini, *La scienza a corte: Collezionismo eclettico, natura e immagine a Mantova fra Rinascimento e Manierismo* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1979): 192-194. The manuscript is cited (136, XXI, cc. 27v-29v), preserved in the University Library of Bologna in which Aldrovandi tells of his journeys to Mantua and, in particular, to the Chamber of the Giants.

39 S.A. Hickson, “More than meets the eye: Giulio Romano, Federico II Gonzaga, and the triumph of *trompe-l’œil* at the Palazzo Te in Mantua,” in L. A. Boldt-Irons, C. Federici, E. Virgulti, eds., *Disguise, Deception, Trompe-l’œil: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009): 41-59.

40 For a more detailed argumentation cfr. D. Sogliani, M. Grosso, eds., *L'imperatore e il duca: Carlo V a Mantova* (Milan: Skira, 2023). The exhibition offers a reflection on the cultural meaning of Europe starting from the figure of Charles V and his alliances with the Italian courts, narrating the emperor's arrival in Mantua in 1530, feted by grand celebrations that Federico II Gonzaga organised in the halls of Palazzo Te under the masterful direction of Giulio Romano.

41 R. Piccinelli, *I Giganti*: 19.

Giants. A clear message addressed to recalling the correct moral and political behaviour to engage in vis-à-vis those who hold power.

By way of conclusion

As will have become apparent by now, the Chamber of the Giants avails itself of a perceptive setting foreshadowing what, almost five centuries later, finds a renewed materialisation in the most advanced technologies of construction of the images that see, in the progressive cancellation of the aesthetic threshold and the disappearance of the “frontier” between the world of representation and that of reality, their final point of arrival. The ambience-images that emerge are capable of generating an effect of reality so immanent that whoever perceives them has the feeling of being part of that fictitious world. And the spectators, wearing a visor “that blinds them with respect to the physical reality that surrounds them,”⁴² isolate themselves completely from the real world. But if – as Elisabetta Modena writes – “the immersion occurs [...] mostly according to a process of environmental reduction: the format of the experiences is central, [as is] that entanglement that is created between the image world and the *experiencer* who, in becoming a part of it, experiences what [...] happens in history.”⁴³

The spatial-pictorial construction of the Chamber of the Giants, without a frame, with interruptions, must in short be considered – as noted by Andrea Pinotti – the perfect example *ante litteram* that “it is certainly not necessary to await contemporaneity to witness the advent of an immersive and enveloping space.”⁴⁴ This does not prevent us from testing the new immersive technologies to try to

42 E. Modena, *Nelle storie*: 145. Cfr. also E. Modena “Immersi nel reale: Prospettive an-iconiche sull’arte contemporanea dall’ambiente alla realtà virtuale,” *Carte Semiotiche. Rivista internazionale di semiotica e teoria dell’immagine*, L. Corrain, M. Vannoni, eds., Annali 7, *Figure dell’immersività* (2021): 71-78.

43 Ibid.: 146.

44 A. Pinotti, *Alla soglia dell’immagine*: 109.

‘simulate’ in every part the original ambience,⁴⁵ proposing, through virtual reality, what can no longer be perceived in situ today. By introducing, from the top of the chimney stack, the photons into the hearth and making use of high definition orthophotographs of the walls and the ceiling, we virtually recreate the flickering light of the flames, as well as the sensorial effect of the heat as they must have been perceived in the original Chamber of the Giants. Ultimately, if Giulio Romano was a full-fledged forerunner of immersive environments, then the new technologies can represent a further aid to fully restoring the original perception of the Chamber of the Giants, leading us back to the ingenious “invention” that the artist had made for his cultured and refined patron. With an apt reference, through the anticlassical taste for the outlandish and for contamination, to that Mannerism that – in the vulgate of Giorgio Vasari – must contain “an abundance of beautiful costumes, variety in imaginative details, charm in their colours, diversity in their buildings, and distance and variety in their landscapes;” in short, “a copious invention in every particular.”⁴⁶

45 The bibliography on immersivity in the contemporary is vast: M. A. Moser, D. MacLeod, eds., *Immersed in Technology: Art and Virtual Environments* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1996); W. Wolf, W. Bernhart, A. Mahler, eds., *Immersion and Distance: Aesthetic Illusion in Literature and Other Media* (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2013); R. Pinto, “La mostra come esperienza immersive: Damien Hirst – Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable,” in C.G. Morandi, C. Sinigaglia, eds., *L’esperienza dello spazio: Collezioni, mostre, musei*, (Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2020): 324-334; J. Voorhies, J. Postsensual, *Aesthetics: On the Logic of the Curatorial* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2003). Cfr. also P. Conte, *Unframing Aesthetics* (Milan: Mimesis International, 2020) and the recent J. Bodin, A. De Cesaris, eds., “Immersivity: Philosophical Perspectives on Technologically Mediated Experience,” *Philosophical Coordinates in Modern and Contemporary Age* 10, no. 20 (2022).

46 G. Vasari, “Preface to Part Three” in *The Lives of the Artists* (1568), trans. J.C. Bondanella, P. Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991): 278.

AN-ICONOLOGY

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