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Turner, James Grantham. The Villa Farnesina: Palace of Venus in Renaissance Rome

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Turner, James Grantham.

The Villa Farnesina: Palace of Venus in Renaissance Rome.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pp. xiv, 501 + 411 ill. ISBN 978-1-316-51101-5 (hardcover) US\$125.

One of the regular stops on our itinerary when I take students to Rome is the Villa Farnesina. It is easy to miss, tucked away somewhat inconspicuously along Via della Lungara just outside Porta Settimiana in Rome's Trastevere neighbourhood and usually only open through the early afternoon. While it seems to have gathered more attention in recent years, it remains far less crowded than Rome's more famous monuments, like St. Peter's Basilica, the Trevi Fountain, or the Colosseum. What a shame for those who skip it, as the Farnesina is the result of the artistic collaboration of its patron-cum-papal banker Agostino Chigi, architect Baldassare Peruzzi, and an array of artists such as Raphael, Giulio Romano, Il Sodoma, and Giovanni da Udine. While perhaps not famous among tourists, the Farnesina remains for scholars of Rome one of the true gems of the High Renaissance in the Eternal City.

This has compelled James Grantham Turner to answer his book's opening, and thankfully rhetorical, question in the affirmative: "Who needs another book on the Farnesina?" (2). For a building that is so well studied and that is so immediately recognizable for all it represents about the Renaissance in Rome, it is a building that one never fully tires of studying. Yet, somehow, no full, systematic monograph-length study of the Farnesina exists in English, rendering Turner's book not only welcomed, and hardly superfluous, but also necessary.

This is no generic survey of the building or of the pictorial schemes that punctuate its loggias, rooms, and corridors. Nor is it an attempt to celebrate the handful of famous frescoes that draw in tourists—the Farnesina's website, for shame, advertises it as the home of "gli affreschi di Raffaello a Roma," Raphael's frescoes in Rome, perhaps to the detriment of other artists whose work also makes the building what it is. Rather, Turner's book "aims to undo the isolation of one or two canonical images, placing them back into an enriched context where each element joins in a productive conversation" (6), with the goal that we can "reintegrate painting, sculpture, architecture, garden design, topographical plans, inventories, legal contracts and literature, notably the poetry and prose of the brilliant circle around Chigi" (6).

By presenting the building as a cohesive whole as well as one in conversation with the Roman cityscape and rival families' suburban villas that sat adjacent to it, this book allows us to reconsider what we know about the place of the Farnesina, its relationship to Rome, and what part of it was built when and why. Through his investigation of drawings, the frescoes, the building's structures, literature, as well as evidence from other places in Rome and, especially, Agostino Chigi's brother Sigismondo's residence Villa Le Volte near Siena, Turner picks apart the various pieces of the Farnesina to show their interrelationships and how it was, as he put it, a "true dwelling" (8) and important residence for Agostino Chigi and not, as is often claimed, simply a pleasure palace or suburban retreat.

The book runs generally in chronological order, from the antecedents, origins, and genesis of the building through to its remodelling for Agostino Chigi's wedding in 1519, which resulted in the creation of the Loggia of the Psyche. Throughout, Turner shows how no piece of art, architecture, or landscape was haphazardly done. Everything—from the foundations of the building and commitment to chthonic architecture to the heated rooms to the way the building was strategically designed to be best positioned along the Tiber just outside of the city's walls—points to a deliberate patron, a committed architect, a team of artists, *litterati*, and a litany of other *familiars* who were poised to celebrate (and celebrate in) the Farnesina every step along the way.

The book is most insightful when Turner focuses on two things: First—much like in his book *Eros Visible: Art, Sexuality and Antiquity in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), which he cites as a starting point for the study of what he coins the erotic revolution in Renaissance art—Turner's emphasis on the celebration of physical love in the Farnesina allows us to understand what can often be difficult pictorial cycles to digest. This is especially useful for those not fully versed in classical motifs and their references found throughout the villa. It likewise allows him to give a sense of unity to the building and articulate the intellectual undercurrents driving Peruzzi's and Chigi's vision for the Farnesina. Second, and no less crucial, is Turner's ability to painstakingly differentiate between what the building looked like when Chigi lived there versus how it looks now. Rome has changed so much over the centuries (the Farnesina can hardly be described as suburban now) and the construction of Rome's *muraglioni*, the retaining walls to combat flooding, has changed the Farnesina's relationship with the Tiber. In turn, it can prove

difficult to make sense of how the building would have appeared when Chigi died in 1520. Turner's rich descriptions of now lost or altered structures as well as over four-hundred images from the sixteenth century onward (drawings, etchings, schematics, etc.) of what the Farnesina looked like and where it sat will be invaluable for peeling back the layers of centuries of alterations, damage, and restoration that often deviate from Chigi and Peruzzi's original vision.

Turner's *Villa Farnesina*, then, is an important intervention in the study of a building that is so central to understanding Rome in the early sixteenth century. A useful tool for scholars and students alike, this book will not only help us better understand the Farnesina as a collective whole. Rather, it will give us a fuller understanding of where patrons like Chigi, architects like Peruzzi, and artists like Raphael fit into the intellectual, cultural, and artistic milieu of sixteenth-century Rome thanks to Turner's systematic dive into one of the treasures of the Roman Renaissance.

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