The Farnese Table: A Rediscovered Work by Vignola

by OLGA RAGGIO Assistant Curator of Renaissance Art

The Farnese Palace in Rome is a monument of such unique fascination and importance that any discovery that adds to our knowledge of its history and of its collections is bound to acquire unusual interest and significance. The visitor who walks under the heavy barrel vault of the vestibule and climbs the wide stairway leading to the state apartment on the piano nobile is so impressed by the majesty of the architecture of Antonio da Sangallo and of Michelangelo that he may forget that these spacious halls once housed one of the greatest renaissance collections of paintings and ancient statuary. Here was once the famous series of Titian’s portraits of the Farnese, now in the Capodimonte Museum in Naples: the group portrait of the old Pope Paul III—the founder of the Palace—with his two grandsons, Ottavio and Cardinal Alessandro; that of their father, the Pope’s somber son Pier Luigi, Duke of Castro and of Parma and Piacenza; the handsome grave likeness of young Cardinal Alessandro—the gentle humanist and the great collector to whom the Palace really owed its life; and the boyish portrait of his youngest brother Ranuccio who was made Cardinal at fourteen and died when he was only thirty-five. Here also was that impressive series of masterpieces of ancient statuary that for generations represented the very epitome of Roman imperial grandeur: the Hercules, the Flora, the Vestal, and the famous group of the Farnese Bull, to mention only a few of the Farnese sculptures now in the National Museum in Naples.

“The Farnese Hercules has gone,” wrote a German visitor to Rome in the spring of 1787, the poet Wolfgang von Goethe. “The King [Ferdinand IV] wants to build a Museum in Naples where all the works of art he possesses—the Herculaneum Museum, the Pompei paintings and all he has inherited from the Farnese house—will be shown together. . . . Even the Farnese Bull must go to Naples and be shown on the Promenade. If they could take also the Carracci Gallery, they would do it.” So drastic was the removal of the Farnese collections to Naples that nearly all that remains today in the Palace are the frescoes of Carracci, Salviati, and Daniele da Volterra and the splendid carved ceilings of the state apartment. Only the vivid descriptions of the old Roman guidebooks and of travelers to Rome help us to imagine its aspect when ancient statues, marble tables, and paintings made it the most imposing and sumptuous of the Roman renaissance palaces.

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Two years ago the Museum had the good fortune to acquire a monumental sixteenth-century marble table which is now installed in the main gallery of Italian renaissance paintings. Its top is a sumptuous inlay of many colored marbles and semiprecious stones forming a border of cartouches of various shapes around two large slabs of Oriental alabaster. This heavy table top is supported by three richly sculptured marble piers upon which fantastic creatures are carved in pairs: vigorous sirens with lions' feet and leafy bodies and satyrs with curious batlike membrane wings. A large beribboned shield displaying six lilies surmounted by the cross and the cardinal's hat—the emblems of Cardinal Alessandro Farnese—appears twice on each pier.

The extraordinary size of this table—almost thirteen feet by six—the unusual motif of the two alabaster "windows" that form the main feature of its top, and the presence of the arms of Cardinal Alessandro are sufficient to identify it with a famous marble piece that was once part of the sixteenth-century furnishings of the state apartment in the Farnese Palace.

All the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Roman guidebooks that describe the treasures of the Palace mention a very large table of inlaid marbles, with sculptured feet "by Michelangelo," standing in the "Sala de' Filosofi"—the "Philosophers' Hall," as the great room next to the Carracci Gallery on the west side of the Palace was called (see plan, page 223). Starting

*The Farnese table, designed by Jacopo Barozzi da Vignola, Italian (Roman), about 1565-1573*
Dick Fund, 1958
with Titi, whose *Descrizione delle pitture . . . esposte al pubblico in Roma* was first published in 1686, and continuing with the books of Rossini (1693), Barbault (1763), and Manazzale (1794), we find the table admiringly described as one of the main features of this room, and of the Palace itself, where, for many years, artists and travelers congregated to study the great antiques and the famous *galleria*. These descriptions are supported by even more detailed and specific ones in the old inventories of the Farnese collections. The first detailed description occurs in an inventory of the Palace compiled in 1653. This speaks of "a large table of hard and soft stones, the center being of Oriental alabaster, supported by three marble feet in the shape of harpies with the arms of the Lord Cardinal." Some amusing details show how highly its precious inlaid top was regarded: "A wooden box to protect this table and a chain with loops to close it and in the middle a small mattress full of wool, covered with a quilted checkered cloth; and a cover for this table, made of tooled and gilded leather with four fringes, decorated borders and fleur-de-lys."

The eighteenth-century inventories of the Palace, taken after the collections had been inherited by the Bourbon house of Naples, and dated 1767, 1775, and 1796, are also specific in their descriptions: two of them mention "a large table with two windows of Oriental alabaster in the middle, all inlaid with semiprecious stones, with a frame of 'verde antico' and marble feet fastened to the floor," and the listing of 1775 gives the precise measurements of the table.

The inventory of 1796 is the last to mention the table in the Farnese Palace. The years that followed were a period of great political turmoil as Rome and Naples became involved in the Napoleonic disturbances. From 1805 when Ferdinand I was deposed until 1814 the Farnese Palace served as the Roman headquarters of Joachim Murat, the new King of Naples. Several times his court resided at the Palace, where many splendid parties were given for all Roman Bonapartist society. It is possible that during these years many objects disappeared from the Palace and that the great inlaid table in the Philosophers' Room was among them. For when in 1834 the reinstated Bourbon King of Naples ordered a new inventory of what remained at the Palace, the table was no longer there.

The first nineteenth-century document that refers to the table is an inventory for fire insurance of the contents of Hamilton Palace in Lanarkshire, Scotland. This inventory was taken soon after 1844. But it is likely that the table had come to Hamilton many years earlier. It had perhaps been secured by the tenth Duke of Hamilton, when, still Marquis of Douglas and

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an ardent Bonapartist, he lived in Rome and in Naples between 1816 and 1819.

The magnificence and the grandiose proportions of the table must have especially appealed to Alexander Douglas. Convinced that he was the true heir to the throne of Scotland, he impressed all the magnificence of his taste upon Hamilton Palace, which in the 1820s he enlarged according to a Palladian plan of ambitious proportions. As "he combined in equal measure a love of art with love of splendour," writes Waagen, who visited Hamilton in 1852, "and was an especial lover of beautiful and rare marbles, the whole ameublement was on a scale of costliness, with a more numerous display of tables and cabinets of the richest Florentine mosaic than in any other palace."

Both the Hamilton inventory for fire insurance and Waagen's recollections describe the Farnese table as a prominent feature in the dining saloon of the Palace. There it remained until 1919, when it was sold at auction not long before the building itself was pulled down. It passed then into the collection of Viscount Leverhulme in London where it remained, entirely unidentified, until a few years ago.

Two years ago it was discovered in London with all the thrill and suspense of a mystery story, and salvaged from a stoneyard by a visiting Roman dealer whose keen eye happened to notice the Farnese arms awkwardly emerging from beneath a heap of rubbish.

After the discovery, the table, whose top fortunately had suffered but little damage but whose piers needed a vigorous cleaning from the outrages of London's soot and grime, was promptly transported to Rome. There it was expertly cleaned and polished by the experienced crafts-

One of the piers of the table
men who still carry on the centuries-old tradition of working hard stones and marble.

This table is an extraordinary piece. Its vast size reminds us of the astonishment with which some authors described it as “the largest table in Rome”; or of Lalande, the author of a lively *Voyage d'un François en Italie fait dans les années 1765 & 1766*, who simply rebaptized the Philosophers' Room “la salle de la grande Table.” The aristocratic beauty of its design, the richness of its marbles, the exuberance of its sculptured piers find no ready comparison among the sixteenth-century marble tables that still exist in the Roman collections. Its forms rather evoke the heroic, ornate vases, candelabra, or pedestals that appear in the great historical cycles painted for Cardinal Alessandro Farnese by the masters of Florentine-Roman mannerism—Salviati, Vasari, or Zuccari. And the solemn harmony of greens, yellows, and blacks of its marbles is the same that reigns in those frescoes.

The richly inlaid top of the table (page 226) commands our immediate attention. Its design is so subtly arranged and the color impact of its many marbles and semiprecious stones is so great that we are at first hardly aware of the structure of the inlay. Only the thin white line that outlines each geometrical shape in the wide border of cartouches and medallions and the two symmetrical rectangles that enclose the large black and white ovals reveals the presence of the white marble ground that supports the inlay. Yet this line is by no means unimportant: as firm and uncompromising as a draftsman's statement it brings out the pattern, emphasizes the decorative value of each form, and confers immense energy and distinction upon the whole design.

The vigorous character of the border contrasts happily with the delicate jewel-like quality of the black slate band inlaid with chalcedony lilies and rosettes in the technique usually called Florentine mosaic. This band forms the inner frame of the composition and divides the two large plates of Oriental alabaster that make up the center of the table.
These two alabaster leaves are the climax of the whole composition. Large, pure, and quiet, they fulfill the promise of their sumptuous frame. Their hard onyxlike translucent surface, marked by wavy, irregular amber veins and elusive whiteish formations, has the mysterious attraction of light clouds traveling through a misty sky, or of the frozen ripples of bottomless waters.

Much of the effectiveness of this top is due to the combination of two different techniques: the old Roman technique of marble inlay used for the border and the renaissance method of inlaying semiprecious stones employed for the black band with its pattern of fleurs-de-lis and rosettes.

The ancient craft of marble inlay was cultivated for centuries by the Roman marmorari. In the sixteenth century it experienced a revival noticeable, among other things, in the fashion for richly inlaid tables in the Roman palaces and villas. Not many of them have survived the tide of fashion and time; but the accounts of two famous sixteenth-century villas—the Villa Giulia and the Villa Mattei—show us how important and highly esteemed they were. In a letter of 1553, Ammanati describes one of these tables, inlaid with various colored marbles, supported by three gilt wooden piers, as "a very rare and beautiful thing"; another one in the same villa had been thought valuable enough to be offered to the Pope by the governor of Rome. And in the Villa Mattei—the pleasure house built shortly after 1570 by the patrician Ciriaco Mattei—one of the chief ornaments were the tavole interziate which he commissioned along with sculptures and paintings "to transform his orchard into a villa." These tables were of various sizes and shapes, but always their tops were remarkable for inlays of beautiful ancient marbles, among which Oriental alabaster was often mentioned as the most precious.

As to Florentine mosaic—as the renaissance technique of inlaying semiprecious stones (pietre dure) into a plate of black slate is rather improperly called—its application to furniture is
not met with before the middle of the sixteenth century. Vasari (Lives, vii, p. 616) is the first to mention such *tavolini di gioie* as a remarkable novelty: two of them were executed in 1562 after his own designs by a Florentine craftsman, Bernardino Porfirio da Leccio—one for the Grand Duke of Tuscany and the other for Messer Bindo Altoviti. Unfortunately, neither these nor any others that may have been made during the following decades seem to have survived. Even the earliest *pietre dure* tables which can be admired today in the museums in Florence, Vienna, or Paris were made in the seventeenth century, at a time when this technique had become the exclusive production of the grand-ducal Opificio delle Pietre Dure in Florence.

The marbles used for our table are all of ancient classical origin. The alabaster may have been imported in antiquity from Egypt. The dark green marble of the frame is a variety of serpentine quarried in the region of Thessaly in Greece and commonly known as *verde antico*. Its somewhat solemn color is happily relieved by the golden hues of the Spanish brocatel—the yellow marble speckled with purplish spots used for the almond-shaped cartouches and for the background of the two large oval escutcheons. These are made of dramatic *nero antico*—a black and white marble of great rarity and beauty, the origin of which is uncertain. Finally, adding a warmer accent to this cool scheme, comes the velvety red of the *rosso antico* used for the indented rectangles carrying the Farnese lilies, and the gray-rose of the *portasanta* marble in the cartouches of the border, while a variety in texture is introduced by the gemlike surface of the medallions of jasper and agate and the precious translucency of the chalcedony.

There is an old legend that the Farnese Palace was built with the stones of the Colosseum. If this has proved to be a malicious accusation, there is little doubt, however, that some other monuments of ancient Rome were used quite liberally as a source of materials for the embellishment of the Palace of Paul III. The twelve columns of granite that support the vault of the vestibule were secured at San Lorenzo fuori le Mura; those of *verde antico* placed by Michelangelo to flank the central bay on the second floor were brought from the Aquae Albulae; and in 1547 we learn that the architects had gone to Ostia "to get colored marbles for the Palace."

Rich as this booty may appear, none was more spectacular than that offered by the systematic excavations of the Baths of Antonino Caracalla. These were started in the 1540s under the supervision of Cardinal Alessandro and yielded the greatest part of the treasures of the Farnese col-

*Head of one of the fauns on the central pier of the table*

lection. In the 1520s the ruins of these Baths, romantically bedecked with thick groves of vegetation, had already kindled the imagination of draftsmen like Peruzzi and Heemskerck who filled their sketchbooks with copies of all the marble fragments their eyes could detect. But now what emerged under the spades of the diggers was marvel upon marvel: colossal statues
and groups, porphyry vases, busts of philosophers and emperors, sculptured reliefs, polychrome marble floors and wall decorations, and a wealth of cameos, gems, bronze statuettes, and coins. It seemed as if all the magnificence of imperial Rome had been suddenly uncovered, ready to be reborn into the new Rome of the Farnese Pope.

It is almost impossible for us to imagine the splendid assurance with which the men of 1540 were ready promptly to re-use these cherished remains of a long-dreamt-of antiquity to create their own version of grandeur. As soon as the ground of the Baths yielded its statues and marbles, the latter were brought to the Farnese Palace and turned over to Guglielmo della Porta and the other restorers and scarpelleti (marble workers) whose workshop was on the ground floor: ancient statues and other anticaglie (antiquities) were there restored before finding their place in the apartments, and marble fragments were transformed into mantelpieces, door enframements, and inlaid tables. Thus the furnish-

Detail of one of the terms carved by Jacopo del Duca for Michelangelo’s Tomb of Julius II

Detail of the ribbons on one end pier

ing of the Palace proceeded at the same time the construction advanced and the excavations yielded their materials.

The sculptured marble piers that support our table are no less remarkable than its inlaid top. The slightly understated grayish cast of the marble is in perfect harmony with the subdued yet rich color scheme of the top. On each of the piers sirens and satyrs form a strictly composed unity: linked to each other in an uninterrupted flow of curves, all the decorative elements adhere to the architectural function of the marble block, yet emerge with striking sculptural vitality. The female figures, powerfully modeled, stand with all the serene and noble beauty of their classical prototypes, while the satyrs range from the amusing to the grotesque. They appear (see page 218) as young fauns on the central pier, as satyrs in the fullness of their maturity on one of the side piers, and as drowsy old silens on the other one.

This type of architectural sculpture is quite characteristic of Roman work around the middle of the century. Terms in the shape of solemn
In this workshop the architect and sculptor Guglielmo della Porta played the leading role. But the names of many other sculptors and marble workers employed by Cardinal Farnese are to be found in contemporary accounts: Domenico da Tivoli whom the Cardinal mentions in a letter as attached to his service for many years; or a M° Giovanni Angelo, a M° Niccolo, a M° Manco—all craftsmen who assisted Guglielmo della Porta in the execution of the Tomb of Paul III, but whose individual work cannot be identified.

The existence of this large shop within the Palace precincts offers a reasonable explanation for what would otherwise remain a puzzling aspect of the table. For on close examination it is evident that the execution of these piers is the work of more than one hand. The vigorous carving of the central pilaster with its bold ribbons and its lively fauns can hardly be credited to the same artisan who cut the flat, uninteresting ribbons that we see on the other two piers; nor can the sensitive execution of a satyr like the one shown below be thought the work of the bearded figures were carved, for example, by Jacopo del Duca in 1545 for Michelangelo’s Tomb of Julius II. (Since these terms vaguely resemble the figures on the piers of the table, Titi’s seventeenth-century description of the table as the work of Michelangelo, mistaken though it was, is at least forgivable.) Other such terms support the architrave of the portico leading into the Nymphéum in the Villa Giulia; and sirens in many ways similar to those supporting our table were carved, for example, at the sides of the basins of two fountains in the same villa.

Close as these comparisons may appear, it is in vain, however, that we look for the name of any particular sculptor to whom this work should be credited. Just as at the Villa Giulia a great number of scarpellini carried out the designs of the architects—Vignola, Ammanati, and Vasari—so at the Farnese Palace much of what was intended for the decoration of the Cardinal’s apartment was first designed by one of the artists in charge and then carried out in the workshop on the ground floor.
same craftsman who carved the masklike features of one shown on page 218.

The name of Guglielmo della Porta may raise the question whether so important a piece as this table could be in some way credited, if not to his hand, at least to his design. Surprisingly enough, it cannot. Nothing is further from the wily, energetic style he displays in his drawings for tables and fireplaces (of which one of his sketchbooks, now in Düsseldorf, contains several) than the static, two-dimensional feeling of these piers. In spite of their supporting function, these figures have no actual feeling of mass and weight: each pier is conceived as a purely architectural element, its sculptured decoration merely applied in strictly symmetrical fashion and each face treated as an independent flat unity. This feeling of flatness is carried through by the whole design: it can be observed, for instance, in the curious device by which the satyrs’ and the sirens’ wings are actually “stapled” onto the background in an entirely abstract, unrealistic fashion that destroys any three-dimensional illusion and emphasizes the strictly decorative, almost graphic nature of the whole composition; in the horizontal line of the conspicuous double-gadrooned border that reminds us of a page of Vignola’s *Regola*; and in the pattern of the strange batlike wings of the satyrs so widely spread out over the entire surface.

If from the sculptured piers we now turn to the inlaid pattern of the top, we discover a deep stylistic consistency between them. It was not the mind of a sculptor that created this piece, but that of an architect. And he, we will see, could be none other than the same who designed so many cornices, door enframements, and fireplaces for Cardinal Farnese: Jacopo Barozzi da Vignola.

Vignola’s achievement as an architect is too well known to need more than a short mention. Born in 1507, he was educated in Bologna, where he was first trained as a painter and a designer. His interest in perspective, which lasted throughout his life, made him the author of some interesting compositions translated into wooden intarsia panels by Fra Damiano da Bergamo, an early example of which, dated 1534, is in the
Museum’s collections. In 1535 he went to Rome where he was first employed by one of the Pope’s architects, Jacopo Meleghino. His many skills must have come to the fore in the early 1540s, for when Francesco Primaticcio, who had successfully made his way up at the court of Francis I, appeared in Rome with royal orders to collect plaster casts of many ancient statues, he invited Vignola to France to work as an architect as well as to help him with bronze casting. The trip to France, whence Vignola returned after eighteen months, had a profound influence on the development of his style as both designer and architect. Soon afterwards he received his first important commissions in Rome: the church of Sant’ Andrea on Via Flaminia, and the Villa Giulia for which he designed the elevation of the Casino and much of the inner decoration of the rooms.

These years marked also the beginning of his work for Cardinal Farnese—a long and fruitful association that was to last until Vignola’s death in 1573. During the nearly twenty-five years when Vignola was the official Farnese architect he created the two major works to which his fame is forever attached: the Farnese Palace of Caprarola which Vasari called “the most beautiful palace of Italy,” and the Church of the Gesù whose design, completed in 1568, was the prototype for Jesuit religious architecture.

It is the role of Vignola as architect in connection with the building and the inner decoration of the Farnese Palace in Rome that is of special interest to us. Vignola’s first duties there probably started shortly before 1549; they continued, slowly and perhaps with interruptions, as long as he lived. When Vignola’s presence at the Palace is first recorded, the entire front of the building had already been erected after the plans of Sangallo, and in 1546 Michelangelo had succeeded him as the main architect. A print engraved in 1549 by Beatrizet shows its aspect approximately as we see it today. At the same time we know from a report to the Duke of Castro that in 1547 the rooms of the second floor were already vaulted and almost ready for occupancy. Under Michelangelo’s supervision Vignola’s role in the Palace was that of second in command. Undoubtedly he was responsible for the progress of construction of the side wings of the Palace which were erected soon after 1550, and for that of the west front which Michelangelo designed as three superimposed loggias opening a vista toward the Tiber, as we see in an engraving of 1560 (page 224). But his role was not limited merely to carrying out Michelangelo’s plans: his principal original contribution was designing the inner fittings of the rooms of the state apartment as, one after another, they were erected. So it was that in 1568 the southern wing of the Palace was called in an inventory “Vignola’s side” (la banda del Vignola).

Some of Vignola’s work at the Palace is precisely documented: the great mantelpiece flanked by caryatids in the Great Hall, and the fireplace that was once in the bedroom of Cardinal Ranuccio and was sold in the nineteenth century by the Bourbons. These were designs of which Vignola was proud enough to reproduce them in the Regola dell’ incin Ordini, published in 1562 under the auspices of Cardinal Farnese.

The Farnese Palace: ground plan of the state apartment. 1. Great Hall. 2. Salotto. 3. Cardinal Ranuccio’s bedroom. 4. The Emperors’ Room. 5. The Philosophers’ Room. 6. The Carracci Gallery
Other works bear so clearly the stamp of Vignola’s distinctive ornamental taste that they can be promptly recognized as his. For instance, the pattern of the tiles on the floor of the main hall; the marble mantelpieces in the Salotto with Salviati’s frescoes and in the Emperors’ Room, as the largest room in the north wing of the Cardinal’s apartment was called; and the stucco frieze that runs beneath Daniele da Volterra’s Bacchanalians in Ranuccio’s bedroom (see page 228). Their designs are remarkably close to those of the mantelpieces and stucco borders of the Farnese Palace at Caprarola (page 229). There we know that Vignola was responsible for even the smallest details, for not only does Vasari tell us that Cardinal Farnese wanted Caprarola to “be entirely born out of the caprice, invention and design of Vignola,” but Vignola himself wrote to the Cardinal, “In my designs I no longer trust anybody but myself.”

As we return to the design of the marble inlay of our table, we recognize some of Vignola’s favorite ornamental motifs. The most striking are the confronted crescents and the indented rectangles carrying the Farnese lilies. These occur in nearly identical form in the stucco frieze in Cardinal Ranuccio’s bedroom and in several places at Caprarola, where Vignola’s predilection for a few basic forms—mostly oval shapes and broken outlines—can be traced everywhere.

But what is even more characteristic of Vignola is the way these elements are organized so as to convey the impression that the whole composition gravitates around the two alabaster plates. The oval forms that he uses for the bor-

A view of the west side of the courtyard of the Farnese Palace, looking toward the garden, 1560. Engraving from Antonio Lafreri’s Speculum Romanae Magnificentiae Dick Fund, 1941
Mantelpiece by Vignola in the Great Hall of the state apartment

ders are not merely alternated: they are symmetrically grouped according to the unity of the whole surface. Thus the four agate medallions set off the limits of the alabaster plates, and the double pairs of confronted crescents mark the perpendicular axes of the composition with the center of the table as their crossing point.

Such a strictly geometrical plan and the type of dry imagination that plays with a few basic shapes to create a perfect, self-contained surface pattern are entirely typical of Vignola. We see it, for instance, in a drawing of 1569 for the pattern of a tiled floor planned for the chapel at Caprarola (page 229), or in the very personal way he subdivided the Caprarola ceilings into several fields. It may, perhaps, also be recognized in the design of some of the carved ceilings in the Roman Palace (page 230). It is the same inborn feeling for the decorative potentialities of a flat surface that reigns throughout all Vignola’s works, whether he designs a palace façade or the outline of a window or fireplace, or supplies the pattern of an inlaid table.

In the design of the marble piers the name of Vignola explains some elements that cannot be well understood otherwise. One such is the curious and completely unorthodox invention of the strange batlike wings of the satyrs. Without parallels in the sculpture of the time, these seem to be the fruit of a queer, literary imagination—the imagination of a northerner at heart as Vignola always remained—the same imagination that was responsible for the superimposed creatures that flank Ranuccio’s fireplace, the unusual caryatids of the fireplace in the Great Hall, and perhaps the winged fauns of one of the fountains at Caprarola.

Vignola’s connection with the Farnese Palace from about 1549 to his death in 1573, as well as the style of our table, would be sufficient evidence for dating its design and probably its execution to those years. There are, however, several other factors that permit us to narrow down this long span of time. The first decisive clue to the dating of the piece is the presence of the arms of Cardinal Alessandro. For in spite of the important role he played in the construction of the great Roman family palace, his arms do not appear there before 1565, the year of the death of his youngest brother, Ranuccio, Cardinal Sant’ Angelo. During the sixteen years be-

Engraving from Vignola’s Regola del Cinque Ordini, 1562, showing the mantelpiece he designed for Cardinal Ranuccio’s bedroom
tween the death of Paul III and that of Ranuccio, the Palace was gradually prepared to become Ranuccio's residence. His coat of arms—six fleurs-de-lis and a cross in chief—and his name were placed upon mantelpieces, doorways, and ceilings, and we can hardly think that so conspicuous a piece as this marble table, planned for one of the main reception rooms, would have carried the arms of Cardinal Alessandro during Ranuccio's lifetime.

More evidence can be gathered from the records that refer to Cardinal Alessandro's purchases. In 1562 the Cardinal bought a group of marble sculptures as well as "an alabaster table" from a Roman nobleman, Paolo del Bufalo. There would be nothing in so casual a mention
to stir our attention, if we did not notice that the price of this alabaster table (probably a simple alabaster slab) was extraordinarily large: 300 scudi, a sum higher than that paid for any of the important sculptures listed in the same deal.

In 1568 the first inventory was taken of the contents of the Farnese Palace. It is a short but extremely interesting list, for it shows that at that date the furnishing of the state apartment was still far from being finished. In most of the rooms that had belonged to Ranuccio, ancient statues, modern sculptures, new pieces of furniture, and many unworked slabs of ancient colored marbles were stored away next to each other. At one point we note the mention of a “tavola grande di alabastro.” This is evidently the same the
Detail of the stucco frieze, probably designed by Vignola, for Cardinal Ranuccio's bedroom

Detail of the Salotto with frescoes by Salviati and a mantelpiece designed by Vignola

Cardinal acquired in 1562. Was the slab still unworked, or was this a finished table with a prominent alabaster center on top? It would be hard to decide this question. But the coincidence of all elements is so great that we may strongly suspect that we have here the first reference to the great table later to be placed in the Philosophers' Hall.

The importance of the evidence that allows us to date this work definitely in the 1560s cannot be sufficiently stressed. For this piece, with its unique combination of marble and pietre dure technique, is, indeed, the earliest example of this type of work. In the Palace itself, a few small marble tables—for example, that illustrated on page 230—repeat some of its motifs of cartouches and medallions. But the difference in quality is impressive. They are real workshop pieces: the crowded and pedestrian pattern of their tops makes us better appreciate the subtle spacing of Vignola’s design.

As a piece of furniture and of glyptic decoration, Vignola’s table stands with the unique authority and originality of all that was created for the Great Cardinal. Like the Farnese casket made by the goldsmith Manno and the crystal engraver Giovanni de’ Bernardi da Castelbolognese, and now at Capodimonte, or like the famous Farnese Book of Hours illuminated by Giulio Clovio and now in the Morgan Li-
brary, the Farnese table designed by Vignola proclaims far and wide the majesty of the Roman High Renaissance.

I should like to express my best thanks to His Excellency Ambassador Palewski for his courtesy in allowing me to inspect the Farnese apartment now occupied by the French Embassy to the Italian Government, and to take measurements and photographs in many rooms normally not accessible.

I am deeply indebted to Professor Wolfgang Lotz for bringing to my knowledge some of the unpublished documents concerning Vignola's work at the Farnese Palace, and to Jack R. McGregor for discovering that our table was at Hamilton Palace.

As no recent complete study exists on the architectural history of the Farnese Palace or on Vignola's work there, the documents upon which this article is based are scattered in numerous publications. The most important of these are: L. Cadier, "Le tombeau du Pape Paul III Farnèse; Documents," in Mélanges d'Archéologie et d'Histoire, IX, 1889, pp. 77-92; P. Giordani, "Ricerche intorno alla Villa di Papa Giulio," in L'Arte, 1907, pp. 133-138; and especially R. Lanciani, Storia degli Scavi di Roma, II, Rome, 1903, pp. 149-179 and III, Rome, 1907, pp. 17, 21-24, 93.

REFERENCES TO OUR TABLE

INVENTORIES


"Inventario generale delle statue . . . a. 1767," Documenti inediti, etc., III, p. 190.

"Inventario delle statue . . . alli 15 Novembre 1775," Documenti inediti, etc., III, p. 190.


An excerpt of the report of 1834 is quoted by R. Lanciani, Storia degli Scavi di Roma, III, Rome, 1907, p. 176.
AT TOP: Marble inlaid top of one of the small tables still in the Farnese Palace.  
Below: Ceiling of one of the rooms at the northwest corner of the state apartment,  
showing the arms and emblems of Cardinal Alessandro Farnese
DESCRIPTIONS OF THE FARNESE PALACE

F. Titi, *Descrizione delle Pitture, sculture ed architetture esposte al pubblico in Roma*, Rome, 1763, p. 112 (1st ed. 1686).


ENGLISH SOURCES


Coat of arms of Pope Paul III. Detail from a fresco by Vasari in the Palazzo della Cancelleria, 1546