

# Palazzotto before the Palace. The *Palazzetto* Eucherio Sanvitale as the First Satellite Residence at the Farnese Court

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*We who were living are now dying  
With a little patience  
T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land**

The Duchy of Parma and Piacenza was created by pope Paul III in 1545 and entrusted to his son Pier Luigi Farnese (1503–1547). According to Cardinal Ercole Gonzaga's now famous remark, the new state sprouted in a single night, like a mushroom.<sup>1</sup>

The two cities were in a border territory. Part of the Papal States from 1513, they were historically under the influence of the Duchy of Milan. The creation of the new duchy by Paul III upset the fragile balance of political relations, and was opposed by local aristocratic families. The situation deteriorated in September 1547 when Pier Luigi was murdered in a conspiracy led by Ferrante Gonzaga, governor of Milan, with the silent approval of Emperor Charles V. Piacenza was occupied by imperial troops, but Pier Luigi's son, Ottavio (1521–1586), succeeded his father as Duke of Parma a few days after the assassination. Parma remained loyal to the Farnese.

Concerned about the effects that the problems in the new duchy were having on the balance of power in the broader European theatre, in 1549 Paul III decided to reverse his decision and annex Parma and Piacenza to the Papal States. Ottavio opposed the decision of the pontiff (his grandfather) and with the help of his older brother Alessandro (1520–1589), a powerful figure in the Roman Curia, he began a long political battle to have his rights as duke recognized. Ottavio courted diplomatic relations with both France and Spain, frequently forming and breaking alliances as the situation changed.

Only with the Treaty of Ghent in August 1556 was Piacenza restored to Ottavio, although the city retained an imperial garrison until 1585. In 1559 the Treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis established a new peace in Europe and concluded the power struggles between France and Spain over Italian territory. One of the terms of the new treaty, returned the Duchy of Parma and Piacenza to the Farnese family.

With the achieved political stability, Ottavio was able, in 1561, to begin construction of the Palazzo Ducale and the surrounding park. Previously the Duke had been living in the Palace of the Apostolic Governor. Documents do not give the name of the architect of the new building, but the project is attributed to Jacopo Barozzi da Vignola (1507–1573). Both the palace and the park have been greatly altered since they were built in the second half of the sixteenth century. Their current appearance is due to the renovations of the French architect Alexandre Petitot in the eighteenth century.

Inside the park, close to the ducal palace, stands the *Palazzetto* Eucherio Sanvitale, the subject of this article. [Fig. 1] The park suffered a long period of neglect, before it was restored in 2002. At that time, the *palazzetto* was

<sup>1</sup> Letter from Cardinal Ercole Gonzaga to Ercole II d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, 23 August 1545: '*pare strana cosa vedere far un duca di due simili città in una notte come nasce un fungo*' ('it seems strange to see a Duke of two such cities sprout up in one night like a mushroom': translated by Paul V. Murphy, *Ruling peacefully. Cardinal Ercole Gonzaga and Patrician Reform in Sixteenth-Century Italy*, Washington 2007, p. 182). See also Giovanni Drei, *I Farnese. Grandezza e decadenza di una dinastia italiana*, Roma 1954. – *I Farnese. Arte e collezionismo* (exh. cat.), Palazzo Ducale di Colorno, Milan 1995; and the recent Giuseppe Bertini (ed.), *Storia di Parma. IV. Il Ducato Farnesiano*, Parma 2014.

also restored, and it now houses exhibitions and cultural activities.<sup>2</sup>

In 1561, while the construction of the Palazzo Ducale was underway, Ottavio bought a small house (casino) from Eucherio Sanvitale (ca. 1500–1571), a member of one of the most important Parmesan families.<sup>3</sup> There were several buildings in the area now occupied by the ducal park, which has led to speculation about the location of this *palazzetto*. Some scholars have proposed that Eucherio's casino was actually the building that Vignola transformed into the Palazzo Ducale, and that the smaller building we see today belonged to the nearby church of San Michele degli Umiliati, which was later destroyed.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, it has been demonstrated that the Palazzo Ducale is inside the perimeter of a former military structure, which in the fifteenth and sixteenth century was called *castello*, as we can read on the map by Ponzoni. This was a triangular area in the west of the town, across the river. It is unlikely that a citizen or even a member of the nobility could purchase such a strategic location from the community, and turn it into his own residence. But if the present *palazzetto* actually belonged to the church of San Michele, and the Palazzo Ducale was built on the foundations of a public structure, where else could the *casino* the Duke acquired from Sanvitale be? Perhaps it was demolished?

However, I think this is unlikely. In my opinion Eucherio's *palazzetto* is the smaller building still standing on the site. In addition to economic reasons (Ottavio paid the considerable sum of two thousand *scudi* to acquire the building), there is also a symbolic meaning. As the new Palazzo Ducale was built on the foundations of the ancient fortification, so the satellite residence – the *palazzetto* – was established in a property formerly associated with the Sanvitale family, one of the Farneses' most significant competitors for regional power.

In effect, Ottavio considered the *palazzetto* an important part of his project. In the map of the city of Parma engraved by Paolo Ponzoni in 1572, this building is represented in a larger scale and with a richer architectural detail [Fig. 2] than similar structures featured on the map. Rather than being an accurate description of the city of Parma, the map depicts the city in such a way as to reflect the Duke's projects and priorities. For this reason, the prominence given to the little building is indicative of its importance in the ducal program of self-representation.

## Paintings

The plan of the building is simple. [Fig. 3] From the loggia you access a large central hall (the entrance was later moved to the opposite end of the hall, where it remains today). From this hall four doors lead to smaller rooms, two on each side. All of these spaces, loggia, hall and rooms, were completely frescoed. Today the paintings are badly damaged, in large part because they were painted over during the eighteenth century. Although little remains of the frescoes today, it is likely that the two long walls depicted large views of imaginary port cities. The upper portion of the walls and the ceiling showed a blue sky with birds in the lunettes. [Fig. 4]

The adjacent Sala di Parmigianino takes its name from a fresco with the Virgin and Child in a lunette over a door. The fresco is now attributed to the young Parmigianino, which reinforces the hypothesis that the building was originally the property of the Sanvitale family.<sup>5</sup> The decorative scheme of this room is complex; the sky is visible through a fictive architectural frame of lunettes and a central tondo in the ceiling and large landscapes appear around the walls in octagonal frames. [Fig. 5]

In another room landscapes occupy the entirety of the walls, without any interruption. The ceiling is painted with a large curtain that articulates the sixteen compartments of the umbrella vault. [Fig. 6]

A third room, also decorated with uninterrupted landscape frescoes, is on the opposite side of the central hall,

2 I have to thank Rosa Marzolini, of the Municipality of Parma, for her valuable assistance.

3 Eucherio Sanvitale had served as the ambassador to the King of France and conduct several diplomatic missions for Ottavio. In 1564 he was named bishop of Viviers in France.

4 This hypothesis has been suggested by Maria Rita Furlotti, *Il "Casino di Co' de Ponte" di Galeazzo Sanvitale a Parma*, Parma 1998; and Bruno Adorni – Maria Rita Furlotti, *L'architettura a Parma all'epoca del Parmigianino*, in: Lucia Fornari Schianchi (ed.), *Parmigianino e il Manierismo europeo*, Milan 2002, pp. 360-369; it has been refuted by Carlo Mambriani, *Il giardino di Parma. Da delizia ducale a patrimonio collettivo di arte e natura*, Parma 2006, pp. 18-22, and by the same Bruno Adorni, *L'architettura a Parma sotto i primi Farnese 1545-1630*, Reggio Emilia 2008, pp. 39-68.

5 The Sanvitale family commissioned Parmigianino to paint the frescoes of *Diana and Acteon* in the castle of Fontanellato, around 1523-1524. For the Parmigianino lunette in the *palazzetto*, see Mary Vaccaro, *Parmigianino. I dipinti*, Turin 2002, pp. 145-146; for the related drawings see Achim Gnann, *Parmigianino. Die Zeichnungen*, Petersberg 2007, pp. 60-61, 363.

and here the umbrella vault depicts a pergola with vines. [Fig. 7]<sup>6</sup> The last room, the most damaged of the four, is painted with a dense forest around all the walls, but unfortunately today the frescoes are barely legible. [Fig. 8]

The *palazzetto* is painted almost entirely with landscapes, which are remarkable for the absence of any historical subject. The walls are completely deserted, except for a few small figures scattered in the woods. It could be assumed that the *palazzetto* was merely a leisure residence, where strolling courtiers could find rest during a walk in the park. However, the absence of historical themes is somehow connected with paintings in the Palazzo Ducale; the Sala del Bacio (Room of the Kiss) painted by Girolamo Mirola around 1563 shows a similar format, with stories depicted around all four walls in an uninterrupted landscape.<sup>7</sup> In the Palazzo Ducale frescoes there is no indication of a celebration of the Duke or his family. [Fig. 9]

This is unexpected, especially in light of the achievements of self-celebration and self-promotion carried out by the Farnese. It is hardly necessary to recall the fresco cycles in Palazzo Farnese in Rome by Francesco Salviati (just before 1556), and at Caprarola by Federico Zuccari, who was working at exactly the same time as Mirola was completing the Parma decoration.

These landscape paintings without any *storia* in the *palazzetto* follow a trend already established in the Palazzo Ducale. Nothing is known about an iconographic program (if such a program existed), so we cannot produce an iconographic analysis for this unusual choice. However, I suggest that the reasons for this unusual decorative program are to be found in the delicate and unstable political balance that had characterized Ottavio's rise to power; the Duke's moderation in celebrating and illustrating his political power in his Parma residences must be interpreted as a conciliatory gesture towards the local aristocracy.

### Authorship

There is no remaining documentation about the Palazzetto Sanvitale decorations. The landscapes have been attributed to different artists on the basis of style. Some scholars have perceived Flemish influences and have given the frescoes to a group of anonymous Flemish artists generically mentioned in the Farnese archives, but impossible to identify. Others have suggested better-known painters such as Cornelis Loot or Jan Soens. The frescoes have also been attributed, correctly, to Cesare Baglione (ca. 1545–1615).<sup>8</sup>

Baglione was a Bolognese artist, little known outside Emilia. He worked mainly in fresco, meaning his works could not travel, and many of these frescoes were later destroyed, including some of his most important achievements. A later lack of scholarly interest in late Bolognese Mannerism pushed the artist further into obscurity.

Only a few comparisons will be sufficient to prove his authorship. A recently recovered fresco of a male nude playing the cello in the loggia of the *palazzotto* is very similar to the figure of a fisherman painted in a frieze at Villa Paleotta, near Bologna.<sup>9</sup> [Fig. 10] Additionally, in the upper part of the walls in the hall, the birds fly in order, one per lunette; Baglione painted the same regular disposition of birds in the ceiling of a room in the Castello di Torrechiara, near Parma, where four similar birds are placed between the ribs of the vault. [Fig. 11] The Torrechiara frescoes are closely related to those of Palazzetto Sanvitale; in the three rooms opening onto

6 Ilaria Fioretti – Maria Evelina Melley – Daniela Paltrinieri, La geometria e la pittura delle volte ad ombrello. Camera di S. Paolo e Palazzetto Eucherio S. Vitale [sic!] a Parma, in: Emma Mandelli – Gaia Lavoratti (eds.), *Disegnare il tempo e l'armonia. Il disegno di architettura osservatorio dell'universo*, Florence 2010, pp. 535–539.

7 The frescoes have been traditionally attributed to both Mirola and Bertoja, see Diane De Grazia, *Bertoja, Mirola and the Farnese Court*, Bologna 1991; but they belong to the former, as discerned by Roberto Venturelli, *La corte farnesiana di Parma (1560-1570). Programmazione artistica e identità culturale*, Rome 1999, pp. 122–153.

8 The most important discussions of the attributions of the frescoes are: Leonardo Farinelli – Pier Paolo Mendogni, *Guida di Parma*, Parma 1981, p. 122 (style of Baglione). – Giuseppe Cirillo – Giovanni Godi, *Guida artistica del Parmense*, II, Parma 1986, p. 264 (Baglione, close to the frescos of Torrechiara and Soragna). – Bert W. Meijer, *Parma e Bruxelles. Committenza e collezionismo farnesiani alle due corti*, Milan 1988, pp. 25–26 (unknown Flemish painters). – Lucia Fornari Schianchi, Palazzetto Eucherio Sanvitale: qualche considerazione sulle decorazioni, in: Giovanni Godi (ed.), *La reggia di là da l'acqua. Il giardino e il palazzo dei duchi di Parma*, Milan 1991, pp. 77–78 (Baglione?). – Diane De Grazia, *Ottavio Farnese and his artists in Parma and Rome*, in: Giovanna Perini (ed.), *Il luogo ed il ruolo della città di Bologna tra Europa continentale e mediterranea*, Bologna 1992, p. 273 (unknown Flemish painters). – Giuseppe Cirillo, Grottesche visioni. Cesare Baglioni a Soragna, in *FMR* XV, 119, 1996, pp. 45–86 (47) (Baglione). – Elisabetta Fadda, "Natura picta": il giardino entra nelle sale, in: Mambriani (see note 4), p. 229 (Cornelis Loots or Jan Soens).

9 The fresco in the loggia reappeared after the restoration in 2002. It was first published as Bertoja by Francesco Barocelli, Di un "Apollo" del Bertoja e degli effetti della cultura parmigianinesca nel Casino del Giardino Ducale di Parma, *Aurea Parma* LXXXVI, 2002, No. 3, pp. 425–434, but returned to Baglione by Giuseppe Cirillo, Ancora per la pittura parmense del Cinquecento, *Parma per l'arte* IX, 2003, Nos. 1–2, p. 7–57, esp. p. 48.

the great hall on the first floor, solutions from Parma are repeated: uninterrupted landscapes, bright sunsets, and harbour views.<sup>10</sup> [Fig. 12] Finally, there are the pink buildings scattered among the rocks, sketched rapidly with an uncertain perspective, which were almost a signature for Baglione.<sup>11</sup> These appear in both Torrechiara and Palazzetto Sanvitale.

## Chronology

Baglione's name first appears in the Farnese accounts in 1574; at that time he received a regular monthly salary. The date cannot be coincidental. The two principle court painters, Mirola and Jacopo Bertoja, had recently passed away, Mirola in 1570 and Bertoja in 1574. The choice of Baglione, who like Mirola, was Bolognese, indicates a willingness to hire a new court artist, or at least a painter who could fulfil a variety of artistic needs. Baglione continued in this role until his death in 1615.

It is not known for what work Baglione was paid in 1574, but the landscapes of the Palazzetto Sanvitale certainly belong to his first period in Parma. Indeed, he joined the Farnese court as a landscape specialist; in 1572 he was working with Prospero Fontana in Palazzo Vitelli in Città di Castello, where he was specifically commissioned to paint landscapes. The patron was Paolo Vitelli (1519–1574), Marquis of Cetona and Carmiano, *condottiero* and faithful ally of the Farnese. It was certainly he who introduced Baglione to Ottavio.

The frescoes in the *palazzetto* must have been executed around 1575. Even if they were done a decade later, they still correspond with paintings in the Palazzo Ducale. For example, the large rocks depicted in the Sala del Velario resemble those in the Sala del Bacio. Additionally, a room on the ground floor in Torrechiara, where landscapes are visible over semi-ruined stone walls, copies the celebrated invention by Mirola in the Camera Rupta (literally Broken Room) in the Palazzo Ducale, which has since been lost.

Baglione, of course, knew the frescoes of the Palazzo Ducale very well, as he had painted several of its rooms, including the kitchens, laundries and other functional spaces. In 1678 Carlo Cesare Malvasia left a vivid account of his impressions of these paintings.<sup>12</sup> In the *Bologna perlustrata* (1666), one of the first sources to discuss Baglione, Antonio Masini writes that the artist '*died in Parma after he painted the inside and outside the Palace of the Duke*', indicating that this was his most important achievement.<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

Although little studied, the frescoes of Palazzetto Eucherio Sanvitale are an important chapter of Farnese patronage. Diane De Grazia attributed them to unknown Flemish painters, and associated them with the frescoes in Torrechiara and Montechiarugolo. According to De Grazia, all these frescoes were characterized by a style common to several artists from different backgrounds, who developed a shared language, which she called the 'Farnese Courtly Style'.<sup>14</sup>

However, Baglione was the artist responsible for all of these works, and he played a leading role in the dissemination of this style, which was influenced by Flemish culture, through his regular study of Northern examples.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, De Grazia was not totally wrong. Although there was only one artist, there were a number of patrons interested in this style: Ottavio Farnese, at the Palazzetto Sanvitale; the scholar Pomponio Torelli, at the Castello di Montechiarugolo; and the Sforza di Santa Flora family, at Castello di Torrechiara. Baglione also worked for other noble families in the region of Parma: the Rossi at Castello di San Secondo; the Meli Lupi at Castello di Soragna; and the Sanvitale family, at their castle in Fontanellato.

From 1604 Baglione was contracted exclusively to the Farnese. But he had been linked to the Farnese court

10 For an overview of Baglione's career, see: Michele Danieli – Davide Ravaioli (eds.), *Palazzo Fava da San Domenico*, Bologna 2008, pp. 73-121.

11 Maria Teresa Sambin De Norcen, *Marco Pio e Cesare Baglione: politica, topografia e pittura di paesaggio*, in: Francesco Ceccarelli – Maria Teresa Sambin De Norcen (eds.), *Lo Stato dipinto. La sala delle vedute nel castello di Spezzano*, Venice 2011, pp. 11–33.

12 Carlo Cesare Malvasia, *Felsina Pittrice*, Bologna 1678, I, pp. 341-342. Unfortunately, all these works have been lost. However, some may still be hidden under the new plaster.

13 Antonio Masini, *Bologna perlustrata*, Bologna 1666, p. 617: '*mori in Parma dopo d'haver dipinto dentro, e fuori tutto il Palazzo di quel Duca*'.

14 De Grazia (see note 8), p. 274.

15 Among Baglione's possessions, Malvasia recorded a crate full of '*paesi di Fiandra a temprà involti, e de' quali, come dissi, servivasi, qualora a rappresentarne predea, imitandoli*' ('Flemish tempera landscapes rolled up, which he imitated when he needed to paint'): Malvasia (see note 12), p. 349.



from the 1570s, and since which time he had worked only on behalf of his Farnese patrons. His activities in the residences of Parmesan aristocrats were part of Ottavio's diplomatic efforts in the region. Baglione was tasked to export the 'Farnese Courtly Style' across the whole duchy, creating a cultural *koinè*. His wide activity marks a sort of pictorial truce between the Farnese and the local aristocracy in the sharing of the same visual language.

After the death of Ottavio (1586) and his son Alexander (1545–1592), the political situation underwent a stark change. Alexander's son, Ranuccio (1569–1622), ordered Baglione to work exclusively for the court (from 1604), and entrusted him with the decoration of churches built under the Duke's direct patronage.<sup>16</sup> Ranuccio's attitude towards nobility was very different from his father's and grandfather's. He considered his political power to be secure, and some years later he found an opportunity to assert greater authority in the duchy.

In 1611 a conspiracy against the Duke was discovered. After a vigorous interrogation, seven nobles confessed their involvement in the plot. A few months later they were executed in public, and their lands and property were confiscated by Ranuccio. Gianfrancesco and Girolamo Sanvitale were among those executed.<sup>17</sup>

In 1561, Ottavio Farnese had attempted to legitimize and consolidate his new-found political authority by the acquisition of symbolic structures and sites; the Palazzo Ducale was built upon the ancient city fortress and the Palazzetto Eucherio Sanvitale was acquired as the first satellite residence of the new Farnese court. After half a century, by force and blood, Ranuccio finally completed the work begun by his grandfather.

16 The Church of the Capuchins at Fontevivo, near Parma (1609-1611), and the Santa Maria delle Grazie in Fidenza (destroyed), on the Via Emilia between Parma and Piacenza (1610).

17 For this episode, known as *la Gran Giustizia* ('the Great Justice'), see: Gian Luca Podestà, *Dal delitto politico alla politica del delitto. Finanza pubblica e congiure contro i Farnese nel Ducato di Parma e Piacenza dal 1545 al 1622*, Milan 1995 – *La "Gran giustizia" del 1612. Streghe, malefici, congiure e confische nel ducato di Ranuccio I Farnese* (exh. cat.), Archivio di Stato di Parma, Parma 2012.



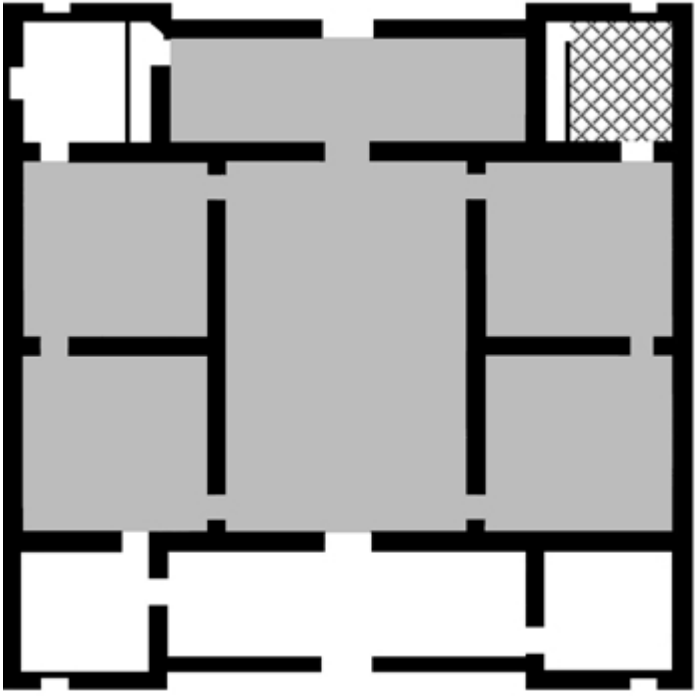
1. Parma, palazzetto Eucherio Sanvitale, external view.

Photo: M. Danieli



2. Paolo Ponzoni, Pianta della città di Parma in prospettiva, 1572, a detail, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale.

Photo: Public domain



3. Parma, palazzetto Eucherio Sanvitale, plan.



4. Cesare Baglione, Landscapes, Parma, palazzetto Eucherio Sanvitale, hall.

Photo: M. Danieli





5. Cesare Baglione, Landscapes and architectures, Parma, palazzetto Eucherio Sanvitale, room of Parmigianino (in lower left corner, the Virgin and Child by Parmigianino).

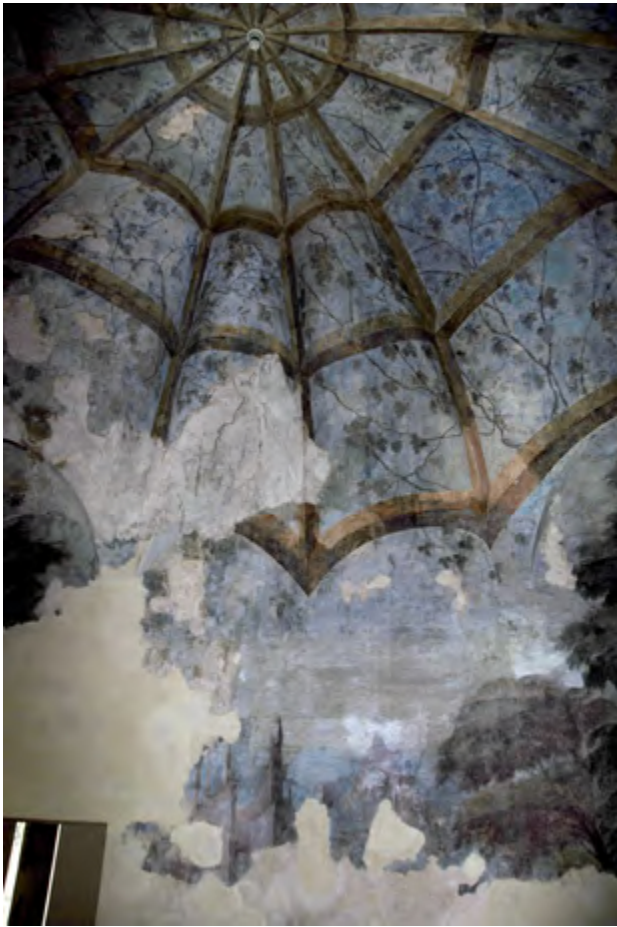
Photo: M. Danieli



6. Cesare Baglione, Landscapes, Parma, palazzetto Eucherio Sanvitale, room of the Velario.

Photo: M. Danieli





7. Cesare Baglione, Landscapes, Parma, palazzetto Eucherio Sanvitale, room of the Pergola.

Photo: M. Danieli



8. Cesare Baglione, Landscapes, Parma, palazzetto Eucherio Sanvitale, room of the Woods.

Photo: M. Danieli



9. Girolamo Mirola, Stories of the Orlando Innamorato, Parma, Ducal Palace, Room of the Kiss.

Photo: M. Danieli



10. Cesare Baglione, Man playing cello, Parma, palazzetto Eucherio Sanvitale, loggia (left); Cesare Baglione, Fisherman, San Marino di Bentivoglio (Bologna), villa Paleotta (right)

Photo: M. Danieli





11. Cesare Baglione, Bird, Parma, palazzetto Eucherio Sanvitale, hall (left); Cesare Baglione, Birds, Torrechiara, castle, room at first floor, vault (right)

Photo: M. Danieli