

Pirro Ligorio's biography (1512-1583)

Ligorio was a painter, architect, engineer and antiquarian born in Naples around 1512. He moved to Rome in 1534 where he first worked as a painter of facades of palaces and houses that he decorated with frescoes in the manner of Polidoro da Caravaggio. From 1549, he served as court antiquarian (1549-1558) for Cardinal Ippolito II d'Este and directed for him the excavations at Hadrian's Villa in Tivoli. Ligorio also deployed his engineering skills by creating for the Cardinal the renowned gardens at the Villa d'Este and the extraordinary hydraulic system for the "hundred fountains" that still work today (fig.1). During this period, Ligorio was avidly gathering information on classical antiquity and particularly the ancient monuments and inscriptions in Rome; he produced numerous drawings and writings that he collected in the greatest encyclopedia of the ancient world in forty volumes intitled "The Roman antiquities" (figg. 2-5) and now dispersed in various libraries (Paris, Oxford, Naples, Turin). In 1558, Pope Paul IV appointed him architect of the Vatican palace and in 1560, he was made honorary citizen of Rome for his contributions to the city and the papal court. But his most prestigious commission was the appointment by Pius IV to succeed Michelangelo as architect of St. Peter's in 1564; he build for him the small masterpiece known as the Casino (fig.6) and was supervising repairs to the Sistine Chapel. When Pius IV died in 1564, Ligorio fell out of favor with the austere Pius V who promptly disposed of many of the pagan statues that the antiquarian had collected for the Casino. Before leaving Rome in 1570 to reurn to the Este family patronage, this time in Ferrara, Ligorio was commissioned to design the tomb for his compatriot the Pope Paul IV in Santa Maria sopra Minerva (fig.7). In Ferrara, Ligorio worked as engineer worked to control the Po River flood and to avoid its frequent overflowing; he also designed the very first anti seismic house of the history after the terrible hearthquake of 1570 in Ferrara (fig.8). But his main duty was that of antiquarian for the Duke Alfonso II d'Este, for whom he orchestrated the famous chivalric Festivals called "cavallerie ferraresi" and whom he served until his death in 1583. The discovery, in the 19th century, of a large number of false inscriptions in Ligorio's 'Antichità romane' earned him the reputation of a forger, but recent research has shown that Ligorio was not alone behind these forgeries; that he often had good reasons for doing so and that the ideal of the humanists and antiquarians was to reconstruct from its texts and ruins the image of the ancient Rome.



Fig.1 « Hundred fountains » in Tivoli.



Fig.2 « Antichità romane ».

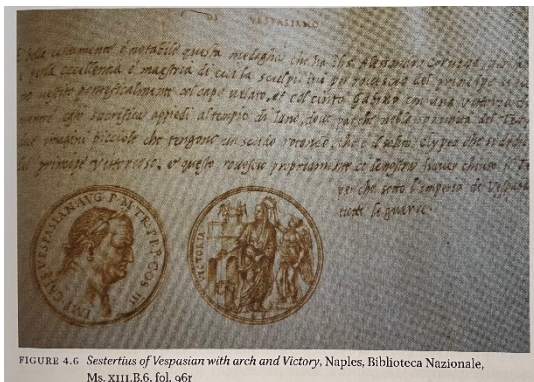


FIGURE 4.G Sestertius of Vespasian with arch and Victory, Naples, Biblioteca Nazionale, Ms. XIII.B.6, fol. 96r

Fig.3 « Antichità romane ».

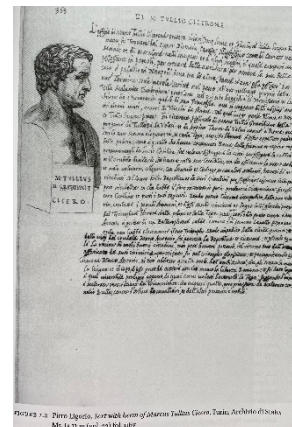


Fig.4 « Antichità romane ».

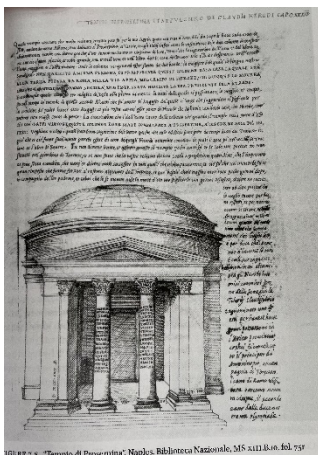


Fig.5 « Antichità romane ».



Fig.6 Casino of Pius IV in the Vatican



fig.7 Tomb of Paul IV S.Maria sopra Minerva

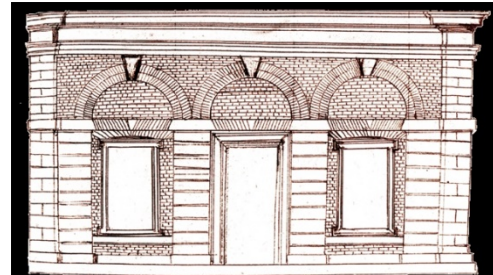


Fig.8 Anti seismic house by Ligorio.