Previously Unnoticed Depictions of Comets in Italian Renaissance Art of the Sixteenth Century

Giangiacomo Gandolfi

Abstract. Three unpublished representations of historical comets in a Renaissance painting, fresco and relief reveal a diffuse interest in the celestial novelties of the second half of the sixteenth century, even on the part of artists. The first object, included in the portrait of an astrologer in Prospero Fontana's 1565 painting in the Galleria Spada in Rome, is likely the Halley comet in its 1531 passage and closely related to the representation of a comet in a seventeenth-century portrait of the cosmographer Alessandro Piccolomini. The second, the famous comet of 1577 studied by Tycho Brahe, can be found in the Palazzo del Commendatore of the Hospital Santo Spirito in Sassia, also in Rome. The last comet, on the eastern façade of the Villa Medici, built 1576–1585) is disguised as an eight-pointed star above an antique relief of 'The Judgement of Paris' from an ancient sarcophagus. The comet is depicted next to a large fish on a band of zodiacal constellations, suggesting that it could be an allusion to the comet of October 1585 which, according to some astrological theories, heralded a new golden age for the Medici and the personal triumph of Ferdinando de Medici, who became Grand Duke of Tuscany two years later.

I would like to draw attention to three interesting and unpublished representations of historical comets in a Renaissance painting, fresco and relief in Rome, that testify to a diffuse interest in the celestial novelties of the sixteenth century in central Italy, even on the part of artists.[1] We will successively explore the Galleria Spada in the palace of the same name,

[1] A large part of the cosmological debate of the Renaissance about the so-called 'celestial novelties' in the age of Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo, concentrated on comets and new stars. For a first overview of the historical research in progress see Miguel Angel Granada, ed., *Novas y cometas entre 1572 y 1618: Revolución cosmológica y Renovación polìtica y religiosa* (Barcelona: Publibacions I edicions de la Universitat de Barcelona, 2012).

Giangiacomo Gandolfi, 'Previously Unnoticed Depictions of Comets in Italian Renaissance Art of the Sixteenth Century', *Culture and Cosmos,* Vol. 29 no 1 and 2, Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter 2025 (Papers from the INSAPXII conference, Corfu, 2024), pp. 173-190.
www.CultureAndCosmos.org

the Salone del Commendatore in the Santo Spirito in Sassia complex and the Villa Medici on the Pincio hill.

The Mystery of the 'Piccolomini Star' in the Galleria Spada

In the second room of the Galleria Spada, in the elegant Palazzo Spada, a portrait of an astronomer immediately catches the eye. Sitting on an elegant chair, he turns towards us with a serious face, holding a large open volume in his hands and pointing to a portion of the sky depicted on his beautiful celestial globe, surmounted by a small, sculpted Venus.

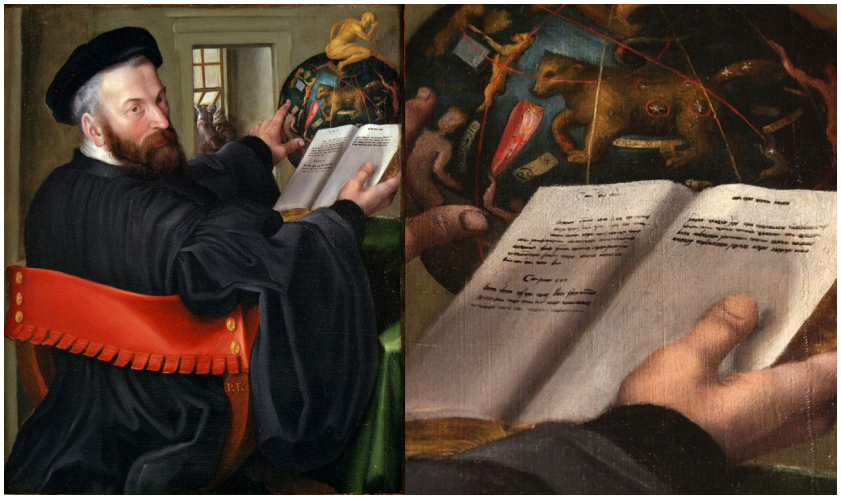

Fig. 1. Prospero Fontana, Portrait of an Astronomer and a detail of his celestial globe with the pink-red comet, c.1565, Galleria Spada, Rome. Photo by Gianluca Masi.

The painting, attributed to Bartolomeo Passerotti or Prospero Fontana, is one of a series of three portraits that probably make up a trittico from the middle of the sixteenth century.[2] The art historian Enrico de Julis has recently suggested in a private letter that the three humanists portrayed (a botanist, an astrologer and a physician) once belonged to the *Accademia degli Infiammati*, a circle of intellectuals centred in Padua and active in the

[2] The description of the portrait is in Federico Zeri, *La Galleria Spada in Roma. Catalogo dei dipinti*, 1954, pp.103–104, cat. 88, tav. 135.

second quarter of the sixteenth century.[3] Its members included Daniele Barbaro, Benedetto Varchi, Sperone Speroni and other literary superstars of the time, but also the Sienese Alessandro Piccolomini (1508–1579), an important humanist and cosmographer, whom de Julis recognises in the painting.[4]

In fact, the astronomer's facial features are very similar to those in the known portraits of Piccolomini, although unfortunately they all show him as an old man, appointed Archbishop of Patrasso in 1575. An anonymous portrait by Giovanbattista Moroni in the Piccolomini Spanocchi collection seems to show an even younger Piccolomini in his thirties.[5]

The 'Portrait of a Noblewoman' in the Musei Civici di Bologna, on the other hand, seems to come from the same studio, with the same enigmatic scene around a window in the background, still to be adequately assessed by art historians.[6] The letters PF on the chair certainly stand for Prospero Fontana: his daughter Lavinia seems to have inherited the statuette of a crouching Venus that also appears in her 'Self-portrait in a tondo'.[7]

---

[3] Enrico de Julis, *personal communication*, 2023. A brief history of this influential Italian academy is in Maria Teresa Girardi, 'Accademia degli Infiammati', in: M. Sgarbi, ed., *Encyclopedia of Renaissance Philosophy*, Springer Cham, 2022. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-14169-5_335

[4] The classical biography of this Italian humanist of the sixteenth century, also known as 'Lo Stordito', a member of the celebrated local *Accademia degli Intronati*, is in Florindo Cerreta, *Alessandro Piccolomini. Letterato e filosofo senese del cinquecento* (Siena: Accademia Senesi degli Intronati, 1960).

[5] Giovanni Battista Moroni, 'Ritratto di giovane con la barba' (about 1543–1545; oil on canvas, 44,2 x 37,6 cm; Siena, Pinacoteca Nazionale, inv. 467). The entire collection, which preserves the precious paintings of both the families, is in S. Maria della Scala, Siena. See Cristina Gnoni Mavarelli, ed., *La collezione Piccolomini Spannocchi* (Pisa: Pacini Editore, 2021).

[6] Prospero Fontana, 'Ritratto di Gentildonna '(about 1565-70); oil on canvas, 90 x 120 cm; Bologna, Museo Davia Bargellini, inv. 387. See S. Battistini and M. Medica, eds, *Il Museo Davia Bargellini* (Ferrara: Edizioni Edisai, 2013). The topic is discussed in Luca Esposito, *Al limite del visibile. La figura di spalle nella Pittura Italiana del Cinquecento*, Tesi di Dottorato XXXIII Ciclo, Università Sapienza di Roma, 2020-21, pp.95–96. https://iris.uniroma1.it/retrieve/e383532c-4e44-15e8-e053-a505fe0a3de9/Tesi_dottorato_Esposito.pdf

[7] Lavinia Fontana, 'Autoritratto nello Studio' (1579), oil on copper, 15,7 × 15,7 cm; Firenze, Galleria degli Uffizi, Corridoio Vasariano, inv. 4013. See Romeo Galli, ed., *Lavinia Fontana pittrice: 1552-1614* (Imola: Galeati, 1940), pp.78–81 and 115–116.

Piccolomini wrote a number of important cosmographical treatises in the vernacular: *De la Sfera del Mondo*, *De le Stelle Fisse* (both written near Padua in 1540) and *Theoriche overo Speculationi dei Pianeti* (1558). His book in the painting does not seem to correspond to these works, but it represents his passion for poetry, philosophy and science, shared in the 'Accademie' of the time, outside the university world.[8]

On the other hand, the celestial globe he indicates can be identified and dated from the many unique details that Fontana reproduces among the constellations: it is by Caspar Vopel and its map was first published in Cologne in 1536.[9]

Vopel's globe, the first to show the constellation of Coma Berenices, is a useful *post quem* for the portrait, which is generally dated around 1565, long after his participation in the *Accademia degli Infiammati* in Padua and the writing of the cosmographic treatises that date back to the 1540s. However, a close examination of the painted figures reveals a striking anomaly that could lead us back to even earlier years: the strange elongated pink object under the snout of Ursa Maior.

In 1911, Warburg noticed the painting in an exhibition of portraits at Palazzo Vecchio and cited it in a seminar (albeit with a wrong attribution), promising to identify its 'comet'.[10] He never returned to the subject. Is the prominent object under the Great Bear the same one identified by Warburg? And is it really a comet at all?

---

[8] A recent and detailed study on Piccolomini astronomer and science communicator is Kristen Lippincott, *Alessandro Piccolomini's Early Astronomical Works: I. An Exploration of Their Cultural Significance* (Springer Cham, 2024).

[9] Details and reproductions of this and other Vopel's globes and their gores may be found on the rich pages dedicated to the cartographer by Felice Stoppa, in his web portal *Atlas Coelestis*, https://www.atlascoelestis.com/Vopel%201532.htm and https://www.atlascoelestis.com/Anonimo%20vopel%201536%20base.htm. See also Elly Dekker, 'Caspar Vopel's Ventures in Sixteenth-Century Celestial Cartography', *Imago Mundi* 62, no. 2 (2010): pp.161–90. https://www.atlascoelestis.com/Vopel%202010%20base.htm.

[10] Aby Warburg, 'Die astronomische Himmelsdarstellung im Gewolbe der alten Sakristei von San Lorenzo in Florenz', *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 2 (1912–1917): p.34. The portrait was exhibited in the 'Mostra del Ritratto Italiano' (1911) in Palazzo Vecchio, Firenze, Room XXIV, n. 7 and attributed to Scipione Pulzone.

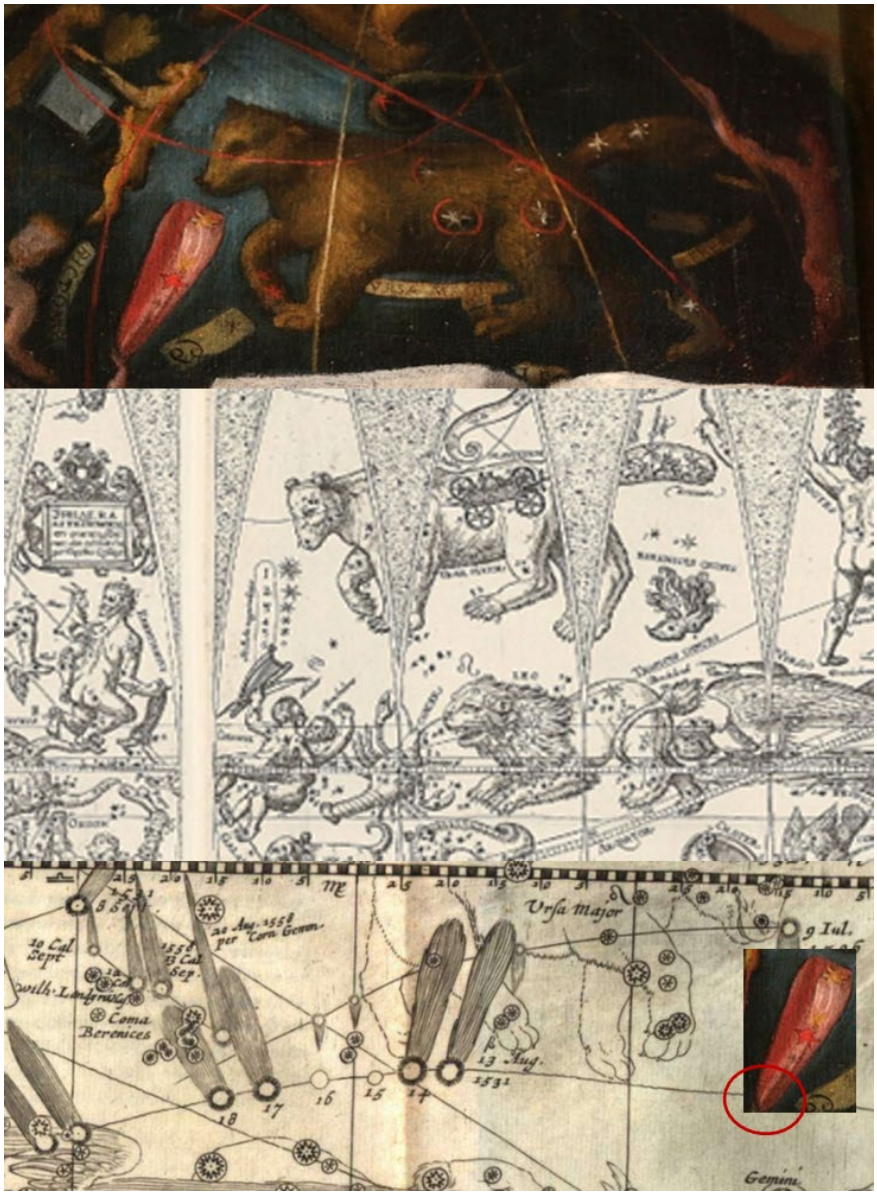

Fig. 2. The region shown on Piccolomini's globe, detail of the gores of Vopel's Globe (Cologne, 1536) and the position of the 1531 comet (Halley) under the snout of Ursa Major extrapolated on the orbit calculated by Stanislaw Lubeniecki in *Theatri Cometici Pars Posterior* (1667).

In 2016, when I first noticed the anomaly, I studied the artefact with high-resolution images (courtesy of Gianluca Masi) and concluded that a late restoration had conflated the legend of the magnitudes with the small lyra represented by Vopel in the region (i.e., the instrument depicted as an attribute of one of the Gemini). The overlapping seemed to me to have created a false object, which in fact contained a series of stars, seen in transparency. Recently, however, the director of the Galleria Spada Adriana Capriotti ruled out such a restoration effect, and when I heard about de Julis's identification of the astronomer, I resumed my research with a new hypothesis: the pink object could indeed be the image of a comet drawn by Piccolomini himself on his globe, accidentally superimposed on the legend and the lyra.[11]

Another portrait of the Sienese cosmographer in the Palazzo Piccolomini in Pienza, painted at the beginning of the XVII century, shows a comet in the background, apparently confirming the tradition of a strangely undefined 'Piccolomini star' reported by local historians.[12] Mazzoni proposes an identification of the object on the basis of the catalogue of major comets of the period.[13] Since Piccolomini is depicted as an old archbishop, he concludes that the comet can only be that of 1577. However, the Pienza portrait is actually a representation, derived from an earlier engraving, and the comet may be a posthumous object observed by the painter while working on the portrait (for example, the prominent comet C/1618 W1), added to allude to the older 'Stella Piccolomini'.

If the object on the Vopel Globe is the 'Piccolomini Star', then the comet certainly predates the one of 1577 (given the dating of the painting and the apparent age of the astronomer, who seems to have been significantly younger), and two other possible comets should be considered because of their high luminosity and spectacular passage during the active life of the Sienese cosmographer.

---

[11] Adriana Capriotti, *private communication*, 2023

[12] The portrait, preserved in the living room of count Silvio Piccolomini in Pienza is attributed to Bonaventura Salimbeni and dated to the first quarter of the seventeenth century. See Laura Martini e Bruno Santi, *Il palazzo Piccolomini di Pienza, Guida al palazzo e alle sue collezioni* (Siena: Edizioni Cantagalli, 2006), pp.35–36. The cometary object is cited for example without explanations or plausible identifications in Aldo Lo Presti, ' Libri Pientini di Alessandro Piccolomini', *Canonica. Rivista di Studi Pientini* 8 (2018): pp.69–72, at p.70.

[13] Massimo Mazzoni, 'Alessandro Piccolomini: la mente al Cielo, con gli occhi al cielo', *Canonica. Rivista di Studi Pientini* 13 (2023): pp.43–66.

The first is the comet of 1556, which appeared in the area of Coma Berenices and can be definitively excluded because of its trajectory very far from the mouth of Ursa Maior.[14]

On the other hand, the comet Halley's passage of 1531 seems very promising. On that occasion, the celestial body appeared as a 'bearded' Pogonia comet, described by Schoner and Fracastoro as brilliant golden-red. The first report came from China (5 August), but in Rome celestial objects defined as 'comets' were already reported at the end of July, and Vapovius mentions a comet on 1 August.[15] Extrapolating the celestial path with the orbital elements, the position of the object is compatible with a very early observation made at dawn on 7–8 August. Piccolomini may indeed have been one of the first observers to rediscover Halley's comet in its passage in 1531!

The Comet of Commendatore Aldrovandi in Santo Spirito in Sassia

The Santo Spirito in Sassia is a twelfth century church, a pilgrims' hospice since the eighth century, and one of the first public hospitals in the world since 1198.

During the pontificate of Pius V, between 1566 and 1572, the S. Spirito complex was enlarged with the construction of the 'Palazzo del Commendatore' by the architect Nanni di Baccio Bigio, commissioned by Bernardino Cirillo, the first Commendatore.[16] On the upper floor, in a splendid apartment, is the Salone del Commendatore, with its sixteenth century frescoes (1576–80) depicting episodes from the founding of the hospital and the investiture of the second Commendatore and patron, Teseo Aldovrandi. The Commendatore was the head of the hospital, and the chief of the religious order of the Ospitalieri.

---

[14] Gary W. Kronk, *Cometography. A catalog of comets. Volume 1: Ancient-1799* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp.509–10.

[15] The Pogonia is a bearded type of comet according to medieval classifications. An extended list of observations of the object is provided by Stanislaw Lubeniecki in *Theatri Cometici Pars Posterior* (Amsterdam: 1667), pp.333–36. All these historical data are extracted from Gary W. Kronk, *Cometography*, pp.298–300 and Alexandre Guy Pingré, *Cométographie ou traité historique et théorique des comètes, Tome I* (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1783), pp.487–91.

[16] Luisa Cardilli Alloisi, *Il Palazzo del Commendatore di Santo Spirito: Le collezioni storico-artistiche* (Roma: Artemide, 1998).

The decoration of the hall began in 1576 and probably continued until 1578. [17] For a long time it was thought to be the work of the workshop of the Zucchi brothers, but recently the frescoes have been attributed to Paris Nogari, Cesare Arbasia or Lorenzo Sabatini and his circle. The themes of the room are essentially three: 1) the history of the hospital; 2) the glorification of Gregory XIII; and 3) the glory of the Aldrovandi family, linked by kinship to the pontiff.

On the four walls, the main representations are dedicated to the foundation and the activities of the hospital. Gregory XIII, with an abundance of dragons, is the patron of many of the smaller allegorical figures. The omnipresent dragon emblem, proposed by the courtier Principio Fabrizi, was attacked by the Pope's ecclesiastic enemies, but defended and honoured by the Aldrovandi brothers in particular. [18]

The Aldrovandis were esteemed Bolognese courtiers and scientists. Ulisse Aldrovandi in particular was one of the leading European naturalists of the sixteenth century. [19] The presence of Ulisse (in Rome in 1576–77) is evidenced by the magnificent bird portraits on the west wall.

Around the main frescoes, a classical Renaissance frieze with grotesque and black grisailles contains some small mythological scenes that are difficult to read. Some are completely missing, others are damaged.

And here, on the eastern wall, is an unexpected scene, in bad condition and with heavy superimposed incisions, but still clearly legible in its main elements: it represents a ‘nocturne’ with some observers, perhaps trees or undefined details of the skyline, a crescent and a beautiful comet with an unmistakable double tail: as modern astrophysicists have discovered, one is composed of gas, the other essentially of dust.

Although there are traces of a restoration of the hall at the beginning of the twentieth century, the originality of the small scene seems to be beyond

[17] For a recent and excellent iconographical study of the Salone del Commendatore see Yvan Loskoutoff, “La frise et le décor du Salon du commandeur à Santo Spirito in Sassia: sens et datation”, in *Frises peintes, les décors des villas et des palais au Cinquecento*, (Rome: Presses de l’Académie de France à Rome, 2017), 213-231

[18] The debate about the dragon “imprese” of Pope Boncompagni, which are the focus of Fabrizi’s work (*Delle allusioni, imprese et emblemi sopra la vita, opere et attioni di Gregorio XIII Pontefice Massimo, Libri VI*, 1579-1582) is discussed in Marco Ruffini, *Le imprese del drago. Politica, emblematica e scienze naturali alla corte di Gregorio XIII* (Roma: Bulzoni Editore, 2005), chapter 2.

[19] For a recent biography see Peter Mason, Ulisse Aldrovandi. Naturalist And Collector (London: Reaktion Books, 2023).

doubt. This is confirmed by the similarity of the grisailles in the frieze of the nearby church of Santo Spirito, partly decorated by the same team of painters at the same time and with the same technique.[20] At that very moment, in 1577, a great comet was shining in the sky: the comet made famous by Tycho Brahe![21]

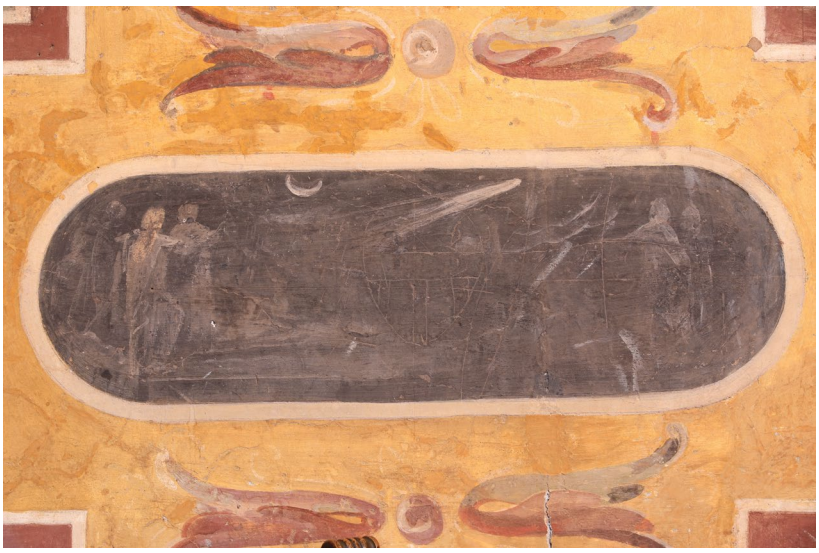

Fig. 3. Anonymous – Nocturne with comet and crescent moon (1577–1578) – Salone del Commendatore, Ospedale di Santo Spirito in Sassia, Roma. Photo by Gianluca Masi.

Among the many items in the rich catalogue of engravings of this comet, some landscape scenes stand out. Two with the crescent above the tail, two with the moon near the horizon, below the object. Both are possible configurations, although imprecise, and allow a precise dating of the observation (Fig. 4).

The NASA/JPL ephemeris and the Stellarium 1.2 software were used to determine the date of the phenomenon depicted in the Salone del

[20] Luisa Cardilli, 'La chiesa di Santo Spirito in Sassia. Analisi e interventi preliminari al restauro delle cinque cappelle di sinistra', *Il Veltro* XLVI, no. 1-4 (2002): pp.117–25.

[21] The reference study for this groundbreaking celestial object is the classical monography by Hellman: Clarisse Doris Hellman, *The comet of 1577: its place in the history of astronomy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944).

Commendatore. From the relative positions of the comet and the moon, we can deduce that the small fresco of Santo Spirito in Sassia represents the object on the night of 16 November 1577 (Fig. 4).

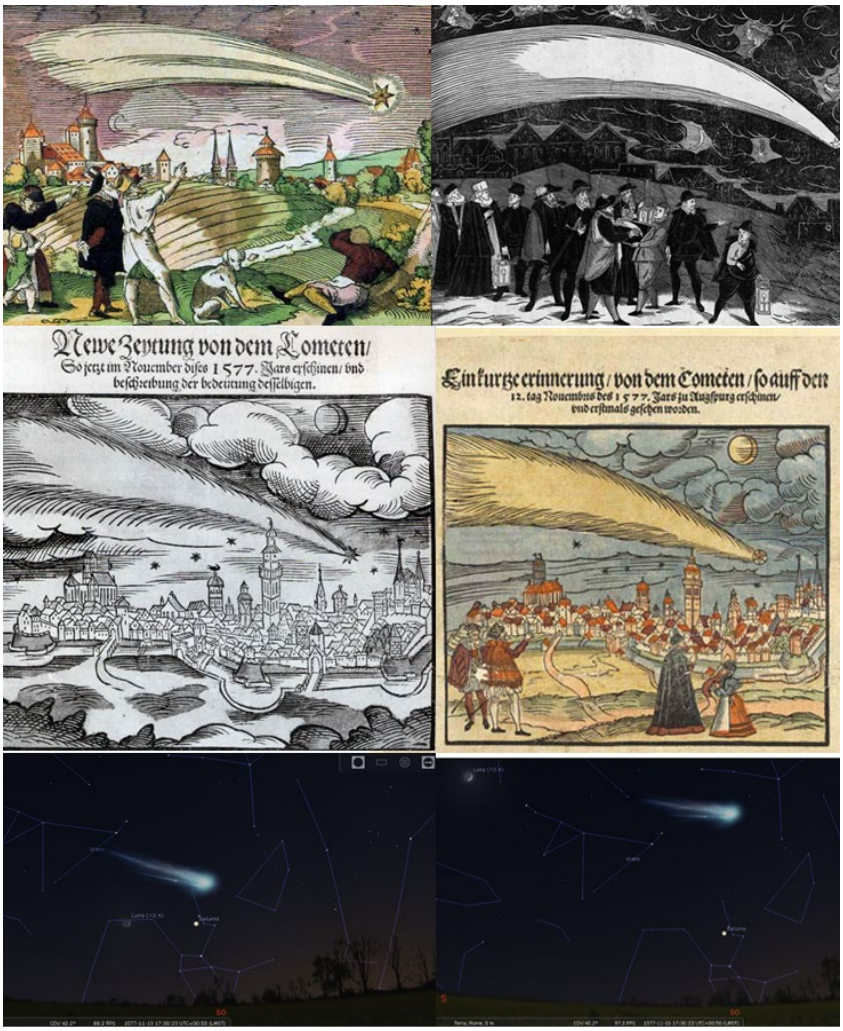

Fig. 4. Above: four German engravings of the 1577 comet at its peak luminosity. Note the position of the moon crescent Below: Stellarium reconstruction of the relevant nights at the latitude of Rome, 13–16 November 1577.

Baldassarre Pisanelli was a Bolognese doctor of Santo Spirito and a pupil of Ulisse Aldrovandi.[22] In those years he published a series of books that are a typical mixture of astrology and medicine, emphasising the same themes as the Salon frieze: dragons, diseases, medicines, celestial influences and comets. He or the Commendatore Teseo Aldrovandi himself may have suggested the inclusion of this small comet scene in the Salone, if not the independent curiosity and fascination for the starry sky of the artists working on the frieze.

A Disguised Comet on Villa Medici's Façade

We are now entering the spectacular villa built by Ferdinando de Medici in 1577–1586 on the top of the Pincio hill.[23] The inner façade of the building, facing the gardens, is richly decorated with ancient Roman reliefs taken from the Ara Pacis, the Ara Pietatis Augustae and other ancient monuments. Cardinal Ferdinando bought most of them from the Della Valle family and placed them on the façade in 1584–86. The composition is clearly reminiscent of the temporary triumphal arches erected by Renaissance families during official celebrations.

The programme of the façade has never been iconographically reconstructed in detail, but some general identification of themes, such as the Felicitas Temporum and the Aurea Aetas, has been attempted.[24] It has been noted that the mythological and historical scenes are juxtaposed: their arrangement suggests a possible political and dynastic interpretation.

In particular, the symmetry and contrast between 'The Rape of the Sabine Women' on the left of the entrance and 'The Judgment of Paris during the Marriage of Peleus and Tethis' on the right seems to suggest a moral message about the politics of marriage in the late Renaissance.[25] This was a particularly important message for the Medici family, which

[22] About the role of Pisanelli at the court of Gregory XIII, see Marco Ruffini, *Le imprese del drago*, Chapter 1.

[23] A detailed study of the Villa may be found in Bernard Toulier, ed., *La Villa Médicis, vol. I* (Rome: Academie de France à Rome/ Ecole Française de Rome, 1989).

[24] The most complete reading has been provided by Glenn M. Andres, *The Villa Medici in Rome* (New York/London: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp.344–416.

[25] A study of the 'Judgement of Paris' relief in a diachronic perspective that takes into account Warburg, Raphael and Manet has been offered by Claudia Wedepohl, 'Introduction to "Manet and Italian Antiquity" – by Aby Warburg', Bruniana & Campanelliana XX, no. 2 (2014): pp.455–61.

was facing a new crisis in the 1580s following the marriage of Francesco I to his mistress Bianca Cappello.[26] The Judgement of Paris – the hero able to provoke the destruction of a kingdom (Troy) and the creation of a future Empire (Rome) – should be imitated with great care by a sovereign, the bas-relief seems to admonish. without Venusian lust and with the help of the right stars.[27]

Fig. 5. Above: *The Rape of the Sabine Women by the Romans* and *the Judgement of Paris* (from ancient sarcophagi) on the eastern façade of Villa Medici, Rome. Below: The Zodiac of the *Judgement of Paris* added by Lorenzetto. Note the astral symbols and the 'new star' on the extreme left.

[26] An effective and concise biography of Ferdinando, describing the family situation through his eyes, is provided by Suzanne B. Butters, 'Le Cardinal Ferdinando de Médicis', *La Villa Médicis, vol. II - Études* (Rome: Academie de France à Rome/ Ecole Française de Rome, 1991), pp.170–97.

[27] The Judgement of Paris was very popular in the Italian Middle Ages: it was associated with Virgil's Aeneid and the foundation of Rome by Landino, a philosopher favoured by the Medicis. Awarding the apple to Venus, who had promised him the love of the beautiful Helen, led the Trojan prince to cause the Trojan War. However, his favourite goddess, the mother of Aeneas, ultimately helped the Trojan hero survive and flee to Italy. Through the lineage of Caesar, the creation of the Roman Empire was the fateful consequence of Paris's choice.

The Judgement scene could be linked to Cristoforo Landino's moral treatment of the theme, where Pallas represents the *Vita Contemplativa* and Juno the *Vita Activa*, while Venus is the terrestrial rather than the celestial goddess, thus representing Epicurean 'luxuria'.[28] The ruler – here the Cardinal Ferdinando de Medici – should make a wise choice in the face of the classical Pythagorean Y (the same of Hercules between vice and virtue). Marriage is one of the supreme political instruments and should be approached in the spirit of Romulus with the Sabine women – the spirit of 'optimised procreation' – rather than choosing Venusian lust, as Paris (and Fernando's own brother Francesco) did.

During the construction of his new residence, Cardinal Ferdinando was in fact extremely disturbed – almost obsessed – by his family situation. His brother Francesco I, the Grand Duke of Tuscany, widower of Joanna of Austria and without a legal male heir, had married the Venetian courtesan Bianca Cappello, a woman he deeply despised and opposed – and the mother of Antonio, an illegitimate son. The Medici succession was in jeopardy and Ferdinando, who had concentrated on the Grand Duchy rather than the papacy, with all the symbolism of his villa (and the rumours of an extraordinary royal horoscope telling that he was the real Chosen One burned by his father Cosimo), feared exclusion at the last minute.

Actually, Paris's role in the judgement was similar to what he expected to be his own in the near future: a prince faced with a careful choice between goddesses on the one hand, a cardinal trying to pull the right strings for a succession divinely sanctioned by the stars on the other.

In the end, the suspicion that he could have been involved in the presumed death of Bianca from malaria in 1587 – if not in that of his brother some hours before in the same villa of Poggio a Caiano – is unavoidable, and the analysis of the cold case is still under discussion.[29]

The Zodiac of the Judgement was added to the original sarcophagus, restored by Lorenzetto and inserted into the wall between 1584 and 1586.[30] All the favourable signs were depicted on it. The direct source of the zodiacal band à la Moebius is not the famous engraving by Raimondi and Raphael, but a painting by Jacopo Zucchi from the cabinet of Ferdinando

[28] Jane Chance' "The Medieval Sources of Cristoforo Landino's Allegorization of the Judgment of Paris', *Studies in Philology* 81, no. 2 (1984): pp.145–60.
[29] See Wikipedia [not a good source?] entries on Francesco I and Bianca Cappello, 2024, for a bibliography of the latest controversial studies on the topic.
[30] Fritz-Eugen Keller, 'Les reliefs de la façade au Jardin', *La Villa Médicis, vol. II - Études* (Rome: Academie de France à Rome/ Ecole Française de Rome, 1991), pp.412–41

('The Assembly of the Gods'), now in the Yale University Art Gallery.[31] Incidentally, the work is probably a disguised horoscope of the cardinal, with the Sun in Leo and Jupiter in Taurus.[32]

The Libra-Scorpio pair at the top of the zodiac refers to the Great Conjunction of 1484, a crucial passage for the Medici dynasty, while the constellation of Pisces on the right alludes to its profection after a century.[33] In fact, the conjunction of the Medicean Golden Age celebrated by Leo X had progressed to the last sign, the same one that hosted the new conjunction of 1583, highly charged with expectations of renewal.

I have not been able to identify the two objects to the left of Libra-Scorpio. They are badly damaged and eroded, and ancient and modern restorations (e.g., those of 1678 and 1984) could have changed their appearance, making the reading exceedingly difficult.

A possible, very uncertain, solution could be a Moon approaching the sign of Cancer: the configuration could help to determine an exact date for the rising star at the beginning of the zodiac, but it is not necessary to interpret the general astrological meaning.

There is no doubt that the second object to the left of the zodiac represents a fish. As it is solitary and large, I would suggest identifying it with the constellation of Piscis Australis, or even better with Cetus, which is at least partly within the zodiacal band and should give an indication of the position of the enigmatic star on the extreme left. Less likely, it represents one of the two zodiacal Pisces.

---

[31] Edmund Pillsbury, 'The Cabinet paintings of Jacopo Zucchi: their meaning and function', *Monuments et Mémoires de la Fondation Eugène Piot* 63 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1980), pp.187–226

[32] Giangiacomo Gandolfi, 'Two Illustrated Horoscopes of the Italian Renaissance', *Paragone: Past and Present* 4, no. 1 (2023): pp,45-69.

[33] Leo X's use of the Libra-Scorpio pair as a symbol of a new Medici Golden Age after the era of Cosimo il Vecchio and Lorenzo il Magnifico is explored in Giangiacomo Gandolfi, 'Marcantonio Raimondi's Zodiacal Sibyls', in L. Zirpolo, ed., *Esoteric Traditions and Their Impact on Early Modern Art*, 2019, pp.77–94. The profection is an ancient astrological technique for analysing the evolution of a particular horoscope during the years. See Giuseppe Bezza, *The profection. How it should be calculated, how it should be interpreted*, 1996, at http://www.cieloeterra.it/eng/eng.articoli.profezione/profezione.html.

The large eight-pointed star at the beginning of the zodiac could hardly be a planet: the context suggests instead a new star, like the supernovas of 1572 and 1604, or one of the many comets of those fateful years. [34]

The apparition must have been linked to the Great Conjunction in Pisces and must have been observed close to a 'fishy' constellation. The most diffuse prediction regarding the conjunction and the subsequent 'stellium' of all the planets in Aries (with Saturn lingering in the last degrees of Pisces) was that of the astrologer Cyprian Leowitz, which was translated throughout Europe.[35] He predicted a new comet in 1584, produced by this configuration. But similar prophecies were made by many astrologers of the time, and the idea that comets were provoked by the meeting of Jupiter and Saturn was repeated by Kepler twenty years later, when the 1604 supernova appeared during the next Great Conjunction. Amazingly, to add to the anomaly of the situation, both the previous comets of 1578 and 1580 appeared near Cetus, Pisces and Piscis Australis, emphasising the link with the last sign of the zodiac and highlighting the persistent aquatic nature of those apocalyptic celestial novelties.

In the Roman cultural milieu of the time, there was a strong interest in comets: as we have seen, in the Santo Spirito Hospital in Sassia (Teseo Aldrovandi was a friend of Ferdinando), a fresco depicts the comet of 1577. There is, however, a direct link between Ferdinando and this type of celestial phenomenon: Antonio Santucci delle Pomarance, one of the

[34] In a previous paper dedicated to the Padiglione di Ferdinando, I analysed and discussed the vault frescoed by Jacopo Zucchi in the sala dell'Aurora, where the attention was concentrated on Saturn's rising in Pisces in the spring of 1576 at the end of his trentennial revolution. See Giangiacomo Gandolfi, "Dove Cosmografia e Topografia si incontrano: tre paesaggi celesti romani tra alto Rinascimento e Manierismo", in Laura Farroni, Manuela Incerti, and Alessandra Pagliano, *Misurare il Tempo, Strumenti e tecniche tra storia e contemporaneità* (Padova: Libreria universitaria.it Edizioni, 2023). But here in the Judgement the focus is on the new Great Conjunction and its aftermath. The rising star cannot be the Saturn of Ferdinando's Studiolo nor the Venus mother of Aeneas and patron of Julian Rome.

[35] In astrological terms, a stellium is a grouping of planets in a narrow region of the sky, a kind of massive conjunction that portends extraordinary consequences. The prediction that generated the great flow of Chiliastic predictions and interpretations on the Great Conjunction of 1583 and its consequences was that of Cyprian Leowitz, in his *De coniunctionibus magnis* (1564). The Bohemian astrologer's analysis conditioned all subsequent European discussions. See, e.g., W. T. Lynn 'A comet predicted in 1584', *The Observatory* 23 (1900): pp.97–98.

cardinal's courtiers, observed the comet of 1582 from Villa Medici.[36] Even Baldassarre Pisanelli, the aforementioned doctor of Santo Spirito, published a booklet on the object.

The most interesting comet during the completion and installation on the façade of the Judgement of Paris relief is the one discovered by Christoph Rothmann and then observed by Tycho Brahe in October 1585.[37] It originated – without tail - in the back of the Cetus constellation (at an ecliptical longitude of 23° Psc).

Fig. 6. Left: Detail of the 1585 comet discovered by Rothmann on a chart by Lubeniecki in *Theatri Cometici Pars Posterior* (1667). Right: the eight-pointed star of the Zodiac of the *Judgement of Paris*. Both are without tail.

We have no evidence of cometary observations in Rome after 1582, but it is intriguing that the object appeared so close to the Saturn-Jupiter conjunction of 1583 (21° Psc) and insisted on the same 'fishy' region as the comets of 1578 and 1580. Although faint (4th magnitude), the 'new star' of 1585 is very compatible with the situation depicted on the Zodiac of the Judgement of Paris and even with the predictions of Leowitz (delayed by one year).

In Vincenzo Coronelli's catalogue of historical comets the object is associated to the celebrations for the election of Sixtus V:

---

[36] Giorgio Strano, 'The Heavens at the Medici Court: Antonio Santucci's Cosmological Models', in *Heaven and Earth united: Instruments in Astrological Contexts* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), pp.180–209.

[37] Miguel Angel Granada, Adam Mosley and Nicholas Jardine, eds, *Christoph Rothmann's Discourse on the comet of 1585: an edition and translation with accompanying essays*. Vol. 22 (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

> Nel 1585 li 8 Ottobre, in gradi 15 di Pesci, facendo feste per l'elettione seguita li 24 Aprile di Sisto V nel Ponteficato.[38]

Among the many conjectures formulated at the time about the relevance of comets and new stars for human history, we may recall the idea that appearances in Pisces heralded general catastrophes and transformations (see Rochenbach and Mizauld: the first comet in history at the time of Noah announced the Flood) and the interest in their recurrence in the same celestial region.

Leowitz was not the only astronomer of the time to suspect a link between great conjunctions and comets: it was common belief that the meeting of Saturn and Jupiter often produced them. The Landgrave of Hesse himself wrote about the star in a letter to Rantzau in 1585:

> It belongs to the genus of comets called, with our endorsement, 'Carceas' and that customarily appears at the time of great conjunctions.[39]

Another spectacular confirmation of this view is the case of Kepler and the new star of 1604: the apparition – linked by many to the comet of 1618 – was associated with the Great Conjunction of the same year and with the triple conjunction in Pisces of 7 BC, the one that heralded the Saviour. According to the imperial mathematician, the Star of Bethlehem was created by the conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn and Mars as one of the divine signs that mark the passage of the cosmic time leading to the Salvation.

In this climate of anxiety and millenarian expectations, Bargaeus and other humanists at Ferdinando's court could have interpreted the celestial novelties (the great conjunction between the end of the watery trigon and the beginning of the fiery one; the future predominance of the triplicity associated with the Medici – Aries, Leo and Sagittarius – the comet in the same region of Pisces where Saturn was at the end of its 30-year revolution; and the 'profection' of the decisive historical conjunction of 1484 again in the same sign) in a sense highly favourable to the dynasty, led by a new

[38] Vincenzo Maria Coronelli, *Epitome Cosmografica* (1693), Vol. 1, pp.922–25, at 923. Note the discrepancy in Coronelli's position, probably due to an error of transcription.
[39] Miguel Angel Granada, *Christoph Rothmann's Discourse on the comet of 1585*, 249.

Grand Duke legitimised by the stars.[40] In the end, comets, triplicities and conjunctions succeeded, and Ferdinando's will prevailed: two years later he ascended the throne of Tuscany in an extraordinary personal triumph.

Conclusions: a harvest of comets

We have examined the representation of some comets in Rome during the second half of the sixteenth century (with incursions into the first half). The approach to such representations is very heterogeneous and sometimes influenced by scientific debates on the eve of the Scientific Revolution, as has already been noted in subsequent artistic representations.[41] Three new and interesting cases have been brought to light: the first, in the Galleria Spada, although inadequately drawn, seems to provide new information on Alessandro Piccolomini's career and astronomical interests, while the second, the comet of 1577, is the first double-tailed comet to be clearly depicted. Moreover, the context of this depiction and that of Villa Medici suggests a cultural world still dominated by astrology and prophecy in the face of this phenomenon. Despite the irresistible temptation of astral divination, Rome would have been increasingly drawn to such celestial spectacles with an emerging scientific mindset, and would have hosted in the following century the decisive comet observations of Orazio Grassi and Galileo (1618), Cassini (1664) and Ponteo (1680).[42]

---

[40] According to Philippe Morel, the courtier Pietro Angeli da Barga, aka Bargaeus, was in charge of the astrological program in Villa Medici. See P. Morel, *Le Parnasse Astrologique. Les dècors peints pour le cardinal Ferdinand de Médicis. La Villa Médicis, vol. III* (Rome: Academie de France à Rome, 1991), pp.120–218.

[41] A comprehensive study may be found in Roberta Olson and Jay Pasachoff, *Fire in the sky: comets and meteors, the decisive centuries, in British art and science* (Cambridge University Press, 1998). The authors often explore comets in art: see e.g., R. Olson and J. Pasachoff, 'Comets, meteors, and eclipses: Art and science in Renaissance Italy', *Meteoritics & Planetary Science* 37, no.11 (2002): pp.1563–78.

[42] For Galileo and Grassi, see e.g., Antonio Beltran Mari, 'Implied controversy: Galileo, Orazio Grassi and the great comet of 1618', *Giornale Critico Della Filosofia Italiana* 7, no. 2 (2011): pp.237–73. The astronomer from Perinaldo, on the other hand, published on the 1664 object the important *Theoria motus Cometae*. Finally, Ponteo observed the large comet of 1680 from his specola in S. Maria in Vallicella and his data were appreciated and later used by Isaac Newton.