

Giovanni Ricci

Intimate and elegant, the "Montepulciano"

Extravagant to the maximum, a lover of the unusual and the bizarre, impressing with gifts

He may not be the most famous cardinal of the late Renaissance, but he is a character deserving of attention. A man of humble origins, a subject of the Medici, he was born in Montepulciano in the very last years of the 15th century. His true fortune peaked during the time of Pope Paul III when he became, among other things, the master of the household for Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, perhaps the most powerful man in Rome and the pope's nephew. To speak of Farnese is to speak of the Medici; there are many differences between them, but both families were interested in power and the arts, and an agreement was always found for individuals with similar inclinations. In the mid-16th century, our man lived in the Vatican, where he had an apartment decorated by various artists. He was associated with Pope Julius III, dealing with ongoing financial and diplomatic issues for the Church in constant travels across European countries.

In 1551, Giovanni Ricci became Cardinal Montepulciano with the title of San Vitale. He had served as a papal envoy in Portugal and then in Spain, where he rendered great services to the Portuguese royals and Philip II.

The gifts sent by Ricci were fabulous and managed to impress even the King of all Spains. The letter accompanying a gift to the royals reads: "Your Catholic Majesty, the bearer of this, who will be my chamberlain sent expressly, will present to Your Catholic Majesty twelve Emperors... sculpted in marble and portrayed from ancient examples by one of the most excellent sculptors in this city, and each of them has his pedestal. Along with these, the image of the never sufficiently praised Emperor Charles V (father of King Philip, editor's note) will be sculpted in the same manner. Next, Your Majesty will have a metal figure brought from the Capitol, one of the rarest antiquities of Rome, depicting a person in the act of removing a thorn from the foot, and three tables composed of various beautiful and exquisite stones, highly valued today. I also send to Your Majesty a painting of the miracle performed by Jesus Christ Our Lord, resurrecting the daughter of the Archisynagogue; and finally, a small study worked in inlay that I believe has not been seen in these times, a type of exotic rarity."

This vivid description continued with details about sending a servant to Montepulciano, slaves, parrots, porcelain, and other exotic items.

The following year, he sent "porcelain... of a value that, small as it may be, costs more than two ducats per piece because they are transparent like jewels and come from the Indies... take good care of them." Some of these porcelain items are still in Italian museums, and a particularly important Ming vase is now in Bologna.

To understand the nature of Cardinal Ricci, one would have to visit his palace. The decoration has an explicit international character in the series of friezes that adorn the rather adorned and enfilade rooms. The painters who conceived them were also French (Marc Duval, Ponsio Jacquio, to name just two), and the various scenes are often divided by noteworthy stuccoes, uncommon in Rome except for those in the nearby Palazzo Spada, a particular aspect of 16th-century Roman art studied carefully by Sylvie Deswarte-Rosa and the late Nicole Dacos. The cardinal acquired curious furniture not typical of the usual Roman taste: small mother-of-pearl furnishings, exotic objects, damasks, and unusually patterned tapestries. The wall coverings of embossed and painted leather, then called "corami," were not Ricci's discovery, but he was a diligent admirer of them: about twenty rooms in his palace were covered in "corami" in various colors. Such leatherworks are still preserved today, with those in the Chigi Palace in Ariccia being the most noteworthy, even if not Renaissance.

The most beautiful room in Palazzo Ricci is the superb audience hall, adorned by one of the most extravagant painters of the time, the Florentine Francesco Salviati. The space, almost surreal where scenes are framed in

decorations that appear more real than reality, even those in Chinese style, arranged like the originals in hanging rolls, seems to approach a spatial irrationalism and an expressive freedom intentionally ignorant of realistic canons and laws.