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**[Review of] *The Cosmos at Home: The Fresco Cycle of Villa Grimani Molin at Fratta Polesine* by Meital Shai**

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*The Cosmos at Home: The Fresco Cycle of Villa Grimani Molin at Fratta Polesine.* Meital Shai.

Contesti 4. Turin: Silvio Zamorani Editore, 2019. 382 pp. + b/w and color pls. €28.

Meital Shai's study contains archival material, bibliography, images, and maps, as it aims to equip the reader with a foundational knowledge of Villa Grimani Molin. This Veneto villa has garnered much less scholarly attention than its neighbor Villa Badoer, designed by Andrea Palladio. Shai's primary audience for *The Cosmos at Home* is specialist researchers, as she assumes the audience is familiar with Veneto Polesine topography. This extensive and well-illustrated volume, derived from Shai's 2013 doctoral thesis, includes the analysis of documentation, philosophy, theatrical influence, and iconography, and culminates in an evaluation of artistic identity. The text is over three hundred pages, not including the comprehensive document appendix and bibliography. This lengthy study follows an enduring interest in the Veneto villa as interpreted by Renaissance architectural studies like James Ackerman's comprehensive *Palladio's Villas* (1967), which set the course for many more. *The Cosmos at Home* is current with other scholarly investigations on humanism and the metastructure of sixteenth-century Renaissance villas. It is refreshing to observe the continued quest to shed light on artistic identity in the Veneto based on geography and regional artistic cross-fertilization. The geographic setting is the formerly uninhabitable wetlands of Polesine, which flourished as a result of Venetian land reclamation, near the confluence of the Adige and Po Rivers. However insalubrious, Fratta Polesine exercised control over a major waterway that meant strategic military access for the Venetian Republic. Thus, Fratta was a valuable location for the Grimani family to cultivate.

The text, a complex matrix of documents, texts, and exegesis of the fresco inscriptions, is

divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 lays out the main argument. The author's intent is multipronged and based on documentary evidence published by Lionello Puppi, Ruggiero Maschio, and Ruggero Ruggolo. Via an analysis of maps, Shai proposes a later construction chronology for Vincenzo Grimani's villa modifications and a new artistic attribution for the decorative program initiated by Betta Grimani Molin. The main thrust here is to dispute any former attributions to the painters Giallo Fiorentino or Francesco Salviati. Chapter 2 aligns the anatomy of the villa with the cosmos, and explores the parallelism at Villa Grimani Molin between elements of the seasons and winds depicted in the fresco program. Further to this point, an engaging discussion follows that focuses on the grotesque and its role as an "ideal visual instrument . . . related to natural philosophy" (139). Shai's diligent investigation of the grotesque as allegory in alchemical terms is especially compelling.

Chapter 3 concentrates on the villa architectural practice as a humanist metaphor of the *theatrum mundi*. The notable association of "Friulian magus," Giulio Camillo Delminio's memory theater, is crucial to the linking of the "six universal creative forces" (173) with the Central Hall frescoes at Villa Grimani Molin. Chapter 4 contains a discussion of functionalism from the villa atrium to *studiolo*, and how this relates to the inscriptions in Hebrew. Here Shai successfully contributes new findings by hypothesizing the various permutations of the Hebrew pseudo-script. Equally worthy is the assertion of what sets this villa apart from others in the region: the ethos of the Villa Grimani Molin programmers was not about self-glorification but rather their view of humanity. Chapter 5 is dedicated to further cosmological comparisons to Villa Foscari, La Malcontenta, and Villa Barbaro at Maser. Questions about program ideation are deliberated, such as what influence Vincenzo's eldest daughter Betta Grimani Molin had. Was the program indicative of the family's moral code? If so, who

would experience such a personal perspective? Ultimately, Shai argues that Betta is the party responsible for the intervention. Chapter 6 culminates with a reattribution to the Ferrarese painter Cesare Filippi, based on his familial presence in Fratta Polesine. The book's best achievement is the judicious explication of archival evidence, which offers a new date of manufacture: 1581–1601.

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