

“RESTRAINED BRIGHTNESS AND ARCHAIC PURITY”.**FASCINATION FROM THE ANTIQUITY IN THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT.**

Villa Negroni’s frescoes in Rome: models of good taste according to Mengs and Azara.

CINELLI Noemi¹

Abstract

The find in 1777 of the frescoes adorning Villa Peretti Montalto-Negroni in Rome was a unique opportunity to foster the renewed interest in ancient painting that Enlightenment Europe was feeding. Protagonists of the excavations in the surroundings of present Termini railway station were the Aragonese diplomat Jose Nicolas de Azara (promoter) and his Bohemian intimate friend Anton Raphael Mengs (drawer), the artist who went down in history as the painter philosopher. The frescoes that Mengs could admire and copy, along with his writings on art theory, influenced the European taste, especially in the parietal decoration of private houses in England, as well as in distant Russia where Czarina Catherine II decided to entirely decorate the Silver Cabinet in the style of the recently found frescoes. This paper presents four unreleased and illuminated engravings, which are stored in the locals of the Archaeological Museum of Seville, but until now had escaped all inventories.

Keywords: Anton Raphael Mengs- José Nicolás de Azara- Rome- Villa Negroni- Taste in XVIII century.

Data de submissão: Junho de 2013 | **Data de publicação:** Setembro de 2013.

¹NOEMI CINELLI. Facultad de Educación. Carrera de Pedagogía en Artes Visuales. Universidad Autónoma de Chile. E-mail: noemicinelli@gmail.com

“Gusto settecentesco” is a synonymous of classicism transferred and read in a dreamy idealization². Art Criticism, and the more modern discipline of Art Theory, has quickly given a definition of the phenomenon - commonly known as Neoclassicism - which is maybe too simple. Some Art History’s handbooks used in the most prestigious universities in Europe and America still define Neoclassicism as an antibaroque reaction in eighteenth century Europe. Leaving aside considerations about neoclassical identity and common adherence to conventional models proceeding from the classical tradition and endorsed by academic standards³, I will focus my attention on the painter-philosopher Anton Raphael Mengs (Aussing 1728- Rome 1779), one of the artists who best represented the taste of those days. We will start telling one of the most successful events – as evidenced browsing through the newspapers of that time – that occurred in Rome at that time, just before the arrival of Antonio Canova that would have soon reinvented the idea of taste.

The renewed interest in ancient painting that inspired Europe in the Age of Enlightenment found a breeding ground in the archaeological excavations of Villa Negroni, where now stands Termini train station, an ancient private roman residence which dates back to the time when Hadrian was the Emperor, exactly to 134 after Christ; according to a well attested hypothesis, the residence belonged to Lucilla - Marcus Aurelius and Faustina’s daughter and Lucius Verus’ wife.

The Aragonese diplomat José Nicolás de Azara (Burbuñales 1730- Paris 1804) and Anton Raphael Mengs played initially a leading role in the event (fig.1).

²I would like to give very special thanks to Professor José María Nogué Luzón for his advices, to Professor Álvaro Recio Mir for his constructive criticisms, to Professor José Antonio Albaronedo Freire for his editing, to the staff of the Museo Arqueológico and the Museo de Bellas Artes of Seville.

³ See: ASSUNTO R., *L’Antichità come futuro. Studio sull’estetica del Neoclassicismo*, Milan, Medusa, 1973; GONZÁLEZ-PALACIOS A., “La grammatika neoclassica”, *Antichità Viva*, Florence, Edam, n. 12, 1973, pp 29-59; OTTAVINI CAVINA A., *Il Settecento e l’antico*, Storia dell’arte italiana, II, Turin, S.N., 1982; PINELLI A., *Nel segno di Giano. Passato e futuro nell’arte europea tra Sette e Ottocento*, Rome, Carocci, 2000; PRAZ M., *Gusto Neoclassico*, Florence, Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 1940; CIPRIANI A., *Aequa potestas. Le arti in gara a Roma nel Settecento*, exhibition catalog (Rome, Accademia di San Luca, 2000), Rome, De Luca, 2000; A.A.V.V., *The Age of Neo-Classicism*, exhibition catalog (London, The Royal Academy; The Victoria & Albert Museum, 1972), London, The Arts Council of Great Britain 1972; CASTELNUOVO E., “Di cosa parliamo quando parliamo di neoclassico?” in CAPUTO F., MASIERO R., *Neoclassico, la ragione, la memoria, la città: Trieste, Venice, Marsilio*, 1990, pp 3-26; MAZZOCCA F., COLLE E., MORANDOTTI A., SUSINO S., *Il Neoclassicismo in Italia da Tiepolo a Canova*, exhibition catalog (Milan, Palazzo Reale, 2002), Geneva, Skira, 2002; ROSSI PINELLI O., *Antichisti e modernisti: dispute, modelli, prospettive nella produzione visiva del XVIII secolo*, Città di Castello, 1995-1996; ROSSI PINELLI O., *Il secolo della Ragione e delle Rivoluzioni. La cultura visiva del Settecento Europeo*, Storia Universale dell’Arte, sez III, Turin, Utet, 2000.



Mengs's experience in the Eternal City began at thirteen when his father Ismael decided to continue the education of his young son with a journey to Italy. Although his education followed a rigid learning based on “principios académicos” (BIANCONI, 1780, p. 7)⁴, it was much more efficient than a standard academic education because it was modeled on the student's character and adapted to his progresses, which soon demonstrated how the student was “assai dotato e volenteroso” (*Ibidem*). In 1740 he arrived in Rome with the only purpose to “ingrandire, come egli diceva le idee e conoscere in questa capitale delle belle arti i lavori di Raffaello che fu mai sempre il suo idolo” (*Ibidem*, p. 4).

Since then an indissoluble connection was established between Mengs and Rome.

He spent his artistic career acclaimed by the most illustrious courts of Europe until his poor health and the unconditional love for the Classical Antiquities - which had become stronger and stronger - urged him to come back to Rome. For his whole life Mengs dedicated special attention to Ancient Art; his collection of casts of the most famous statues of the Italian collections, stored in his studios in Rome and Madrid, interested artists who got there during their “Grand Tour” and established aesthetic models of different periods, from which he would never move away, that is artists of classical Greece, Raffaello Sanzio, Tiziano Vecellio and Antonio Allegri “Correggio”.

⁴ According to Gian Ludovico Bianconi (1717-1781), who was the personal physician and adviser of the Polish-Saxon Royal Family from 1750 to 1763. Since 1764 until his death he was the Saxon Court's ambassador in Rome. He was one of the greatest observers of the court life in Saxony and he had always been a great supporter and admirer of Mengs, defined as “il più memorabile de' pittori del nostro secolo”. BIANCONI G.L., *Elogio storico del Cavaliere Antonio Raffaele Mengs*, Milan, G.Galeazzi.

Reading the glowing words of Francesco Milizia, Luigi Lanzi and Johann Wolfgang Goethe used to describe Mengs's talent, we realize that we are facing an artist who, in spite of his unflattering reputation as "Europe's highest paid painter", was able to claim the attention not only of aristocrats and rich clients, but of scholars, man of letters and theorists of that time.

Francisco de Goya y Lucientes was the first one in embracing the theoretical impulses coming from Mengs's teaching and he opened a path that soon moved away from Giovan Battista Tiepolo, Corrado Giaquinto and Mengs. The identity of Spanish Art acquired vigour and definition thanks to Goya. The intensity of the debate on concepts as *Gusto* and *Bello Ideale* started by Mengs led to one of the highest periods of Spanish aesthetic.

Transcripts have been collected here in their original languages - that is, Spanish and Italian - in the belief that translations had been the reason for misrepresenting the role played by Mengs in Art History and Art Theory, following the thesis according to which you either love or loathe the Bohemian⁵.

The other protagonist of the events was Azara, who carried out his diplomatic career between Spain, Italy and France⁶.

He had his first outstanding position in 1765 when he replaced don Manuel de Roda as Prayers Agent in Rome⁷ - thus he began his experience outside Spanish borders. This gradually led him to become one of the most influential personalities of the tricky historical moment of both Spain and Italy, which would take to the expansion of the Napoleonic Empire. For Azara the aim of his career was to turn himself into a key figure to inform the Spanish Crown, thanks to his privileged position in Italy, from where he would be able to

⁵ For further information on the topic of misinterpretation of Mengs's writing due to mistranslation by Azara, see TELLECHEA IDIGORAS J. I., "Azara y la edicion de las Obras de Mengs. Interpolaciones de Llaguno Amirola", Boletín de la Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, n.35, Madrid, Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, 1971, pp 45-71.

⁶ CASTELLANOS DE LOSADA B.S., El espíritu de José Nicolas de Azara descubierto en la correspondencia epistolar con D. Manuel de Roda, Madrid, 1846; CASTELLANOS DE LOSADA B.S., Historia de la vida civil y politica de D. José Nicolas de Azara, Madrid, 1848; NICOLÁS GOMEZ S., José Nicolás de Azara, representante en Italia del pensamiento ilustrado español, in Boletín de la Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, n.54, Madrid, Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, Primer semestre de 1982, pp. 239-276; SÁNCHEZ ESPINOSA G., Memorias del Ilustrado aragonés José Nicolás de Azara, Zaragoza, Institución Fernando el Católico, 2000; SÁNCHEZ ESPINOSA G., José Nicolás de Azara, traductor: la Historia de la vida de Cicerón de Conyers Middleton, Madrid, 1961; CORONA BARATECH CARLOS E., José Nicolas de Azara: un embajador español en Roma, Zaragoza, Institucion Fernando El Catolico, 1948.

⁷ RAFAEL OLAECHEA, Las relaciones hispano - romanas en la segunda mitad del XVIII: la agencia de preces, Zaragoza, Talleres Ed. El Noticiero, 1965.

deal with both the events occurring in the Papal Court and the cultural debates taking place in gathering lounges and art academies.

It can be said that throughout his whole life Azara acted driven by a passionate - if not somewhat exaggerated - patriotism. This consideration can be seen by reading the letters he addressed to Roda, where he wrote about the relations he had with the Directory and Napoleon⁸, whom he admired so much that became his close friend. In these letters he also wrote about plans to save the Spanish Monarchy⁹, to which he showed total devotion.

Anyway, the frenetic political life did not prevent Azara from cultivating his interests in areas such as fine arts and liberal arts, especially in Italy.

In those days, when Rome catalysed the need for cultural renewal demanded by scholars and artist's circles, Azara was appointed *Agente General* and Procurator of King Carlos III in the Eternal City. This was a privileged setting from which to observe the renaissance of the Classical Antiquity, thanks to continuous findings. The *Urbe* was like an open-air museum where Azara could feed his antiquarian passion. Many of the works of his collection came from Rome, inexhaustible and essential source where look for and find the material needed to rediscover and illustrate knowledge about Classical Antiquity. Azara's eclecticism in fine arts can be easily perceived by taking a look at books in his rich library¹⁰, which was made up of more than twenty thousand volumes¹¹ (CACCIOTTI, 1993, p.35). As Beatrice Cacciotti highlights “[...] algunos libros pueden ejemplificar su experiencia cognoscitiva del pasado, con un carácter prevalentemente erudito” (*Ibidem*, p. 36).

⁸ As a proof of their friendship and as a symbol of appreciation for Napoleon, Azara gave him the famous bust of Alexander the Great found during excavations in Tivoli in 1779.

⁹ The Anglophobic policy followed by Azara was aimed at giving commercial maritime domain back to Spain, and the only purpose of peace with France was in order to wipe out British power. For these reasons his interventions were two sides of the same coin, since at the beginning in Rome he was seen as a liberator but later he will be accused of infamy and treason.

¹⁰ Azara himself informs us about how many books he had in Rome, underlining the importance of Latin and Greek authors, of whom he kept all editions, from the best-known to the rarest. In 1806, Francisco Iturri did a sale catalogue where there are about 3.000 works belonging to Azara.

¹¹ CACCIOTTI B., “La collezione di José Nicolás de Azara: studi preliminari”, in *Bollettino d'arte*, n.78, pp 1-54, Rome, Istituto poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, Libreria dello Stato, 1993, p. 35. As soon as he established himself in Paris he rent a house with a magnificent library, poor but with Latin books.

During his stay in Rome, besides the diplomatic tasks, Azara spent his time trading in antiques and nurturing his interest in fine arts as patron¹², collector¹³ and bibliophile. He sponsored excavations and took part in all Roman cultural societies, from archeological to artistic and literary ones¹⁴. His dedication to fine arts allowed him to come in contact with the greatest exponents of those days, to whom he was linked by the same deep feeling towards the search of Ideal Beauty.

It would be enough to remember some of the people he worked with: Ennio Quirino Visconti¹⁵, Francesco Milizia¹⁶, Carlo Fea¹⁷, Giovan Battista Bodoni¹⁸. We know about the relationship with Bodoni thanks to their correspondence - studied in great detail by Angelo Ciavarella¹⁹ – made of 370 letters which represent the clearest example of Azara's authority, honour and cultural thickness (CIAVARELLA, 1979).

In the matter of the archaeological activity, the diplomat was involved in three excavations (CACCIOTTI, 1993). The first one (1777), of which I will deal with, was near Villa Negroni in Rome. The other two were in the area around the city, exactly in Tivoli: the so called Pisoni's Villa in 1779 – where Azara could devote himself to one of his favourite fields of classical antiquity, that is to say, portraits of Greek figures; the so called Mecenas' Villa, near the Sanctuary of Hercules Victorious, which is now undergoing preventive restoration in

¹² See URRÍES Y DE LA COLINA J.J., “El diplomático José Nicolás de Azara, protector de las bellas artes y de las letras”, *Boletín del Museo e Instituto Camón Aznar*, Zaragoza, Caja de Ahorros de Zaragoza, Aragón y Rioja, 2000 n.81, pp. 61-88.

¹³ See PALMA VENETUCCI B., “Le erme tiburtine e gli scavi del ‘700”, in *Uomini Illustri dell’Antichità*, Rome, De Luca, 1992, pp 173-310.

¹⁴ He was honorary member of the Academia de San Fernando in Madrid, of the Accademia di San Luca in Rome, of the Real Accademia in Parma and in Gottingen, and of the Accademia Colombaria in Florence. He took part in the Arcadia Romana, where he entered with the onomasticon of Admeto Cillenio.

¹⁵ They were bound together by a deep friendship and a strong professional collaboration that strengthened when they started translating classical books.

¹⁶ The relationship between the diplomat and the architect-philosopher is widely known thanks to their correspondence.

¹⁷ He was part of the close erudite circle that Azara employed in his several translations of classical books. In 1783 the lawyer Carlo Fea published the first Italian edition of the huge piece of work *Historia del arte de los Antiguos* by J.J. Winckelmann. The initial dedication, which consists of four pages of praises for Azara, reflected the close relationship between them and underlined the decisive role played by Azara in the artistic circle of XVIII century.

¹⁸ The Parmesan publisher, probably Azara’s Italian closest friend, was in charge of the edition of *Obras de Anton Raphael Mengs* in 1780, which was Azara’s biggest tribute to Mengs. Azara published with Bodoni many classical books and the Italian, to show his appreciation for the help he received from Azara, gave him a copper that depicted the goddess Pallas Athena resting on a plinth in which were represented the heads of Azara and Maecenas.

¹⁹ CIAVARELLA A., *De Azara-Bodoni*, Parma, Museo Bodoniano, 1979. Their intense correspondence lasted more than 25 years, from 1776 to 1802.

order to revealing the blue polychromy in some parts of the temple. The finds were kept in Azara's private collection.

The excavations in the area of Villa Negroni – where Azara was living thanks to his friendship with the Negroni family - started in June 1777 and brought to light astonishing finds. The *villa* consisted of two floors²⁰, although little was left of the top floor. The clamour caused by such findings matched up with a particularly positive moment, since ancient painting was having great success among scholars, and it was mainly related to the uncovering of well-preserved paintings adorning the first floor's walls. Azara was captivated by these frescoes, depicting mythological subjects such as Venus and Adonis:

“Il vestibolo era ornato di solo arabeschi; la prima camera aveva due quadri, uno rappresentante Adone, che va alla caccia; l'altro Adone ferito, e moribondo in braccio a Venere. La seconda dedicata a Venere ha due quadri: uno con Venere seminuda fra tre Amori, l'altro colla medesima assisa sopra uno scoglio, con una Ninfa, che trae dalle acque un Amorino. La terza sacra a Bacco ha tre quadri; vi è un Ercole ubriaco sostenuto da un Fauno; in quello d'incontro Bacco e Arianna; nell'ultimo un Fauno colle tibie ed altro ubriaco retto da una Ninfa. Nella quarta camera di Giunone vi sono due quadri, ed una marina con navi Greche. Non ha la quinta, che nicchie e rabeschi. L'ultima ha un solo quadro rappresentante Pallade” (VENUTI CORTONESE, 1824, p. 170).²¹.

Azara was aware of the uniqueness of these artworks and also of the need to document the iconographic collection before pigment decomposition could put at risk the possibility to disseminate such attestation of antiquity. This was the reason the diplomat decided to entrust Mengs the task of reproducing the paintings in question:

²⁰ For further information see BUTI C., *Pitture Antiche della Villa Negroni*, Rome, 1778.

²¹ VENUTI CORTONESE R., *Accurata e succinta descrizione topografica delle antichità di Roma*, Vol. 1, 1824, Rome, Pietro Paolo Montagnani-Mirabili, p. 170. Here below the Spanish version of the description: “El vestíbulo era ornado de arabescos; la primera habitación tenía dos cuadros, uno que representaba Adonis cazador; el otro Adonis herido, y moribundo en los brazos de Venus. La segunda dedicada a Venus tenía dos cuadros: uno con Venus semidesnuda entre tres Amores, la otra con la misma sentada sobre un risco, con una Ninfa, que saca un Amorcillo de las aguas. La tercera sagrada a Baco tiene tres cuadros; hay un Hércules borracho sujetado por un Fauno; en aquel de enfrente Baco y Ariadna; en el último un Fauno con las tibias y otro borracho sujetados por una Ninfa. En la cuarta habitación de Juno y hay dos cuadros y un marina con barcos griegos. La quinta tiene solo nichos y arabescos. Lo última sólo tiene un cuadro que representa Palas”.

“Habiendo yo descubierto una casa antigua en el monte Esquilino con varias pinturas á fresco, corrió al instante Mengs á verlas: y determinando que se grabasen, ofreció de hacer los dibuxos. No contento con eso, emprendió copiarlas en pequeño con un amor y empeño increíbles. Lo executó las tres primeras, haciendo tres prodigios del arte, que con generosidad me regaló. La muerte no quiso que acabase las restantes hasta trece, que eran los originales hallados” (AZARA, 1780, op. cit., p. XXXVI).

At that time Mengs was already praised as the “New Raffaello” and he still held the position of First Court Painter in Madrid, but he had been living in Rome for three years thanks to the permission given by the King, with whom he had an agreement to send to court the agreed artworks.

Despite the humidity, which did not favor his poor health, Mengs accepted to restore the frescoes, but he was not able to carry out the initial project because he died prematurely in 1779. As we know from Azara, up until that time he had done the first three sketches of thirteen and the work was finished by his disciple and brother-in-law Anton von Maron (1733-1808)²². The engravings drawn with Mengs and Maron’s drawings represent nowadays the only attestation of the paintings from Villa Negroni.

Drawings and colored miniatures brought to light by the painter-philosopher and owned by Azara were sold at auction in Paris by Charles F. Lebrun in 1811 and after they got lost (ROETTGE, 2001, p. 248). They were probably preliminary drawings for a series of engravings, a piece of work by the roman architect Camillo Buti (1747-1808) published in Italy before 1780. We can state almost surely that Mengs carried out only the copies of the central panels depicting mythological figures, while the architectural cornice was an invention of the Italian engravers Angelo Campanella (1748-1811 ca) and Pietro Vitali (1755- 1810) that were working in Azara’s project. While excavations went on to reveal the five rooms of the ground floor, frescoes with mythological subjects were cut out and panels were extracted in order to be given to Irish merchant Henry Tresham (1751-1814), the history painter who remind us of Johann Heinrich Fussli. When Tresham came back to Ireland he sold them to Frederick Hervey, Bishop of Derry, fourth Count of Bristol (1730-1803). The Lord’s intention was to decorate his dwelling in Downhill with those artworks, but they

²² The drawings were realized by Mengs y Anton von Maron, while the engravings were made by Angelo Campanella and Pietro Vitali.

didn't get there. It may also be that the Pope Pio VI forbade exporting the artworks, buying them in order to make up the Museo Pio-Clementino in Rome (*Ibidem.*). Tresham was with the British landscape painter Thomas Jones (1743-1803), who left us an evocative oil painting where he depicted one of the excavation stages (fig. 2).



Here we can clearly observe the layout of the villa's rooms and also of the frescoes which fascinated Mengs, who found in those images the same canons of taste he represented in the *Parnaso* of Cardinal Alessandro Albani's Villa, in 1761 (fig. 3).



Such canons were exposed the following year in his theoretical work *Reflexiones sobre la belleza y el gusto en la Pintura*, where he started from the selective process theorized by Platon by means of reaching the Ideal Beauty:

El gusto que más se acerca á la perfección es aquel que escoge lo mejor y más útil de la Naturaleza, conservando todo le esencial de cada cosa, y desechando lo inútil. Entonces todo parece verdad y de Gusto excelente: porque de este modo la Naturaleza se mejora; pero no se muda ni altera, como sucede en la Manera (MENGS A. R., *apud* AZARA, p. 96)²³.

The above mentioned writing and the drawings of the villa realized by Mengs influenced the European taste, especially the parietal decoration of private houses in England. The publication of the excavation's results had in fact some spreading since they served as model for all those artworks commissioned by scholars who had steeped in the figurative culture of Pompeian and Herculaneum houses during their "Grand Tour". Modern audience – fascinated by such strictly-geometrical compositions – could see in the engravings the same decorative order of Campania with more attention to Greek influence. An elegant example is the parietal decorations by Ickworth Castle in Bury St. Edmunds – in which the influence of Villa Negroni's frescoes is very evident - known thanks to Hetty Joyce²⁴. Other clients mixed up the *grottesche* by Raffaello Sanzio with the decorative topics of Villa Negroni and Pompeian houses – as sir Joh Soane did in the breakfast-room of his house in Lincoln's Inn Fields in London and in Ritzhanger Manor in Ealing (*Ibidem*, pp 437-439). The impact of the discoveries reached even Russia, where Czarina Catalina decided to entirely decorate the Silver Cabinet in the style of the newly found frescoes. The influence of ancient frescoes in those days can be seen also in the "Gelbe Zimmer" of Marmorpalais in Potsdam, decorated by Carl Gotthard Langhans in 1779 (*Ibidem*).

The most exhaustive series of these engravings from Villa Negroni's frescoes is the one kept in the Albertina's Collection in Wien. In the abovementioned article, Hetty Joyce did a list of all the engravings until 1983 which today is enhanced with more copies. He mentions

²³ MENGS A.R., "Reflexiones sobre la Belleza y el Gusto en la pintura" (1762), in AZARA J. N., *Obras de D. Anton Raphael Mengs*, op.cit., p. 96

²⁴ JOYCE H. "The ancient frescos from the Villa Negroni and their influence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries", *The Art Bulletin*, n. 65, 3, New York, New York Art Association of America, 1983,423-440.



Fig. 6²⁸.
VI- Baco y Ariadne



Fig. 7²⁹.
VII- Venus y Adonis

²⁸ A. von Maron (del.), A. Campanella (sculp.), *Adonis and young man*, 1779. Seville, Archaeological Museum.

²⁹ A. von Maron (del.), P. Vitali (sculp.), *Venus and Adonis*, 1779. Seville, Archaeological Museum.



Fig. 8³⁰.

Works have the following dedications:

II: Eques Antonius Raphael Mengs delin./ Angelus Campanella sculpsit.

*“Antonio Raphaeli Mengs CAROLI III Hispan. Reg.it quondam
Alexandri Magni Apelles/ Pictori Graecorum summi artificibus
comparando imaginem Adonidis morientes in sinu Veneris nuper/ in
exquilis detectam en aena tabula expressam Amicus Amico Dulcissimo.
DDD MDCCLXXVIII/ cum privilegio SSDN Pii VI”.*

IV: Eques Antonius Maron delin./ Angelus Campanella sculpsit.

*“Memoriae Antonii Raphaelis Mengs Pictoris Philosophi nuper extincti
exquilinam Adonidis Venatoris Picturam in aenea tabula expressam
Amicus. DDD MDCCLXXIX/ cum privilegio SSDN Pii VI”.*

VI: Eques Antonius Maron delin. / Petrus Vitalis sculpsit.

“Equiti Josepho Nicolao de Azara Potentiss. Caroli III Hisp Reg. Catholici apud S. Sedem Pro Legato/ Procuratorique Generali aequo Bonarium Artium aestimatori etc/ ...Viminalem collem anno MDCCLXXVIIDomus Camillus Buti Architectus Romanus/ DDD MDCCLXXXI”.

VII: Eques Antonius Maron delin./ Petrus Vitalis sculpsit.

“Josepho Nicolao de Azara Potentiss. Caroli III Hisp Reg. Catholici apud S. Sedem Pro Legato/ Procuratorique Generali aequo Bonarium Artium aestimatori etc/ Paretibus Picturas inter Esquilibus et Viminalem collem anno MDCCLXXVII detectas in ruderibus privatae Domus Divi Antonim Pii aevo depictas facili/ elegantique Arte et ornamento rum simplicitate spectandus...proporzione in tabulis espressi Camillus Buti architectus romanus; MDCCLXXXIII”.

The research we are carrying out did not yet allow us to find out when and how these works arrived to Seville and how the Archaeology Museum got them, but we do know that they are deposited in 1973 in Seville, where they are currently held³¹. Next step will be to find out to what extent these works influenced Andalusia.

Some years before 1777 Mengs dared to paint a piece in *all'antica*-style, performing a work that even today, despite the certain attribution to the bohemian painter, causes perplexities and keeps the debate alive. We mean the fake fresco of *Jupiter and Ganymede* which dates back to his Neapolitan stay in the summer of 1759 and today is held in the Barberini Palace in Rome (fig.9).

³⁰ A. von Maron (del.), P. Vitali (sculp.), *Bacchus and Ariadne*, 1783. Seville, Archaeological Museum.

³¹ Museum of Fine Arts of Seville, Inventario ROD7934-35-36-37, Acta de Recepción s/n. «Entrega en depósito de cuatro litografías en color en las que se representa un fondo arquitectónico que encuadra un tema mitológico. Expediente 5112/1973/02.Ficha de catálogo redactada por D. Manuel Camacho Moreno con fecha de 08/10/2008». We consider that the use of the term “litograph” referring to the above mentioned engravings is not very appropriate because this technique was introduced in Europe in 1796.



Fig .9³².

The work complied with formal stylistic criteria and with concepts on Ideal Beauty in Ancient Art as seen by J.J. Winckelmann (1717-1768), the *prussiano fatto romano*, and shared also by Mengs. The painting is a skilled synthesis of ancient revivals and Renaissance inheritance, as well as the *Parnaso*, executed in a language which has the stylistic characters of the figurative culture of the second half of the 18th century.

Felice Giani (1758-1823)³³ - which was one of the most prolific Italian artists of that time and excelled at decorating interior - was able to interpret the artistic stimulus coming from this work of art. In Rome he dealt creatively with classical themes, moving away from the canonical frames praised at those days: he created dynamic and dramatic compositions set in a fantastic atmosphere, where the outline is vigorously marked and became fundamentally important. In Rome Giani decorated the Doria Palace, Altieri Palace and the Palace of the Embassy of Spain. Here, in 1806, he painted artworks depicting mythological subjects on the walls and on the ceiling of the Legislative Hall. The fresco *Numa Pompilius receives from the nymph Egeria the laws of Rome* particularly stands out (fig.10): the throne where the nymph is sitting is a literal quote and a tribute to the late Mengs, as well as the shell in the seat's back in *Jupiter and Ganymede*, definitely an invention of the Bohemian painter because the detail has no correspondence in ancient paintings.

³² A.R.Mengs, *Jupiter and Ganymede*, 1760. Rome, Barberini Palace.

³³ Giani started his career some decades after Mengs.

Fig. 10³⁴.

Back to Villa Negroni's frescoes - which portray the owner's love for wine and music, and support Mengs' thesis on ancient painting techniques – their formal characters fully coincided with the idea of *good taste* theorized by him. In these artworks, subjects are easily identifiable – essential condition for any work to be in good taste. According to Mengs theorization, the author of mythological scenes found the right balance between deity and common humanity, painting the characters like heroes posing in their distinctive iconography - Venus with cherubs and Adonis injured – raising art to its most sublime form, because the most beautiful forms spring from the harmony between divine and human nature. Other peculiarities of the ancient author appreciated by Mengs were the mistrust he showed towards technical virtuosity - especially in the line which marks the contour of the body and in the details of the vegetation – and the skill in using color: in a few words, “disegnar con foco ed eseguir con flemma” theorized by Winckelmann and pursued by Mengs.

The audience was enraptured by these frescoes while the Mannerist works – in Mengs's opinion - were in bad taste, because they were just fiction since they left out necessary details or they invented unnecessary ones.

³⁴ F. Giani, *Numa Pompilius receives from the nymph Egeria the laws of Rome*, 1806. Rome, Palace of Spanish Embassy.

Furthermore, they showed a great attention for anatomic details: Venus and Adonis were portrayed in poses which emphasized the musculature of their bodies, with a refined care for the nudity of both figures and a meticulous respect for Venus’s pudendum by covering them with thin drapes. Such divine forms became the image of human perfection, free from human blemishes.

I would like to conclude with a quote from *Reflexiones sobre el Gusto* which in my opinion is the most significant passage of the book – almost a vademecum of the “good artist”:

“Creo pues poder llamar el Gusto de los antiguos Gusto de la Belleza [...] El pintor moderno que quiera hallar el mejor Gusto, debe estudiarle tomando de los antiguos el de la Belleza, de Rafael el de la Expresión, de Coregio el de lo Agradable y Armonioso, y de Ticiano el de la Verdad o Colorido; y todo esto en fin debe buscarlo en la Naturaleza” (AZARRA, 1780, pp. 53-55).

Hard task for every artist.

REFERENCES

- ASSUNTO R. (1973). *L'Antichità come futuro. Studio sull'estetica del Neoclassicismo*, Milan: Medusa.
- AZARA J. N, Obras de D. Anton Raphael Mengs, Primer Pintor de Cámara del Rey, publicadas por Joséph Nicolás de Azara, Madrid, Imprenta Real, 1780, op. cit., p. XXXVI.
- BIANCONI G.L. (1780). *Elogio storico del Cavaliere Antonio Raffaele Mengs*. Milan: G.Galeazzi.
- CACCIOTTI B., “La collezione di José Nicolás de Azara: studi preliminari”, in *Bollettino d'arte*, n.78, pp 1-54. Rome, Istituto poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, Libreria dello Stato, 1993, p. 35.
- CASTELLANOS DE LOSADA B. S. (1846). *El espíritu de José Nicolas de Azara descubierto en la correspondencia epistolar con D. Manuel de Roda*. Madrid.
- CASTELLANOS DE LOSADA B. S. (1848). *Historia de la vida civil y politica de D. José Nicolas de Azara*. Madrid.
- CASTELNUOVO E., “Di cosa parliamo quando parliamo di neoclassico?” in CAPUTO F., MASIERO R., *Neoclassico, la ragione, la memoria, la città: Trieste*. Venice: Marsilio, 1990, pp 3-26;
- CIAVARELLA A. (1979). *De Azara-Bodoni*. Parma, Museo Bodoniano.
- CIPRIANI A., *Aequa potestas. Le arti in gara a Roma nel Settecento*, exhibition catalog (Rome, Accademia di San Luca, 2000),
- CORONA BARATECH CARLOS E. (1948). *José Nicolas de Azara: un embajador español en Roma*. Zaragoza: Institucion Fernando El Catolico.
- GIANI F. (1806). *Numa Pompilius receives from the nymph Egeria the laws of Rome*. Rome: Palace of Spanish Embassy.
- GONZÁLEZ-PALACIOS A., “La grammatica neoclassica”, *Antichità Viva*, Florence, Edam, n. 12, 1973, pp 29-59;

- JOYCE H. “The ancient frescos from the Villa Negroni and their influence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries”, *The Art Bulletin*, n.65,3, New York, New York Art Association of America, 1983,423-440.
- MARON, A. von (del.), A. Campanella (sculp.), *Adonis and young man*, 1779. Seville, Archaeological Museum.
- MARON, A. Von (del.); & VITALI, P. (sculp.). *Bacchus and Ariadne*, 1783. Seville, Archaeological Museum.
- MARON, A. Von (del.); & VITALI, P. (sculp.). *Venus and Adonis*, 1779. Seville, Archaeological Museum.
- MAZZOCCA F.; COLLE E.; MORANDOTTI A.; & SUSINO S. (2002). *Il Neoclassicismo in Italia da Tiepolo a Canova, exhibition catalog* (Milan, Palazzo Reale, 2002). Geneva: Skira.
- MENGS A.R., “Reflexiones sobre la Belleza y el Gusto en la pintura” (1762), in AZARA J. N., *Obras de D. Anton Raphael Mengs*, op.cit., p. 96.
- MENGS, A. R. (1760) *Jupiter and Ganymede*. Rome: Barberini Palace.
- MENGS, A. R. (del.), A. Campanella (sculp.), *Venus and wounded Adonis*, part., 1778. Seville, Arc. Museum.
- MENGS, A. R. (del.), A. Campanella (sculp.). *Venus and wounded Adonis*, 1778. Seville, Archaeological Museum
- NICOLÁS GOMEZ S., José Nicolás de Azara, representante en Italia del pensamiento ilustrado español, in *Boletín de la Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando*, n. 54, Madrid, Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, Primer semestre de 1982, pp. 239-276;
- OTTAVINI CAVINA A. (1982). *Il Settecento e l'antico, Storia dell'arte italiana*, II. Turin, S.N.
- PALMA VENETUCCI B. “Le erme tiburtine e gli scavi del ‘700”, in *Uomini Illustri dell'Antichità*. ROME, De Luca, 1992, pp 173-310.
- PINELLI A. (2000). *Nel segno di Giano. Passato e futuro nell'arte europea tra Sette e Ottocento*. Rome: Carocci.

- PRAZ M. (1940). *Gusto Neoclassico*. Florence: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli.
- RAFAEL OLAECHEA (1965). *Las relaciones hispano - romanas en la segunda mitad del XVIII: la agencia de preces*. Zaragoza: Talleres Ed. El Noticiero.
- ROETTGEN S. (2001). *Mengs. La scoperta del Neoclassicismo*. Venice: Marsilio.
- ROME, De Luca (2000). A.A.V.V. *The Age of Neo-Classicism , exhibition catalog* (London, The Royal Academy; The Victoria & Albert Museum, 1972). London: The Arts Council of Great Britain 1972.
- ROSSI PINELLI O. (2000). *Il secolo della Ragione e delle Rivoluzioni. La cultura visiva del Settecento Europeo, Storia Universale dell'Arte, sez III*. Turin: Utet..
- ROSSI PINELLI O. *Antichisti e modernisti: dispute, modelli, prospettive nella produzione visiva del XVIII secolo, Città di Castello, 1995-1996*;
- SÁNCHEZ ESPINOSA G. (1961). José Nicolás de Azara, traductor: la Historia de la vida de Cicerón de Conyers. Madrid: Middleton.
- SÁNCHEZ ESPINOSA G. (2000) *Memorias del Ilustrado aragonés José Nicolás de Azara*. Zaragoza: Institución Fernando el Católico.
- TELLECHEA IDIGORAS J. I., “Azara y la edicion de las Obras de Mengs. Interpolaciones de Llaguno Amirola”, *Boletín de la Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando*, n.35, Madrid, Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, 1971, pp. 45-71.
- URRÍES Y DE LA COLINA J.J., “El diplomático José Nicolás de Azara, protector de las bellas artes y de las letras”, *Boletín del Museo e Instituto Camón Aznar, Zaragoza, Caja de Ahorros de Zaragoza, Aragón y Rioja*, 2000 n. 81, pp. 61-88.
- VENUTI CORTONESE R., *Accurata e succinta descrizione topografica delle antichità di Roma*, Vol. 1, 1824, Rome, Pietro Paolo Montagnani-Mirabili, p. 170.