Two Unpublished Plans of the Farnese Palace

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Among the architectural drawings in the Metropolitan Museum are two plans for the Farnese Palace, which appear to be unknown but which throw some light on the early history of the building. One (Figure 1) is a plan of the Palace at ground level which agrees substantially with the existing building, but shows a number of small variations. Apart from minor details, such as the piercing of doors and windows and the subdivision of rooms, these variations are mainly to be found in two parts of the Palace: the loggia facing the garden and the northwest corner of the building.

The loggia has pilasters instead of half columns on its outer face, a feature it shares with a drawing now in the Uffizi, a ground plan of the Palace from the studio of Antonio da Sangallo the Younger (Figure 2). The Metropolitan’s plan differs, however, both from the Uffizi plan and from the existing building in showing two deep niches in the east wall of the loggia, behind which the architect has inserted two small rooms, apparently privies.

The second difference is more considerable. In the northwest corner of the Palace the plan shows a spiral staircase with an open newel supported by single columns, following exactly Bramante’s famous staircase in the Belvedere in the Vatican, which Sangallo imitated in a celebrated double spiral staircase in the Pozzo di San Patrizio at Orvieto. No spiral staircase was incorporated in the Farnese Palace as executed and none occurs in the Uffizi drawing. This would suggest that the Metropolitan drawing is earlier than the Uffizi scheme, but it must be noticed that in one respect it is closer to the building itself than the Uffizi version: it shows the three niches on each side of the passage leading from the court to the loggia, which occur in the Palace itself but not in the Uffizi drawing.

The second of the two plans in the Metropolitan (Figure 3) is of greater interest, since it represents a part of the Palace of which no other record has been published. It shows a scheme for systematizing the awkwardly shaped area between the west façade and the Via Giulia which runs askew to it.

It may not at first sight seem obvious that the plan is connected with the Farnese Palace at all, but the unusual shape of the area shown in the plan corresponds exactly to the site behind the Palace, and the layout of the west wing of the Palace itself is substantially the same as in the first drawing. There are, however, some differences: half columns on the outer face of the loggia (as in the building), unbroken walls in the passage between court and loggia (as in the Uffizi drawing), square ends to the loggia (apparently not recorded in any other scheme), the elimination of a narrow passage near the spiral staircase.

The drawing is without wash, but the pen line seems to be like that on the first drawing, and since they seem to have the same provenance and are of similar size and on similar paper, there is no reason to doubt that they are by the same hand.

This second drawing shows that the architect planned to form a rectangular court with its shorter axis on that of the Palace, and with the loggia of the west façade repeated on the other three sides. The triangle left between this court and the Via Giulia was to be filled with rooms of varying shapes and sizes and with two small staircases, which may have led to a second story but more probably served to give access to a terrace on the roof. Later Cardinal Alessandro
Farnese actually built along the north side of the site a terrace leading to a private oratory in the church of Santa Maria dell’Orazione e della Morte, consecrated in 1586 but rebuilt by Fuga in the eighteenth century. This terrace still exists, but has none of the architectural features shown in the plan.

Nothing now remains of the court shown in this drawing, and it is not even certain that it was ever erected. There is, however, some evidence for thinking that it was at least begun. Vasari records that at the end of 1546, just after the death of Sangallo, when the Farnese Bull was discovered near the Baths of Caracalla, Michelangelo, who had taken over the conduct of the Palace for Paul III, “advised that it should be conveyed into the second court and there restored so as to make it spout water in the original manner,” and Vasari adds that the restoration was still in progress when he wrote, that is to say in 1568. At the same time, Vasari continues, Michelangelo planned the extension of the whole vista by means of a bridge across the Tiber which was to lead to the Farnese gardens.

Vasari’s statement implies at least that the court was laid out, even if the buildings had not actually been put up, and we may assume that the Metropolitan plan shows its general appearance.

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Fig. 1 (opposite, above). Ground plan for the Farnese Palace. 20 3/4 x 27 5/8 inches
Gift of Janos and Anne Bigelow Scholz in memory of Walter Bigelow Rosen, 1949

Fig. 2 (opposite, below). Ground plan for the Farnese Palace, from the studio of Antonio da Sangallo the Younger Uffizi Gallery, Florence

Fig. 3. Ground plan for the Farnese Palace. 17 3/4 x 23 3/8 inches
Gift of Janos and Anne Bigelow Scholz in memory of Walter Bigelow Rosen, 1949