ICONOCRAZIA

RIVISTA DI SCIENZE SOCIALI E FILOSOFIA POLITICA

SAGGIO

Francesco Salviati's Emblematic Imagery in the Sala dell'Udienza of Florence

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Abstract

From 1543 to 1548, Francesco Salviati painted the fresco cycle depicting the triumph of the ancient Roman hero Marcus Furius Camillus in the Sala dell' Udienza of the Palazzo Vecchio as the civic palace of the Florentine Republic was being transformed into a ducal residence for Cosimo I and his family. This study will focus on the emblematic imagery found in the dado or *basamento* of the audience hall. It will examine the depictions of the river gods in terms of ideas circulating among Salviati's friends and associates, such as Paolo Giovio, the writer who shared an interest in allegorical images and emblems.

Keywords: Sala dell' Udienza, Francesco Salviati, Paolo Giovio, fresco, symbolism

It has been well established in scholarship by Luisa Mortari, Iris Cheney, and Melinda Schlitt that Francesco Salviati extolled Cosimo de' Medici's principate in the fresco cycle depicting the triumph of the Roman leader Marcus Furius Camillus in the 1540s, when the Palazzo Vecchio, the former civic palace of the Florentine republic, was being transformed into a ducal residence (Mortari, 1992; Cheney, 1963; Schlitt, 1991, e 1996; Allegri e Cecchi, 1980; Cibelli, 2010). The historical accounts by Livy and Machiavelli inform the four major narrative scenes that represent: on the east wall Camillus's triumph after the defeat of the Etruscan city of Veii (**Figure 1**); the return of Camillus from exile combined with his victory over Brennus and the Gauls; and on the south wall the burning of the Volsci camp (**Figure 2**); and the group with the Falerian schoolmaster being beaten by the children he had held for ransom (Livy, 1982; Machiavelli, 1996, pp. 38–40 and 143–145; Schlitt,1991, p. 175).

Figure 1. Francesco Salviati, East Wall, Storie di Furio Camillo, 1543–1545. Sala dell' Udienza. Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 2. Francesco Salviati, South Wall, details, The Burning of the Volsci Camp and Sacrifice of Isaac. Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons.

In each scene, Camillus is an ideal leader who shows mercy for his defeated enemies and respects the religious traditions of his subjects (Schlitt, 1991, pp. 10–11). The many secondary scenes, allegorical figures, and motifs that contribute to the abundance of decoration offer new subject matter for study, as there are motifs that have not yet been fully interpreted, especially in reference to emblems (Nova, 1980; Pierguidi, 2006).[1] Therefore, it is worthwhile to examine the role of the contributors to the iconographic programme and the connections many of them had to emblem literature.

In a letter of 9 October 1543, Lorenzo Pagni, the Duke's secretary, wrote to Pier Francesco Riccio, noting that Cosimo was to determine the subject and that Riccio was to oversee the project (Schlitt,1991, p. 135). Nonetheless, as Mortari (1992) has noted, this did not preclude contributions from other scholars. While Pierio Valeriano (Curran, 1998/1999), one such learned advisor known for using hieroglyphic studies as sources for emblems, conferred with Salviati on allegory, we shall see that there are motifs that should be assessed in light of Salviati's friendship with the noted emblem writer, Paolo Giovio, even though Giovio did not have an active role in the initial project. There is evidence that he only heard about Salviati's work on the fresco and its completion second-hand (Schlitt, 1991).[2]

We learn that even in its unfinished state and from a distance, it captured Giovio's imagination. While work was still underway, Giovio received written communication about the fresco from a captain Luca Antonio, who reported to him from Florence. Giovio, in turn, mentioned the project in his letter to Cardinal Alessandro Farnese dated 11 September 1545. As Schlitt has observed, Giovio always used the expression *dice* when he discussed it, which confirms he heard about the fresco without viewing it. Furthermore, Giovio said that the programme referred to Scipio and not Camillus (*ibidem.)*.

As the work neared completion, Ludovico Domenichi, the fictional participant in Giovio's *Dialogo dell' imprese militari et amorose*, mentioned the frescoes in his 1547 translation of Alberti's *De Pictura*, a work he dedicated to Salviati with a note that the project was "soon to be finished."[3] Domenichi's

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[1] Scholars such as Alessandro Nova and Stefano Pierguidi have assessed allegorical images painted by Salviati. Nova (1980) discusses Salviati's use of Time-Prudence Seizing Occasion by the Hair, a motif also used at the Palazzo Ricci-Sacchetti to allude to Cardinale Giovanni Ricci's personal aspirations as a churchman. Pierguidi (2006) acknowledged Salviati's original contributions with, for example, the figure of Sole or the Sun on the north wall of the Sala dell' Udienza at the Palazzo Vecchio, noting that the artist may have viewed a similar motif in Padua and adapted it as part of the temporal symbolism at the Palazzo Vecchio.

[2] Schlitt comments on Giovio's lack of direct involvement. However, Giovio probably helped Salviati develop the programme for frescoes at the Palazzo Farnese c.1552, which had narrative scenes combined with allegorical figures and emblems.

[3] Giovio's text was published without imagery, posthumously in 1555. For the information on Antonfrancesco Doni, see Schlitt, 1991, p. 139. Schlitt also notes that Doni dedicated a book in his library to Salviati around June 1547 and referred to the frescoes as, "non finito ancora da voi.…"

acknowledgement proves that Salviati remained within Giovio's circle while working on the commission. This affiliation may further illuminate how Giovio would discuss some of the imagery in his book on imprese.

The east wall has the central image of Peace Burning Arms and the astrological symbol of Capricorn at the far ends, images associated with Augustus. The Medici had long adopted the image of Capricorn, and Giovio noted it was part of Cosimo's impresa (Cox-Rearick, 1984, pp. 252–253; Giovio, 1976, p. 52).[4] In Salviati's fresco, Capricorn surmounts the allegorical figure of *Tempio* or *Prudenzia* depicted with a snake (**Figure 3**).

Figure 3. Francesco Salviati, Tempio-Prudenzia e Occasio. Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons.

The imagery on both sides of the east wall depicts Time-Prudence seizing Occasion by the Hair. The figure of Time-Prudence was represented standing on a globe and holding a pair of scales balanced to show a decisive moment.[5] The

[4] The impresa depicts the winged mythical animal combined with the motto, "Fidem Fati Virtute Sequemur"/We will courageously pursue the faithful promise of destiny (Giovio, 1976, p. 52).

[5] For the motif of the scales, see Hall, 1979, p. 229.

combined imagery conveyed that Cosimo, too, would achieve the illustrious victories his horoscope promised him.

Augustus was especially important for the iconographic programme (Richelson, 1978, p. 35).[6] In his history, Vincenzo Borghini stated that Florence was founded by Augustus in the year 43 BCE on the 25th of March, the date that was not coincidentally the birthday of Cosimo's heir, Francesco I (Rubenstein, 1967, p. 71). With the birth of a son, Cosimo would have wanted to recast his family's ambition as dynastic. He could do so by forging a bond with Augustus, a figure important for both the early history of Florence and for imperial Rome.

In his gloss on Cosimo's impresa, Giovio noted that Cosimo won the battle at Montemurlo in 1537, on the day Augustus obtained victory over Anthony and Cleopatra. This triumph in Egypt resonated with Augustus's use of the sphinx, which Giovio commented on in another section of the text when he noted it was Suetonius who observed in "dispatches and private letters he [Augustus] used as his seal at first a sphinx, and later an image of Alexander the Great; and his successors continued to use as their sea" (Giovio, 1976, p. 173). This passage was also included in an entry on the sphinx in Valeriano's *Hieroglyphica* (Bolzani, 1976, p. 60).

Perhaps with support from Valeriano, Salviati gave the sphinx a prominent place in the Sala, as it was repeated with depictions of river gods in the lower area of the room eight times. The sphinx is the central figure within each oval, as seen in the lower section of the west wall and this detail (**Figures 4 and 5**).

Figure 4. Francesco Salviati, Adoration of the Sphinx with River Arno, detail. Sala dell' Udienza, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, Italy. Photo credit: photo by the author.

[6] Richelson refers to Mario Matasiliani, La Felicita del Serenissimo Cosimo Medici, published in 1572 as providing the "most complete attempt to parallel the lives of Augustus and Cosimo".

Figure 5. Francesco Salviati, Adoration of the Sphinx with River Tiber, detail. Sala dell' Udienza, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, Italy. Photo credit: photo by the author.

The Sala, with its references to Augustus and Camillus, expresses Cosimo's desire to be King of Etruria and his efforts to promote the Florentine language—aspirations embodied in the image of the sphinx (Butters, 1996, 1:53-53), for after the Accademia Fiorentina was established in the 1560s, it adopted the sphinx as its emblem; and for the academicians, the Etruscans were seen as the inheritors of Egyptian knowledge (Schlitt, 1991, pp. 120 and 209–211; Lazzaro, 2011).[7]

In the fresco programme, the sphinx was used for the evocation of power. In each iteration, it was not represented alone: Vasari referred to the figures adoring the sphinx and identified the accompanying motif as the River Arno (**Figure 6**) (Vasari, 1906, p.25)[8].

[7] Schlitt (2011) notes that the association of Etruria with Egypt was expressed in terms of Cosimo's support for the Tuscan language with the establishment of the Accademia Fiorentina and the University of Pisa.

[8] Vasari wrote, "e nel mezzo sono certi ovali con storie di popoli che adorno una sfinge ed il fiume Arno".

Figure 6. Francesco Salviati, Allegoria dell' Arno. Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons.

Vasari may have referred to the Arno because in his *Lives* he discussed the river god depicted on the west wall above one of the windows as being portrayed "with a horn of abundance, holding up a cloth with one hand to discover the greatness of the popes and heroes of the Medici from Florence" (Bolzoni, 2019, p. 52, n.14)[9]. While there is no cornucopia in the fresco, Vasari's mention of it suggests he had a specific statue of the Arno in mind, probably the one restored by Michelangelo with a sixteenth-century head that had a heavy beard (Lazzaro, 2011, p. 74).

The same pose is found in one version of the river god depicted in the dado or *basamento*. The semi-recumbent figure leans on an overturned vase and poses with his legs and torso directed to the left. He reaches up with one arm toward reeds defining the periphery of a grotto. Another version of a river god faces the other direction; this second type is shown with the overturned vase directly under his slightly bent knees. He reaches back with his right arm to touch a bearded face that is barely visible, which may have been an allusion to Tiberinus before his transformation into a river god. The different poses, positions of the vase, and head distinguish the figure from the Arno. However, the similarities in the fresco treatment of this other figure suggest that he represented another river god connected to the statuary.

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[9] Bolzoni quotes Vasari from *Le vite de' piu eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori nelle redazione del 1550 e 1568*, ed. R. Bettarini and P. Barrochi, 5 vols. (Florence: Sansoni, 1966–1984), 5:522: "Sopra le finestre è un fregio tutto pieno di bellissimi ignudi, grandi quanto il vivo et in diverse forme et attitudini … è il fiume Arno, che avendo un corno di dovizia abbondantissimo, scuopre, alzando con una mano un panno, una Fiorenza e la grandezza de' suoi Pontefici e gli Eroi di casa Medici."

When Salviati depicted both versions of the Sphinx and the river god, he painted cartouche-like frames and wall panels that imitated stonework and placed an image within an image because the centre, tinted reddish brown, represented stone statues (Schlitt, 1991, p. 210).[10] The illusionistic techniques underscored the artist's facility to render and function as a *paragone*, showing the superiority of painting to sculpture.[11]

Given the differences between the figures, we must determine whether Salviati forged connections to the Arno in one version and the Tiber in the other and paired both of the river gods with the Sphinx to emphasise the connections the Medici had to Florence and Rome. We must also consider whether the imagery was used to promote Salviati's growing reputation as a painter of epic history, which he had established in Rome (Schlitt, 1991, p. 64).[12]

Salviati undoubtedly knew of the Arno statue that had been discovered in Rome that we have discussed as a source for imagery on the west wall and the other statues of the Nile and Tiber that were recovered from another site in the city. *The Nile* (**Figure 7**), with some of the original figures symbolising the 16 ells of flood water needed to sustain agriculture, was unearthed around 1513 near where the statue of *The Tiber* (**Figure 8**) had been excavated the year before (Bober and Rubinstein, 1986, p. 68).

Figure 7. The Nile Vatican Statue. Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons.

[10] Schlitt (1991, p. 210) calls them "fictive bronze ovals."

[11] For the debate and comments on the letter Vasari wrote noting that literature and sculpture provided records of lost paintings, see Mendelsohn, 1982, p. 59; Schlitt, 1991, p. 259.

[12] Schlitt (1991, p. 64) refers to Salviati as a Roman painter of epic history.

Figure 8. Marble Roman Tiber River Statue. Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons.

They were both found between Santa Maria sopra Minerva and Santo Stefano del Cacco, on the site of a sanctuary of Isis and Serapis (Pliny the Elder,1962, pp. 42–47; Haskell and Penny,1981, p. 272). The location had special significance for the Medici because the church of Santa Maria housed the tombs of Leo X and Clement VII (Kleefisch-Jobst, 1988, pp. 535–536). Furthermore, Leo X displayed both statues in the Vatican Belvedere, as recorded by Maarten van Heemskerck in a drawing of 1532–1533, now at the British Museum (Lazzaro, 2011, p. 72).[13] Leo X also commissioned artwork that drew upon the statues of river gods as references to different geographical locations, perhaps most famously in the borders of Raphael's tapestries for the Sistine Chapel (*ivi*, p. 83).

It was the fame of the river gods among artists, including Baldassare Peruzzi, who in a drawing depicted the river god Tiber without a rudder, that makes it likely Salviati was preoccupied with both statues so prominently displayed by the Medici popes (Rubinstein, 1984).[14] Although they were treated as a pair, the statues existed separately, and each river god, Nile and Tiber, could function as an individual subject. As the Nile was a recurrent motif for allegories and emblems because of its association with arcane knowledge, it should not be surprising to find that Giovio discussed the use of the sphinx for an impresa (**Figure 9)** he designed for a man whose first name derived from the Latin, Camillus.

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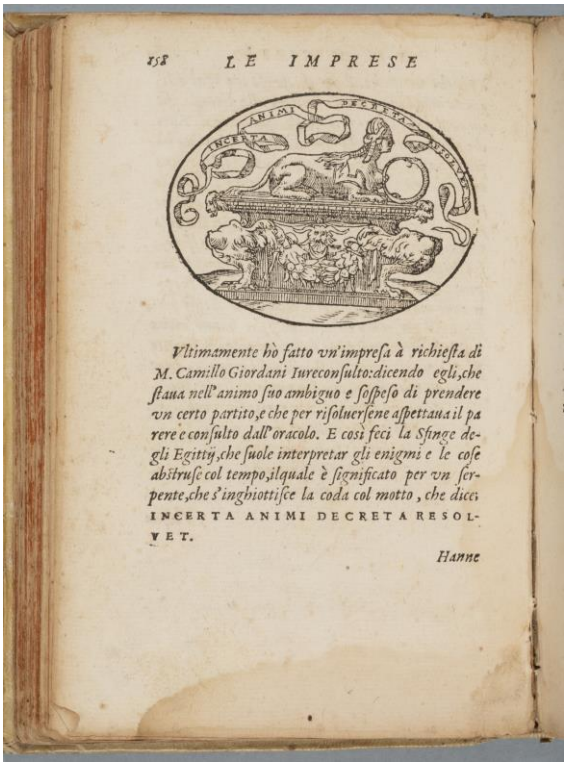
[13] Lazzaro (2011, p. 72) reproduces Heemskerck's *View of the Nile and Tiber in the Vatican Belvedere*, 1532–1533, a drawing at the British Museum.

[14] See tav. LXXIII, fig. 3, B. Peruzzi, "River-god Tiber, found in 1512. London British Museum, 1946.7.13.15."


158 LE IMPRESE

INCERTA ANIMI DECRETA RESOLVET

Vltimamente hò fatto vn'impresa à richiesta di M. Camillo Giordani Iureconsulto: dicendo egli, che staua nell'animo suo ambiguo e sospeso di prendere vn certo partito, e che per risoluersene aspettaua il parere e consulto dall'oracolo. E così feci la Sfinge degli Egitty, che suole interpretar gli enigmi e le cose abstruse col tempo, il quale è significato per vn serpente, che s'inghiottisce la coda col motto, che dice: INCERTA ANIMI DECRETA RESOLVET.

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Figure 9. Paolo Giovio, Dialogo dell'imprese militari et amorose, 1574. Photo credit: Reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Martino, CA.

In the *Dialogo del imprese*, he stated:

> Finally, I made an Impresa at the request of Master Camillo Giordani, a Lawyer, upon this that he said he was doubtful in mind, and in suspense to adventure certain enterprises and to be resolved therein, he attended the advice and counsel of some Oracle, And thereupon I figured him the Egyptian Sphinx, which did interpret Riddle with abstruse and secret matters, and also that Serpent with his tail in his mouth, which signifies time, with this motto, "the uncertainties of spirit or heart dissolves all resolution" (Giovio, 1976, pp. 138–139). 15

The motif which Giovio said stressed how prevailing doubt could affect future resolve was amended by the sphinx that foretold of success and the ouroboros, a temporal device that the early humanist Marsilio Ficino had traced to

15 "Ultimamente hò fatto un'impresa à richiesta di M. Camillo Giordani lureconsulto: dicendo egli, che statua nell' animo suo ambiguo e sospeso di prendere un certo partito, e che per risoluersi ne aspettaua il parere e consulto dall'oracolo. E così feci la Sfinge degli Egitty, che suole interpreter gli enigma e le cose abstrufe col tempo, il quale è significato per un serpente, che s'inghiottisce la coda col motto, che dice; INCERTA ANIMI DECRETA RESOLVET" (Giovio, 1976, pp. 138–139).

Egypt and discussed as part of a cyclical process of destruction and creation that taught one prudence (Grafton, 1993, p.14).[16]

The idea of deferred resolution that Giovio attached to the sphinx and ouroboros in his impresa for Camillo Giordani also seems applicable to the theme of exile and return experienced by the Roman leader Camillus and the Medici. It may have seemed inevitable that Camillus was destined to rule even though he had to be restored to power as many as five times, and that Cosimo would rule after two periods of Medici exile, first from 1494 to 1512 and second from 1527 to 1530 (Dumèzil, 1980; Cox-Rearick, 1984). Thus, in further disseminating depictions of the sphinx along with the river god statuary, Salviati and his advisors for the fresco cycle may have adopted the trope found in Pliny and also used by Philostratus that the ancient stones can speak to disclose the future (Barkan, 1999, p. xxiv). With it, they found a way to represent the idea of recovery.

As river gods, the statues could serve as symbols of skilfulness and thereby attest to artistic achievement, especially if the motifs supported the Medici by alluding to Salviati's career in Rome, where he studied classical sources and established a reputation as an epic painter. Rivers were metaphors for eloquence and talent and were used by Seneca, Cicero, and Pliny. Similarly, in an epigraph to the letter written to Giovanni Piero, Ficino stated, "Fontes potius quam rivulos sectari debemus," paraphrased by Francis Junius in his *Painting of the Ancients*, published in London in 1638 as "It is a sign of a dull wit … to run after little brookes and not to visit the main fountains of things from whence all is derived" (Herendeen,1981, p. 117). Thus, to chart rivers was to show erudition (*ivi.*, p. 124). Salviati's erudition based upon his early training as an artist working in Florence alongside Vasari, and his subsequent Roman apprenticeship was recounted in detail in Vasari's life of the artist (Vasari, 1912–1915, vol. 8, pp.174–179). In his account, Vasari also came to the artist's defence despite stating that after Salviati established himself at the Medici court, he became increasingly critical of other artists. Vasari noted that in response, Giovanni Battista del Tasso and others began to spread rumours that the frescoes in the Palazzo Vecchio were a failure and would be destroyed (Vasari, 1906, p. 7). Accordingly, Salviati was ready to abandon the work and was only prevented from doing so by the persuasion of his friends (Pilliod, 1998, p. 41).

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[16] Grafton (1992, p. 14) quotes Ficino: "The Egyptian priests, when they wished to signify divine things, did not use letters, but whole figures of plants, trees, and animals; for God doubtless has a knowledge of things which is not complex discursive thought about its subject, but is, as it were, the simple and steadfast form of it. Your thought of time, for instance, is manifold and mobile, maintaining that time is speedy and by a sort of revolution joins the beginning to the end. It teaches prudence, produces much, and destroys it again. The Egyptians comprehend this whole discourse in one stable image, painting a winged serpent, holding its tail in its mouth. Other things are represented in similar images, as Horus describes."

Given the prominent role the rumours played in Salviati's biography, we may hazard to ask whether the hostile atmosphere at the Palazzo Vecchio made Giovio regard the sphinx as a personal device for the "irascible Salviati," and this reinforced the idea that the sphinx showed dissolution of resolve, which also made it appropriate for Camillo Giordani's impresa.[17] I would like to suggest that even if there was no direct connection between the motif in the Sala dell' Udienza and Giovio's impresa for the lawyer Camillo, the images were part of a desire shared by Giovio and Salviati to harness the power and efficacy of popular emblems for their patrons and sometimes for themselves. Giovio, for example, owned a set of tapestries (Adelson, 1990) he ordered from the Flemish weaver Janni Rost that were paid for by Cosimo not long after Rost had worked with Nicholas Karcher on the *spalleire* or tapestries for the lower area of the Sala dell' Udienza designed by Francesco Ubertini, known as Il Bachiacca (Adelson 1980 and 1990), that were produced in Florence from 1546–1553 (**Figure 10**).

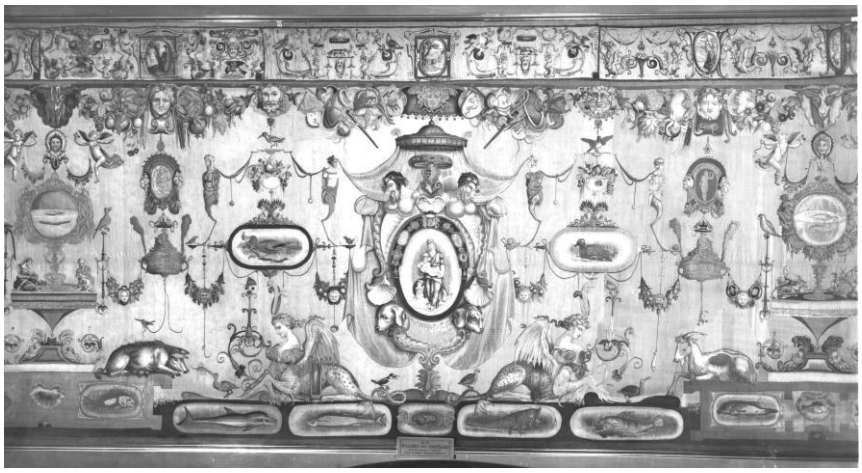

Figure 10. Bacchiacca (Francesco Ubertini, 1494–1557). Grotesque Spalliera with a Figure of Charity. Uffizi, Florence, Italy. Photo credit: Photo courtesy of Alinari/Art Resource NY.

One of the panels for Giovio bears his motto, "Fato Prudentia Minor" (Wisdom Is weaker than Faith), probably from the *Georgics*, to refer to how fortunate he felt throughout his career. It was a motto Giovio interpreted in a letter to Vasari as affirming the benefits of listening to God when choosing a wife. In her assessment of Giovio's tapestry, Candace Adelson compares the herms and garland imagery with title-page designs Lorenzo Torrentino used for Giovio's work and Vasari's 1550 edition of the *Vite* (Adelson, 1990, p. 445). She even proposes that the design of Giovio's tapestry was by Vasari *(ivi*., p. 43).

Giovio's tapestry is particularly compelling for emblem use because it relates to his intellectual achievements. Furthermore, the production of this tapestry

[17] Salviati's ill temper was mentioned by Giovanni Battista Armenini in *De veri Precetti della Pittura*, cited by Schlitt, 1991, pp. 35–36.

for Giovio by one of the weavers who worked on the *spalliere* Cosimo commissioned for the Sala dell' Udienza further supports the thesis that the frescoes and tapestry programme imagery inspired Giovio. When the *spalliere* was partially installed in the Sala for an exhibition in 1980, they covered Salviati's lower frescoes (Adelson, 1980, p. 141). This may explain why the vibrant yellow, grotesques, and sphinx were used in some of the tapestry panels, as the different elements resemble things found in the fresco cycle. The sphinx appears in the panel that depicts Charity.

Furthermore, the grotesques in the Charity tapestry are similar to the forms used in Salviati's border for the *Sacrifice of Isaac* found over the doorway on the south wall (**Figure 2**).

Such designs were informed by the same sensibility that treated emblems as polyvalent symbols because different individuals could refashion motifs for different purposes, a practice facilitated by books on emblems. The use and reuse of allegorical figures, the sign of Capricorn associated with Augustus and Cosimo, and other imagery—such as the sphinx discussed in emblem literature and used in the fresco and tapestries—show these devices were subject to coding and recoding. With this practice of adopting and reinterpreting popular motifs, the Sphinx and river god could express Salviati's aspirations and reputation as an artist, while also affirming the duke's destiny. The connections that viewers made between the project and Salviati's reputation would have been enhanced by their knowledge of the inclusion of his self-portrait in the cycle, a detail mentioned by Vasari who noted Salviati depicted himself as a soldier in the army flanking the priests returning the cult statue of the Goddess Juno to the Etruscans after Camillus defeated the city of Veii (**Figure 11**) (Vasari, 1912-1915, vol. 8, p.175). The self-portrait serves as a signature and makes the work seem intensely personal.

Figure 11. Francesco Salviati, Self-portrait in Triumph of Camillus, East Wall. Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons.

Along with this signature, the sphinx and the river god had the potential to serve as a manifesto, to assert Salviati's personal connections to Rome, and to show his resolve to complete the work in face of hostile criticism. If we use Giovio's motto for Camillo Giordani about the need for resolve as a motto for Salviati, or some variant of it that related to the Sphinx as an oracular creature predicting success or the Tiber as an allegory for Rome and as a source for mastery, the design would be an impresa. Nonetheless, even without a motto, the imagery was emblematic and interwove Salviati's status as a Roman artist and his personal fortune with his patron's illustrious lineage and destiny.

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