

“Whoever gifted this painting to Donna Olimpia must have known her intimately to present her with a work so resonant with her personal aesthetic and ambition.”

GUERCINO'S *ERMINIA*

A Gifted Painting's Story of Italian Power Culture

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AMIDST THE DECADENCE OF BAROQUE ROME, PRESENTING *ROMANITAS* (I.E. "ROMAN-NESS") WAS ESSENTIAL TO BECOMING PART OF THE CITY'S GOVERNING ELITE. ESTABLISHING ART COLLECTIONS AND PICTURE GALLERIES WAS A MEANS FOR AMBITIOUS FAMILIES TO DISPLAY THEIR SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS, SOPHISTICATION, AND WORTHINESS TO ASSUME A ROLE AMONG THE FOREMOST ROMAN FAMILIES. LIKE MANY ROMAN NOBLES IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY, THE PAMPHILJ FAMILY AMASSED A COLLECTION, SOME OF WHICH SURVIVES IN THE GALLERIA DORIA-PAMPHILJ IN ROME. ALTHOUGH THE PAMPHILJS USED THE ACCUMULATION OF ART TO DRIVE THEIR FAMILIAL AMBITION, THIS FAMILY AND THEIR RELATION TO THE PONTIFICATE WERE UNUSUAL DUE TO THE STATUS OF DONNA OLIMPIA MAIDALCHINI PAMPHILJ, SISTER-IN-LAW OF POPE INNOCENT X. THE SELF-APPOINTED MATRIARCH FASHIONED HERSELF INTO A WOMAN OF INFLUENCE, AND WAS CONSIDERED BY SOME TO BE THE REAL POWER BEHIND THE PAMPHILJ PAPACY. THE STUDY OF GUERCINO'S *ERMINIA FINDS THE WOUNDED TANCREDO*, A PAINTING FROM THE PAMPHILJ COLLECTION WITH TIES TO DONNA OLIMPIA, SHEDS LIGHT UPON THE COMPLEXITY OF HER POWERFUL ROLE IN ROME AND ELUCIDATES THE ROLE OF ART IN THE BAROQUE PERIOD.

INTRODUCTION

Guercino's painting *Erminia Finds the Wounded Tancred* is nearly six feet wide by five feet high and currently hangs in the Doria Pamphilj Gallery's Galleria Aldobrandini. But this was not its original home; if the original owner were still alive, there is little doubt she would be vexed by its current location. According to members of the Doria-Pamphilj family, the work was presented as a gift to Donna Olimpia Maidalchini Pamphilj, the wife of Pamphilio Pamphilj, sister-in-law of Giovanni-Battista Pamphilj, and a person of standing in the pontificate of Pope Innocent X. Though the painting first appears in the Pamphilj records in the 1657 inventory of the villa at San Martino al Cimino, there is no conclusive evidence regarding the circumstances surrounding this generous gift.¹ A circumstantial framework may be pieced together to illuminate the possible identity of the benefactor and the occasion of his gratitude. Due to the seventeenth-century's particular gift culture, the prominence of the artist and his patrons, and the painting's subject matter, it is probable that *Erminia Finds the Wounded Tancred* was presented to Donna Olimpia as a gift by one of Rome's cultural luminaries.

The practice of gift giving has always played an integral role in western culture. Since antiquity it has been a common custom to present precious items to figures of authority, whether kings or gods, in order to gain approval or appease their sense of justice.² It was not until the Middle Ages, however, that a gift economy developed, thus standardizing the practice of bartering goods for favors.³ Unlike a payment, the gift acquired an altruistic pretense that bestowed benevolence on the giver and magnificence upon the receiver, thus commending both parties involved in the exchange.⁴ The practice of purposeful gift-giving continued to be a major part of European culture, and in the seventeenth-century—due to the particular climate of conspicuous consumption—gift-giving became an obligatory form of ritual exchange.⁵ As the practice evolved, there was significantly less emphasis on maintaining an appearance of altruism because corrupt dealings were common practice, a Machiavellian necessity for an individual to obtain a favorable outcome from a figure of authority.⁶

DONNA OLIMPIA: A WOMAN OF INFLUENCE

Though Donna Olimpia Maidalchini was not in a position of formal authority, she (like her brother-in-law Giovanni Battista) was perceived as a conduit to curial, cardinal, and eventually, papal power. She exploited her unique position

as Giovanni Battista's primary consort in order to gain power and prestige in the papal city. Donna Olimpia was a prominent figure in seventeenth-century Rome, causing great scandal and intrigue throughout the duration of her tenure in the city. Hailing from Viterbo, she came to Rome as a young widow and proceeded to marry into one of the city's oldest families in 1612, bringing much-needed liquid assets to the union.⁷ In exchange, "The young woman gained a stage that was more suited to her worldly acumen than her unsophisticated hometown."⁸ Her previous marriage left her with a sizable dowry that she used strategically to promote herself, and the Pamphilj family, and to further the ecclesiastical career of her brother-in-law (later Pope Innocent X).⁹ According to contemporary sources, Donna Olimpia financially supported the future Pope during his time as papal nuncio, and it is rumored that she used her monetary influence to secure him this position.¹⁰ After the death of her husband, Pamphilio, in 1639, Giovanni Battista "placed Donna Olimpia in charge of the Pamphilj patrimony, granting her an official role in overseeing the family."¹¹ This particular role gave her the opportunity both to maintain and to control the family's finances and public image. By delegating this responsibility to her, Giovanni Battista publicly acknowledged his trust in her intelligence and judgment and assured her prominent position in his life and within the Pamphilj family.

Upon Giovanni's election to the papacy in 1644, Olimpia received an endless stream of courtiers seeking her goodwill; nobility, foreign ambassadors, and ministers of the palace called on her to gain her ear and favor.¹² There is no—nor can there be any—explicit direct evidence concerning the extent to which Donna Olimpia influenced the decisions of Pope Innocent X, but she did occupy an enormously powerful position at the papal court, granting offices and benefices to those who best curried her favor.^{13,14} According to a written account by the Venetian ambassador:

Donna Olimpia . . . the only object of political favors, who holds the sum of authority, is a woman of genius and virile spirit and makes one know woman only as prideful and avacious, whence it is necessary for the pretenders at Court to give her incessant homage and favors.¹⁵

Her prominence in Innocent's pontificate made her the de facto cardinal nephew, a position scandalous for a woman to hold, for it was reserved for a trusted male relative and entailed overseeing many of the most vital elements of papal administration. Generally, Donna Olimpia's presence



ERMINIA FINDS THE WOUNDED TANCREDO BY GIOVANNI FRANCESCO GUERCINO.

was resented in a papal government that was “by definition restricted to celibate male ecclesiastics.”¹⁶ Her influential position in the papal court is reinforced in the renovated Palazzo Pamphilj on the Piazza Navona, which was constructed under her direction between 1644 and 1650.¹⁷ The new palace “provided her with a suitable setting for her central role in the Pamphilj pontificate and aggrandized her presence to visitors.”¹⁸ She exalted herself using painted imagery in the chambers of the piano nobile, which references her both indirectly and directly. These allusions to her underscore her preeminent position in the palace.¹⁹ If callers were not previously aware of Donna Olimpia’s stature before they entered the palace, they cer-

tainly would have been after spending just a few moments in the noble chambers and her audience room.

Though the relationship between Donna Olimpia and Pope Innocent X was scandalous, it was not without precedence. Anna Colonna Barberini played a diplomatic role during her brother-in-law’s—that is, Pope Urban VIII’s—reign as pope; Donna Olimpia greatly admired Anna Barberini, and looked to her as a personal role model.²⁰ Donna Olimpia Mairalchini, however, did not serve in a diplomatic position, rather taking a place as Innocent X’s primary consort, pushing gender roles to the limit in a tradition-bound government and city. Though she faced

serious criticism for her close relationship with Giovanni Battista, she acted in the age-old tradition of the influential women behind the man. If foreign ambassadors and local nobility often courted royal wives in order to gain favor with, or receive benefits from, other rulers, why not the Pope himself.²¹ Gifts were a primary avenue to curry the favor of these women. Donna Olimpia was an exceptionally prominent woman, so it is reasonable to presume that Guercino's painting entered the collection as a gift to the Pamphilj matriarch.

GUERCINO: A MASTER HIGHLY PRIZED

Guercino's *Erminia Finds the Wounded Tancred* would have made an appropriate gift for the Pamphilj matriarch. Due to the prominence of the artist, the pedigree of his patrons, and the subject matter of the painting, the picture would have appealed to Donna Olimpia. Guercino's work was highly coveted in early seventeenth-century Italy. Born in Cento, a small village between Bologna and Ferrara, in

PORTRAIT OF POPE INNOCENT X, DEPICTING THE BROTHER-IN-LAW OF DONNA OLIMPIA.



“Donna Olimpia may have identified with the story of Erminia, since both the poem and the painting advocate female empowerment according to her beliefs and tastes.”

1591, the artist showed remarkable talent at a young age and apprenticed both with Benedetto Gennari Sr. in Cento and with the perspective painter Paolo Zagnone in Bologna before the age of twenty-two.²² After leaving Zagnone, Guercino earned high praise from his fellow artists—including the famed Carracci brothers—and attracted wealthy and influential patrons that included both papal families and local nobility.²³ By 1617 he had already worked on oil paintings for Cardinal Alessandro Ludovisi (later Pope Gregory XV) and for Cosimo II de Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany.²⁴ Moreover, between 1619 and 1620 he produced five paintings for Jacopo Serra, Cardinal Legate of Ferrara. Guercino was knighted “as he was in Mantua in 1620 for the works he had painted for Ferdinando Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua.”²⁵ By the age of twenty-eight, Guercino had established a reputation that extended beyond the local region and was known to the most powerful and wealthy families in Italy.

After the election of Ludovisi to the papacy in 1621, Guercino was called to Rome to paint the Benediction Loggia of Saint Peter's.²⁶ Though this particular project never came to fruition, the artist gained international fame as well as many high-profile patrons associated with the papacy, including the Borghese and the Barberini families.²⁷ Between 1621 and 1623, Guercino became further entrenched with Rome's cultural elite, painting decorative cycles in the Casino Ludovisi, Palazzo Lancelotti, and the Palazzo Patrizi.²⁸ He was even commissioned by Cardinal Scipione Borghese to decorate the ceiling of the Church of San Crisogno.²⁹ But Guercino's time in Rome was brief and, after the death of Pope Gregory XV in 1623, the artist left the papal city.³⁰

Guercino's popularity became so great and his paintings so coveted that when he returned to his native Cento, his work was solicited not only by his previous Roman patrons, but also by nobles across the globe.³¹ For example, the kings of both England and both France sought, unsuccessfully, to purchase his paintings and to acquire his services as a court painter. Given his newfound prestige and high regard for his work, the presence of one of Guercino's paintings in the Pamphilj art collection would have been an accomplishment for the family, which – until Giovanni Battista gained his cardinal hat in 1626 – had not yet fully secured its place among the foremost Roman families.³² Donna Olimpia's ambition for the Pamphilj family and for Giovanni Battista impelled her to make tangible, visible connections to these papal families. Establishing an art collection that would measure up might have been an effective means of accomplishing this goal. This postulate is strengthened by the fact that Donna Olimpia had worked to establish the Pamphilj family as a collector of prominent art. Prior to her marriage into the family in 1612, the family had not collected art at all.³³ As such, it is reasonable to presume that she took particular care in selecting which paintings the family acquired and presented to the public, for these works would have communicated ostensibly the family's social rank and solidified their claims to Roman heritage.³⁴

THE GIFT: CONTENT AND INTERPRETATION

Guercino painted *Erminia Finds the Wounded Tancred* between 1618 and 1619, prior to the artist's Roman sojourn, and exemplifies his younger, more dramatic style. The mosaicist Marcello Provenzali originally commissioned the work, and it was given subsequently to Stefano Pignatelli.³⁵ The painting depicts arguably the most dramatic scene in Torquato Tasso's epic poem *Jerusalem Delivered*. *Erminia Finds the Wounded Tancred* is rooted in Canto XIX, where Erminia – a maiden who falls in love with a hero in the First Crusade named Tancred and betrays her people to help him – encounters her wounded beloved. Throughout the poem Erminia has sacrificed her safety in an effort to pursue and aid Tancred, even though her love has gone unrequited. This painting depicts the episode after the noble Vafrine, another warrior in the Crusade, has entreated Erminia's assistance to heal Tancred, and she is overcome by passion and sorrow at the sight of her injured love:

*The misadventurous girl had stopped to peer
At the fierce soldier, a little ways apart,*

*When the sound of his sad voice came to her ear:
It was arrow through her loving heart.
The name of Tancred was enough for her;
Madly or drunkenly she came, she caught
Sight of the handsome face, its color gone.
She didn't dismount, she leapt from the horse—and upon*

*His body let pour forth a ceaseless flow
Of tears, and words she uttered mixed with sighs:
"Into what misery Fortune leads me now!
How sad and bitter a spectacle meets my eyes!
So much time, so much pain I took to find you,
Tancred—I see you, but you can't recognize
Me—I am here, and you cannot see,
I find you, and I lose you eternally."³⁶*

Guercino captures the overwhelming sense of shock and horror described by Tasso, employing a dark palette and theatrical gestures to express the drama of the scene. This

TORQUATO TASSO PENNED *JERUSALEM DELIVERED*, ON WHICH GUERCINO'S *ERMINIA* IS BASED.



is a highly unusual depiction of the poetic scene, for not only is the viewer thrust into the middle of the action, but also Argantes—the source of Tancred’s near-fatal wounds—is absent. Compared to paintings of this very scene by Guercino’s near-contemporaries, such as the French academic painter Nicolas Poussin, Guercino’s work is far more theatrical, anticipating the style of many mid-seventeenth-century Italian artists and also recalling great masterpieces of artists such as Caravaggio. Guercino’s style significantly changed when he returned to Cento in 1623. His art gradually moved away from the dramatic gestures and chiaroscuro of the Baroque, becoming more classical as his career progressed. As part of the Pamphilj art collection, the early *Erminia Finds the Wounded Tancred* would have visually signaled that the Pamphilj had acquired Guercino’s work before he returned to Cento, thus suggesting that they were in league with families such as the Borghese and Barberini, who were the primary patrons of Guercino’s brief stint in Rome. Consequently, this picture would have acted as a signifier of the Pamphilj’s noble status in the papal city’s social hierarchy.

This painting would have made a perfectly fitting gift for Donna Olimpia Maidalchini, since both the painting’s subject matter and provenance accord with her familial ambitions. It would have held enormous appeal for the Pamphilj matriarch in particular because she was attracted to portrayals of strong women. In the renovated Pamphilj palace, she had her audience rooms decorated with frescoes of the Old Testament heroines Judith, Esther, and Abigail. The visual spectacle in her *camera grande* is arguably the most compelling, for the “display of female leadership was especially germane in this room where [she] exer-

cised her authority by receiving visitors and meting out favors to the fortunate.”³⁷ Extending into her own quarters, this imagery served to augment her persona in the pontificate of Innocent X and to promote visually her maxim that the power of women should not be underestimated.³⁸ Donna Olimpia may have identified with the story of Erminia, since both the poem and painting advocate female empowerment according to her beliefs and taste.

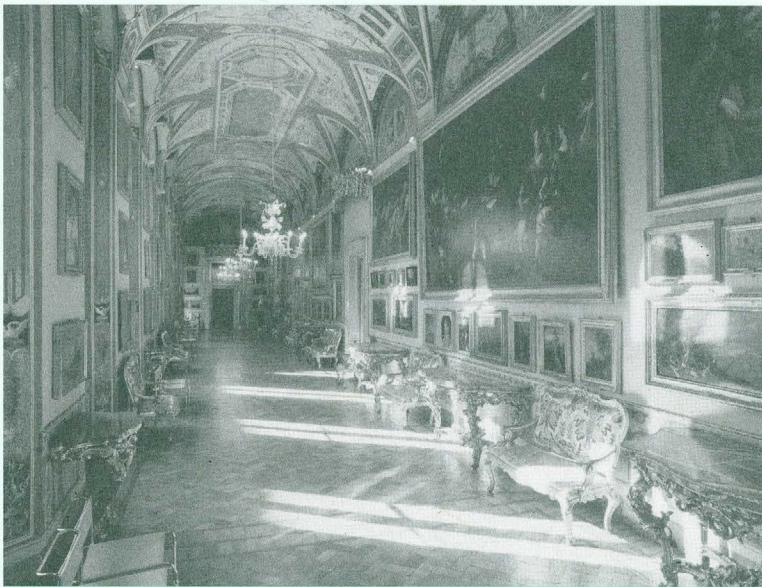
Tasso and Guercino are noted for depicting monumental women in their respective mediums.³⁹ Tasso’s epic poem is often cited for its prominent and positive portrayal of women; his female characters, including Erminia, play an integral role in the story, shaping the arch of the poem outside of the purgatory of side plots where poets typically relegated female characters.

In his painting, Guercino taps into Tasso’s spirited portrayal of women, presenting Erminia as a monumental figure. She is physically very large, nigh statuesque, and both the theatrical lighting and positioning of the other figures draws the viewer’s

gaze directly to her. The wounded Tancred almost disappears from sight, eclipsed by Erminia’s flowing drapery and dramatic gesture. Whoever gifted this painting to Donna Olimpia must have known her intimately to present her with a work so resonant with her personal aesthetic and ambition.

THE GIVER: ALL SIGNS POINT TO PIGNATELLI

Though the identity of the painting’s benefactor is officially unknown since there are no written documents to pin down its trail from Guercino’s hand to Donna Olimpia’s, it is probable that Stefano Pignatelli’s was his benefactor



A WING OF THE THE DORIA PAMPHILJ GALLERY, WHICH TODAY HOUSES PART OF DONNA OLIMPIA’S COLLECTION.

given his acquaintance with the Pamphilj family and friendship with Donna Olimpia. Pignatelli was connected to the painting in question in two significant ways: not only was he the last known owner of the painting before it entered the Pamphilj collection, but he also was involved in the architectural plans of the Casa Pamphilj in 1615. Pignatelli was a significant player in Rome's cultural milieu; a member of the "intellectually-minded" *Accademia degli Umoristi*, he patronized writers, collected paintings and scientific instruments, and had a particular penchant for architecture.⁴⁰ He was a close friend and trusted advisor of Cardinal Scipione Borghese and was made cardinal himself in 1621.⁴¹ The Pamphilj family had close ties to the Borghese family, and the Pamphiljs may have made Pignatelli's acquaintance through this connection.⁴² Nevertheless, in 1615 Giovanni Battista Pamphilj—who at this time was serving in the curia as auditor of the tribunal of the Rota—and his brother, Pamphilio, were in the process of renovating their homestead.⁴³ Although their uncle Girolamo had served as a cardinal in the pontificate of Clement VIII, he had neglected to refurbish their home in keeping with his status as a prince of Rome.⁴⁴ After Girolamo's death, the Pamphilj brothers took it upon themselves to refashion it in line with their familial ambitions.⁴⁵ In 1615, three years after Donna Olimpia had married into the Pamphilj family, Pignatelli created a floor plan for the Casa Pamphilj. Donna Olimpia's interest in the lasting architecture probably drew her to play a prominent role in the physical refashioning of the Pamphilj residence.⁴⁶ Pignatelli may have taken a liking to Donna Olimpia because she was widely known for her intelligence and preference for the company of men, or he may have seen parallels between Erminia's spirit and that of Donna Olimpia's. Even so, though many probable causes exist and though the circumstantial evidence is compelling, the motives and, indeed, whether Pignatelli actually presented the Pamphilj matriarch with Guercino's *Erminia Finds The Wounded Tancred* will never be known with certainty so long as the absence of written evidence persists.

THE GIFT IN PERSPECTIVE

Guercino's painting is valued because the hand of a highly sought-after artist created it. The subject matter itself would not have made this painting unique or particularly significant in seventeenth-century Rome. In fact, the poem was so ubiquitous that it may have been considered a standard subject among collectors. Tasso's epic poem was originally published in 1581 and enjoyed enormous popularity throughout the Italian peninsula in both the sixteenth and

seventeenth-centuries. Scholars have suggested that the reading of and familiarity with *Jerusalem Delivered* in the seventeenth-century "presumably involved little more than the reading of Robinson Crusoe in the twentieth."⁴⁷ There are several peculiarities, however, that make the painting unique to the Pamphilj family. In 1657 the picture was housed in Donna Olimpia's private residence at San Martino al Cimino, near her hometown of Viterbo. She purchased this property shortly after Giovanni Battista ascended to the papacy—at which time he raised the fief to a principality, making Donna Olimpia the principessa di San Martino.⁴⁸ The fact that she kept Guercino's painting in this particular residence suggests that the work assumed a special meaning for her.

After Donna Olimpia's death the family kept the painting, though the majority of the art collection was later deaccessioned.⁴⁹ Though the work's endurance in the collection may be attributed to the prominence of the artist and his Roman patrons, the subject itself may have played an important role. According to the Pamphilj family's 1666 inventory, their painting collection contained three additional works related to *Jerusalem Delivered*, all of which name Erminia as the primary figure.⁵⁰ Giovanni Francesco Romanelli's *Erminia con il Vecchio pastore*, for example, was acquired in 1648.⁵¹ The number of 'Erminia' paintings in the 1666 Pamhilj collection suggests that the family had a particular affinity for the love-struck heroine, and though pictures depicting Erminia from various episodes of *Jerusalem Delivered* were common in seventeenth-century Rome, most families had at most one or two examples, not four.⁵² Although it cannot be definitively established that the Pamphilj's Erminia collection is directly connected to Donna Olimpia Maidalchini, the circumstantial evidence, namely the liveliness of the fictional and historical women, suggests a highly plausible correspondence. If this shared identity did in fact exist, it would infer that Donna Olimpia literally embedded herself in the family's patrimony, further articulating her power for posterity.

Guercino's *Erminia Finds the Wounded Tancred* remains one of the most significant pictures in the modern Doria-Pamphilj art collection. It is admired because of its subject and the genius of Guercino's artistry. The painting not only speaks to the artist's talents, but also reveals something of the inner workings of the Pamphilj family in the seventeenth century and its grand matriarch, Donna Olimpia Maidalchini. Though the picture's precise pedigree cannot be definitively determined, the prominence of the artist and his patrons, as well as the painting's particular

iconography, serve to further substantiate the primacy of Donna Olimpia's role in Rome and her continuing presence within the Pamphilj art collection. The Pamphilj matriarch's relationship to *Erminia Finds the Wounded Tancred* suggests that the picture still has much to offer art historians on both a biographical and iconographical level. Definitive answers regarding this connection may only be unearthed by uncovering and analyzing Stefano Pignatelli's will, or by discovering previously unknown correspondence between Donna Olimpia and Pignatelli. These documents, if they indeed exist, would surely shed light on the relationship between these two individuals and their shared interest in Guercino's painting. For now, all that may be concluded is that the Pamphilj's belief that *Erminia Finds the Wounded Tancred* entered their family's collection as a gift to Donna Olimpia is quite compelling, and may well be the truth.

ENDNOTES

1. "Erminia Finds the Wounded Tancredi." doriapamphilj.it. Galleria Doria Pamphilj.
2. Mauss (1)
3. Goldthwaite (152)
4. Bischoff (19)
5. Ibid.
6. Bischoff (20-21)
7. Leone (95)
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Leone (107)
12. Leone (155-56)
13. Currently, scholars are not aware of any written documents that detail what specific power the Pamphilj matriarch wielded in the papal court. cf. Leone.
14. Leone (145)
15. Ibid.
16. Leone (145)
17. Leone (213)
18. Leone (156)
19. Ibid.
20. Leone (157)
21. Bischoff (21)
22. Mahon (118), Prasad (12)
23. Prasad (22)
24. De Grazia (44)
25. Ibid.
26. Mahon (47)
27. Ebert-Schifferer (99)
28. De Grazia (47)
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Notably, the cardinals who most often requested paintings from him in Cento were the "creatures" of Pope Urban VIII (a member of the Barberini family).
32. Levillain (801)
33. Stephanie Leone. "Collecting in Renaissance Florence: The Medici". Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA. 28 Sep 2009.
34. In order to ascend Rome's social ladder, one had to evidence one's Roman ancestry; generally, this could be accomplished through the acquisition of property and material wealth. cf. Leone, "Collecting in Renaissance Florence: The Medici". 28 Sep 2009.
35. "Erminia Finds the Wounded Tancredi." doriapamphilj.it. Galleria Doria Pamphilj.
36. Tasso (104-105)
37. Leone (217)
38. Ibid.
39. Waterhouse (20-21)
40. Ehrlich (32), Leone (88)
41. Ehrlich (32)
42. Leone (88)
43. Levillain (801)
44. Leone (88)
45. Ibid.
46. Stephanie Leone, "Pamphilj Patronage and Art Collecting, Part I." Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA. 14 Sep. 2009.
47. Ebert-Schifferer (106)
48. Donna Olimpia purchased the property in 1645. Cf. 101. Ibid.
49. Stephanie Leone, "Pamphilj Patronage and Art Collecting, Part I." Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA. 14 Sep. 2009.
50. The other paintings are: *Pietro da Cortona's Erminia che giunge dal pastore* and Romanelli's *Erminia che si presenta al pastore*. Capitelli (75)
51. The assertions made here are based on research using the Getty Institute's Provenance Index Database to explore the inventories of other major seventeenth-century Roman art collections.

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