



Giulio Romano
Sala dei Giganti
1532-34, fresco
Palazzo del Tè, Mantua



PRIMARY SOURCE READER

ZEUXIS VR: IMMERSIVE ART HISTORY

Giorgio Vasari, *Life of Giulio Romano* (1568)

After passing the great loggia, which is adorned with stucco-work and with many arms and various other bizarre ornaments, one comes to some rooms filled with such a variety of fantasies, that the brain reels at the thought of them. For Giulio, who was very fanciful and ingenious, wishing to demonstrate his worth, resolved to make, at an angle of the palace which formed a corner similar to that of the room of Psyche described above, an apartment the masonry of which should be in keeping with the painting, in order to deceive as much as possible all who might see it. He therefore had double foundations of great depth sunk at that corner, which was in a marshy place, and over that angle he constructed a large round room, with very thick walls, to the end that the four external angles of the masonry might be strong enough to be able to support a double vault, round after the manner of an oven. This done, he caused to be built at the corners right round the room, in the proper places, the doors, windows, and fireplace, all of rustic stones rough-hewn as if by chance, and, as it were, disjointed and awry, insomuch that they appeared to be really hanging over to one side and falling down. Having built this room in such strange fashion, he set himself to paint in it the most fantastic composition that he was able to invent--namely, Jove hurling his thunderbolts against the Giants. And so, depicting Heaven on the highest part of the vaulting, he placed there the throne of Jove, representing it as seen in foreshortening from below and from the front, within a round temple, supported by open columns of the Ionic Order, with his canopy over the centre of the

throne, and with his eagle; and all was poised upon the clouds. Lower down he painted Jove in anger, slaying the proud Giants with his thunderbolts, and below him is Juno, assisting him; and around them are the Winds, with strange countenances, blowing towards the earth, while the Goddess Ops turns with her lions at the terrible noise of the thunder, as also do the other Gods and Goddesses, and Venus in particular, who is at the side of Mars; and Momus, with his arms outstretched, appears to fear that Heaven may be falling headlong down, and yet he stands motionless. The Graces, likewise, are standing filled with dread, and beside them, in like manner, the Hours. All the Deities, in short, are taking to flight with their chariots. The Moon, Saturn, and Janus are going towards the lightest of the clouds, in order to withdraw from that terrible uproar and turmoil, and the same does Neptune, who, with his dolphins, appears to be seeking to support himself on his trident. Pallas, with the nine Muses, stands wondering what horrible thing this may be, and Pan, embracing a Nymph who is trembling with fear, seems to wish to save her from the glowing fires and the lightning-flashes with which the heavens are filled. Apollo stands in the chariot of the sun, and some of the Hours seem to be seeking to restrain the course of his horses. Bacchus and Silenus, with Satyrs and Nymphs, betray the greatest terror, and Vulcan, with his ponderous hammer on one shoulder, gazes towards Hercules, who is speaking of this event with Mercury, beside whom is Pomona all in dismay, as are also Vertumnus and all the other Gods dispersed throughout that Heaven, in which all the effects of fear are so well expressed, both in those who are standing and in those who are flying, that it is not possible, I do not say to see, but even to imagine a more beautiful fantasy in painting than this one.

In the parts below, that is, on the walls that stand upright, underneath the end of the curve of the vaulting, are the Giants, some of whom, those below Jove, have upon their backs mountains and immense rocks which they support with their stout shoulders, in order to pile them up and thus ascend to Heaven, while their ruin is preparing, for Jove is thundering and the whole Heaven burning with anger against them; and it appears not only that the Gods are dismayed by the presumptuous boldness of the Giants, upon whom they are hurling mountains, but that the whole world is upside down and, as it were, come to its last day. In this part Giulio painted Briareus in a dark cavern, almost covered with vast fragments of mountains, and the other Giants all crushed and some dead beneath the ruins of the mountains.

Besides this, through an opening in the darkness of a grotto, which reveals a distant landscape painted with beautiful judgment, may be seen many Giants flying, all smitten by the thunderbolts of Jove, and, as it were, on the point of being overwhelmed at that moment by the fragments of the mountains, like the others. In another part Giulio depicted other Giants, upon whom are falling temples, columns, and other pieces of buildings, making a vast slaughter and havoc of those proud beings. And in this part, among those falling fragments of buildings, stands the fireplace of the room, which, when there is a fire in it, makes it appear as if the Giants are burning, for Pluto is painted there, flying towards the centre with his chariot drawn by lean horses, and accompanied by the Furies of Hell; and thus Giulio, not departing from the subject of the story with this invention of the fire, made a most beautiful adornment for the fireplace.

In this work, moreover, in order to render it the more fearsome and terrible, Giulio represented the Giants, huge and fantastic in aspect, falling to the earth, smitten in various ways by the lightnings and thunderbolts; some in the foreground and others in the background, some dead, others wounded, and others again covered by mountains and the ruins of buildings. Wherefore let no one ever think to see any work of the brush more horrible and terrifying, or more natural than this one; and whoever enters that room and sees the windows, doors, and other suchlike things all awry and, as it were, on the point of falling, and the mountains and buildings hurtling down, cannot but fear that everything will fall upon him, and, above all, as he sees the Gods in the Heaven rushing, some here, some there, and all in flight. And what is most marvellous in the work is to see that the whole of the painting has neither beginning nor end, but is so well joined and connected together, without any divisions or ornamental partitions, that the things which are near the buildings appear very large, and those in the distance, where the landscapes are, go on receding into infinity; whence that room, which is not more than fifteen braccia in length, has the appearance of open country. Moreover, the pavement being of small round stones set on edge, and the lower part of the upright walls being painted with similar stones, there is no sharp angle to be seen, and that level surface has the effect of a vast expanse, which was executed with much judgment and beautiful art by Giulio, to whom our craftsmen are much indebted for such inventions.

In this work the above-mentioned Rinaldo Mantovano became a perfect colourist, for he carried the whole of it into execution after the cartoons of Giulio, as well as the other rooms. And if this painter had not been snatched from the world so young, even as he did honour to Giulio during his lifetime, so he would have done honour (to himself) after Giulio's death.

-Translated by Gaston du C. De Vere

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Bk I: 151-168, The Giants (8 CE)

Rendering the heights of heaven no safer than the earth, they say the giants attempted to take the Celestial kingdom, piling mountains up to the distant stars. Then the all-powerful father of the gods hurled his bolt of lightning, fractured Olympus and threw Mount Pelion down from Ossa below. Her sons' dreadful bodies, buried by that mass, drenched Earth with streams of blood, and they say she warmed it to new life, so that a trace of her children might remain, transforming it into the shape of human beings. But these progeny also despising the gods were savage, violent, and eager for slaughter, so that you might know they were born from blood.

