Ariccia: in the baroque country dwelling of prince Chigi, gilt leather and archival documentation

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THE PALACE The fiefdom of Ariccia was acquired in 1661 by the Chigi family (princes Mario, Agostino and cardinal Flavio, all nephews of Pope Alexander VII) and the palace was partly transformed and enlarged between 1666 and 1672. This reconstruction was executed by Carlo Fontana using plans designed by Bemini. Further enlargements and extensive decorations took place during the 1700s. The palace, a rare example of Baroque country residence unaltered in its own environment, was ceded by the Chigi family to the town hall of Ariccia in 1988. The past twenty years have seen the conservation of the architectural structures, maintenance and/or conservation and restoration of relevant paintings, sculptures and rich furnishings. Among the latter, for instance, are several examples of the gilt leather wall hangings still present in numerous rooms.

THE LEATHER FURNISHINGS The Chigi’s Wardrobe inventories dated 1672 and 1673 allow an overview of the decorations and furnishings within the palace upon completion of the renovation works. They include rather detailed descriptions of the leatherworks, such as portieres, table covers, cushion covers as well as wall hangings in gilt and painted leather, in some cases embossed or flocked. The documents even indicate whether the leatherwork was expressly made for Ariccia.

ARCHIVAL DOCUMENTATION The examination of accounts and of inventories permits the dating of most of the leatherwork, and the identification of many of the artisans involved in the execution and installation: from the carver of the wood moulds, to the leather artisan, to the painter in charge of painting the family arms, medallions, etc. The research has also enabled a wider knowledge of historical technical terms relative to these types of artefacts. Some of the wall hangings are still in the same rooms for which they were conceived (for example: Sala del Trucco, Chapel, etc.), some have been dismounted, and fragments of others remain only, in some cases to a greater or lesser extent. With the help of the documents, including later inventories, we are studying the original setting of the artefacts, their provenance and eventual re-location or adaptation.

AN EXAMPLE: THE CHAPEL The Chapel was refurbished and by 1672 it had been enriched with two mural paintings, and became an enclosed space with the addition of an elaborated wooden gate, and furnished with chandeliers, crucifix and kneeling-stools, and finished up by extensive gilded surfaces. At Christmas 1672 it finally was sumptuously adorned with an unusual gilt leather wall hanging decorated like brocade with red flock (now faded to a yellow ochre colour), with the Chigi coat of arms painted on the corner columns. The wall hanging was minutely described by the cornaro Agostino Nespola. This is that same artisan who made many of the other leather artefacts ordered in those years for the Palace of Ariccia and whose stamp impression appears on the rear of two of the wall hangings now in storage: A.N.