From his election in 1572 to his death in 1585, Pope Gregory XIII, schooled in the upheavals in the Catholic Church that marked the preceding violent decades, undertook to mend and reform the institution he headed by building and restoring Rome’s streets, churches, and public monuments. One major monument, unstudied heretofore, is the three-story apartment called the Tower of the Winds rising up from the Vatican Palace. It was built and painted to celebrate the most famous achievement of Gregory’s papacy, the calendar reform. The program of the entire tower proclaimed with assurance not only Gregory’s political and religious authority over the capital, but also Gregory’s domination of nature, time, and past and present cultures. Its innovations in architecture and decoration – efflorescent Flemish landscapes in all of its seven rooms – and its wider religious and political purpose in the culture of Gregorian Rome and the Counter Reformation, are the subject of this book.

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THE PAPACY
AND THE
ART OF REFORM IN
SIXTEENTH-CENTURY
ROME

GREGORY XIII’S
TOWER OF THE WINDS
IN THE VATICAN

NIGOLA COURTRIGHT
Amherst College
List of Illustrations xi
Acknowledgments xxi
Introduction 1

PART I
Imagery of Counter-Reformation Rome,
the Vatican, and the Papacy under Gregory XIII

CHAPTER ONE
Reformed Rome and the Person of the Pope 9
The Person of the Pope 9
The Relationship of Religious to Artistic Culture in Counter-Reformation Rome 18
The Vatican, Epicenter of Reform 25

CHAPTER TWO
The Tower of the Winds and Calendar Reform 28
The Concept of the Tower of the Winds 28
Egnatio Danti: Author of the Tower’s Program 31
Gregory XIII’s Calendar Reform, Easter, and Constantine: The Appeal of Unity 33

PART II
The Papal Apartment

CHAPTER THREE
Architecture Unifying the Imagery of Rule and Retreat 43
Ottaviano Mascarino: The Architect 43
The Situation of the Tower of the Winds within the Vatican 44
The Legacy of Bramante: Changing Form and Function in the Belvedere Courtyard 51
The Gregorian Transformations of the Belvedere Courtyard 54
Iconography of Retreat 56
Iconography of Rule 59

CHAPTER FOUR
The Art of Time, Cosmos, and the Counter Reformation:
The Meridian Room 69
Nicolò Circignani and His Fellow Artists 69
Subjects of Calendar Reform: Time and the End of Time 70
Style: Transformation of High Art into Counter-Reformation Art 84
Ceremonial Rooms Past and Present 99
Note: Unless otherwise identified, all monuments and institutions listed are located in Rome.

**COLOR PLATES**

Plates follow p. xxiv

I. Matthijs Bril, *The Western Wing of the Belvedere Courtyard*, north wall, Room of Tobias.

II. Nicolò Circignani, *Paul’s Shipwreck at Malta and Paul and the Miracle of the Viper*, west wall, Meridian Room.

III. Nicolò Circignani, *Christ Stills the Storm on the Lake of Tiberias and Heals the Possessed at Gerasa*, south wall, Meridian Room.


VI. Room with Topographical Views, south and west walls.

VII. Matthijs Bril, *View of Rome and the Vatican from the Viminal Hill*, south wall, Room with Topographical Views.

VIII. Matthijs Bril, *View from a Hillside toward an Imaginary Town*, west wall, Room with Topographical Views.

IX. Matthijs Bril, *View of Rome from the Janiculum Hill*, east wall, Room with Topographical Views.

X. Matthijs Bril, *View of Fortress on a River with Vignettes*, south wall, Room of Imaginary Views.

**Figures**

2. Belvedere Courtyard seen from the north, photo. Vatican Palace.  
3. The Tower of the Winds seen from the north, photo. Vatican Palace.  
4. MarcAntonio Ciappi, portrait of Gregory XIII and his deeds, woodcut.  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title/Description</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Matthijs Bril</td>
<td><em>Translation of the Relics of Gregory Nazianzus</em>, Terza Loggia. Vatican Palace.</td>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Gian Federico Bonzagna</td>
<td>Holy Year medal of 1575.</td>
<td></td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td>“Sancta Roma,” engraving, 1575.</td>
<td></td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td>Emblem “Pontifex futurorum bonorum,” from Fabrizi, <em>Delle allusioni</em>, woodcut.</td>
<td></td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td>Altar, Gregorian Chapel. St. Peter’s.</td>
<td></td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
<td>Emblem “Urbs Beata Hierusalem,” from Fabrizi, <em>Delle allusioni</em>, woodcut.</td>
<td></td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
<td>Tower of the Winds, Agora, Athens.</td>
<td></td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Egnatio Danti</td>
<td>Mechanism of an anemoscope, from “Anemographia,” manuscript, BAV.</td>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
<td>Meridian Room, floor. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace.</td>
<td></td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sala Vecchia degli Svizzeri. Vatican Palace.</td>
<td></td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
<td>Axonometric view, Cortile del Belvedere, Vatican Palace, under Gregory XIII,</td>
<td></td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>drawing.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td>Section, Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace.</td>
<td></td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Matthijs Bril</td>
<td><em>Tower of Winds</em>, detail of frieze in the Room of Tobias. Tower of the Winds,</td>
<td></td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vatican Palace.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Ottaviano Mascarino</td>
<td>plan, Cortile del Belvedere, Vatican Palace (detail), drawing, Accademia di S.</td>
<td></td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Luca.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Giovanni Maggi</td>
<td>map of St. Peter’s and the Vatican Palace, 1615, engraving (detail).</td>
<td></td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
<td>First storey, Tower of the Winds, plan.</td>
<td></td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
<td>Second storey, Tower of the Winds, plan.</td>
<td></td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
<td>Third storey, Tower of the Winds, plan.</td>
<td></td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Martino Ferrabosco</td>
<td>plan of the third storey of the Vatican Palace, c. 1615, drawing, BAV.</td>
<td></td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Antonio Tempesta</td>
<td>St. Peter’s and Vatican Palace, map of Rome, 1593 (detail), engraving.</td>
<td></td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Antoine Lafréry</td>
<td>tournament in the Cortile Belvedere, Vatican Palace in 1565, engraving.</td>
<td></td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Pirro Ligorio</td>
<td>lower court of Belvedere, drawing, Istituto Nationale di Archeologia e Storia dell’Arte.</td>
<td></td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Étienne Dupérac</td>
<td>St. Peter’s and the Vatican Palace, map of Rome, 1577, engraving (detail).</td>
<td></td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Ottaviano Mascarino</td>
<td>plan for the Cortile del Belvedere, Vatican Palace, drawing, Accademia di S. Luca.</td>
<td></td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Étienne Dupérac</td>
<td><em>Urbis romae sciographia ex antiquis monumentis . . . delineata</em>, 1574, engraving</td>
<td></td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(detail).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Claude Duchet after Pirro Ligorio</td>
<td>Varro’s aviary from <em>Lafréry’s Speculum</em>, 1581, engraving.</td>
<td></td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Diocletian’s palace.</td>
<td>Spalato.</td>
<td></td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Sala Regia. Vatican Palace.</td>
<td></td>
<td>60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Dipìtych of the Lampadì, Museo Civico Cristiano, Brescia.</td>
<td></td>
<td>61</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>After Pirro Ligorio, map of ancient Rome, 1561 (detail).</td>
<td></td>
<td>62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Ottaviano Mascarino</td>
<td>window for Cortile del Belvedere, Vatican Palace, drawing.</td>
<td></td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Western corridor, Cortile del Belvedere. Vatican Palace.</td>
<td></td>
<td>63</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>Bramante’s portal and view of Mascarino’s appearance window, Cortile del Belvedere.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS**
Vatican Palace. 63
43. Giovanni Maggi, map of St. Peter’s and the Vatican Palace, 1615, engraving (detail). 64
44. Obelisk base of Theodosius I. Constantinople. 66
46. Floor, Meridian Room. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 69
49. Nicolò Circignani, *Christ Stills the Storm on the Lake of Tiberias and Heals the Possessed at Gerasa*, Meridian Room. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 72
54. Nicolò Circignani, *Apocalyptic Angels Still the Four Winds and Seal the 144,000*, Meridian Room. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 78
60. *Jonah Cast from the Boat*. Catacomb of SS. Marcellinus and Peter. 81
61. Nicolò Circignani, vault, Meridian Room. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 82
62. Egnatio Danti, title page, “Anemographia,” 1581, manuscript, BAV. 83
63. Albrecht Dürer, world map, 1515, woodcut. 83
64. Sala dei Fasti Farnesiani. Palazzo Farnese, Caprarola. 84
65. Paolo Veronese, vault, Sala dell’Olimpo. Villa Barbaro, Maser. 86
66. Sala del Mappamondo. Palazzo Farnese, Caprarola. 87
67. Pellegrino Tibaldi, vault, Sala di Fetonte. Palazzo Poggi, Bologna. 86
68. Paolo Veronese, vault, Sala dell’Olimpo. Villa Barbaro, Maser. 86
69. Giovan Antonio Varesi, Lorenzo Sabbatini, and Ottaviano Mascarino, vault, Sala Bologna. Vatican Palace. 87
70. Sala dei Fasti Farnesiani. Palazzo Farnese, Caprarola. 87
71. Nicolò Circignani, vault, Meridian Room (detail). Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 88
72. Nicolò Circignani, vault, Meridian Room (detail). Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 88
73. Ninth-century wind scheme, manuscript, BAV. 89
74. Michelangelo, *Flood*, Sistine Chapel. Vatican Palace. 90
75. Detail of figure 50. 90
79. Albrecht Dürer, *Four Angels Holding the Winds and the Sealing of the 144,000*, woodcut. 92
80. Bernard Salomon, *Paul and the Miracle of the Viper at Malta*, from Damiano Maraffi, *Figure del Nuovo Testamento* (Lyon, 1559), woodcut. 93
82. Hans Sebald Beham, *Jonah Cast from the Boat*, from *Biblische Historien figürlich fürgebildet* . . . (Frankfurt, 1536), woodcut. 94
83. *Pharaoh’s Dream of the Ears of Grain*, copy of narrative in St. Paul’s Outside the Walls, drawing. 94
84. Bernard Salomon, *Pharaoh’s Dream of the Cattle*, from *Quadrins historiques* (Lyon, 1553), woodcut. 94
86. *Moses, with Aaron, Brings On the Plague of Locusts*, copy of narrative in St. Paul’s Outside the Walls, manuscript, BAV. 95
89. Michelangelo, *Separation of Water from the Earth*, Sistine Chapel. Vatican Palace. 96
90. Pietro Santi Bartoli, copy of cupola, S. Costanza, drawing, Windsor Castle. 98
91. Pompeo Ugonio, plan, Sala del Concilio, Lateran Palace, drawing, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana. 101
94. Matthijs Bril, *Castel Sant’Angelo and the Ponte Sant’Angelo* from *View of Rome from the Janiculum Hill*, Room with Topographical Views (detail). Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 107
95. Matthijs Bril, *Arch of Septimius Severus*, drawing, Louvre. 107
96. Matthijs Bril, *Torre delle Milizie*, drawing, Louvre. 108
100. Matthijs Bril, *Esau Gives Up His Birthright to Jacob, Personification of Christian Doctrine, Jacob’s Dream of the Ladder, Personification of Matrimony, Jacob and Rachel*
at the Well, Room of Old Testament Patriarchs. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 110–11
102. Matthijs Bril, The Fall of Simon Magus, Domine quo vadis?, The Fall of Eutychus and Miracle of Paul Raising Eutychus from the Dead, Paul’s Vision at Troas (?), Miracle of Andrew Raising Philopator from the Dead, Andrew Led by the Angel to Rescue Matthew from Prison, Room of Apostles. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 112–13
103. Matthijs Bril, Miracles of James Major over Demons and Hermogenes, James Major Gives Hermogenes His Staff and the Demons Retreat, Miracle of John the Evangelist Raising Drusiana from the Dead, John’s Apocalyptic Vision on Patmos, Miracle of Thomas Destroying an Idol, Thomas and the Death of the Majordomo at the Wedding Feast of King Gundafero’s Daughter, Miracle of Philip Raising Two Magistrates from the Dead and Commanding a Dragon, Room of Apostles. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 112–13
104. Matthijs Bril, Philip Rescued by a Dragon at the Altar of Mars, Miracle of Bartholomew Curing the Sick at the Pagan Temple, Bartholomew Exorcizes King Polymius’s Lunatic Daughter, Miracle of Matthew Baptizing the King of Ethiopia, Matthew Tames the Magicians Zaroes and Arphaxat’s Dragons, Miracles of Simon over Magicians, Room of Apostles. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 114–15
105. Matthijs Bril, Simon Prevents the Commander of Xerxes’s Army from Immolating the Pagan Priests, Miracle of Judas Thaddeus Healing a Blind King, Judas Thaddeus Heals King Abgar with the Mandylion, Miracle of Apostle (James Minor?) Healing, Apostle (James Minor?), a Dragon in a Vase, and a Devil, Room of Apostles. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 114–15
106. Matthijs Bril, Deborah Exhorts Barac to Enter into Battle with Sisara, Deborah Prays at the Victory of Barac over Sisara, Jael Kills Sisara, Room of Old Testament Women. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 114–15
109. Matthijs Bril, Judith Kneels before Holofernes, Judith Places Holofernes’s Head in the Bag Held by Her Maidervant, Holofernes’s Head is Displayed on the Ramparts as the Assyrians Are Routed Room of Old Testament Women. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 116–17
110. Matthijs Bril, Tobit Leaves the Feast Table to Remove the Body of the Murdered Jew, Tobit Buries the Dead Jew/ Sleeping Tobit is Blinded, Tobias and Raphael Set Out on Their Journey, Room of Tobias. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 118–19
111. Matthijs Bril, Tobias Catches the Fish, Tobias Greeted by Raguel, Raphael on His Journey to Claim Tobit’s Money from Gabael, Room of Tobias. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 118–19
112. Matthijs Bril, Tobias Greets Raphael on His Return, Tobias and Sarah Pray/ the Wedding Feast is Prepared/ Raphael Binds the Demon in the Wilderness, Tobias, Sarah
and Raphael Set Out on Their Return Journey, Room of Tobias. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 118–19

113. Mattheüs Bril, Anna Watches for the Return of Tobias, Tobias Restores His Father’s Sight, Departure of Raphael, Room of Tobias. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 120–21

114. Perino del Vaga, frieze, Sala di Perseo, Castel Sant’Angelo. 121

115. Daniele da Volterra, frieze, Palazzo Farnese. 121


117. Bernard Salomon, Isaac and Ishmael’s Quarrel/ Abraham Dismisses Hagar and Ishmael, from Quadrins historiques (Lyon, 1560), woodcut. 126


119. Mattheüs Bril, Raphael on His Journey, Room of Tobias. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 128

120. Mattheüs Bril, John’s Apocalyptic Vision on Patmos, Room of Apostles. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 129

121. Mattheüs Bril, James Major Gives Hermogenes His Staff and the Demons Retreat, Room of Apostles. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 130

122. Mattheüs Bril, Tobias Healing His Wife/ Their Wedding/ Demon Bound, Room of Tobias. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 130

123. Mattheüs Bril, Andrew Led by the Angel, Room of Apostles. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 131

124. Mattheüs Bril, Jacob Wrestles with the Angel, Room of Old Testament Patriarchs. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 135

125. Bernard Salomon, Jacob Wrestles with the Angel, from Quadrins historiques (Lyon, 1560), woodcut. 135

126. Mattheüs Bril, Judas Thaddeus Heals King Abgar with the Mandylion, Room of Apostles. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 137

127. Mattheüs Bril, Tobias’s Mother Laments His Departure, from Tobias and Raphael Set Out on Their Journey, Room of Tobias (detail). Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 138

128. Orante (detail), Catacombs of Priscilla. 138

129. Mattheüs Bril, Sacrifice of Isaac, Room of Old Testament Patriarchs. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 139

130. Mattheüs Bril, Deborah Prays at the Victory of Barac over Sisara, Room of Old Testament Women. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 140

131. Defeat of the Amorites, S. Maria Maggiore, mosaic. 140

132. Joachim Patinir, St. Jerome, Prado. 143

133. Michelangelo, Sistine Chapel (detail). Vatican Palace. 145

134. Mattheüs Bril, View of Rome from the Janiculum Hill, Room with Topographical Views. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 148

135. Mattheüs Bril, View of Rome from the Viminal Hill, Room with Topographical Views. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 148

136. View of Parma, loggia, Palazzo Farnese. Caprarola. 149

137. Gentile Bellini, Procession in the Piazza San Marco. 150

138. Villa Farnese at Caprarola, loggia, Villa Lante. Bagnaia. 151


140. Loggia, Palazzo Farnese. Caprarola. 152
142. Stanza della Tribunale d’Amore, Villa Barbaro. Maser. 154
143. Matthijs Bril, *View from a Hillside toward an Imaginary Town*, Room with Topographical Views. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 154
144. Matthijs Bril, *View of a Fortress above a Harbor*, Room with Topographical Views. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 155
145. Matthijs Bril, *Carriage and Act of Charity from View of Rome from the Viminal Hill* (detail), Room with Topographical Views. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 155
146. Matthijs Bril, *View of a Naval Fleet in a Harbor*, Room of Imaginary Views. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 156
150. Matthijs Bril, *View of Rome from the Janiculum* (detail), Room with Topographical Views. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 160
151. Matthijs Bril, *Procession on the Ponte S. Angelo from View of Rome from the Janiculum* (detail), Room with Topographical Views. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 160
156. Matthijs Bril, *Forest outside a City*, Room of Imaginary Views. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 163
158. Annibale Carracci, *Sacrifice of Isaac*, Louvre. 176
159. Sala Clementina. Vatican Palace. 177
160. Ottaviano Mascarino, plan, Quirinal Palace, drawing, Accademia di S. Luca. 178
161. Ottaviano Mascarino, facade of casino, Quirinal Palace, drawing, Accademia di S. Luca. 178
162. Ottaviano Mascarino, Quirinal Tower of the Winds, drawing, Accademia di S. Luca. 179
165. Emblem “Cui obediunt venti,” from Fabrizi, *Delle allusioni*, woodcut. 181
167. Bernard Salomon, *God Appears to Abraham*, from *Quadrins historiques* (Lyon, 1560), woodcut. 185

*List of Illustrations* xiii
168. Bernard Salomon, Abraham Greets Three Messengers, from Quadrins historiques, woodcut. 186
169. Pierre Eskrich, Abraham Serves Three Messengers, from Figure de la Biblia (Lyon, 1564), woodcut. 186
170. Bernard Salomon, Hagar and Ishmael Succoured by the Angel, from Quadrins historiques, woodcut. 186
171. Bernard Salomon, Sacrifice of Isaac, from Quadrins historiques, woodcut. 187
172. Bernard Salomon, Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well, from Quadrins historiques, woodcut. 187
173. Pierre Eskrich, Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well, from Figure de la Biblia, woodcut. 187
174. Bernard Salomon, Jacob’s Dream, from Quadrins historiques, woodcut. 188
175. Pierre Eskrich, Jacob and Rachel at the Well, from Figure de la Biblia, woodcut. 188
176. Bernard Salomon, Jacob’s Reconciliation with Esau, from Quadrins historiques, woodcut. 189
177. Bernard Salomon, Jacob Departs from Laban, from Quadrins historiques, woodcut. 189
178. Bernard Salomon, Birth of Benjamin and Death of Rachel, from Quadrins historiques, woodcut. 189
179. Matthijs Bril, Fall of Simon Magus, Room of Apostles. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 191
180. Andrew Raises the Corpse of Philopator, manuscript, BAV (detail). 192
181. Matthijs Bril, James Major Frees Philetus from His Chains/ A Demon Flies Away/ Two Demons Bring Hermogenes to James, Room of the Apostles. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 193
182. Attributed to Lauro Padovano, John the Evangelist Raises Drusiana, Wittelsbacher Ausgleichsfonds. 193
183. Matthijs Bril, Miracle of Philip Raising Two Magistrates and Commanding a Dragon to Abandon the Altar of Mars, Room of the Apostles. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 195
184. Steffen Arndes, Philip Raises Magistrates in Scythia from the Dead, from Passional der Hylghen (Lübeck, 1492), woodcut. 195
185. Bartholomew Exorcizes King Polymius’s Daughter, manuscript, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek (detail). 196
186. Matthew Baptizing the King of Ethiopia, S. Marco Baptistry, mosaic (detail). Venice. 196
187. Matthew Commanding Magicians’ Dragons, manuscript, BAV (detail). 197
188. Matthijs Bril, Simon Converts, while Snakes and Dragons Attack Magicians, Room of Apostles. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 197
189. Bernard Salomon, Jael Kills Sisara, from Quadrins historiques, woodcut. 199
190. Ruth cycle, manuscript, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. 200
191. Judith cycle, manuscript, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. 201
192. Bernard Salomon, Judith Places Holofernes’s Head in the Bag, from Quadrins historiques, woodcut. 202
193. Hans Sebald Beham, Holofernes’s Head Displayed on the Ramparts, from Biblische Historien (Frankfurt, 1536), woodcut. 202
197. Bernard Salomon, *Tobias Catches the Fish*, from *Quadrins historiques*, woodcut. 205
199. Bernard Salomon, *Tobias and Sarah Pray on Their Wedding Night*, from *Quadrins historiques*, woodcut. 206
201. Room with Topographical Views. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 208
203. Room with Topographical Views. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 210
204. Room with Topographical Views. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 211
205. Bernard Salomon, *Meeting of Rebecca and Isaac*, from *Quadrins historiques*, woodcut. 211
207. Room of Imaginary Views. Tower of the Winds, Vatican Palace. 213
211. Bernard Salomon, *Construction of the Tower of Babel*, from *Quadrins historiques*, woodcut. 216
214. Egnatio Danti, mechanism for anemoscope, from “Anemographia,” manuscript, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana. 228
From his election in 1572 to his death in 1585, Pope Gregory XIII (Boncompagni), schooled in the upheavals in the Catholic Church that marked the preceding violent decades, spent a great deal of the money that was entering the institution’s coffers anew on the building and restoration of Rome’s streets, churches, and public monuments. In the thirteen years of his reign, a related focus of Gregory’s efforts was ordering and overseeing extensive additions to the Vatican Palace, which served both as the seat of state ceremony and as his personal domicile. These two endeavors, the restoration of the physical fabric of Rome and the papal palace, mirrored the pope’s proclaimed mission to heal and reform the Catholic Church, as well as to assert the papacy’s right to the unquestioned leadership of that institution. These goals, as well as the image of the pope and the imagery of reform developed during Gregory’s pontificate to promote them, are the subject of Part I, Chapter 1.

The burgeoning Vatican Palace was the locus of some of Gregory’s most powerful imagery celebrating the aims and achievements of the Counter Reformation and the origins of its reforming authority. Following a comprehensive campaign to build and decorate rooms in the heart of the papal palace, Gregory turned his attention to the vast Belvedere Courtyard extending from the medieval core of the pontiff’s residence to a fifteenth-century papal Villa Belvedere, once far removed to the north (Fig. 1). One of the long, arcaded corridors that were to connect the three levels of the staggeringly ambitious garden-theater ascending the hilly terrain – planned by Julius II’s architect Bramante at a time when colossal papal projects were undertaken as a matter of course – was still unfinished. Instead of merely completing this western enclosure, in 1578 the papal architect, Ottaviano Mascarino, added an extra storey spanning more than half the length of the terraced expanse (Pl. I). Decorated in encyclopedic fashion with forty maps of Italy on the walls and a cycle on the vault depicting sacred historical events that had occurred in the various regions of the peninsula, the Gallery of Geographical Maps, completed around 1581, was one of the most cele-
brated projects of Gregory’s papacy. It lauded what the program characterized as the pre-
destined triumph of Christianity, inaugurated by Constantine and extended by the pope,
over the temporal domain.

Planned, built, and decorated immediately afterwards was a new papal suite that
crowned a block of apartments adjoining the gallery. Called the Torre dei Venti, or Tower
of the Winds, it was composed of seven magnificently frescoed rooms grouped together in
three stories that jutted prominently above the Belvedere Courtyard, the visual climax of
the newly restructured wing (Figs. 2, 3). Long forgotten, the Tower of the Winds has rarely
been mentioned in art-historical literature or, when discussed, has not often been treated
as a unified entity. Nor was it regarded as a link in the development of subsequent art,
although I will suggest here that in its time it was renowned and its influence was far-reaching. One factor affecting its disappearance from historical consciousness was that soon after
the tower’s creation, it was isolated from the main body of the papal palace when Sixtus V
(1585–90) added a library connecting the eastern and western corridors of the Belvedere
Courtyard. The tower not only became less prominent visually, but also soon became asso-
ciated with the new library rather than the corridor, and thus was increasingly inaccessible
from the body of the Vatican Palace. Owing to this circumstance, its function changed, and during the seventeenth century it was used as a guest apartment – even, rather appropriately to its original intention, for a famous convert to Catholicism, Queen Christina of Sweden. Eventually, however, forgetfulness set in: By the eighteenth century, because it came to serve the purposes of the library and the papal archive in the floors below, the tower was no longer considered a cohesive suite. For a time beginning in the late eighteenth century under Pius VI, when it was used as an observatory, the memory of the tower as an entity was revived. But when the Specola Vaticana – the official Vatican observatory founded by Leo XIII in 1890 – was transferred in 1906,
the former papal apartment once again became inaccessible. In late 1970s, archives stored there were removed from the tower and its art was restored, but the tower remains closed to public view.

Another, more significant factor accounting for the oversight of the tower was that it was created in a period that art historians traditionally have not held in high regard: The Counter Reformation. Even though recent years have seen the publication of much thoughtful literature dedicated to the art of this time, outside of this specialized scholarship, there remains a fundamental reluctance to embrace it. The art of this lamentable post-Renaissance/pre-Baroque era is seemingly lacking in artistic geniuses; it has been deemed unaesthetic and unoriginal; it appears dogmatically to serve a rigid, unappealing ideology rather than the aims of art or higher truths. Undeniably, an essential component of Gregory XIII’s Tower of the Winds was the insistence, in visual terms, upon papal and church authority and hierarchy. Yet in much of its art the tower also contradicts negative assumptions about art of the Counter Reformation and, I believe, introduced imaginative possibilities important for seventeenth-century art.

The tower, the one architectural structure in the Vatican apart from St. Peter’s dome that was clearly visible from the city itself, was built and painted to celebrate the most famous achievement of Gregory’s papacy, the calendar reform. The calendar’s purpose has become obscured in our post-Enlightenment age, however, because it was not changed for the sake of scientific accuracy. Gregory’s reformed calendar was instead regarded as a sacred vehicle to reestablish divine order in both church and nature: The church historically had determined the measurement of time, since its passage was considered the unmistakable path to salvation. The Tower of the Winds made clear to contemporaries the inextricably intertwined relationship of Gregory’s calendar reform to his mission to renew faith and to lead the Christian world towards redemption. It proclaimed with assurance not only Gregory’s political and religious authority over the capital and the universe, as did the Gallery of Geographical Maps, but also Gregory’s domination of nature and time. The origin of the Tower of the Winds in the calendar reform, and their history, is the subject of Chapter 2.

How could one imagine a building and series of paintings devoted to this triumph of Gregory’s reign, art that was to represent a political and spiritual unity under the authority of the pope in the wake of the Protestant revolt? Following Martin Luther’s break with the church in 1517, the Christian world was suddenly divided into polarized factions; all universal leadership but God’s had been called into question, and no solution to the problem of cohesion in a divided faith could be found, let alone in the form of a Catholic pontiff. How could one possibly represent a pope as devout, as spiritual, as truly reformed, as the legitimate leader of the faith, when, according to innumerable critics, so many papal predecessors had shamelessly, sacrilegiously, and publicly abused their positions of leadership? These were the conceptual and philosophical challenges of the tower’s program.

A further challenge was to find compelling and even original artistic means to best rep-
resent the potentially exhilarating promise of religious renewal in a time when artistic innovation was often suspect, since all religious truths were believed to be unchanging and age-old, and when no artistic virtuoso was at the helm to ensure the acceptance of a message couched in progressive language. In this post-Vasarian, Counter-Reformation period even Michelangelo’s genius no longer represented the absolute authority of the church, nor automatically gained universal approval. In the tower, it was a team of artists unknown today – papal cosmographer Egnatio Danti, architect Mascarino, painters Nicolò Circignani and the Fleming Matthijs Bril – who labored in tandem to represent religious renovation through a variety of surprisingly evocative artistic innovations, treated in Part II. They devised a picture of papal jurisdiction over nature and the world not only in the polemical vocabulary of political dominion and absolute hierarchy developed in earlier “high” art of the Renaissance, but also in terms of an alternative aesthetic, marked by a programmatic return to archaic or “low” art that focused sharply on humble devotional values.

Mascarino’s architecture for the papal apartment ranging high above the Vatican Belvedere Courtyard, and its profound, ancient associations with imperial and papal prerogatives of rule that took canonical shape under Constantine, the first Christian emperor, is the subject of Chapter 3. The largest chamber, the Meridian Room, containing one instrument to measure the winds and another to measure time, was dedicated explicitly to the calendar reform; its form and meaning are the topic of Chapter 4. The pope’s control of time and the cosmic forces of nature was here celebrated largely by the exalted imagery of high art in palatial ceremonial rooms, but Circignani merged this familiar vocabulary with other traditions – most notably art of the early church – that were intended to express qualities of heightened spirituality. Chapters 5 and 6 treat the remarkable landscape frescoes – small-scale historical cycles in four rooms and large-scale views of the surrounding terrain in the remaining two – painted in a more humble key. Filled with both pastoral and paradisiacal imagery, the Biblical narratives and illusionistic views of contemporary Rome evoke an idyllic, renewed era and suggest that a joyful end for the devout could perhaps be realized in Gregory’s renovated capital. Chapter 7 analyzes the artistic innovations in the tower and their meaning for the concept of unity of the faith – likewise the purpose of the calendar reform – and how some of its ideas and visual language took root in art of the following century. Part III consists of the catalogue, which identifies the textual and visual sources for each of the paintings, and the appendix, a previously unpublished transcription and translation of Egnatio Danti’s treatise on the winds, which was dedicated to Gregory XIII in honor of the anemoscope (or wind instrument) he designed for the tower.

My fundamental aim in this book has been to reimagine, as much as possible through contemporary sources, the designers’ intentions in making the program, and the way the tower would have been understood by its patron, the pope. In my mind’s eye, I also envision the small circle of highly educated churchmen, delegated with fashioning and carrying out Gregory’s program of institutional and personal reform, who presumably viewed it,
too, along with selected visitors such as ambassadors and high-ranking pilgrims; although for want of documents placing them there, this group of beholders remains only hypothetical. What these men intended for the art, or saw in it, was assuredly an ideal, a wished-for perfection, a cosmic unity that resolved conflicts in the actual superstructures of their church, their culture, and their society. Certainly uncontrollable frictions and fears of rupture with the past may well have given impetus to the development of key aspects of the decoration. These conflicts surely contributed to the formulation of such strident, emphatic statements of the traditional unity of faith and power found in the tower’s main ceremonial room, but also, remarkably, to the embrace of low subjects and styles that, in part, were associated with precisely those social forces that, to some, threatened to tear the church’s fabric. My primary effort here is not to enlarge upon the manifold ways in which the imagery, from a current perspective, may have contested or undercut the ideology of its makers, however. Instead, I hope that I have illuminated how narrative, iconographical, and other visual devices were employed precisely to construct that elusive perfection.

The designers of the program did not mimic reality; they fabricated an ideal that sings its siren song to this day. Whether that ideal was realized in political terms, or was desirable in human terms, is beyond the scope of my quest. I would like to think, however, that the tower’s art amplified concepts that were never so comprehensively and vividly articulated in church doctrine or politics as in this suite. Further, I think it likely that it was understood as such by some observers in succeeding generations, thus making the art an “active agent in history” that had a lasting effect on later art, culture, and society.