

An Unexplored History: The Trastevere Mattei House and its Oak Branch Plaque

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John Cabot University

Department of Art History

Masters of Arts in Art History

**An Unexplored History: The Trastevere Mattei House and its Oak Branch
Plaque**

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Abstract

A lawyer, an art collector, and the head of a government organization, Ilo Giacomo Nunes was a complex man who has for the most part been forgotten. A single plaque, overlooked by hundreds of pedestrians daily, serves as a solitary reminder of his existence. Located on the Mattei House in Piazza in Pisciunula, this marble relief, here called the Oak Branch Plaque, is the point of intersection for various narratives taking place across time. It speaks to the long history of the Mattei House, which extends back to the thirteenth century. It allows for an exploration of Trastevere in the nineteenth century, before the Tiber Walls were installed, and it invites an examination of the Fascists' twentieth-century medieval revival. Bearing an oak branch relief and an inscription dated to 1927, this plaque serves as a lens through which each of these aspects can be examined by systematically uncovering basic identifying information about the plaque. This paper utilizes primary sources not yet explored in scholarship, as it attempts to be the first comprehensive examination of the plaque, Nunes, and the Mattei House. Through this investigation it has been determined that the plaque is most likely a reused marble fragment originating from an ancient context. It was placed on the house sometime between December 25, 1926, and 1930, and commemorates a restoration to the Mattei House undertaken by Ilo Giacomo Nunes in 1927. Finally, the plaque likely found itself in either Nunes' personal collection or the Mattei of Trastevere's collection before being inscribed and placed on the southern façade of the Mattei House where it appears today. Bearing a relief that appears ancient and an inscription that is clearly not, this Plaque's existence invites questions about its history. From this investigation, the contentious and varied life of both the Mattei House and Ilo Giacomo Nunes will once again be brought to light.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my friends and family who have always supported me in my personal and academic pursuits. Through highs and lows, knowing that I had their love and support kept me going. Specifically, this work is dedicated to my dear friend, Amanda Lopez-Fasanella, who always believed in me even when I told her my crazier ideas. Although we are now on separate paths, I know we will one day reunite as “all roads lead to Rome.”

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Introduction

Walking the streets of the Roman neighborhood of Trastevere one cannot help but admire the quaint buildings that line the narrow, winding streets. A close look at these buildings might reveal fragments embedded in the walls of many of these structures. One might see fragments of columns, or possibly even sections of strigillated sarcophagi. These fragments, traditionally called spolia, are easy to miss or overlook. However, given more than a passing glance, they speak to a history that has been relatively overlooked in scholarship. The focus of this paper will be just one fragment among the vast selection that Trastevere has to offer. This fragment, which includes both a relief and an inscription, resides on the southern façade of what is known as the Case dei Mattei or the Mattei House in Piazza in Piscinula and inhabits the space between Via della Lungarina to the south and Lungotevere degli Anguillara to the north [Figs. 1-2]. While at first glance this object appears to be an ancient fragment, a closer examination reveals that it includes a twentieth-century inscription. This dichotomy raises questions about what period this fragment originated in, and if it should even be called a fragment. For this reason, it will henceforth be generally referred to as the Oak Branch Plaque. The goal of the paper is to uncover all that can be known about this Plaque with the objective of uncovering basic identifying information about it. Each chapter is headed by a simple question about the Plaque: What is it? When was it placed in its current location? Why was it placed? And ultimately, where did it come from? Through this investigation, the history of this object and its surroundings will be brought to light. It will be revealed how one of its owners, Ilo Giacomo Nunes, was involved with the Fascist party in the 1930-40s, as well as allow for an exploration of the extensive

restoration to the house in 1927 completed with the goal of historicizing the medieval house. Overall, the Oak Branch Plaque serves as a lens through which an examination of topics that have been overlooked are once again brought into focus.

Literature Review

Even though the Mattei House is a rare surviving medieval house of a noble Italian family, there is surprisingly little written about it in scholarship.¹ More often, the topic of interest in relation to the Mattei are their residences across the Tiber River, which include Palazzo di Giacomo Mattei, Palazzo Mattei di Giove, Palazzo Mattei Caetani, and Palazzo Mattei Paganica.² Scholars such as Richard Brilliant, Dale Kinney, and Gerda Panofsky-Soergel have documented these various palazzi and discussed Asdrubale Mattei's extensive collection of ancient statues and reliefs at Palazzo Mattei di Giove.³ Other scholars, such as Kristine Togstad and Katherine Rinne, have spent time exploring the nearby Fontana delle Tartarughe, which can be found in the piazza named after the Mattei and was sponsored by Muzio Mattei.⁴ There are even sources, including Anthony Majanlahti's book *The Families Who Made Rome: a History and a Guide*, that look at the Mattei family's history, and outline their speculated origin.⁵ In the

¹ Benevolo, Leonardo. "Ancora su Piazza in Piscunila." *Italia Nostra*, 18, (1967): 34-36.

² Anthony Majanlahti, *The Families Who Made Rome: A History and a Guide*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 2005), 11.

³ Richard Brilliant and Dale Kinney, *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine*, (London: Taylor and Francis, 2016), 141-153; Gerda Panofsky-Soergel, "Zur Geschichte des Palazzo Mattei Di Giove," *Römisches Jahrbuch Für Kunstgeschichte / Hrsg. Von Leo Bruhns* 11.1967/68, (1968): 111-188.

⁴ Anne Kristine Togstad, "Fontana delle Tartarughe, the Iconography of a Roman Fountain," (PhD diss., University of Oslo, 2005); Katherine Wentworth Rinne, *The Waters of Rome: Aqueducts, Fountains, and the Birth of the Baroque City*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 99-103.

⁵ Majanlahti, *The Families Who Made Rome*, 7-28.

rare case that the Mattei House is mentioned in these sources, it is often listed as just one of the residences owned by the Mattei family and little is said of its history.

Despite the minimal scholarship on the Mattei House in Piazza in Piscinula, it does seem to be in the public consciousness. The vast majority of sources dedicated to discussing the house are tourist websites or blogs, such as TripAdvisor, RomeArtLover, or the Trastevere App.⁶ Within these sources the various fragmentary objects on the house are documented but given no explanation. However, the Oak Branch Plaque is never brought up. Comments on TripAdvisor reveal that the Mattei House is a popular spot for tour groups to visit. These comments reiterate the information told to them on the tour, by describing the historicizing elements of the house, like the loggias, and the scandalous events that the Mattei were involved in during the sixteenth century.⁷ While none of these sources are scholarly, they do indicate that the general public is interested in the Mattei House.

Within scholarly literature the Mattei House often exists in the periphery of the analysis, important yet not given much consideration. For example, Camillo Massimo writing in 1864 about the church of San Benedetto in Piscinula mentioned the house to contextualize his primary discussion. Massimo provided a description of what the house looked like, who its past and current owners are, and a brief explanation of who the Mattei were.⁸ Massimo says this about the house:

“La sua facciata però rivolta sulla Longarella vi ha il suo Portone al No. 188, sormontato da un bell'architrave con simili Armi de' Mattei scolpite nell'interno ed esterno, e indicanti antica nobiltà, sebbene oggi sia convertita in locanda per gente che poco possa spendere,

⁶ RomeArtLover, “Isola Tiberina Verso Occidente,” accessed December 10, 2022, <https://romeartlover.tripod.com/Vasi91.html>; Trastevere App, “Piazza in Piscinula & S.Benedetto,” July 9, 2019, <http://www.trastevereapp.com/piazza-in-piscinula-s-benedetto/>; TripAdvisor, “Casa Dei Mattei,” accessed December 10, 2022, https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g187791-d13527466-Reviews-Casa_dei_Mattei-Rome_Lazio.html.

⁷ TripAdvisor, “Casa Dei Mattei.”

⁸ Camillo Massimo, *Memorie Storiche della chiesa di S. Benedetto in Piscinula del rione Trastevere, raccolte e pubblicate dal Principe D. Camillo Massimo*, (Roma: Tip. Salviucci, 1864), 99-100.

e perciò volgarmente chiamata la Locanda Sciacquetta, la qual denominazione avea sin dal principio del presente Secolo, come rilevasi dal Libro suppletorio de morti di S. Benedetto in Piscinula, pag. 12, in data dei 31 Gennajo 1812.”⁹

[“However, its façade facing the Longarella has its main gate at No. 188, surmounted by a beautiful architrave with similar armi de' Mattei carved inside and out, and indicating ancient nobility, although today it is converted into an inn for people who can spend little, and therefore voluntarily called the Locanda Sciacquetta, which denomination it had since the beginning of the present century, as revealed by the supplementary book of the dead of S. Benedetto in Piscinula, pag. 12, dated January 31, 1812.”]

Massimo’s analysis of the house is brief, as this is not the focus of his book. He mentions the house only because it resides across the piazza from his primary focus, San Benedetto in Piscinula. Similarly, Edgardo Badaracco writing in 2017 briefly discussed the Mattei House in relation to his study of the cult of Elagabalus in Trastevere.¹⁰ Badaracco is principally interested in the Mattei house for its collection of foreign cult inscriptions, which he analyzes in great detail.¹¹ However, Badaracco does provide some contextual information about the ownership and appearance of the Mattei house:

“Casa Mattei espone i tratti caratteristici delle residenze nobiliari quattrocentesche. Portale ad arco, finestre a bifore e a croce guelfa, loggia ad archi poggianti su colonne; accentuata asimmetria nella sequenza dei vari corpi dell’edificio, uso del bugnato e pareti laterali lisce su una delle quali appare, ormai scialba, la decorazione a graffiti; infine il reimpiego di alcuni frammenti marmorei medievali, inseriti volutamente a suggerire reminiscenze storiche ed artistiche. Nel Seicento, con la morte degli ultimi eredi della famiglia Mattei, la proprietà fu acquistata dai Della Molarà. Dopo essere stata frazionata in più case venne ereditata in parte dal duca Massimo, erede dei Della Molarà ed in parte dal marchese Origo. Nel 1870 l’edificio ospitò la “Locanda della Sciacquetta”, e venne probabilmente adibito a bordello. Vent’anni dopo le case furono acquistate da due nuovi padroni, Giacomo Nuñez ed il barone Celsia di Vegliasco, che fecero restaurare il complesso restituendogli le forme originali. Un ulteriore restauro si ebbe nel 1930 ad opera dello scenografo Walter Mocchi.”¹²

[Casa Mattei exhibits the characteristic features of fifteenth-century noble residences. arched portal, mullioned windows and Guelph cross, loggia with arches resting on

⁹ Massimo, *Memorie Storiche della chiesa di S. Benedetto in Piscinula*, 101.

¹⁰ Edgardo Badaracco, *Il Culto Del “Deus Elagabalus”: Dal I Al Iii Secolo D.c. Attraverso Le Testimonianze Epigrafiche, Letterarie E Numismatiche*, (Tricase: Youcanprint self-publishing, 2017), 113-116.

¹¹ Badaracco, *Il Culto Del “Deus Elagabalus,”* 113-116.

¹² Badaracco, *Il Culto Del “Deus Elagabalus,”* 114.

columns; marked asymmetry in the sequence of the various bodies of the building, use of ashlar and smooth side walls on one of which now appears dull, the graffiti decoration; finally the reuse of some medieval marble fragments, inserted deliberately to suggest historical and artistic reminiscences. In the seventeenth century, with the death of the last heirs belonging to the Mattei family, the property was purchased by the Della Molaras. After being divided into several houses it was inherited in part by Duke Massimo, heir of the Della Molaras and in part by the Marquis Origo. In the 1870 the building housed the "Locanda della Sciacquetta," and was probably used as a brothel. Twenty years later the houses were bought by two new masters, Giacomo Nuñez and the baron Celsia di Vegliasco, who had the complex restored, returning it to its original forms. A further restoration took place in 1930 AD work of the scenographer Walter Mocchi.”]

This is the extent of the information provided by Badaracco about the Mattei House, outside of their collection of cult inscriptions. He does not mention the Oak Branch Plaque or give any information about the activities of the owners outside of their connection to the house. While this information is useful as an introduction to the house, it overlooks core aspects such as its connection to Fascism or the extent of the restorations.

While Massimo and Badaracco’s discussions of the Mattei House are brief, they are rare examples of sources that provide contextual information about the House. Many sources, such as Francesca Romana Stabile and Giovanna Spadafora’s article “Graffiti Coverings in Rome in the Sixteenth Century,” and Selena Anders in her doctoral dissertation “Medieval Porticoes of Rome,” use the Mattei House as an example but do not discuss it in depth. Stabile and Spadafora who wrote in 2015, look at the sgraffito on the Mattei House to provide an example of early Renaissance fake opus quadratum.¹³ Similarly, Selena Anders who wrote in 2016 about medieval porticos in Rome, gives nothing more than a cursory glance at the Mattei house.¹⁴ She notes the various covered and reopened porticos on the Mattei House, and the numerous fragmented columns embedded in the house. Anders also mentions Nunes’ restoration but does not expand

¹³ Francesca Romana Stabile and Giovanna Spadafora, “Graffiti Coverings in Rome in the Sixteenth Century: The Example of the House in Vicolo Del Governo Vecchio,” 52,” *Disegnare* 8, no. 14 (January 2015): 4.

¹⁴ Selena Anders, “Medieval Porticoes of Rome: New Methods and Technologies for Revealing Rome’s Architectural and Urban Heritage,” (Doctoral dissertation, Sapienza - Università di Roma, 2016), 1194-5.

on what it entailed. Even Richard Krautheimer in his book *Rome: The Profile of the City 312-1308* only very briefly mentioned the Mattei House during his discussion of ground porticos.¹⁵ What these examples illustrate is that the Mattei House is referred to in discussions of topics related to it. However, mentions of the Mattei House almost never go beyond serving to either contextualize larger topics or be an example. Most importantly none of these sources directly mention the Plaque. The closest reference to the Plaque was Badaracco when he stated that Mattei House was decorated in marble fragments, which were deliberately inserted to suggest historical significance.¹⁶ He does not describe what he is referring to, and so he can be referencing any or all of the numerous objects that cover the house. One very rare case which refers to the Plaque is Laura Gigli's *Guide Rionali di Roma, Rione XIII Trastevere, Parte III*, where she says "fra le due più in basso, in una targa con motivi ornamentali la scritta ricorda i restauri alla facciata."¹⁷ However, since Gigli's goal is to provide an overview of Trastevere, the Plaque is relegated to just a few lines of shallow analysis.

The Oak Branch Plaque appears to be an ancient fragment. The relief and the lettering of the inscription both look ancient. However, upon closer inspection the inscription is from the twentieth century.¹⁸ Despite this complication there is still value in examining how scholarship has discussed reused ancient fragments in Rome, as there is the possibility that the Plaque could be one. A leading scholar in the study of Rome's reused fragments is medieval and ancient scholar Dale Kinney. While Kinney has written numerous articles and chapters on the issue of reused fragments, or *spolia*, one article in particular is of special interest to this paper.¹⁹ This

¹⁵ Richard Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City, 312-1308*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 294.

¹⁶ Badaracco, *Il Culto Del "Deus Elagabalus,"* 114.

¹⁷ "Between the two lower down, is a plaque with ornamental motifs, the inscription recalls the restoration of the facade."; Laura Gigli, *Guide Rionali Di Roma*, (Roma: Fratelli Palombi Editori, 1982), 108.

¹⁸ Gigli, *Guide Rionali Di Roma*, 108.

¹⁹ Because the word "spolia" carries with it the connotation of stealing, its use has become problematized in recent times. To avoid any issues, this paper will instead use the word "fragment" when referring to anything that might be

article called “Spolia from the Baths of Caracalla in Sta. Maria in Trastevere” examines the columns found in Santa Maria in Trastevere and concludes that they came from the ancient Baths of Caracalla.²⁰ This study is significant to this paper, as not only is her case study situated in Trastevere like the Plaque, but also because Kinney’s aim was to answer questions about a reused object’s original location. Many studies of fragments do not attempt to determine where the fragments came from, and instead examine them in their new context.²¹ This may be because the original location of these fragments are nearly impossible to know. However, like Kinney, this paper attempts to arrive at a satisfactory hypothesis to the question of where the Plaque might have come from if it is indeed an antique fragment.

Methodology

Because there is almost no existing scholarship that discusses the Plaque, the process to uncover information about it in a satisfactory and diligent way has utilized various methods. Primary sources such as photographs, paintings, newspapers, and contemporary literature were used to shed light on to the existence of the Plaque. To find these sources, archives, such as the Archivio Storico Capitolino, were visited and carefully combed through for any reference to the house or the Plaque. From this investigation Nunes’ 1926 restoration proposal was uncovered, which revealed the event commemorated in the Plaque. Secondary sources were also sought out, to contextualize the Plaque in relation to the time period. The process of investigation might be

labeled by some as “spolia.”; For other chapters that discuss spolia see Richard Brilliant and Dale Kinney’s book *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine*. See Dale Kinney’s article “Roman Architectural Spolia.”

²⁰ Dale Kinney, “Spolia from the Baths of Caracalla in Sta. Maria in Trastevere,” *The Art Bulletin* 68 (1986): 379-397.

²¹ Brilliant and Kinney, *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine*.

compared to a scavenger hunt where I sought out sources that mentioned anything relating to the Mattei House or sources that might help contextualize the Plaque in relation to well-studied topics. This scavenger hunt was organized around a series of questions that the Plaque invites, such as what was Nunes' affiliation with the Fascist Regime? What does oak signify, and was it chosen for a specific reason? And why might a fragment have been appealing to place on the façade of a house? This paper has then taken these small kernels of information and pieced them together like a puzzle to reveal the history of the Plaque and how it speaks to a larger history that has until now been unexplored. From this investigation a rich narrative about Ilo Giacomo Nunes' busy and contentious life in Rome during the early twentieth century has been uncovered. This was all done with the hopes that this paper can serve to fill in where there has been a gap in scholarship on the Mattei House, its owners, and especially the Plaque.

1. What is it?

This chapter seeks to answer the question, what is the Oak Branch Plaque? This investigation will begin with a careful visual analysis of the Plaque, which explores what material it might be made from as well as a brief examination of its motifs. After this, a succinct contextual analysis will be conducted which examines the history of the Mattei House and its surroundings. By the end of this chapter, an understanding of how the Plaque fits into the larger narrative of the Mattei House under the ownership of Ilo Giacomo Nunes will be gained.

Visual Analysis

The Oak Branch Plaque is located in Rome on what is known as the Mattei House. This house resides in Trastevere, directly across from the Tiber Island. Today, the Mattei House inhabits the space between Via della Lungarina and Lungotevere degli Anguillara. To the west of the house is Piazza della Gensola. The northern façade of the house faces the Tiber River while the southern faces Piazza in Piscinula. The house is four stories tall and has an open courtyard to the north.²² The Plaque resides on the southern façade, between the house numbers of 8-9 and faces into Piazza in Piscinula [Fig. 1]. Across the Piazza, directly in front of the Plaque, is the church of San Benedetto in Piscinula. The southern façade is decorated with faded sgraffito, has three Guelph-cross windows, four mullioned windows, and a loggia in the upper right corner [Fig. 2]. This facade is irregular and appears to be composed of multiple structures. For example,

²² *Archivio Storico Capitolino* (= ASC), *Ripartizione V Lavori Pubblici*, disegni e lettere, “ispettorato edilizio | anno 1926,” protocollo: 14910/1926, col. 966, n. 20786.

a section near the western side of the house juts out approximately three feet. The roofline as visible from Piazza Piscinula is also irregular, as the section between the house numbers 8-9 has a higher roof than the two sections beside it. The southern façade also includes one of the entrances to the house to the right of the Plaque, as well as three windows on the ground floor covered in metal grates.

The Mattei House is decorated extensively with historicizing features, such as loggias and Guelph-cross windows, that give the house a medieval/Renaissance character. The Plaque is just one of these elements, but there are multiple other fragment-like objects embedded in the walls. The only other fragmentary objects on the southern façade are two columns with ionic capitals that are embedded in the wall to the left of the Plaque and serve as a reminder of a ground portico [Fig. 2]. Some other examples of fragments on the exterior of the house include a small section of a strigillated sarcophagus on the western façade near the door [Fig. 3]. Multiple fragmentary coats of arms depicting fleur-de-lis and papal tiaras overlook the courtyard on the northern façade [Fig. 4]. On the eastern façade is a strange mouse-like creature with a curly tail that is approximately a foot long and made of a white stone [Fig. 5]. However, these are just a few examples, as the house includes many more fragments, especially on the western façade.

Spatially, the Plaque is cemented to the wall at about 12 feet 2 inches (307.84 cm) above the ground. It measures approximately 4 ½ feet wide by 2 ½ feet tall (137.16 x 76.2 cm) and 3 inches (7.62 cm) thick. Unlike many of the other fragments on the exterior of the house, the Plaque is not embedded in the wall but is instead attached to it. Because it is not inserted, and is therefore not flush with the wall, its sides are visible from below. This reveals that the plaque is not flat but is instead slightly concave [Fig. 6].

The Plaque appears to be made of a weathered white stone, likely marble, and is rectangular with a longer width than height. The plaque has two registers, one a relief and the other an inscription. The top register includes a relief of oak branches that are contained in a simple geometric frame. The relief is deeper than that of the frame by approximately three cm. The frame is a simple three stepped molding and is damaged in the middle of both the top and bottom as well as missing in the upper left corner. In the relief, two oak branches sweep downward from the upper corners creating a soft “U” shape. The branches meet in the middle and are tied with a ribbon knotted in a bow. In the upper corners ribbons are tied to the branches in bows and have tails that hang down. Forking off each of the two main stems are six smaller branches, three above and three below, which in turn sprout five-pronged leaves and acorns. Every leaf is symmetrical, as each side mirrors the other. Almost none of the leaves or branches overlap, making the foliage appear barren rather than lush when compared to other festoon examples. The few overlapping sections are pairs of leaves at the end of the six smaller branches. The only damage to the relief is a crack that runs vertically over the right branch, as well as the middle top section missing where there was presumably no relief carving. Neither of these impair the overall comprehension of the relief.

In the lower registrar an inscription reads ILO·G^o·NVNES·R·A^{vo}·MCMXXVII. The lettering resembles a serif typeface with varied line weights. Despite recording a twentieth-century date, the lettering of the inscription looks like ancient inscriptions such as those visible on the Arch of Titus or the Pantheon. The damage to this area includes a crack that runs diagonally through the V of MCMXXVII. There is another crack that also runs diagonally, but splits into two. This crack goes through the second N of NVNES. Like the relief, none of this

damage impairs the readability of the inscription, and no information appears to have been lost due to the damage.

The inscription records certain elements relevant to the history of the house. To begin, ILO·G°·NVNES clearly refers to Ilo Giacomo Nunes, owner of the Mattei House from probably 1925 until it seems at least 1943.²³ The R refers to a restoration and can be expanded as *restaurata* as proposed by Laura Gigli or *restauravit*. This restoration was undertaken by Nunes and concluded in 1927, the date recorded in the inscription MCMXXVII.²⁴ Finally, A^{V°} signifies that 1927 was the fifth year of the *era fascista*.²⁵ While the oak branch relief could be ancient, the inscription is clearly a twentieth-century creation, thereby suggesting that the Plaque as a whole might be the product of two different periods.

As mentioned, the relief depicts oak branches in a festoon or garland design.²⁶ Festoons have been a popular Roman decorative motif through time but came in and out of fashion during different periods including the ancient, Renaissance, and modern periods.²⁷ A common trait of festoon reliefs was the inclusion of ribbons to fill empty space.²⁸ The Oak Branch Plaque engages with the tradition, as it includes three separate ribbons. Ancient Roman examples commonly depict festoons hung between rosettes, candelabra, or animal skulls.²⁹ This motif

²³ The spelling of Nunes' name is subjective depending on the source being examined, however for this paper the spelling will be standardized as "Nunes." Although, some sources retain his Spanish spelling by writing his name as "Nuñez.;" Badaracco, *Il Culto Del "Deus Elagabalus,"* 114; Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, "New York Passenger and Crew Lists, 1909, 1925-1957," NARA microfilm publication T715, database with images, FamilySearch, Ilo Giacomo Nunes, 1939, <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-95NF-1ST?i=26&cc=1923888&personUrl=%2Fark%3A%2F61903%2F1%3A1%3A24L3-HMX>.

²⁴ Gigli, *Guide Rionali Di Roma*, 108.

²⁵ José María de Francisco Olmos, "Los calendarios propios de los regímenes totalitarios en el período de entreguerras: La doble datación en la documentación oficial del 'Bando Nacional' durante la Guerra Civil Española (1936-1939)." *Revista General De Información Y Documentación* Vol. 19 (2009): 273.

²⁶ Franz Sales Meyer, *Handbook of Ornament: A Grammar of Art, Industrial and Architectural Designing in All Its Branches for Practical as Well As Theoretical Use*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1957), 59.

²⁷ Meyer, *Handbook of Ornament*, 59.

²⁸ Meyer, *Handbook of Ornament*, 59.

²⁹ Meyer, *Handbook of Ornament*, 59.

often appeared on temples and seems to have originated from the practice of hanging live festoons and animal skulls from temple friezes.³⁰ One example of an ancient festoon frieze is the frieze of the Temple of Apollo Medicus Sosianus [Fig. 7]. The remains of this temple are located across the Tiber River, in the former Circus Flaminius, near the Jewish Quarters. Amanda Claridge describes the design as, “a frieze of laurel branches strung between bulls’ skulls and candelabra with tripod bases.”³¹ Despite the plaque depicting a relief of Oak while the temple’s relief is of laurel, they are remarkably similar in the shape of their festoons. Most festoons are depicted as being lush, with no binding in the middle, such as the festoon relief found on the inside of the Ara Pacis [Fig. 8]. However, both the frieze of the Temple of Apollo and the Plaque have only a few leaves and are arranged in two distinct branches that meet and are tied in the middle.

During the Renaissance, this motif saw a revival and was used in many locations, especially tombs. The empty space above the lowest point of the festoon commonly depicted a small design or a family crest.³² Examples include the tomb of Beatrice and Lavinia Ponzetti in Santa Maria della Pace and the tomb of Cardinal Cristoforo Della Rovere in Santa Maria del Popolo [Figs. 9-12].³³ Festoons are still regularly evoked in modern times since about the nineteenth century to today. They are commonly depicted on public architectural features such as the Victor Emmanuel II National Monument in Rome [Fig. 13]. The use of festoons may have been included in an attempt to historicize modern structures, or just to simply add

³⁰ Meyer, *Handbook of Ornament*, 59.

³¹ Amanda Claridge, Judith Toms, and Tony Cubberley, *Rome: An Oxford Archaeological Guide 2nd edition*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 278.

³² Meyer, *Handbook of Ornament*, 59.

³³ Meyer, *Handbook of Ornament*, 59-63.

embellishment. Either way, walking around Rome reveals the long life festoons have had in the city.

Material Analysis

Because the Plaque is covered in grime, its material is not immediately evident. It appears to be made of a white stone, but this still leaves the door open to a wide selection of materials. Because the Plaque is found in Rome there are two main materials that it could most likely be, Tivoli travertine or marble as they are the most prolific white stones in Rome.³⁴ Travertine is a hard white limestone, and one type is naturally found near ancient Tibur, today Tivoli.³⁵ Tivoli is approximately 33.2 km from Rome, making the transportation of this material fairly easy.³⁶ This travertine from Tivoli is formed in a basin that is supplied by the sulfur springs at Bagni di Tivoli, which developed due to natural fault lines.³⁷ It began to be quarried and transported to Rome starting in the second century BC.³⁸ In the past, travertine was used for architectural and sculptural projects before marble was made easily accessible.³⁹ Before the Luna marble quarries opened on mainland Italy by Julius Caesar in the first century BC, marble had to be imported from Greece or other Mediterranean territories resulting in marble being difficult and costly to

³⁴ Tufa, a volcanic conglomerate that can come in different colors and was quarried from different regions of what is today Italy, is another common material to see in Rome. However, Tufa is not only extremely porous, but also not white. For this reason, tufa is not considered in this examination.; Fabio Barry, *Painting in Stone: Architecture and the Poetics of Marble from Antiquity to the Enlightenment*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 38; Claridge, Toms, and Cubberley, *Rome: An Oxford Archaeological Guide*, 40-41.

³⁵ Roger Bradley Ulrich and Caroline K Quenemoen, *A Companion to Roman Architecture*, (West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 163.

³⁶ Ulrich and Quenemoen, *A Companion to Roman Architecture*, 159.

³⁷ Ulrich and Quenemoen, *A Companion to Roman Architecture*, 159.

³⁸ Ulrich and Quenemoen, *A Companion to Roman Architecture*, 163.

³⁹ Barry, *Painting in Stone: Architecture and the Poetics of Marble from Antiquity to the Enlightenment*, 38.

obtain.⁴⁰ Travertine was frequently employed architecturally for paving, door frames, and steps.⁴¹ Marble on the other hand is a metamorphosed crystalline limestone.⁴² It comes in a variety of colors and patterns, and even among white marbles there is a wide variety. The three most commonly used white marbles in Rome are Parian, Pentelic, and Luna.⁴³ Of these three, Luna marble is the only one that was quarried in Italy in the ancient city of Luna or Luni, today called Carrara.⁴⁴ In contrast to the other two, Luna marble is dull in luminosity and can sometimes be slightly gray.⁴⁵ Because the Plaque is not a bright white color with a translucent quality, it is most likely not made from Parian or Pentelic marble.⁴⁶ For these reasons, the plaque is likely sculpted out of either travertine or Luna marble.

Travertine is a soft and easily worked stone, making it a good choice to build with.⁴⁷ Many structures that incorporate large amounts of travertine survive until today, such as the Theater of Marcellus, a section of the Porticus of Metellus, and the Colosseum. This indicates that travertine is a durable material that can stand the tests of time.⁴⁸ However, due to the porousness and softness of the material, it was primarily used as building blocks for large structures rather than as a medium for carving intricate details. Nevertheless, there are some surviving examples of details carved in travertine, such as the relief of Asclepius and his snake entwined staff found on the Tiber Island [Fig. 14]. As indicated by this example, travertine does

⁴⁰ Barry, *Painting in Stone: Architecture and the Poetics of Marble from Antiquity to the Enlightenment*, 38; Patrizio Pensabene and Eleonora Gasparini, "Marble Quarries: Ancient Imperial Administration and Modern Scientific Analyses," in *The Oxford handbook of Roman Sculpture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 94.

⁴¹ Claridge, Toms, and Cubberley, *Rome: An Oxford Archaeological Guide*, 40.

⁴² Claridge, Toms, and Cubberley, *Rome: An Oxford Archaeological Guide*, 40.

⁴³ Claridge, Toms, and Cubberley, *Rome: An Oxford Archaeological Guide*, 40-41.

⁴⁴ Pensabene Gasparini, "Marble Quarries," 97.

⁴⁵ Claridge, Toms, and Cubberley, *Rome: An Oxford Archaeological Guide*, 41.

⁴⁶ Barry, *Painting in Stone*, 41.

⁴⁷ David B. Williams, *Stories in Stone: Travels through Urban Geology*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019), 203.

⁴⁸ Williams, *Stories in Stone: Travels through Urban Geology*, 203.

not allow for sharp details to be rendered. The edges are rounded, and the large holes in travertine make the relief appear textured. Travertine has large pores where calcite crystals grew causing the material to take on an uneven texture and preventing carvings from being smooth.⁴⁹ When the Plaque is compared to travertine reliefs, it seems unlikely that the Plaque is made of travertine as despite the simplicity of the plaque's relief the details are sharp, and the overall texture is smooth. Regardless of the weathering to the Plaque that has texturized it slightly, the plaque does not include large holes, and the edges of the carved elements are sharp and intact.

Luna marble is dull in both color and luminosity when compared to the Greek white marbles.⁵⁰ However, this contrast was realized and utilized by the ancient Romans to create statues that conveyed different textures depending on the stone used. For example, the Via Labicana Augustus depicts Augustus dressed in a religious toga, as he enacts his role as the supreme priest [Fig. 15]. His skin is made from a shining Parian marble, while his toga is made out of the matte Luna marble.⁵¹ The two marbles contrast with one other and make each section seem more lifelike. The skin almost appears to be actual flesh, as the marble takes on a slightly wet appearance, while the flat Luna marble conveys the texture of fabric. Another example of Luna marble's use in ancient Rome is the Ara Pacis [Fig. 8]. This structure, built to commemorate Augustus' return to Rome in 9 BC after a three-year absence in Spain and Gaul, is entirely made of Luna marble.⁵² This work bears multiple reliefs of foliage and figures, demonstrating the level of detail that can be carved in Luna marble. For example, the interior festoons shown in figure 8 still hold their details despite the age of the monument, unlike the travertine relief of Asclepius and his staff. The individual leaves and the variety of fruits in the

⁴⁹ Williams, *Stories in Stone: Travels through Urban Geology*, 209.

⁵⁰ Barry, *Painting in Stone*, 41; Claridge, Toms, and Cubberley, *Rome: An Oxford Archaeological Guide*, 41.

⁵¹ Barry, *Painting in Stone*, 41.

⁵² Claridge, Toms, and Cubberley, *Rome: An Oxford Archaeological Guide*, 207

festoon are clearly distinguishable, as is the delicate ribbon that flutters around. The texture of the Ara Pacis' relief is also similar to the Plaque. The porousness, or lack of, in both are the same indicating that the Plaque was mostly likely sculpted out of Luna marble.

Oak

A. Characteristics

The leaves in the Plaque's relief can be identified definitively as representing oak by looking at their shape and the inclusion of acorns. The shape and arrangement of the leaves are often characteristic of specific trees, and oak trees are characterized by their pinnately lobed leaves, meaning they have two parallel rows of lobes or leaflets.⁵³ Oak leaves often have large, rounded lobes and a distinct vein running down the center. Oak trees are also the only type of tree that produces acorns, clearly indicating that the Plaque must be depicting oak branches.⁵⁴ The Plaque's relief seems to be somewhat stylized by elongating the leaves, as they do not match up perfectly to any real oak leaves. However, the relief does bear some similarities to a few species, particularly Sessile Oak and Pedunculate Oak. These species have leaves and acorns that look remarkably similar in shape to the Plaque's relief [Figs. 16-17].⁵⁵ Unlike other oaks whose individual leaflets might be pointed rather than lobed or whose acorns are hairy, Sessile and Pedunculate Oaks have neither.⁵⁶

⁵³ Bob Press and David Hosking, *Trees of Britain and Europe. A Photographic Field Guide*, (London: Connaught, 2007), 17-20.

⁵⁴ Press and Hosking, *Trees of Britain and Europe*, 17-20.

⁵⁵ Press and Hosking, *Trees of Britain and Europe*, 118.

⁵⁶ Press and Hosking, *Trees of Britain and Europe*, 114-123.

B. Iconography

In Italy, oak has been periodically invoked across time.⁵⁷ In ancient Rome the *corona civica*, or civic crown, was made of oak leaves. This crown was given to figures, such as Augustus, to indicate that they had saved the life of a Roman citizen.⁵⁸ Many statues of Augustus depict him wearing this crown, such as the Glyptothek Augustus bust. The high honor of this award was even reinforced by Augustus himself when he wrote:

“In my sixth and seventh consulships [28-27 BC], after I had extinguished the civil wars, although I had power over everything by universal consent I transferred the republic from my power into the control of the Senate and People of Rome. In return for my action I was named Augustus by a resolution of the Senate, the doorposts of my house were publicly decorated with laurels, and a civic crown was fixed above my door’ (Augustus *Res gestae* 34.1-2)”⁵⁹

This quote demonstrates that the honor of receiving the *corona civica* was so great that Augustus had it fixed above the door of his house so that anyone entering could remember that he had earned that honor. In ancient Rome, oak was also associated with the god Jupiter.⁶⁰ According to

⁵⁷ Oak has also had a long life outside of Italy. Oak has been an important feature in many different civilizations from the start of time. From prehistoric times up to the Greek and Roman eras, the consumption of oak was prevalent in multiple civilizations. Oak was also a staple construction material, and even used in early medicines. It is speculated by Thibault Leroy, Christophe Plomion, and Antoine Kremer in their article, “Oak Symbolism in light of Genomics,” that because of humanity’s subsistent relationship with oak, we began to associate values and virtues to it that eventually found its way into mythologies. Because of this, oak became a symbol for longevity, strength, stability, endurance, fertility, power, justice, and honesty. It also became associated with powerful gods such as Jupiter in Roman mythology and Thor in Norse mythology. An oak tree is also said to be the *axis mundi*, or the center of the world, in Celtic and Germanic cultures. Oak’s symbolic importance subsists even into modern times, as countries such as the United Kingdom, Poland, Portugal, and Germany use oak as their national emblem.; Thibault Leroy, Christophe Plomion, and Antoine Kremer, “Oak Symbolism in the Light of Genomics,” *New Phytologist* 226, no. 4 (2020): 2-3.

⁵⁸ Claridge, Toms, and Cubberley, *Rome: An Oxford Archaeological Guide*, 141; Valentina Follo, “The Power of Images in the Age of Mussolini,” (publicly Accessible Penn Dissertations, 2013): 68.

⁵⁹ Translation provided by T. P. Wiseman, *The House of Augustus: A Historical Detective Story*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 9.

⁶⁰H. Munro Chadwick, “The Oak and the Thunder-God,” *the Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 30 (1900): 35.

Livy, the Temple of Jupiter Feretrius on the Capitoline hill was built on top of a sacred oak tree by Romulus to commemorate a victory over the king of Caenina.⁶¹

“[Romulus] then led his victorious army back, and being not more splendid in his deeds than willing to display them, he arranged the spoils of the enemy's dead commander upon a frame, suitably fashioned for the purpose, and, carrying it himself, mounted the Capitol. Having there deposited his burden, by an oak which the shepherds held sacred, at the same time as he made his offering he marked out the limits of a temple to Jupiter, and bestowed a title upon him. [6] “Jupiter Feretrius,” he said, “to thee I, victorious Romulus, myself a king, bring the panoply of a king, and dedicate a sacred precinct within the bounds which I have even now marked off in my mind, to be a seat for the spoils of honour which men shall bear hither in time to come, following my example, when they have slain kings and commanders of the enemy.” [7] This was the origin of the first temple that was consecrated in Rome.’ (Livy I.10.)”⁶²

Like Augustus, images of Jupiter and his Greek counterpart Zeus sometimes depicted him wearing a crown of oak. While not exactly an image of Jupiter himself, a statue that was discovered in Lanuvium depicts the emperor Claudius in the guise of Jupiter. This portrait shows him wearing an oak crown with an eagle at his feet, both attributes of Jupiter.⁶³ The inclusion of these elements in a guise suggests that these were two easily identifiable elements in association with Jupiter.

During the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, the della Rovere family grew in importance as this family produced two popes, Sixtus IV (Francesco della Rovere) and Julius II (Giuliano della Rovere).⁶⁴ The family's crest depicts an oak tree with four intertwining branches with acorns.⁶⁵ This crest appears throughout Rome as the family sponsored many projects.⁶⁶ Just

⁶¹ Carole M. Cusack, *The Sacred Tree: Ancient and Medieval Manifestations*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2011), 51.

⁶² Titus Livius (Livy), *Ab urbe condita*, translated by Benjamin Oliver Foster (Perseus Digital Library: Tufts), University. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/>.

⁶³ Steven L. Tuck, *A History of Roman Art. Chichester*, (West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 157.

⁶⁴ Alessandro Pastore, “Giulio II,” *Enciclopedia Dei Papi*, (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 2000), https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giulio-ii_%28Enciclopedia-dei-Papi%29/; Giuseppe Lombardi, “Sisto IV,” *Enciclopedia dei Papi*, (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 2000), https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/sisto-iv_%28Enciclopedia-dei-Papi%29/; Majanlahti, “The Families Who Made Rome,” 72-73.

⁶⁵ Majanlahti, “The Families Who Made Rome,” 72-73.

⁶⁶ Majanlahti, “The Families Who Made Rome,” 72-73.

some of the projects that bear their crest are Palazzo della Cancelleria, the Cappella del Coro, the Sistine Chapel, the Raphael Rooms in the Apostolic Palace, and the Montemirabile Chapel in Santa Maria del Popolo. Because of Pope Julius II and Augustino Chigi's close relationship in the sixteenth century, the Chigi's coat of arms was given the honor of being quartered with the della Rovere crest.⁶⁷ For a time the Chigi's crest of six mountains with a star was paired with the oak tree of the della Rovere. Just one example that shows this unique crest is the façade of the church of Sant'Andrea della Valle on Corso Vittorio Emanuele II which was put in place by Pope Alexander VII who was born Fabio Chigi.⁶⁸

Later in the twentieth century, oak was invoked by the Fascist party. Mussolini, in his attempt to create symbolic links between his regime and that of Rome's Imperial past employed specific imagery to accomplish this.⁶⁹ Oak was just one symbol he used, but he also utilized the imperial eagle that was once also linked to Jupiter.⁷⁰ Just one example to illustrate how oak was used is a section of a Fascist hymn, *Giovinezza*, that reads "*Siam le foglie d'una quercia nate a nuova primavera: noi cadremo innanzi sera, ma la quercia resterà.*"⁷¹ This version of the hymn was composed by Giuseppe Blanc and Federico Valerio Ratti in 1927.⁷² Giuseppe Blanc was the composer of *Giovinezza*, the official hymn of the Fascist Party and was sung at rallies and marches.⁷³ The hymn originally had different lyrics, but when the *l'Associazione nazionalista italiana* merged with the *Partito nazionale fascista*, Ratti was commissioned to write new lyrics

⁶⁷ Francesco Dante, "CHIGI, Agostino," in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Vol. 24, (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1980), https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/agostino-chigi_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/.

⁶⁸ Richard Krautheimer, *The Rome of Alexander VII, 1655-1667*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), 10.

⁶⁹ Follo, "The Power of Images in the Age of Mussolini," 68.

⁷⁰ Follo, "The Power of Images in the Age of Mussolini," 68.

⁷¹ "We are the leaves of an oak born in a new spring: we will fall in the evening, but the oak will remain"; Follo, "The Power of Images in the Age of Mussolini," 68.

⁷² Follo, "The Power of Images in the Age of Mussolini," 68.

⁷³ Nicola Balata, "Blanc, Giuseppe," *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 34, (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 1988,) https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giuseppe-blanc_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/.

for *Giovinezza* and added this line.⁷⁴ Aside from appearing in *Giovinezza*, oak also made an appearance on the ten cent lira coin in the 1930s. On this coin oak was paired with a branch of wheat against the backdrop of *fasci* and the Savoy coat of arms [Fig. 18].⁷⁵ The obverse depicted a bust of King Vittorio Emanuele III. What this examination has revealed is that oak has had a long and varied symbolic history across time in Italy. Primarily, this examination has indicated how oak symbolizes strength or power, as it has been associated with powerful figures such as Jupiter and Augustus as well as the influential della Rovere family. Because of this connotation it was then employed by Mussolini to characterize his rule as strong. The inclusion of oak on the Plaque is therefore making a strong statement and was likely not chosen randomly.

Contextual Analysis

A. The Mattei

The Oak Branch Plaque's current setting, the Mattei House, acquired its name from the family who once owned the building. The Mattei were a Roman noble family who were prominent during the Middle Ages and Renaissance.⁷⁶ The early history of the family is not known for certain, but it seems they came from an even older noble family, the Papareschi of Trastevere.⁷⁷ If this is true, the Mattei can trace their genealogy back to Pope Innocent II, born

⁷⁴ *l'Associazione nazionalista italiana* = "The Italian Nationalist Association"; Nicole Hofmann, "Il fondo archivistico di Federico Valerio Ratti presso la Biblioteca Oliveriana di Pesaro. Indagini Preliminari e Primo Censimento," *Studi Pesaresi: Rivista della Società Pesarese di Studi Storici*, no. 5 (2017): 228.

⁷⁵ Follo, "The Power of Images in the Age of Mussolini," 68.

⁷⁶ Giuseppe Marchetti Longhi, "Mattei," *Enciclopedia Italiana*, (Italy: Treccani, 1934), https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/mattei_%28Enciclopedia-Italiana%29/.

⁷⁷ This attribution is only speculated, however is reported in many source's discussions of the Mattei. Majanlahti, "The Families Who Made Rome," 21; Massimo, *Memorie Storiche della chiesa di S. Benedetto in Piscinula*, 100; Luigi Huetter, "I Mattei, custodi dei ponti," *Capitolium* 5, (1929), 348; Gigli, *Guide Rionali Di Roma*, 102; Dirk Ameyden and Carlo Augusto Bertini, *La Storia Delle Famiglie Romane*, Vol. 2, (Roma: Edizioni romane Colosseum, 1987), 99; Longhi, "Mattei," https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/mattei_%28Enciclopedia-Italiana%29/.

Gregorio Papareschi.⁷⁸ While the Mattei family is today more often associated with their four palaces near the Jewish Ghetto, their house in Trastevere is described by many scholars, including Mario Tosi, as their first residence in Rome.⁷⁹ As the family grew, the different branches began to acquire other residences and titles. In 1372 the Mattei family split and moved across the Tiber River to the *rione* Sant'Angelo. Over time these members built four different palaces on the same block between Via delle Botteghe Oscure and Via dei Funari. These palaces were Palazzo di Giacomo Mattei, Palazzo Mattei di Giove, Palazzo Mattei Caetani, and Palazzo Mattei Paganica. Because of the proximity of these palaces the area they lived in was nicknamed the *isola* of the Mattei.⁸⁰ The family also purchased a villa on Caelian Hill.⁸¹ It was initially known as Villa Mattei, but is today called Villa Celimontana. The villa was built sometime in the 1580s, and eventually came to be owned by Ciriaco Mattei, which he included in his 1610 will.⁸² This villa was known for its collection of antiquities, that were inventoried in 1614 upon the death of Ciriaco.⁸³ The members from the different branches were referred to based on their residence. In turn, the branch that remained in Trastevere became known as the Mattei of Trastevere.

Despite the house in Trastevere being the first residence of the Mattei, it has been relatively overlooked. Very little is recorded about the individual members of the family who lived there or the activities they participated in. Most of what is reported about the house is

⁷⁸ Huetter, "I Mattei, custodi dei ponti," 348; Tommaso Di Carpegna Falconieri, "Innocenzo II, papa," *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 62, (Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 2004.) https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/papa-innocenzo-ii_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/.

⁷⁹ Mario Tosi, *La Società Romana dalla feudalità al patriziato: (1816-1853)*, (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1968), 55; Huetter, "I Mattei, custodi dei ponti," 349.

⁸⁰ Gigli, *Guide Rionali Di Roma*, 104; Longhi, "Mattei," https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/mattei_%28Enciclopedia-Italiana%29/.

⁸¹ Elisabeth Blair MacDougall, "A Circus, a Wild Man and a Dragon: Family History and the Villa Mattei," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 42, no. 2 (1983): 121.

⁸² MacDougall, "A Circus, a Wild Man and a Dragon: Family History and the Villa Mattei," 121.

⁸³ MacDougall, "A Circus, a Wild Man and a Dragon: Family History and the Villa Mattei," 121.

sensational. Firstly, in 1414 Giovanni Mattei lived at the Mattei House in Trastevere.⁸⁴ On March 8, 1414, he helped form a revolt against Pietro di Matuzzo who had been elected “Signore e Governatore” and was attempting to prevent cardinal Giacomo Isolani from taking possession of the city in the name of the Church.⁸⁵ Secondly, on June 1, 1484, the house was sacked by Pope Sixtus IV because Paolo Mattei sided with the Colonna family who were at the time in a feud with the pope.⁸⁶ Later, during the sixteenth century, the house was inhabited by three particularly quarrelsome Mattei brothers, Marcantonio, Alessandro, and Curzio Mattei.⁸⁷ According to Camillo Massimo, an “antico Manuscritto” reports the following events.⁸⁸ In 1555 Marcantonio was killed by his relative Girolamo Pietro Mattei, because they had a “differenza di liti fra loro civili.”⁸⁹ In revenge Alessandro sought out the man who killed his brother, and killed him. For this, Alessandro was banished from Rome for six months.⁹⁰ However, an agreement was reached with the permission of Pope Julius III, that Alessandro could be forgiven if Girolamo Pietro married Alessandro’s niece, Olimpia, without paying a dowry.⁹¹ Alessandro consulted his brother and Olimpia’s father, Curzio, who agreed to the terms.⁹² On the night of the wedding, Alessandro, his son Girolamo, and two “*Forastieri*” crept into the wedding bed and

⁸⁴ Gigli, *Guide Rionali Di Roma*, 104.

⁸⁵ *Signore e Governatore* = “Lord and Governor”; Massimo, *Memorie Storiche della chiesa di S. Benedetto in Piscinula*, 102; Gigli, *Guide Rionali Di Roma*, 104.

⁸⁶ Massimo, *Memorie Storiche della chiesa di S. Benedetto in Piscinula*, 102-3; Gigli, *Guide Rionali Di Roma*, 104.

⁸⁷ Alessandro and Curzio Mattei held the position of *Conservatori* in 1538 and 1535 respectively. All three brothers were also *Caporioni e Priori*. Alessandro in 1532, Cuzio in 1541, and Marcantonio in 1543; Claudio De Dominicis, *Membri del Senato della Roma Pontificia: Senatori, Conservatori, Caporioni e loro Priori e Lista d’oro delle famiglie dirigenti (secc. X-XIX)*, (Rome: Fondazione Marco Besso, 2009), 40, 41, 76,79,80.

⁸⁸ *Antico Manuscritto* = “Ancient manuscript”; Massimo, *Memorie Storiche della chiesa di S. Benedetto in Piscinula*, 103.

⁸⁹ *Differenza di liti fra loro civili* = “Difference between civil disputes.” Massimo, *Memorie Storiche della chiesa di S. Benedetto in Piscinula*, 103; Gigli, *Guide Rionali Di Roma*, 104; Majanlahti, “The Families Who Made Rome,” 21-22.

⁹⁰ Massimo, *Memorie Storiche della chiesa di S. Benedetto in Piscinula*, 103.

⁹¹ Massimo, *Memorie Storiche della chiesa di S. Benedetto in Piscinula*, 103; Gigli, *Guide Rionali Di Roma*, 106.

⁹² Massimo, *M Memorie Storiche della chiesa di S. Benedetto in Piscinula*, 103.

killed Girolamo Pietro.⁹³ During this struggle Cuzio was accidentally killed by one of the *Forastieri*, who in anger was then killed by Alessandro. Alessandro Mattei then fled Rome to avoid papal punishment from the events that occurred at the bloody wedding and died in exile.⁹⁴ Despite this tragedy, the house remained in the hands of the Mattei family until the death of Annibale and Maria Mattei in the seventeenth century, who died without heirs.⁹⁵ The Mattei house finally passed into hands outside the family. However, the marks of the Mattei's period of ownership have subsisted until today, as their coat of arms can be found in multiple different locations on the outside of the house. The distinctive coat of arms depicting a checkered pattern with a diagonal ribbon appears above the doorframe of the southern entrance on Via della Lungarina, in a stone window frame on the eastern façade, and in a metal grate over a window on the southern facade [Figs. 19-21].

B. Later Owners

With no Mattei of Trastevere heirs available to claim ownership of the house, it was purchased by the della Molarina family, specifically Valerio and Cesare della Molarina.⁹⁶ For unknown reasons, soon after Valerio and Cesare claimed ownership the Mattei House was divided into separate properties, each owned by a different party. In the Catasto Urbano Pio Gregoriano (1816-1835), Marchese Antonio Origo, is listed as part owner of the house.⁹⁷ At the same time, Badaracco reports that Duke Massimo, heir of the della Molarina, and the Chiesa

⁹³ Massimo, *Memorie Storiche della chiesa di S. Benedetto in Piscinula*, 103.

⁹⁴ Massimo, *Memorie Storiche della chiesa di S. Benedetto in Piscinula*, 104; Gigli, *Guide Rionali Di Roma*, 106.

⁹⁵ While the exact date of their death is unknown, it was sometime after 1637 as Annibale Mattei is recorded as holding the position of *Conservatori* in that year; De Dominicis, *Membri del Senato della Roma Pontificia*, 51; Gigli, *Guide Rionali Di Roma*, 106.

⁹⁶ Badaracco, *Il Culto Del "Deus Elagabalus,"* 114; Gigli, *Guide Rionali Di Roma*, 106.

⁹⁷ Badaracco, *Il Culto Del "Deus Elagabalus,"* 114.

Nuova were also partial owners of the house.⁹⁸ The Catasto clarifies which sections of the house each party owned. There were three “*Principali*” that made up the Mattei House, 689-691.⁹⁹ *Principale* 689 was the northern half of the Mattei House and wrapped around both the eastern and western facades.¹⁰⁰ This section once overlooked Piazza della Molara, which was demolished when the Tiber walls were installed between 1876-1910.¹⁰¹ The Catasto records that 689 was owned by the “congregazione oratorio di Roma” which was the Chiesa Nuova mentioned by Badaracco. The function of this section is listed as “Botteghe” or shops as well as “Casa” or home.¹⁰² *Principale* 690 was a section to the west. It comprised half of the western façade and half of the southern facade. Oddly, the Catasto lists “Di Ripa Conti” as owning this property. They are recorded as using the property as a house. *Principale* 691 is mostly in the south and faces into Piazza in Piscinula.¹⁰³ It takes up the remainder of the southern façade and some of the eastern façade. The Catasto reports that “Origo Marchese Giuseppe” owned 691 and used it as both a shop and home. However, it seems that a section of 691 to the east was also owned by the Oratory, and functioned as a house.¹⁰⁴

In 1864 the Mattei House was referred to as “Locanda della Sciacquetta,” suggesting it functioned or was at least considered a brothel.¹⁰⁵ Despite this surprising transition from a property owned in part by a church and by a marchese into a brothel, little documentation on this

⁹⁸ Badaracco, *Il Culto Del "Deus Elagabalus,"* 114.

⁹⁹ “Descriptio Romae: Catasto Urbano – Pio Gregoriano,” *Archivio Stato di Rome / Descriptio Romae: un WebGIS per la documentazione su Roma*, http://www.dipsuwebgis.uniroma3.it/gamma_1/index.phtml.

¹⁰⁰ “Descriptio Romae: Catasto Urbano – Pio Gregoriano.”

¹⁰¹ Gregory S. Aldrete, *Floods of the Tiber in Ancient Rome. Ancient Society and History*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 247.

¹⁰² “Descriptio Romae: Catasto Urbano – Pio Gregoriano.”

¹⁰³ “Descriptio Romae: Catasto Urbano – Pio Gregoriano.”

¹⁰⁴ “Descriptio Romae: Catasto Urbano – Pio Gregoriano.”

¹⁰⁵ The term *Sciacquetta* in general translates to “little girl” but in Rome is a derogatory term that indicates a maidservant or a “little slut.”; Giuseppe Lorin, *Transtiberim: Trastevere, il mondo dell'oltretomba*, I edizione, (Storia. Roma: Bibliotheka, 2018), np; Massimo, *Memorie Storiche della chiesa di S. Benedetto in Piscinula*, 101.

subject exists. It is also currently not known who owned the house during the time it functioned as a brothel. Regardless, many guidebooks report that in 1890 the house was bought by two new owners, lawyer Ilo Giacomo Nunes and Baron Celesia di Vegliasco.¹⁰⁶ However, an examination of primary sources about Nunes problematizes this dating. Immigration papers from when Nunes moved from Italy to the United States show that he was 49 years old in 1939 [Fig. 22].¹⁰⁷ This suggests that he was born in or around 1890, making it impossible for him to have bought the house that year. When did Nunes obtain the Mattei House then? A 1927 sale catalog of objects from Nunes' collection records that Nunes did not move into the Mattei House until 1927, suggesting he owned the property by that year.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, unpublished documents from the Archivio Storico Capitolino show his proposal for the restoration to the Mattei House and are dated to 1926, also suggesting he owned the house by this date.¹⁰⁹ One idea put forth by Silvia Fallacara and Stefania Golluscio in their 2007 chapter is that Nunes bought the house in 1925.¹¹⁰ Because it likely took time to draft the plan for Nunes' restoration, 1925 seems like a plausible date for Nunes to have bought his section of the house.

As mentioned already, Nunes had part of the Mattei House restored to its "*forme originali*" by architect Lorenzo Casanelli and an engineer named Suave in 1927.¹¹¹ Similarly, according to Laura Gigli, Vegliasco "cercarono di restituire al palazzo le sue linee originali [...]"

¹⁰⁶ Provided is a list of sources which state this: Badaracco, *Il Culto Del "Deus Elagabalus,"* 114; Bonsignori, *Fiume Bojaccia: Delitti e misteri romani sul Tevere*; Lorin, *Transtiberim: Trastevere, il mondo dell'oltretomba*.

¹⁰⁷ Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, "New York Passenger and Crew Lists, 1909, 1925-1957."

¹⁰⁸ Curated by Alfredo Silvestri, *Vendita di oggetti d'Arte antica spettante al Signor Avv. Ilo Giacomo Nunes*, (39 Piazza Spagna, Rome: Galleria d'Arte, March 1927), <https://bibliotheque-numerique.inha.fr/idurl/1/65370>.

¹⁰⁹ ASC, *Ripartizione V Lavori Pubblici*, "ispettorato edilizio | anno 1926."

¹¹⁰ Silvia Fallacara and Stefania Golluscio, "Palazzo Mattei in Piscinula. Progetto di Restauro e Ridefinizione del Contesto Urbano," in *Progetti di Restauro Architettonico e dei Monumenti*, edited by Tancredi Carunchio, (Rome: Edizioni Kappa, 2007), 120-121.

¹¹¹ Badaracco, *Il Culto Del "Deus Elagabalus,"* 114; Gigli, *Guide Rionali Di Roma*, 106.

erano state completamente coperte.”¹¹² Gigli does not give a date for this renovation but does note that a photo included in her book taken prior to 1928 shows the house before this modification occurred.¹¹³ However, it seems likely that this renovation was carried out in 1926, as it appears to be recorded in two travertine window sills on the left half of the southern façade. One inscription reads RESTAURATA while the other reads A.D. MCMXXVI.¹¹⁴ It is known that Vegliasco owned this section of the house in the year 1926, as plans drafted for Nunes’ 1927 restoration indicate the western side of the property was owned by “Celesia,” indicating Baron Celesia di Vegliasco.¹¹⁵

According to Badaracco, in 1930 the house underwent another restoration by set designer Walter Mocchi.¹¹⁶ The extent of these modifications is unknown as is whether Mocchi had partial ownership of the Mattei House. If Mocchi did have partial ownership, he likely owned the western side that was once owned by Vegliasco, as the last mention of Vegliasco’s ownership was in 1926.¹¹⁷ Nunes still owned his section of the house in 1930, as he is listed as living at “Piazza in Piscinula 8” in 1943, indicating Mocchi could not have owned the eastern half of the house.¹¹⁸ For this reason, it seems likely that Mocchi’s modifications were to the western half of the Mattei House. If this is true, Mocchi may have been responsible for the many fragmentary objects embedded in the walls, as the majority of the house’s fragments are found on the western half. It is also known that on January 13, 1930, Mocchi married his second wife, Sayao de

¹¹² “Tried to restore the house to its original lines [...] that had been completely covered”; Gigli, *Guide Rionali Di Roma*, 106.

¹¹³ Gigli, *Guide Rionali Di Roma*, 106.

¹¹⁴ Gigli, *Guide Rionali Di Roma*, 106.

¹¹⁵ ASC, *Ripartizione V Lavori Pubblici*, “ispettorato edilizio | anno 1926.”

¹¹⁶ Badaracco, *Il Culto Del "Deus Elagabalus,"* 114.

¹¹⁷ ASC, *Ripartizione V Lavori Pubblici*, “ispettorato edilizio | anno 1926.”

¹¹⁸ ASC, *Ripartizione V Lavori Pubblici*, “ispettorato edilizio | anno 1926”; FDR Library, “Naval Aide's Files A-16 Italy and Sicily, August 1943-April 1945,” Franklin D. Roosevelt, Papers as President: Map Room Papers, 1941-1945, Box 166, appendix D.

Olivara Balduina, in Rome.¹¹⁹ A new wife might have meant a new home, and the Mattei House could have been bought by Mocchi to coincide with this event. The problem with this hypothesis is that in 1948 Mocchi's permanent residence was listed as "Rua Aurelio Saffi, 26 – Milãno-." ¹²⁰ While this is nearly twenty years after his 1930 modification and possible ownership of the Mattei House, no records have been uncovered that list him as living at Piazza in Piscinula.

The next known change in ownership was in 1958, when the Gualino family took ownership of the wing between the house numbers 9-10.¹²¹ It is known through both the 1926 restoration proposal and an American military report that Nunes was the prior owner of this section of the house.¹²² This suggests that the Gualino family could have taken possession of the house directly from Nunes. Today the house appears to be a mix of apartments and offices. Google maps lists the property as a gynecologist office, and the various front doors have buzzers that list different family names. This indicates that even today, the property is still not consolidated under just one owner.

C. Nunes' 1927 Restoration

The Oak Branch Plaque's inscription commemorates Nunes' 1927 restoration of the Mattei House. For this reason, it is important to examine carefully the restoration for any information it might provide in relation to answering the questions posed about the Plaque. Nunes' application to the commune now in the Archivio Storico Capitolino indicates that he

¹¹⁹ Alessandra Cimmino, "Mocchi, Walter," *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, (Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 2011), [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/walter-mocchi_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/walter-mocchi_(Dizionario-Biografico)/).

¹²⁰ *Arquivo Nacional, Rio de Janeiro* (National Archives, Rio de Janeiro), "Brasil, Cartões de Imigração, 1900-1965," *FamilySearch*, Group 8 > 004915706 > image 92 of 203, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-95B9-SV58?cc=1932363&wc=QS65-J4M%3A1019548401%2C1020622801>.

¹²¹ Gigli, *Guide Rionali Di Roma*, 106.

¹²² ASC, *Ripartizione V Lavori Pubblici*, "ispettorato edilizio | anno 1926"; FDR Library, "Naval Aide's Files A-16 Italy and Sicily, August 1943-April 1945," Franklin D. Roosevelt, Papers as President: Map Room Papers, 1941-1945, Box 166, appendix D.

sought approval for his restoration in 1926.¹²³ This package contains both a written account and drawings of the proposed modifications. A letter written by the architect Lorenzo Corrado Cesanelli indicates that Nunes wished to enlarge the house and sought approval for a license needed to conduct these modifications [Fig. 23]. However, the letter indicates that they had already begun consolidating the house by April 4, 1926. Cesanelli also notes that twenty-four drawings were created, but the package only contains nine. These drawings include depictions of the southern, eastern, and northern facades [Figs. 24-26]. When compared to photos taken of the house before 1926, these drawings suggest that Nunes had the southern and eastern loggias reopened [Fig. 27]. The proposal also recommended changing the type of window frames and their positions. The suggested mullioned and Guelph-cross window frames would function to invoke the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

These drawings were likely created by Cesanelli, who had an extensive career of restoring old buildings.¹²⁴ Aside from working as an architect, Cesanelli also wrote multiple books on the topic of restoring buildings. Just one of these publications was a 1966 book called “*Restauro ideali e progetti esecutivi*.”¹²⁵ Aside from restoring the Mattei House, Cesanelli also helped to restore the Torre de Vito, Villa Torlonia (1927), and Palazzo Ruspoli in Nemi.¹²⁶ These projects demonstrate that Cesanelli was versatile in the assignments he took, and that he received high-end commissions such as the Villa Torlonia. That Nunes was able to hire Cesanelli suggests that Nunes was influential or wealthy, or possibly that the Mattei House was an alluring building to restore.

¹²³ ASC, *Ripartizione V Lavori Pubblici*, “ispettorato edilizio | anno 1926.”

¹²⁴ Alessandro Cremona, “Lorenzo Corrado Cesanelli,” info.roma.it, accessed December 24, 2022, https://www.info.roma.it/personaggi_dettaglio.asp?ID_personaggi=5371.

¹²⁵ Lorenzo Corrado Cesanelli and Ludovico Puglielli, *Restauro Ideali e Progetti Esecutivi*, (Roma: Istituto grafico tiberino, 1966).

¹²⁶ Cremona, “Lorenzo Corrado Cesanelli.”

Cesanelli and Nunes did more than just modify the appearance of the exterior. The floor plans show that they planned to have an extension added to the house on the northern side. In the plan for the ground and first floor, the walls highlighted in red seem to be this proposed expansion [Figs. 28-29]. When the house today is compared to a photograph taken before 1927, it reveals that this extension was carried out, and in the way specified in the proposal [Fig. 30]. The drawings for the courtyard show the proposed extension from the perspective of the courtyard. The drawings indicate that a floor loggia held up by Corinthian columns should be created [Fig. 31]. This would have fit in with the character of the historized house, as Corinthian columns are a classical form. Nunes' proposed restoration reveals that he clearly had an interest in preserving and highlighting the antique nature of the house, much like other buildings in Trastevere. Around the corner from the house, in Piazza Giuseppe Gioachino Belli, the Anguilla tower was restored between 1892 and 1902 by Augusto Fallani.¹²⁷ Fallani added battlements to the tower and mullioned windows, as well as incorporated ancient fragments of friezes, capitals, and heraldic insignia.¹²⁸ Similarly, in 1929 Giuseppe Guerra Baldelli modified John Cabot University's Guarini campus on Via della Lungara 233 when it was owned by the Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice, a branch of the Salesian Order of Don Bosco.¹²⁹ As explored in Matthew Beckmann's paper on the topic, Guerra Baldelli originally proposed a unified restoration incorporating medieval and Renaissance revival elements, such as a first story loggia and a tower near Porta Settimiana.¹³⁰ While much of the proposal was not carried out, the tower was built,

¹²⁷ Harula Economopoulos, "Fallani, Augusto," *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 44, (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 1994), https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/augusto-fallani_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/.

¹²⁸ Casa di Dante in Roma, "The Palazzetto degli Anguillara," accessed December 24, 2022, <https://lnx.casadidanteinroma.it/la-casa/>.

¹²⁹ Matthew Beckmann, "Scars of the Master Plan: The Built Environment of Via della Lungara 233 as a Product of Modern City Planning" (unpublished paper, John Cabot University, May 20, 2022), Microsoft Word file, 5.

¹³⁰ Beckmann, "Scars of the Master Plan," 5.

though disjointed in appearance.¹³¹ These examples illustrate that Nunes' historicizing restoration to the Mattei House was not unusual, and was in fact in line with other restorations in Trastevere.

The smallest details were taken into consideration when creating Cesanelli's drawings. For example, in the drawing of the eastern façade, the architect depicted the coat of arms of the Mattei above the window and included two fragments of columns in the corners of the building [Fig. 25]. Both of these elements are still visible today, indicating they were carried out as proposed. It is intriguing then that these drawings do not show the Oak Branch Plaque on the southern façade. These renditions of the facades also do not show the various other fragmented objects embedded in the walls today. For example, the mouse-like creature, the interlace screen, and the Virgin that are today on the eastern façade are not shown in the drawings. The crests found on the northern façade are also not depicted. It is uncertain what exactly this indicates, although it implies that these fragments were added after the restoration.

D. The Surrounding Demolitions

The entire area surrounding the Mattei House has been the subject of extensive changes across time, including demolitions and street name changes. As already mentioned, the northern façade that now faces the Tiber River once overlooked Piazza della Molara, which was destroyed when the Tiber Walls were constructed.¹³² This demolition resulted in a renaming of the street to Lungotevere degli Anguillara. The building that once overlooked the Tiber River was also demolished at that time. Composed of five *principali*, 1-5, this structure included both homes

¹³¹ Beckmann, "Scars of the Master Plan," 5-6.

¹³² Aldrete, *Floods of the Tiber in Ancient Rome*, 247.

and a large garden.¹³³ With its demolition, the Mattei House was now visible from across the Tiber River. Similarly, a building once existed on the southern side of the Mattei House and took up a majority of the future Piazza in Pisciunula. The demolished Pisciunula building was an irregular rectangle in ground plan and composed of five *principali*, numbers 375-9.¹³⁴ The building functioned as homes and gardens and appears to have been primarily owned by the surrounding churches. However, this structure was demolished at the end of the nineteenth century.¹³⁵ The existence of the demolished Pisciunula building was recorded in a few maps and photos. The 1748 Giambattista Nolli map shows both Piazza della Molarra and the demolished Pisciunula building [Fig. 32]. A photograph taken by watercolorist Ettore Roesler Franz provides photographic evidence of the Pisciunula building, as it appears to the right of the photo [Fig. 33].¹³⁶ The photo was taken standing in what was called Via di Pisciunula. It shows the front of San Benedetto and the corner of the demolished Pisciunula building. The building once had a picture of the Virgin on the corner, and what seems to be a fountain on the side that faced the Mattei House. Aside from the demolished Pisciunula building, the structure to the Mattei House's eastern façade is also no longer present today. Its existence is marked on the Nolli map, but a comparison to a satellite view reveals this area is now a grass lot.¹³⁷ Similarly, the church of Sant'Eligio dei Sellari, which once stood in Piazza delle Gensola to the west was also demolished in 1902 having fallen into disrepair.¹³⁸ The discussion of surrounding demolitions highlights how the visibility of the Mattei has changed. It was once packed tightly into the urban fabric but is now highly visible, making the house seem important. The high visibility may have been alluring

¹³³ "Descriptio Romae: Catasto Urbano – Pio Gregoriano."

¹³⁴ "Descriptio Romae: Catasto Urbano – Pio Gregoriano."

¹³⁵ Vittoria Artico, "San Benedetto in Pisciunula e il suo oratorio mariano in Roma," (Masters Thesis, Università degli Studi di Roma Tre, 2018), 3

¹³⁶ Bruno Brizzi, *Roma fine secolo nelle fotografie di Ettore Roesler Franz*, (Roma: Quasar, 1978): 167.

¹³⁷ Giambattista Nolli, *La Pianta Grande di Roma* [map], 1748.

¹³⁸ Gigli, *Guide Rionali Di Roma*, 100.

to figures like Nunes, and could have contributed to his acquisition of the property and its subsequent restoration.

The information presented in this chapter illustrates the varied history and context the Oak Branch Plaque is a part of. The figure of Ilo Giacomo Nunes is imperative to know, as he is integral to the Plaque. His name is recorded in the inscription and he was also leading the restoration to the house that the Plaque commemorates. The demolition of the Piscinula building is also significant, as it opened the Piazza and made the House highly visible. Its opening created a large open space for gatherings to take place in front of the house, which would be taken advantage of in the 1930s. The demolition also facilitates the dating of photographs as the exact dating of the plaque's placement is now considered.

2. When was it placed?

The next question to be explored is: when was the Plaque placed in its current location and in its current form? The current form is important to distinguish because there is the possibility that the Plaque resided on the Mattei House before it was inscribed. It is likely the oak branch relief and the inscription were created at separate dates, suggesting that the Plaque could have existed on the façade of the house before the inscription was added. As a reminder, the Plaque consists of a framed festoon relief of oak and an inscription. The inscription likely did not originally accompany the relief and was added centuries later. The inscription reads, ILO·G°·NVNES·R·A^{V°}·MCMXXVII [Fig. 1]. Because the inscription is dated this chapter's question might at first seem to already be resolved. However, the date should not be taken at face value without evidence to back up its claim, as in theory, it could have been created at a different time. However, by examining images of the Mattei House, it can be determined that the Plaque was placed sometime between c. 1927-1930. Similarly, an analysis of the inscription reveals that the Plaque could not have been inscribed earlier than December 25, 1926.

Representation of the Mattei House

A. Ettore Roesler Franz's Watercolors

One of the earliest depictions of the façade of the Mattei house comes in the form of a series of watercolor paintings by Ettore Roesler Franz. Franz was born in 1845 in Rome but had

German ancestry.¹³⁹ He studied architecture at various institutions including the Istituto dei Fratelli delle Scuole Cristiane, the Collegio di Propaganda Fide, and the Accademia di San Luca.¹⁴⁰ In 1875 Franz shifted all his attention to his practice of watercolor paintings, and became a cofounder of the Società degli Acquarellisti di Roma.¹⁴¹ He is most famous for his collection of watercolor paintings that he called “Roma Sparita” or Vanished Rome, made between 1878 and 1896.¹⁴² In this collection of one hundred and twenty works, broken up into three series of forty paintings, he documented the city that was about to be lost in part to demolitions and the transformation of Rome into the new capital.¹⁴³ Franz died in 1907 at the age of 67, leaving behind a series of paintings that captured a picturesque Rome.¹⁴⁴ Despite Franz clearly romanticizing Rome, by adding quaint horse-drawn carriages or figures carrying brooms, he depicted the buildings with careful accuracy. He also painted many of his watercolors from photographs he took, which ensured that the paintings captured the true appearance of the buildings.

In a watercolor tentatively dated to 1886 Franz depicted what seems to be the southern façade of the Mattei house on the right side of the image [Fig. 34].¹⁴⁵ The dating of this painting is not known with certainty, as it was stolen in 1966 while on show in Cologne, Germany.¹⁴⁶ However, in her 2008 thesis, looking at primary sources, Eleonora Drikes date the photo to 1886.

¹³⁹ Brizzi, *Roma fine secolo nelle fotografie di Ettore Roesler Franz*, 5.

¹⁴⁰ Brizzi, *Roma fine secolo nelle fotografie di Ettore Roesler Franz*, 5-6.

¹⁴¹ Società degli Acquarellisti di Roma = Society of Watercolorists of Rome; Brizzi, *Roma fine secolo nelle fotografie di Ettore Roesler Franz*, 5-6.

¹⁴² “Vanished Rome,” Ettore Roesler Franz, April 26, 2019, <https://www.ettoreroeslerfranz.com/en/acquerelli/roma-sparita/>.

¹⁴³ Ettore Roesler Franz, “Vanished Rome.”

¹⁴⁴ “Biographical Notes on Ettore Roesler Franz,” Museo di Roma in Trastevere, accessed September 24, 2022. https://www.museodiromaintrastevere.it/en/museo/la_collezione/la_roma_pittoresca_di_ettore_roesler_franz/cenni_biografici_su_ettore_roesler_franz.

¹⁴⁵ Eleonora Drikes, “La Roma di Ettore Roesler Franz tra realtà sociale e visione artistica” Thesis, Università degli Studi Roma Tre, 2008, 66.

¹⁴⁶ Drikes, “La Roma di Ettore Roesler Franz tra realtà sociale e visione artistica,” 66.

Also according to Drikes, Franz himself named this painting *Via della Longaretta all'angolo di Via in Piscinula – Il Palazzo Mattei a sinistra*.¹⁴⁷ While this title does indicate that the building represented is the Mattei House, Franz identified it as the building to the left. This seems to be an error, as the Mattei House is clearly on the right side. The distinctive protruding section to the west of the House's southern façade is clearly visible. This feature is visible on the house today when standing in the same position as the angle of the 1886 watercolor [Fig. 35]. Secondly, the front door depicted in the painting is also identical not only to the front door of the house today, but also to the door represented in a watercolor by Franz dated to 1888 [Fig. 36].¹⁴⁸ In the later 1888 watercolor, the distinctive door frame and the Mattei Coat of Arms clearly indicate that the painting depicts the door of the Mattei house that can be accessed from Piazza in Piscinula [Fig. 37].¹⁴⁹ According to Drikes, Franz also named this painting, *Via della Longaretta – Ingresso al Palazzo Mattei*.¹⁵⁰ The title further indicates that the building Franz depicts to the right of his 1886 watercolor is in fact the Mattei House.

From the angle that the 1886 watercolor was painted from, if the Plaque were situated on the house, it would be visible. However, there is no indication of it in the watercolor. It would have appeared between the main door frame and the section of the façade that protrudes. It could be argued that Franz took artistic liberties and excluded the Plaque from his painting. However, another image he created of the Mattei house does not support this hypothesis. In an image dated to 1882, Franz primarily depicted the eastern façade of the Mattei House [Fig. 38].¹⁵¹ The house

¹⁴⁷ Eleonora Drikes, "La Roma di Ettore Roesler Franz tra realtà sociale e visione artistica," (Thesis, Università degli Studi Roma Tre, 2008), 66.

¹⁴⁸ Drikes, "La Roma di Ettore Roesler Franz tra realtà sociale e visione artistica," 67.

¹⁴⁹ For evidence that this is the Mattei's coat of arms seen Dirk Ameyden and Carlo Augusto Bertini, *La Storia Delle Famiglie Romane*, (Roma: Edizioni romane Colosseum, Vol. 2, 1987), 100.

¹⁵⁰ Drikes, "La Roma di Ettore Roesler Franz tra realtà sociale e visione artistica," 67.

¹⁵¹ "Medieval Buildings and Palazzo Mattei in the Via Transtiberina, Now via Longaretta, near the Cestio Bridge," Museo di Roma in Trastevere, accessed September 24, 2022,

is identifiable from the small section that overhangs in the corner of the eastern facade, the two arches on the ground floor, the closed loggia in the upper corner of the southern facade, and the general irregular shape of the house [Fig. 39]. In this 1882 painting, Franz painstakingly renders the details of the medievalizing mullioned windows, the pointed brick chimneys, and the string course that divides the building in three spots. These details could have been easily omitted if Franz were not particularly concerned with accurately rendering the small details of the Mattei house. This fact suggests that the Plaque in any form had not yet been placed on the House when Franz created his 1886 watercolor.

B. Photographs Without the Plaque

Two photographs show the Mattei House without the Plaque, but their dating is uncertain [Figs. 40-41]. However, when compared to dated changes to the Mattei House and Piazza in Piscinula, it can be determined that they were taken after 1886 but before 1927. The first photograph shows the southern façade straight on. In the doorway approximately eight figures stand [Fig. 40]. The Plaque is noticeably absent between the two lower windows to the left of the central door, as is the loggia on the upper floor. The second photo shows children playing in Piazza in Piscinula in front of the southern facade [Fig. 41]. Again, the Plaque is absent, and the upper loggia is not open.

These photos were taken after 1886, because the demolished Piscinula building, which appears in Franz 1886 painting, had already been demolished. This is known because these photos were taken from a distance that was impossible if the building still existed. Franz's 1886 watercolor showed that the street was narrow between the Mattei House and this demolished

https://www.museodiromaintrastevere.it/en/percorsi/percorsi_per_sale/sala_ettore_roesler_franz_la_memoria_dei_luoghi/abitazioni_medievali_e_palazzo_mattei_nella_via_transtiberina_ora_longaretta_presso_il_ponte_cestio.

Piscinula building [Fig. 36]. The street appears to have been approximately seven to nine feet wide. Similarly, a photograph taken of the Piscinula building before it was demolished demonstrates how much space it took in the piazza [Fig. 33]. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this building was demolished at the end of the nineteenth century, indicating that these two photographs of the House were taken after that date.¹⁵²

It can also be determined that these photos were taken before 1927, as the changes made during Nunes' restoration had not yet been carried out. As mentioned, these photos show that the upper loggia had not yet been opened. Similarly, the windows visible in these photos are also different from their current form of mullioned and Guelph-cross windows. These two changes were carried out during Nunes' restoration, as indicated in the 1926 proposal, indicating these photos must have been taken before 1927.¹⁵³ Therefore the photos were taken some time between 1886 to 1927. While this still gives a wide range of dates, these photos are imperative to examine as they clearly illustrate that the Plaque in any form was not placed before the 1927 restoration it commemorates. However, there is still the possibility that the plaque was placed significantly after 1927. For this reason, the earliest known photos that show the Plaque will now be examined.

C. Photographs with the Plaque

Two other photos [Figs. 42-43] illustrate that the Plaque was placed soon after, if not in the same year, that the restorations on the Mattei House were carried out. They suggest that the Plaque was not placed a significant time after the restoration, and was therefore likely put up by

¹⁵² Artico, "San Benedetto in Piscinula e il suo oratorio mariano in Roma," 3.

¹⁵³ ASC, *Ripartizione V Lavori Pubblici*, "ispettorato edilizio | anno 1926"; Fallacara and Golluscio, "Palazzo Mattei in Piscinula. Progetto di Restauro e Ridefinizione del Contesto Urbano," 120-121.

Nunes himself, rather than by a later owner. These two images are contenders for the earliest photographs showing the Plaque on the Mattei House, although only one is firmly dated. The dated photo was captured in 1930, as reported by Carlo Travaglini [Fig. 42].¹⁵⁴ Despite the photo being taken from the western corner, a majority of the southern façade is visible, including the Plaque. The undated photo was taken from the east and shows the eastern façade as well as a majority of the southern façade [Fig. 43]. In this photo, the Plaque is clearly visible in the same spot where it can be found today, to the left of the main door and between two windows on the first floor. The undated photo was clearly taken after 1927, as the renovations documented in Cesanelli's drawings in 1926 were carried out. The opened loggias are visible on both the southern and eastern facades, and the extension added in the north is slightly visible. The mullioned and Guelph-cross window frames and positions are also identical to those depicted in Cesanelli's drawings [Fig. 24]. This suggests that this photo may have been taken soon after the 1927 restoration and could therefore be the earliest photographic record of the plaque and its presence on the Mattei House. However, the missing sgraffito that is present on the house today and the lack of knowledge of the photo's exact date causes doubt on this assumption. For this reason, 1930 will be considered the first year the Plaque is photographically documented.

The Inscription

The date provided in the inscription of the Plaque is instrumental in dating its placement, as it provides a *terminus post quem* for when the inscription as a whole could have been created. The entire inscription reads ILO·G^o·NVNES·R·A^v·MCMXXVII, but the element that is to be

¹⁵⁴ Carlo M. Travaglini, *Trastevere: società e trasformazioni urbane dall'Ottocento ad oggi*, (Roma: CROMA, 2007), 135.

examined currently is A^V·MCMXXVII. The A^V indicates that the entire date should be read as in the fifth year of the *era fascista*, 1927. “A” indicates A[nno], and the superscript “V” is five.

Part of Mussolini’s strategy to legitimize his rule was to not only invoke Rome’s imperial past but to also invent new systems that emphasized his rule.¹⁵⁵ Based on the French example, the Fascists proposed an alternative calendar system alongside the standard Gregorian calendar.¹⁵⁶ This plan was devised in 1926, when on December 25 of that year a publication circulated announcing that all dating, both public and private in nature, should follow this new system.¹⁵⁷ The announcement specified that a Roman numeral should be used to indicate the year of the *era fascista*, the start of which was October 29, 1922, the date Mussolini ascended into power.¹⁵⁸ 1922 retroactively counted as the first year in the new *era fascista*.¹⁵⁹ The New Year was moved from January 1st to October 29th. Thus, year 1 was not the entirety of 1922 but rather October 1922 to October 1923.¹⁶⁰

When the Plaque’s inscription is compared to other *era fascista* dates it demonstrates that it records the date January-October 29, 1927. Some examples to illustrate *era fascista* dates include a coin, a municipal aqueduct, a letter, and a plaque [Figs. 44-47]. The 20 cent lira coin is from 1928 and has an inscription that reads MCMXVIII on one line, and below A.VI [Fig. 44]. The Gregorian year is 1928, one year after the date given on the Oak Branch Plaque, and the *era fascista* year is six. Like the Plaque, the A on the coin stands for A[nno]. Similarly, a municipal aqueduct located in La Lastra, Florence, has an inscription that reads, MCMXXVII-V above the

¹⁵⁵ Catherine E. Paul, *Fascist Directive: Ezra Pound and Italian Cultural Nationalism*, (Oxford: Liverpool University Press, 2016), 114-5.

¹⁵⁶ Marla Stone, “Staging Fascism: The Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 28, no. 2 (1993): 230.

¹⁵⁷ Francisco Olmos, “Los calendarios propios de los regímenes totalitarios en el período de entreguerras,” 273.

¹⁵⁸ Francisco Olmos, “Los calendarios propios de los regímenes totalitarios en el período de entreguerras,” 273.

¹⁵⁹ Stone, “Staging Fascism: The Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution,” 230.

¹⁶⁰ Efstratios Theodosiou, Vassilios N. Manimanis, and Milan S. Dimitrijevic, “Six Calendar Systems in the European History from 18th to 20th Century,” *Bulgarian Astronomical Journal* (2011): 121-124.

door [Fig. 45]. Again, the Gregorian year is 1927, while the *era fascista* year is five. However, because the Fascist year changed on October 29th, inscriptions created after this date in 1927 are considered year six. Two examples that illustrate this are a letter sent by the Ministero della Marina and a plaque commemorating Ferrante Aporti [Figs. 46-47]. The letter is dated 16 Dicembre 1927 Anno VI or December 16, 1927, in the sixth year of the *era fascista*. Similarly, the Aporti plaque is inscribed with 1 NOVEMBRE 1927 – ANNO VI^o or November 1, 1927, in the sixth year of the *era fascista*. Both of these examples are dated to 1927, but because they were inscribed after October 29th, they were considered to be in the sixth year, rather than the fifth, of the *era fascista*. As the Oak Branch Plaque is considered year 5 of the same Gregorian year, it is therefore recording a date between January-October 29, 1927.

While this helps determine more specifically that date recorded in the inscription, it does not necessarily mean the inscription could not have been created after this date. There is also the possibility that the *era fascista* date was added after, as it is written as a superscript above the rest of the inscription. The “A” was clearly created with the rest of the inscription, as it is the same size and in line with the other characters. If this is true, then the inscription would have originally been read as A[nno] 1927, which would still make sense. Despite the inscription still working without the superscript, it seems likely that the “A” was always intended to be an *era fascista* date. It was common for *era fascista* dates to be preceded with an “A” or “ANNO” as evident in the inscription for the Fascist era coin, the letter, and the Ferrante Aporti plaque [Figs. 44, 46-47]. However, it is true that some *era fascista* dates would be paired with an “E.F.” such as the plaque found on the Theater of Marcellus, though this inscription also includes an “A.” Regardless, because the *era fascista* calendar system was not made public until December 25, 1926, the inscription visible today could not have been created sooner than that date. For this

reason, the inscription provides further evidence in support of the idea that the Plaque was inscribed and placed on the Mattei House after 1926 but before 1930.

Archival images and the *era fascista* date in the inscription reveal that the Plaque was placed in its current form and location sometime between December 25, 1926, to 1930. The date of 1926 comes from the inclusion of A^V° in the inscription indicating that it follows the newly devised *era fascista* calendar.¹⁶¹ The date 1930 comes from archival photos that show the Plaque on the Mattei building, indicating that either this year or prior it was placed. Despite the range of dates, the Plaque was not on the house earlier than the twentieth century. This meant it is intrinsically tied to the events and trends that took place in this century, particularly the rise of Fascism. But to what extent is the Plaque linked to Fascism? And could this fragment be considered a Fascism monument?

¹⁶¹ Francisco Olmos, “Los calendarios propios de los regímenes totalitarios en el período de entreguerras,” 273.

3. Why was it placed?

As mentioned in Chapter One, the inscription's inclusion of an "R" can be expanded as *restauravit*, and indicates that the Plaque was installed to commemorate a restoration of the house undertaken by Ilo Giacomo Nunes in 1927.¹⁶² However, this is not a complete answer as it does not address the question of why a seemingly fragmented object was used to record this restoration, nor does it answer the question of why this particular object was chosen. These two questions will be the focus of this chapter. Nunes' involvement with the Fascists will be the core of this discussion, as he clearly favored them. The Plaque, either from the start or later, may have been a Fascist monument and placed to coincide with Fascist ideologies.

Why install a fragment?

A. Fascist Medieval/Renaissance Revival

One of the Fascist party's strategies to strengthen their control over Italy was to invoke Italy's medieval/Renaissance past.¹⁶³ The use of a historizing Plaque on the Mattei House may have been influenced by this revival. Explored in great depth in Medina Lasansky's 2004 book, the Fascist invoked the Middle Ages and the Renaissance between 1922-1945.¹⁶⁴ Lasansky notes that often the term medieval and Renaissance was used fluidly, indicating that the revival was

¹⁶² Gigli, *Guide Rionali Di Roma*, 108.

¹⁶³ Medina D. Lasansky, *The Renaissance Perfected: Architecture, Spectacle, and Tourism in Fascist Italy. Buildings, Landscapes, and Societies*, (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), xxvii.

¹⁶⁴ Lasansky, *The Renaissance Perfected*, xxvii.

not always concerned with accuracy.¹⁶⁵ This revival occurred across Italy in a variety of forms, including architecture, novels, and festivals.¹⁶⁶ Just one example is Assisi's Calendimaggio, a festival consisting of various contests to celebrate spring.¹⁶⁷ It was developed in 1927 by the Accademia Properziana del Subasio and its president, Arnaldo Fortini, who worked closely with the Fascist regime.¹⁶⁸ Despite being a twentieth-century invention the festival invokes the Middle Ages by using late medieval vernaculars and dressing in medieval attire.¹⁶⁹

While the medieval/Renaissance revival occurred more often outside of Rome, Lasansky notes that Rome did receive some medieval/Renaissance revival efforts.¹⁷⁰ One example of the highly visible use of the Renaissance, was Mussolini's choice of making Palazzo Venezia his office where he delivered his monumental speeches from the balconies.¹⁷¹ Many Fascist architects were interested in *Romanitas*, which utilized Rome's ancient past, at the same time that they were also interested in highlighting Rome's medieval/Renaissance past.¹⁷² Gustavo Giovannoni is one notable architect who hoped to make Rome more medieval/Renaissance.¹⁷³ In 1931 he wrote a book about "Architettura del Rinascimento," where he very briefly mentions the Mattei House as an example of a "casa medioevale."¹⁷⁴ He also extensively studied Renaissance and Baroque architects such as Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Donato Bramante, and Antonio da

¹⁶⁵ Lasansky, *The Renaissance Perfected*, xxvii.

¹⁶⁶ Tommaso di Carpegna Falconieri, "'Medieval' Identities in Italy: National, Regional, Local," *Manufacturing Middle Age: Entangled History of Medievalism in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Patrick J. Geary and Klaniczay Gábor, (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 320-321.

¹⁶⁷ Tommaso di Carpegna Falconieri and Lila Yawn, "Forging 'Medieval' Identities: Fortini's Calendimaggio and Pasolini's Trilogy of Life," *The Middle Ages in the Modern World: Twenty-first Century Perspectives*, eds. Bettina Bildhauer and Chris Jones, (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2017), 188.

¹⁶⁸ Falconieri and Yawn, "Forging 'Medieval' Identities," 193.

¹⁶⁹ Falconieri and Yawn, "Forging 'Medieval' Identities," 191.

¹⁷⁰ Lasansky, *The Renaissance Perfected*, xxxvii.

¹⁷¹ Follo, "The Power of Images in the Age of Mussolini," vii; Lasansky, *The Renaissance Perfected*, 12.

¹⁷² Lasansky, *The Renaissance Perfected*, 14.

¹⁷³ Lasansky, *The Renaissance Perfected*, 13.

¹⁷⁴ Gustavo Giovannoni, *Saggi sulla architettura del Rinascimento*, (Milano: Treves, 1935), 30.

Sangallo the Younger.¹⁷⁵ Architect Antonio Muñoz was another figure with this motivation. Muñoz restored many churches by removing postmedieval additions, including the churches of Santi Quattro Coronati, Santa Sabina, and Santa Prassede.¹⁷⁶ For example, in 1913 he restored Santi Quattro Coronati by removing the clock tower that was placed in the seventeenth century and refurbished the mullioned windows.¹⁷⁷ Similarly, Muñoz restored the Torre dei Conti and its medieval house near the Forum of Nerva in Rome.¹⁷⁸ Though, scholars such as Paola Porretta argue that the medieval house was invented by Muñoz, as his restorations to it were so extensive that it was essentially a new building.¹⁷⁹ He changed the elevation of the house, and the walls that were now external were once internal.¹⁸⁰ What these examples illustrate is that despite this Fascist medievalism taking place predominantly outside of Rome, there were some attempts to medievalize Rome. Therefore, it is possible that Nunes may have been influenced by this revival and chosen to place a fragment-like plaque on his house in order to further historicize the house in line with the Fascist medieval/Renaissance revival.

C. Ilo Giacomo Nunes

Under Nunes the Mattei House was renovated to make it appear more medieval, suggesting Nunes was interested in highlighting the history of the house, particularly the period of time it was owned by the Mattei.¹⁸¹ It is possible that he chose the Plaque because he wanted

¹⁷⁵ Guido Zucconi, "Giovannoni, Gustavo," *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 56, (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 2001), https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/gustavo-giovannoni_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/.

¹⁷⁶ Raffaella, Catini, "Muñoz, Antonio," *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 77, (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 2012), https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/antonio-munoz_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/; Lasansky, *The Renaissance Perfected*, 14.

¹⁷⁷ Catini, "Muñoz, Antonio."

¹⁷⁸ Lasansky, *The Renaissance Perfected*, 14.

¹⁷⁹ Paola Porretta, "L'invenzione di una Torre medievale," *Roma, Torre Dei Conti: Ricerca, Formazione, Progetto*, ed. Elisabetta Pallottino, (Roma: Carocci, 2013), 62.

¹⁸⁰ Porretta, "L'invenzione di una Torre medievale," 62.

¹⁸¹ Gigli, *Guide Rionali Di Roma*, 106.

to include more elements to historicize the house. Indeed, the Plaque is only one of many objects attached to the exterior of the house that appear to be fragments of antique objects. Exclusively on the eastern façade, these objects include column fragments and an interlace relief below a pointed window that has a spiral column [Fig. 48-49]. Regardless of whether these objects actually originate from an antique context or if they were invented fragments, their inclusion on the Mattei House function to give the house an old and eclectic character. Anyone looking at the Mattei House is made immediately aware by these fragments that this is an old historical house, even if they know nothing about its history. The house also fit in with other historical buildings in Trastevere, such as the Vecchia Sinagoga on Vicolo dell'Atleta, the Dante House, Santa Maria in Trastevere, and Casa di Ettore Fieramosca. Each of these structures incorporate multiple fragmentary objects, such as columns or strigillated sarcophagi. The inclusion of the fragmentary objects clearly characterizes each structure as old. By including various fragments, including the Plaque, on the Mattei House, it not only fits into the character of Trastevere but also indicates that it is an old house in line with other antique structures near it.

Also to be considered is Nunes' personal history of collecting antiques, as attested by two sales catalogs dating from 1924 and 1927. The first sale began on December 10, 1924, at 2:15 PM.¹⁸² Held by the American Art Association Inc. at Madison Avenue, New York, this sale included 207 objects consisting of bronzes, furniture, textiles, paintings, wood carvings and other decorative items.¹⁸³ The second catalog's sale began on March 21, 1927, and lasted for ten days straight.¹⁸⁴ The sale was held by the Galleria d'arte at 93 Piazza Spagna, Rome, every day at 14:00.¹⁸⁵ Like in 1924, Nunes was again selling various antique objects from around the world.

¹⁸² American Art Association, *The Private Collection of Ilo Giacomo Nunes*, (New York, December 10, 1924).

¹⁸³ American Art Association, *The Private Collection of Ilo Giacomo Nunes*.

¹⁸⁴ Silvestri, *Vendita di oggetti d'Arte antica spettante al Signor Avv. Ilo Giacomo Nunes*.

¹⁸⁵ Silvestri, *Vendita di oggetti d'Arte antica spettante al Signor Avv. Ilo Giacomo Nunes*, cover page.

However, the 1927 sale was occurring because Nunes was downsizing as he moved residences from Palazzo Orsini to the Mattei House.¹⁸⁶ Apparently not all of the items were sold in 1924, as some objects reappeared in the 1927 catalog. Just one example is the portrait of Isabella Orsini by Pompeo Batoni.¹⁸⁷ Both catalogs include black and white details of this portrait, ensuring that this is the same work listed in both [Figs. 50-51]. These catalogs indicate that Nunes was actively involved in the art-collecting world, so much so that he even sought buyers abroad. It is unsurprising then that he was drawn to the Plaque to commemorate his restoration of the Mattei House, as he was already involved in collecting antiquities, including ancient marbles.

Aside from the extensive collection presented in these two sales catalogs, there are other records that indicate Nunes was heavily involved in the art world of twentieth-century Italy. Nunes was one of Armando Spadini's first patrons, when he commissioned Spadini to paint a portrait of his wife in 1917.¹⁸⁸ Spadini was an Italian oil painter, who studied at multiple art schools in Florence, including the scuola professionale delle arti decorative industriali di Firenze in S. Croce and la scuola libera del nudo dell'Accademia di belle arti.¹⁸⁹ He had a prolific career in Italy, as he was invited to exhibitions in Rome, Florence, and Venice, and even after his death in 1925 an exhibition was held to celebrate his achievements.¹⁹⁰ Similarly, Nunes was one of the

¹⁸⁶ Silvestri, *Vendita di oggetti d'Arte antica spettante al Signor Avv. Ilo Giacomo Nunes*, cover page.

¹⁸⁷ Eventually this painting was bought and appears to now be in a private collection. Not much is known about the painting, and the sources that do discuss it do not appear to know that it was originally owned by Nunes. In 1972 it was listed in Asta Christie's sale catalog in London, and in 1980 it is recorded as being in Colnaghi, London; Fondazione Federico Zeri: Università di Bologna, "Batoni Pompeo Girolamo, Ritratto della Principessa Giacinta Orsini Boncompagni Ludovisi," accessed December 19, 2022, <http://catalogo.fondazionezeri.unibo.it/scheda/opera/63526/Batoni%20Pompeo%20Girolamo%2C%20Ritratto%20della%20principessa%20Giacinta%20Orsini%20Boncompagni%20Ludovisi>.

¹⁸⁸ "Ritratto della Signora Teresa Mauri Nunes," *Catalogo generale dei Beni Culturali*, accessed November 18, 2022, <https://catalogo.beniculturali.it/detail/HistoricOrArtisticProperty/1200490413>.

¹⁸⁹ Chiara Ulivi, "SPADINI, Armando," *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 93, (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 2018), https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/armando-spadini_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/.

¹⁹⁰ Ulivi, "SPADINI, Armando," https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/armando-spadini_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/.

first supporters of Roberto Fontirossi, when the two of them met in 1959.¹⁹¹ Fontirossi is an Italian painter, who made his artist debut in 1960.¹⁹² Many of his paintings are social commentaries, as he paints surrealist scenes inspired in style by Bosch.¹⁹³ Nunes helped Fontirossi set up his first exhibition in 1961 at the Galleria "S. Salvatore in Lauro" in Rome.¹⁹⁴ Nunes also entertained important figures in the art world at his residences. The 1927 catalog reports that he hosted Adolfo Venturi in his salone when he lived at the Orsini Palace, where the two of them admired Nunes' collection together and held lectures.¹⁹⁵ Adolfo Venturi was one of the leading figures in the development of art history as a field of study in the twentieth century.¹⁹⁶ His debut publication was an 1878 essay called "Le belle arti a Modena: osservazioni critiche" and earned him the position of "ispettore" for the Galleria dell'Istituto di belle arti di Modena.¹⁹⁷ He also dedicated his life to cataloging works of art dispersed across Italy, leading to the development of OA cards.¹⁹⁸

Aside from affiliating with important figures in the art world, Nunes appears to have also held a position in an artistic organization. An edition of the *Gazzetta Ufficiale* published on August 11, 1930, also reports that Nunes was "*commissario*" for an organization called Ente nazionale per l'artigianato e le piccole industrie or ENAPI.¹⁹⁹ This organization was responsible

¹⁹¹ "Teatro Visionario | Roberto Fontirossi | Biografia," Museo dei Bozzetti, accessed November 18, 2022, http://www.museodeibozzetti.it/it/home/le-attivita-culturali/eventi/mostre/2003/teatro-visionario#e_bg.

¹⁹² Museo dei Bozzetti, "Teatro Visionario | Roberto Fontirossi | Biografia."

¹⁹³ Museo dei Bozzetti, "Teatro Visionario | Roberto Fontirossi | Biografia."

¹⁹⁴ Museo dei Bozzetti, "Teatro Visionario | Roberto Fontirossi | Biografia."

¹⁹⁵ Silvestri, *Vendita di oggetti d'Arte antica spettante al Signor Avv. Ilo Giacomo Nunes*, "La Vendita Nunes."

¹⁹⁶ Marco Cavenago, "Venturi, Adolfo," *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 98, (Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia italiana, 2020), https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/adolfo-venturi_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/.

¹⁹⁷ Cavenago, "Venturi, Adolfo," https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/adolfo-venturi_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/.

¹⁹⁸ Cavenago, "Venturi, Adolfo," https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/adolfo-venturi_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/.

¹⁹⁹ *Ente nazionale per l'artigianato e le piccole industrie* = The National Organization for Crafts and Small Industries; "Proroga della gestione straordinaria dell'Ente nazionale per le piccole industri," *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, August 11, 1930, <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/gu/1930/08/11/187/sg/pdf>.

for assisting small industrial and artisanal enterprises and helped artisans participate in exhibitions both nationally and internationally.²⁰⁰ These examples clearly illustrate that throughout his life, Nunes was deeply immersed in the art world. For these reasons, it makes sense why Nunes chose to be commemorated with the Plaque visible on the Mattei House today.

How was the Oak Branch Plaque Perceived?

A. Connection to the Mattei

To further historicize and link the house to its past, Nunes may have been drawn to the Plaque for its link to the Mattei family, particularly Asdrubale Mattei who was the Duke of Giove and a collector of antiquities. The Mattei family were a medieval noble family and highlighting the house's history with them was within line of the medieval revival that was occurring around 1927. Nunes clearly had a particular interest in highlighting the history of the house he owned, as exemplified through his restoration proposals drafted in 1926.²⁰¹

Asdrubale was appointed Marchese di Giove after buying the palace of Giove in Umbria on June 14, 1597.²⁰² From this moment on, this branch of the family added an eagle to their family crest to represent Giove, or Jupiter.²⁰³ Asdrubale was also known to be a collector of ancient objects, including reliefs, that he incorporated into the courtyard of his Palazzo Mattei di Giove. These elements were so integral to the courtyard that they still exist *in situ* today.²⁰⁴ As the Duke of Giove, Asdrubale was associated with Giove or Jupiter who in turn was associated

²⁰⁰ “Ente Nazionale per l'artigianato e le Piccole Industrie - ENAPI Di Bari,” SIUSA, accessed November 18, 2022, <https://siusa.archivi.beniculturali.it/cgi-bin/pagina.pl?TipoPag=prodente&Chiave=44085>.

²⁰¹ ASC, *Ripartizione V Lavori Pubblici*, “ispettorato edilizio | anno 1926.”

²⁰² Togstad, “Fontana delle Tartarughe, the Iconography of a Roman Fountain,” 39.

²⁰³ Togstad, “Fontana delle Tartarughe, the Iconography of a Roman Fountain,” 39.

²⁰⁴ Brilliant and Kinney, *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine*, 141.

with oak.²⁰⁵ Asdrubale was also a well-known collector of ancient fragments, not unlike the Plaque.²⁰⁶ In the courtyard of Palazzo di Giove are multiple rectangular reliefs embedded in the walls. Some of these reliefs depict vegetation in swirling designs, like the acanthus plants on the Ara Pacis. Many of the other rectangular reliefs depict figures, often in battle scenes. Amongst these reliefs are various other antique objects, such as freestanding statues of nude male figures or circular fragments that depict busts of figures. While none of these antique objects look identical to the Oak Branch Plaque, they share similar vegetation motifs and rectangle shape.

As one of the most famous members of the Mattei family, Nunes may have been drawing on this known information about Asdrubale and could have placed the Plaque to represent him and by extension the Mattei family. While it is somewhat of a stretch, Nunes' train of thought could have been that his house was once owned by the Mattei, and the Mattei were associated with Jupiter through Asdrubale, and Jupiter was associated with Oak. Following this logic, it is not unreasonable to presume that Nunes could have hung the Plaque up on the house as a reminder of the house's history with the Mattei.

Evidence to support the hypothesis that Nunes was embracing the house's roots with the Mattei are the inclusion of three of the Mattei family's coat of arms on the house [Figs. 19-21]. One appears above the doorframe of the main entrance on Via della Lungarina, another in a stone window frame on the eastern facade, and the last in a metal grate over a window on the southern facade. Because Nunes had the house extensively restored, he had the opportunity to remove these elements if he was truly not interested in recalling the house's history with the Mattei. However, this is not the case, and it also appears that he added the coat of arms in the

²⁰⁵ Togstad, "Fontana delle Tartarughe, the Iconography of a Roman Fountain," 6; Chadwick, "The Oak and the Thunder-God," 35.

²⁰⁶ Brilliant and Kinney, *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine*, 141.

metal grate as these grates did not exist on the house until his restoration. The problem with this argument is that if the Plaque is meant to function as a reminder of the Mattei it is of course invoking the wrong branch of the family. Despite this, it should not be overlooked that the Plaque invokes references to the Mattei family as a whole. It may have been appealing for Nunes to highlight the Mattei, as they were a medieval noble family. Not only would referencing them have appealed to the medieval revival that was occurring during this time but would have also brought a certain prestige to Nunes and the House. As Nunes had just moved from Palazzo Orsini, Nunes clearly had a taste for residences owned by noble medieval families.²⁰⁷ Despite him being the owner of the Mattei House, Nunes evidently held an interest in the previous owners. The placement of the Oak Branch Plaque on the house in such a visible spot could have been motivated by these interests.

B. Fascism

Evidence exists that indicates Nunes was involved with the Fascists, suggesting the Oak Branch Plaque may have been placed to coincide with their ideologies. As examined in Chapter two, the Plaque bears an *era fascista* date. The inclusion of this dating already creates a link between the Plaque and Fascism. However, does it indicate that the plaque was placed and inscribed with the goal of function as a Fascist monument? The inscription is not enough evidence to answer this question, as everyone was expected to use this new system regardless of their political beliefs.²⁰⁸ Regardless of if the Plaque was intended to hold Fascist connotations, it seems to have been received positively by Fascists as evident from a series of photographs from the Archivio Luce dated to 1936.

²⁰⁷ Silvestri, *Vendita di oggetti d'Arte antica spettante al Signor Avv. Ilo Giacomo Nunes*, cover page.

²⁰⁸ Francisco Olmos, "Los calendarios propios de los regímenes totalitarios en el período de entreguerras," 273.

On September 20, 1936, a *Partito Nazionale Fascista* (PNF) gathering took place in Piazza in Piscinula directly in front of the Mattei House and consequently the Plaque [Figs 52-55].²⁰⁹ Photographs show a giant banner bearing a photo of Mussolini dressed in military garb wearing a hard helmet depicting the emblem of an eagle was hung on the Mattei House. A banner reading “*Credere Obbedire Combattere*,” a popular phrase used by the Fascists, was strung up between the Mattei House and the building next to it in the east.²¹⁰ A large crowd of people stood in Piazza in Piscinula looking at the Mattei House, as a podium was set up from where the speakers could address the crowd. A newspaper article from an edition of *Il Messaggero* dated to Sep. 20, 1936, reports that a District Group of Trastevere called “Duilio Guardabassi,” gathered to give its annual report of the group’s activities.²¹¹ Guardabassi was a teenager who had been killed in July and was made into a Fascist martyr.²¹² The newspaper describes how the streets of Trastevere were lit up and decorated with flags as people converged in Piazza in Piscinula.²¹³ It states that the atmosphere at this event was warm with familiarity and enthusiasm. The Mattei House is then described as having a “tipico frontale mediovale” and decorated with “una grande effigie del Duce.”²¹⁴ In attendance were multiple high-ranking officers, though no names are listed. These included the “Segretario Federale,” accompanied by “Vice Segretario del Fascio Romano.” They were received by the “Ispettore di Zona,” the

²⁰⁹ “Un Dirigente Del PNF Tiene Un Discorso Dal Palco Delle Autorità in Una Piazza Di Trastevere,” *Archivio Storico Luce*, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://patrimonio.archivioluca.com/luce-web/detail/IL3000020859/12/un-dirigente-del-pnf-tiene-discorso-dal-palco-autorita-piazza-trastevere-1.html>.

²¹⁰ *Credere Obbedire Combattere* = “Believe, Obey, Fight”; “Credere, Obbedire, Combattere IX Maggio - Anno XVII,” *Archivio Storico Luce*, accessed December 27, 2022, <https://patrimonio.archivioluca.com/luce-web/detail/IL3000087995/1/ix-maggio-anno-%20xvii.html?startPage=0>.

²¹¹ “Fervide manifestazioni di popolo a Trastevere per il rapporto annuale del Gruppo ‘Guardabassi.’” *Il Messaggero*, September 20, 1936.

²¹² “Per Duilio Guardabassi,” *Il Messaggero*, August 7, 1936, https://www.casamuseogiacomomatteotti.it/wp-content/uploads/giornali/il-messaggero/M22-1924-___188IlMessaggero.pdf.

²¹³ *Il Messaggero*, “Fervide manifestazioni di popolo a Trastevere.”

²¹⁴ *Il Messaggero*, “Fervide manifestazioni di popolo a Trastevere.”

“Fiduciario,” and the other managers of the group. Duilio Guardabassi’s mother was also in attendance at this event.²¹⁵ Their attendance suggests this must have been an important gathering, which also indicates that either the Mattei House, Piazza in Piscinula, Nunes, or possibly even the Plaque held some significance to the party and to this particular group.

Despite this detailed report that includes the group’s activities, such as how forty-nine volunteers were sent to aid in expanding the empire or that 410 needy children were sent to summer camps, Nunes is not mentioned in the article.²¹⁶ The newspaper also does not offer an answer as to why this location was chosen to host such an important event. Regardless, it appears that the Plaque appealed to the Duilio Guardabassi group, as the large banner of Mussolini is hung up parallel to the Plaque. This placement seems to invite a comparison between the image of the Duce and the Plaque, particularly the oak. While the Plaque may not have been intended to be Fascist monument, it could have been appropriated by the Fascists to fit in with Mussolini’s attempts to present himself as the next Augustus.

Mussolini utilized the concept of *Romanitas* to unite the country under himself.²¹⁷ For example, Mussolini sponsored a new campaign to excavate and restore the Ara Pacis in 1937-38 in celebration of Augustus’ bimillennial.²¹⁸ The Ara Pacis was of course an ancient Roman monument, dedicated to Augustus in celebration of his return from a campaign to settle matters in the western empire of Spain and Gaul.²¹⁹ Mussolini also sponsored a grand exhibition for Augustus between 1937 and 1938 at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni.²²⁰ Officially called the

²¹⁵ *Il Messaggero*, “Fervide manifestazioni di popolo a Trastevere.”

²¹⁶ *Il Messaggero*, “Fervide manifestazioni di popolo a Trastevere.”

²¹⁷ Follo, “The Power of Images in the Age of Mussolini,” 2.

²¹⁸ Filippo Coarelli, *Rome and Environs: An Archaeological Guide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 427.

²¹⁹ Claridge, Toms, and Cubberley, *Rome: An Oxford Archaeological Guide*, 207.

²²⁰ Flavia Marcello, “Mussolini and the Idealisation of Empire: The Augustan Exhibition of Romanità,” *Modern Italy* 16, no. 3 (2011): 223.

Mostra Augustea della Romanità, this event was part of the Fascists' strategy to reinforce their ideologies, with the goal of forming a new unified social identity.²²¹ One propagandistic tool utilized by this event was creating a link between Mussolini and Augustus.²²² In doing so, a cult of personality around the Duce could be formed, where he would be held up as a figure that would once again create a unified Italian empire.²²³ This link seems to have begun in 1936 with the conquest of Ethiopia where Mussolini reenacted Augustus' *Res Gestae*.²²⁴ Mosaics and postage stamps depicting images that equated Mussolini with Augustus, were also spread around Italy, clearly suggesting a link between these two figures.²²⁵ The link between Mussolini and Augustus is important in relation to the Plaque, as Augustus was a famous recipient of the *Corona Civica* that was made of oak leaves.²²⁶ As discussed in Chapter One, this honor was so important to Augustus that he even placed the crown on his house, so that all could be reminded of this valor.²²⁷ In emulating Augustus, oak would have likely appealed to Mussolini as another outlet through which to create a link. While Mussolini's emulation of Augustus did not begin until after the Plaque was already placed around 1927, the reception of the Plaque in 1936 at the rally may have been as a tool to reinforce the link between Mussolini and Augustus. Despite this reception clearly not being the intended reasoning behind the Plaque's initial placement, it is important to acknowledge. However, evidence does exist in support of the idea that Nunes placed the Plaque with Fascist ideologies in mind.

While there is no evidence found that Nunes was a member of the PNF, he clearly favored the party for a time. He also appears to have been on friendly terms with Fascist leaders,

²²¹ Marcello, "Mussolini and the Idealisation of Empire: The Augustan Exhibition of Romanità," 223-4.

²²² Marcello, "Mussolini and the Idealisation of Empire: The Augustan Exhibition of Romanità," 223.

²²³ Marcello, "Mussolini and the Idealisation of Empire: The Augustan Exhibition of Romanità," 223.

²²⁴ Marcello, "Mussolini and the Idealisation of Empire: The Augustan Exhibition of Romanità," 226.

²²⁵ Follo, "The Power of Images in the Age of Mussolini," 50.

²²⁶ Follo, "The Power of Images in the Age of Mussolini," 68.

²²⁷ Wiseman, *The House of Augustus*, 9.

suggesting he was favored by the party, too. The 1927 sales catalog reports that Nunes entertained “Sua Eccellenza Fedele” in his Salone at the Orsini Palace.²²⁸ Pietro Fedele was the Ministro della Pubblica Istruzione [Minister of Education] and a member of the Gran Consiglio del Fascismo from 1925-1928.²²⁹ While the 1927 sales catalog does not date when Nunes entertained Fedele at his house, Fedele was likely already affiliated with both organizations by the time Nunes and Fedele were interacting.²³⁰ Similarly, as *commissario* while ENAPI was in the process of reorganizing in 1930, Nunes gave puppets created by Eugenio Tavolara and Tosino Anfossi to Edda Mussolini, Benito Mussolini’s daughter, and Galeazzo Ciano as a wedding gift.²³¹ While not initially founded to be a Fascist organization, ENAPI also worked closely with la Federazione Nazionale Fascista degli Artigiani [The National Fascist Federation of Artisans].²³² That Nunes was interacting with such high ranking members of the Fascist party clearly suggests he was sympathetic to their ideologies. For this reason, the Oak Branch Plaque’s placement could have been motivated by Fascist ideologies.

Nunes was likely also involved with the 1936 Fascist rally and could have pushed for the reception of the Plaque to change to be in line with Mussolini’s new goal of equating himself with Augustus. Nunes still owned the House in 1936, as he is listed as owning the Mattei House in a report dated to November 1943. This report is found in a March 1944 declassified

²²⁸ Silvestri, *Vendita di oggetti d'Arte antica spettante al Signor Avv. Ilo Giacomo Nunes*, “La Vendita Nunes.”

²²⁹ *Gran Consiglio del fascismo* = “Grand council of Fascism”; Francesco Biscione, “Fedele, Pietro,” *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol 45. (Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia italiana, 1995), https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/pietro-fedele_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/.

²³⁰ Silvestri, *Vendita di oggetti d'Arte antica spettante al Signor Avv. Ilo Giacomo Nunes*, “La Vendita Nunes.”

²³¹ “Proroga della gestione straordinaria dell'Ente nazionale per le piccole industrie,” *Gazzetta Ufficiale*; Carlo Figardi, “Un mondo di balocchi di legno,” *Il Messaggero Sardo*, December 1991.

²³² *la Federazione Nazionale Fascista degli Artigiani* = “The National Fascist Federation of Artisans”; “Ente Nazionale per l'artigianato e le Piccole Industrie - ENAPI Di Bari,” SIUSA, accessed December 3, 2022, <https://siusa.archivi.beniculturali.it/cgi-bin/siusa/pagina.pl?TipoPag=prodente&Chiave=53011>.

naval aid file from America's Office of Strategic Services.²³³ Nunes' name appears in relation to the McGregor Project, whose operations are outlined in the document. The McGregor Project saw Americans correspond with the Officers of the Italian Royal Navy with the goal of obtaining intelligence and assisting Italy get out of the war.²³⁴ In Appendix D, Nunes is mentioned twice as a point of contact to deliver this confidential correspondence between America and the Italian Royal Navy. Both times he is listed as owning "Piazza in Piscinula 8" and having the phone number "582-586."²³⁵ Despite Nunes still owning the house at this date, it is unknown whether he lived in the house. A 1939 immigration record from Washington D.C. lists an "Ilo Giacomo Nunes" as immigrating to the United States at this date.²³⁶ While not known for certain, it seems likely that Nunes had fallen out of favor with the Fascists at this point and was fleeing from the country. It is possible that Nunes was Jewish, as reported in a personal correspondence with Giuseppe Catalano di Melilli, who knew Nunes in life. The last name of Nunes is also considered a Jewish last name, further suggesting Ilo Giacomo Nunes was Jewish.²³⁷ If this is true, he may have fled Rome when the Fascist party enacted the racial laws in 1938.²³⁸ Regardless of this broken relationship, Nunes for a time was evidently working closely with the Fascist party though later changed sides or at least assisted the Allies. However, when the Plaque was placed, Nunes was still in favor and favored the Fascists. For these reasons, he may have placed the Plaque because it was in line with the Fascist medieval revival. Similarly, he may have later

²³³ FDR Library, "Naval Aide's Files A-16 Italy and Sicily, August 1943-April 1945," Franklin D. Roosevelt, Papers as President: Map Room Papers, 1941-1945, Box 166, appendix D.

²³⁴ "Naval Aide's Files A-16 Italy and Sicily, August 1943-April 1945," appendix D.

²³⁵ "Naval Aide's Files A-16 Italy and Sicily, August 1943-April 1945," appendix D.

²³⁶ Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, "New York Passenger and Crew Lists, 1909, 1925-1957."

²³⁷ Alberto Rovighi, *I militari di origine ebraica nel primo secolo di vita dello stato italiano*, (Roma: Stato maggiore dell'esercito, Ufficio storico, 1999), 163.

²³⁸ Michael A. Livingston, *The Fascists and the Jews of Italy: Mussolini's Race Laws, 1938-1943*. (Cambridge England: Cambridge University Press, 2013), i.

encouraged perceiving that Plaque as another tool for Mussolini to present himself as the next Augustus.

This chapter has illustrated the various hypotheses of why the Oak Branch Plaque was selected to be placed on the Mattei House to commemorate its restoration. Despite the different ideas, each may contain a grain of truth. Nunes collected antiquities and was briefly the head of an organization focused on arts and crafts, indicating Nunes had an interest in objects like the Plaque. It is also true that the period during which the plaque was placed saw a growing interest in medieval and Renaissance revivals and could have also inspired Nunes to place the Plaque because it helped to historicize the Mattei House, and highlight its medieval/Renaissance nature. It can also be said that the oak relief served Nunes' goal of drawing out the Mattei House's link to the Mattei family as well as functioned to connote Fascist ideologies. Each statement does not negate the other, and each could therefore be true.

4. Where did it come from?

While the Oak Branch Plaque has been discussed in relation to how it functioned to historicize the Mattei House, it has not yet been determined if the Plaque is an actual fragment or if it was made during the twentieth century. This chapter will seek to answer the question of where the Plaque came from, both timewise and spatially. The Plaque's relief appears at a first glance to be ancient as it bears many cracks and is weathered, but is it actually? While the relief is mostly likely ancient, this chapter will consider alternative possibilities. The chapter will conclude by exploring the possible provenance of the Plaque by considering that it may have been part of a statue or altar base and displayed on the Tiber Island. Later, the Plaque may have been a piece in Nunes' or the Mattei of Trastevere's collection, before being placed on the house.

Comparanda

The Oak Branch Plaque's relief appears to be ancient in origin, both in appearance and perception. Not only is it placed among other historicizing fragmentary objects, such as strigillated sarcophagi or columns, but it is also on a historicized house. Similarly, the cracks and broken edges make the Plaque seem old, as though it has been worn away and damaged by time. The motif of the relief also connotes an ancient character, as festoons are common to see on ancient structures. However, there is the possibility that the Plaque could have been created during the twentieth century and made to look old or could have come from the Renaissance period that revived some ancient motifs. For these reasons, the Plaque will be compared to

similar reliefs from three different periods. Renaissance *comparanda* will first be examined, as this period seems the least likely to have been the Plaque's original period of creation. Then an examination of twentieth century *comparanda* will be conducted, as this period is characterized by an antique revival. Finally, ancient examples will be explored last as this seems to be the period the Plaque most likely originated in.

A. Renaissance

This analysis focuses on the church of Santa Maria del Popolo, which houses three examples of reliefs that can be compared to the Oak Branch Plaque. These examples were chosen because of their connection to the delle Rovere family. If the Plaque originated from the Renaissance, it was most likely created in connection to this family, as it bears oak similar to the della Rovere crest. One of the reliefs to be examined comes from a marble balustrade of the Costa Chapel, which bears a festoon design with flowing ribbons [Fig. 56]. This chapel originally belonged to Cardinal Comenico della Rovere and was later acquired by Cardinal del Portogallo Giorgio Costa in 1488, who had his tomb built in the chapel in 1503.²³⁹ The balustrade to be examined was likely placed in the fifteenth century.²⁴⁰ Similarly, in front of the Montemirabile Chapel is another marble balustrade that depicts the della Rovere family coat of arms with ribbons flowing out of it [Fig. 57]. The information plaque placed in front of the chapel states that the balustrades are contemporary to the fresco decorations on the pilasters which were painted by the workshop of Pinturicchio in 1476.²⁴¹ Finally, the Tomb of Cardinal

²³⁹ Gerald S. Davies, *Renascence: The Sculptured Tombs of the Fifteenth Century in Rome, with Chapters on the Previous Centuries from 1100*, (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1916), 190.

²⁴⁰ Davies, *Renascence: The Sculptured Tombs of the Fifteenth Century in Rome*, 190; "The Costa Chapel," Soprintendenza per i Beni Artistici e Storici di Roma, (Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome).

²⁴¹ "The Montemirabile Chapel," *Soprintendenza per i Beni Artistici e Storico di Roma*, (Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome).

Cristoforo della Rovere in Maria del Popolo has festoon reliefs on both the carved sarcophagus and on the section directly below the shelf holding up the sarcophagus [Fig. 12]. This marble tomb was created by Andrea Bregno and Mino da Fiesole upon Cristoforo's death in 1478.²⁴²

Each depicts both ribbons and vegetation, elements also found in the Plaque's relief. However, unlike the Plaque, these examples depict reliefs with varied heights. In the Costa Chapel's some sections, like the festoons, extend approximately three cm from the background, while other areas, like the ropes, are nearly flat. The change in heights is also gradual, causing the different elements to emerge gradually from the background. The Oak Branch Plaque's reliefs are all one height, and jut out sharply from the background. The reliefs from Santa Maria del Popolo are also more varied, as various elements are added which draws the eye to all the corners. The Costa Chapel's ribbons flutter both horizontally and vertically, while the two hanging festoons connect from the left corner to the right. Similarly, the Montemirabile Chapel's della Rovere crest demonstrates how the Renaissance period depicted oak leaves. The balustrade's oak leaves are slightly pointed, where the Plaque's leaves have rounded lobes. The depth of the relief in the balustrade's crest is also varied, as the trunk and acorns are about a centimeter higher than the background while the leaves are almost flat. However, the edges of the leaves are slightly higher than the middle, creating depth. The same can be said about the reliefs on the tomb of Cardinal Cristoforo della Rovere. The fruits of the festoons sit about three cm above the background, whereas the string connecting each bundle of fruit is nearly flat. The difference in carving technique suggests that the Oak Branch Plaque is not contemporary to these reliefs found in Santa Maria del Popolo.

²⁴² Davies, *Renascence: The Sculptured Tombs of the Fifteenth Century in Rome*, 107.

B. Modern

Another possibility is that the Plaque is a modern creation, possibly even commissioned by Nunes himself. This would not be entirely unsurprising, as it has already been explored how the modern period was characterized by an interest in antiquities, and Nunes personally had a taste for antique objects. The early modern and modern period also saw the revival of classical forms, such as the festoons.²⁴³ Just one example that illustrates both of these points is the Victor Emmanuel II National Monument.

The Victor Emmanuel II National Monument was built between 1885-1935 on the northern slope of the Capitoline hill in honor of the former King of Italy, Victor Emmanuel II.²⁴⁴ This building is an ornate structure with various classically inspired elements, such as the statues.²⁴⁵ Along the bottom edge of the monument are festoons [Fig. 13]. These festoons depict oak leaves, as they include acorns and the leaves have the characteristic lobed leaf shape.²⁴⁶ However, unlike the festoon on the Plaque, these festoons are lush, as none of the branches, that these leaves presumably are connected to, are visible. The relief is also high, as the entire festoon relief is approximately 12 cm above the background. Despite the leaves of the festoons being tightly bound, each leaf is sharply defined as an individual leaf rather than blending into one another. The Monument's ribbon is also in high relief, though only approximately eight cm from the background. It twists on itself and pools at the bottom edge. The sculptors of the Victor Emmanuel Monument were most likely trying to emulate the festoon type on the Ara Pacis,

²⁴³ Meyer, *Handbook of Ornament*, 59.

²⁴⁴ The Victor Emmanuel II National Monument is also known as the Vittorio Emanuele II Monument and the Altar of the Fatherland; David Atkinson and Denis Cosgrove, "Urban Rhetoric and Embodied Identities: City, Nation, and Empire at the Vittorio Emanuele II Monument in Rome, 1870-1945," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 88, no. 1 (1998): 33.

²⁴⁵ Atkinson and Cosgrove, "Urban Rhetoric and Embodied Identities," 32.

²⁴⁶ Press and Hosking, *Trees of Britain and Europe*, 17-20.

which is an ancient example of lush festoons [Fig. 8]. The Ara Pacis does not include oak leaves, but it does depict various leaves, such as laurel, and fruits, such as pomegranates, closely bound to one another. However, unlike the Ara Pacis, the Victor Emmanuel Monument's reliefs were created in high relief.

Similarly, on the Janiculum Hill stands a structure called the *Mausoleo Ossario Garibaldino*. The mausoleum was inaugurated on November 3, 1941, and houses the remains of those killed in battles for Rome from 1849 to 1870.²⁴⁷ The structure consists of a quadriporticus with a red granite altar at its center with reliefs of classical Roman motifs, such as the she-wolf, an eagle, shields, and *gladi*, or swords.²⁴⁸ Of particular interest, these swords are wrapped in vine-like branches of oak and laurel [Fig. 58]. This design is repeated on the travertine posts of the gate [Fig. 59]. Like the Victor Emmanuel Monument, the mausoleum has high reliefs, the highest point extending approximately five cm from the background. The leaves protrude the most, with the sword in the midground. However, the sword has varied levels as the middle projects out further than the side by approximately a centimeter. Elements, such as the acorns detach themselves from the background and reach out into the viewer's space. The branches and leaves are also stylized to convey motion, as they twist around the sword and pull away from it in spots. This examination further suggests that despite the Mausoleum and the Victor Emmanuel Monument utilizing ancient motifs in a deliberately historicizing way, the style used to carve the reliefs is not ancient. That the Plaque does not match these two modern monuments, which both depict oak leaves, indicates it is most likely not from this period.

²⁴⁷“Mausoleo Ossario Garibaldino,” Sovrintendenza Capitolina ai Beni Culturali, accessed November 18, 2022, https://www.sovrintendenzaroma.it/i_luoghi/roma_medioevale_e_moderna/monumenti/mausoleo_ossario_garibaldino.

²⁴⁸“Mausoleo Ossario Garibaldino,” Sovrintendenza Capitolina ai Beni Culturali.

C. Ancient

The most probable hypothesis is that the Plaque is an ancient fragment. An example of an object similar in size and design to the Plaque is a marble altar that was collected by Palazzo Massimo alle Terme [Figure 60]. A 1913 catalog of ancient altars reports that its height is .74 m and its width is .865 m, and that it was once located in room XIX.²⁴⁹ It was found on the bank of the Tiber, near the “theater of Apollo.”²⁵⁰ This catalog dates the altar to the Augustan age.²⁵¹ Like the Plaque, the altar is decorated in a relief that depicts two branches that hang down and meet in the middle and the leaves are all uniform and do not overlap. Similarly, like the Plaque, the altar’s relief is shallow, no more than two to three cm higher than the background at its highest points. Unlike the Plaque, the altar’s reliefs are varied in depth, as the branches and bull’s skull extend further out while the leaves extend no more than a centimeter from the background. However, there is evidence of weathering on the material of the altar, as the background has a rough texture. This texture is similar to the weathering of the Plaque, suggesting these two objects have had a similar life span.

As examined in Chapter One, the Temple of Apollo Medicus Sosianus bears a frieze that looks remarkably similar to the Plaque [Fig. 7]. The Temple of Apollo Medicus Sosianus was dedicated after a plague in 433 BC, but what little is visible today comes from the late first century BC.²⁵² The columns were excavated in 1926-8, and the entire structure as visible today was restored soon after, though much is conjecture.²⁵³ The temple is located near what used to be the Circus Flaminius, next to the Theater of Marcellus. Both the temple and the Plaque depict

²⁴⁹ Helen Cox Bowerman, *Roman sacrificial altars: an archaeological study of monuments in Rome*, (Lancaster, Pa.: New era Print. Co., 1913), 53.

²⁵⁰ Bowerman, *Roman sacrificial altars*, 54.

²⁵¹ Bowerman, *Roman sacrificial altars*, 54.

²⁵² Claridge, Toms, and Cubberley, *Rome: An Oxford Archaeological Guide*, 278.

²⁵³ Claridge, Toms, and Cubberley, *Rome: An Oxford Archaeological Guide*, 277-78.

sparse festoon reliefs, as the two distinct branches are highly visible and not covered by leaves or fruits. The branches do not include any bulbs or added details, and the leaves do not overlap. The depth of the relief on the Temple of Apollo is also like that of the Plaque, as they appear to extend about three cm from the background. Unlike the previous examples, the temple's reliefs are all one depth, making it appear flat. Like the altar, the decay on this relief is also comparable to the weathering on the Plaque, as each has rough textured backgrounds. Because the weathering is similar it suggests that the Plaque has been outside or underground for many centuries like the temple.

Less famous examples from classical antiquity are also informative, for instance a fragment of the corner of an ancient sarcophagus found in the portico of Santa Maria in Trastevere [Fig. 61]. This fragment is one among many other fragments embedded into the walls. This sarcophagus fragment depicts a branch oriented vertically with leaves that appear to be those of a laurel tree and has both the head of a satyr and an eagle carved on a corner. The provenience of the fragment in question is unknown, as well as its date of creation. However, based on the inclusion of figures it was clearly created after c. 120 AD as elaborate sarcophagi were not in use until this period.²⁵⁴ The inclusion of the satyr also indicates this was a pagan sarcophagus, as Christians did not incorporate satyrs into their iconography. Therefore, this sarcophagus was likely created before the outlaw of Paganism in the late fourth century.²⁵⁵ The leaves on this sarcophagus look like the Plaque's leaves in their method of carving. Like the Plaque, the sarcophagus's leaves are nearly flat. They extend no more than one or two cm from the background and do not have varied heights. Their protrusion from the background is also sudden,

²⁵⁴ Jaś Elsner and Janet Huskinson, *Life, Death, and Representation: Some New Work on Roman Sarcophagi*, (New York: De Gruyter, 2011), 21.

²⁵⁵ Claridge, Toms, and Cubberley, *Rome: An Oxford Archaeological Guide*, 27.

and not gradual, which makes the edges sharp. Similarly, the sarcophagus' leaves are simple. They are not depicted with a central vein, nor do any of the leaves deviate in shape from one another. All the leaves are all the same, only slightly changing in size depending on if they are attached to the trunk or a branch. Based on this analysis, one suggestion is that the Plaque's relief dates from a similar period.

Similarly, a marble cylinder in the Capitoline Museums represents a leaf and branch pattern [Fig. 62]. Upon visiting the object in November 2022, the museum did not provide an information label for this cylinder, but it is placed in the Sale degli Horti di Mecenate. This Horti was located on the Esquiline hill and originated from the first century but was later incorporated into the gardens of Nero's Domus Aurea.²⁵⁶ While the exact dating of this cylinder is unknown, its placement in these rooms suggests it was created around the first century. The style of the cylinder's relief is similar to the Plaque, with shallow carvings no more than a centimeter from the background and simple three-pronged leaves with no middle vein. The height of the relief is regular throughout, making the design appear flat. This pattern also includes ribbons, that twist on themselves, and simple circular berries in bundles at the end of branches. The cylindrical shape of this object is interesting as it might suggest that the Plaque, which is not entirely flat, could have come from a similar context. Another relief found in the Capitoline Museum depicts a dancing Maenad [inv. 1094] in Sale degli Horti di Mecenate. From the front, this object appears flat, but examining it from the side reveals that it is slightly convex, like the Plaque [Fig. 63]. As indicated by the information card about this object provided by the museum, this relief

²⁵⁶ "Sale degli Horti Di Mecenate," Musei Capitolini, accessed December 30, 2022, https://www.museicapitolini.org/en/percorsi/percorsi_per_sale/museo_del_palazzo_dei_conservatori/sale_degli_horti_di_mecenate.

comes from a cylindrical Augustan era monument.²⁵⁷ What these examples illustrate is that when the Plaque is compared to similar looking objects from across time, it matches best to ancient reliefs. This suggests that the Plaque most likely comes from an ancient context, as hypothesized since the start.

Where do reused fragments come from?

Often fragments, such as strigillated sarcophagi, were taken from their original context to represent various new ideas. While we cannot know the exact provenience of many of the reused sarcophagi scattered across Rome, it can be speculated that they came from outside the old city walls as the dead were not allowed to be buried within the walls.²⁵⁸ Across time these sarcophagi have been reused in a variety of ways. In the early Middle Ages, they were used as reliquaries or even reused as sarcophagi for Christians.²⁵⁹ In the Renaissance and Baroque period they were collected by the elite and often turned into fountains.²⁶⁰ During this time, the collection of ancient fragments like these highlighted the elite's antiquarian interests.²⁶¹ Finally, after the unification of Italy, the use of strigillated sarcophagi came to represent *romantias*.²⁶² As this period of the mid to late nineteenth and early twentieth century focused on creating an Italian national identity, the sarcophagi were used to build a Roman identity. When the Fascist party took power, they utilized strigillated sarcophagi in an unparalleled variety of ways in an effort to

²⁵⁷ "Relief with Dancing Maenad," Musei Capitolini, accessed December 28, 2022, <http://capitolini.info/scu01094/?lang=en>.

²⁵⁸ Claridge, Toms, and Cubberley, *Rome: An Oxford Archaeological Guide*, 7.

²⁵⁹ Janet Huskinson, "The Reuse of Strigillated Sarcophagi," in *Roman Strigillated Sarcophagi: Art and Social History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015),251.

²⁶⁰ Huskinson, "The Reuse of Strigillated Sarcophagi," 264.

²⁶¹ Huskinson, "The Reuse of Strigillated Sarcophagi," 264.

²⁶² Huskinson, "The Reuse of Strigillated Sarcophagi," 271.

further connote *romantias*.²⁶³ One example was the tomb of Alessandro Parisi, Commander-in-Chief of the Arditi, placed in the Torre de' Conti on the site of the Temple of Peace.²⁶⁴ The sarcophagus was placed on a high base, and given a new lid. It was decorated with corner palmettes and inscribed with Parisi's personal details and military rank.²⁶⁵ What this examination illustrates is that fragments like the Oak Branch Plaque or strigillated sarcophagi can be transformed and used in new ways. Therefore, fragments could be taken from across Rome, suggesting the Plaque's original context does not necessarily need to be in close proximity to its location today.

The Possible Original Context of the Plaque

A. Statue Bases

One possibility is that the Plaque may have originally been a statue base. Jakob Munk Højte, in his study of Roman Imperial statue bases, notes that there were typically two ways to create inscriptions on statue bases. One method included inscribing directly onto a monolithic stone base, while the other involved creating a plaque that was then mounted on the base.²⁶⁶ If the Oak Branch Plaque was indeed a part of a statue base, it seems possible that it could have been a separate plaque, as today this is the form it exists in. Højte also notes that many statue bases were inscribed with an honorific inscription identifying the person the statue above depicted.²⁶⁷ This practice is similar to what is visible on the Plaque today, which commemorates

²⁶³ Huskinson, "The Reuse of Strigillated Sarcophagi," 272.

²⁶⁴ Huskinson, "The Reuse of Strigillated Sarcophagi," 272.

²⁶⁵ Huskinson, "The Reuse of Strigillated Sarcophagi," 272.

²⁶⁶ Jakob Munk Højte, *Roman Imperial Statue Bases: From Augustus to Commodus. Aarhus Studies in Mediterranean Antiquity*, (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2005), 21.

²⁶⁷ Højte, *Roman Imperial Statue Bases*, 19-20.

and identifies the owner, Ilo Giacomo Nunes. The obvious problem with this is that the inscription on the Plaque is not ancient. However, it could be argued that Nunes was trying to evoke this ancient tradition if he were aware of the Plaque's original function. Højte also explains that statue bases found in Italy were often composed of multiple pieces, as opposed to Greek statue bases that were more often monolithic.²⁶⁸ This further indicates that the Plaque could have been just one piece of a whole statue base. Though it cannot be known with certainty if the Plaque was a part of an ancient statue base, the size and shape of the Plaque is similar to the statue bases used in the ancient world. For example, Højte reports that the height of statue bases found in Italy on average tended to be between 0.80 to 1.40 m tall.²⁶⁹ The Plaque is approximated to have a height of 0.76 m which is close to the 0.80 m minimum. These facts are compelling evidence that the Plaque could have been a part of a statue base and been displayed publicly somewhere in Rome.

B. Altars

Another possibility is that the Oak Branch Plaque was part of an altar. Many altars created in ancient Rome were decorated with festoons. There are various different altar types, such as sacrificial or grave altars. According to Helen Cox Bowerman, sacrificial altars were simpler in design than funerary altars.²⁷⁰ Bowerman explains that sacrificial altars typically only bore decorations with minimal reliefs while funerary altars were decorated with more elaborate decorative motifs.²⁷¹ Wreaths, ram's heads, and egg and dart moldings were common on both altar types.²⁷² However, Bowerman notes that wreaths were used less commonly on funerary

²⁶⁸ Højte, *Roman Imperial Statue Bases*, 30-31.

²⁶⁹ Højte, *Roman Imperial Statue Bases*, 30.

²⁷⁰ Bowerman, *Roman sacrificial altars*, 83.

²⁷¹ Bowerman, *Roman sacrificial altars*, 83.

²⁷² Bowerman, *Roman sacrificial altars*, 84-85.

altars.²⁷³ The shape of altars could also vary, as some might be rectangular, triangular, or even cylindrical.²⁷⁴ Because the Plaque is convex, this suggests it may have originally been a part of a cylindrical object, though it would need to have been a large cylinder as the Plaque is only slightly convex. Within Bowerman's book on Roman sacrificial altars, five separate altars are noted as representing oak in some form. In some, the oak branches are in the form of wreaths while others are trees.²⁷⁵ All are associated with a different deity, such as Jupiter or the Lares Augusti.²⁷⁶ This suggests that if the Plaque was originally an altar, it would have likely been associated with a deity rather than serving as a funerary monument. For these reasons, one hypothesis is that the Plaque could have been a part of a cylindrical altar dedicated to a deity and probably placed somewhere in Rome. However, the molded frame around the oak branches on the Plaque is unusual for the cylindrical altars. Cylindrical altars did not typically contain frames around the reliefs, as seen in the marble altar of dancing Maenads [Fig. 64]. Despite this, the festoon motif depicted in the Plaque's relief suggests the Plaque may have been a part of an altar, either cylindrical or not.

C. Tiber Island

One possible suggestion is that the Plaque's provenience was the Tiber Island, whose bridge leading from Trastevere is directly behind the Mattei House. In classical antiquity, the god Asclepius, who was associated with oak, had a shrine on the island. Asclepius was the Greek god of medicine, and was imported to Rome in response to a devastating plague in 291 BC.²⁷⁷ A

²⁷³ Bowerman, *Roman sacrificial altars*, 86.

²⁷⁴ Bowerman, *Roman sacrificial altars*, 56.

²⁷⁵ Bowerman, *Roman sacrificial altars*, 48, 28.

²⁷⁶ Bowerman, *Roman sacrificial altars*, 35.

²⁷⁷ Gil H. Renberg, "Public and Private Places of Worship in the Cult of Asclepius at Rome," *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 51-52 (2006): 87-88.

story told in Aelian's *Historical Miscellany* [third century AD] in regard to Asclepius is that if anyone dared to cut down an oak tree from his shrine in Athens they would be executed.²⁷⁸ This story is told to demonstrate the great respect and fear they held towards Asclepius, but it also indicates that oak was important to him. It is thus possible that Asclepius' sanctuary on the Tiber Island was decorated with oak motifs.

Aside from a shrine to Asclepius, there were also minor shrines on the northern side dedicated to Faunus and Veiovis constructed by 194 BC.²⁷⁹ Faunus was a pastoral god, suggesting he had naturalistic motifs, like oak, incorporated into his shrine.²⁸⁰ Veiovis or Vediovis' name appears to be a derivative of Iuppiter or Jupiter.²⁸¹ Not much is known about Veiovis, but it has been suggested that Veiovis was a young/small Jupiter or possibly Jupiter's antithesis.²⁸² As Jupiter was associated with oak, Veiovis may have had oak motifs incorporated into his shrine. Therefore, the Oak Branch Plaque could have come from a shrine on the Tiber Island as multiple deities honored there had a relationship with oak.

Another idea is that if the Plaque was originally either a statue base or an altar, it could have been displayed on the Island. Many altars have been found on or around the Tiber Island.²⁸³ Some were decorated with oak wreaths, such as the Altar of Lares Augusti found in 1676 on the Island, which bears a wreath of oak leaves between olive branches.²⁸⁴ Similarly, cylindrical altars were found near the Island, suggesting they were once located there.²⁸⁵ One example included an uninscribed altar from the Antonine period that represented the healing deity Telesphorus and

²⁷⁸ Aelian, *Historical Miscellany*, edited by N. G Wilson, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 225.

²⁷⁹ Coarelli, *Rome and Environs: An Archaeological Guide*, 494.

²⁸⁰ W. Warde Fowler, *The Roman Festivals of the Period of the Republic: An Introduction to the Study of the Religion of the Romans*, (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2004), 80.

²⁸¹ Michael Lipka, *Roman Gods: A Conceptual Approach*, (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 138.

²⁸² Lipka, *Roman Gods: A Conceptual Approach*, 138-9.

²⁸³ Renberg, "Public and Private Places of Worship in the Cult of Asclepius at Rome," 104.

²⁸⁴ Bowerman, *Roman sacrificial altars*, 35.

²⁸⁵ Renberg, "Public and Private Places of Worship in the Cult of Asclepius at Rome," 104.

was located in Santa Cecilia in Trastevere for a time.²⁸⁶ As explored by Luigi Huetter, the Mattei were also believed to be guardians of the bridges. They likely held control over Ponte Cestio, the bridge leading to the Tiber Island from Trastevere.²⁸⁷ This idea suggests a link between the Mattei and the Island, and indicates they were likely familiar with any discoveries made on or around it. Therefore, it is possible that the Plaque may have originally been placed on the Tiber Island and rediscovered centuries later and obtained by the Mattei of Trastevere.

D. Personal Collections

Possible provenances of the Plaque include the Mattei's collection or/and Nunes' collection. Edgardo Badaracco's book on the god Elagabalus, investigates the Mattei of Trastevere collection of foreign cult inscriptions. Badaracco states that the Mattei of Trastevere had amassed thirty-three inscriptions in the garden of the Mattei House by the second half of the fifteenth century.²⁸⁸ Most of these inscriptions were from "oriental cults," and four referred to the Cult of Elagabalus.²⁸⁹ While oak does not appear to be associated with any of the cults whose inscriptions they were documented as collecting, it is not unreasonable to consider whether the Plaque could have been collected by the Mattei of Trastevere themselves. A drawing by Maarten van Heemskerck even provides a glimpse at what the Mattei of Trastevere's collection looked like [Fig. 65].²⁹⁰ This drawing shows the Mattei House's courtyard decorated with fragments of ancient statues. The drawing also depicts a few altar-like objects and fragments embedded in the walls. Despite this enlightening look at the Mattei's collection, none of the fragments look like the Oak Branch Plaque. It is possible that the Plaque was initially a part of the Mattei of

²⁸⁶ Renberg, "Public and Private Places of Worship in the Cult of Asclepius at Rome," 95.

²⁸⁷ Huetter, "I Mattei, custodi dei ponti," 347-355.

²⁸⁸ Badaracco, *Il Culto Del "Deus Elagabalus,"* 114-15.

²⁸⁹ Badaracco, *Il Culto Del "Deus Elagabalus,"* 115.

²⁹⁰ Giovannoni, *Saggi sulla architettura del Rinascimento,* 29.

Trastevere's collection at one point. Despite the house changing ownership multiple times before Nunes bought it, it may have remained *in situ* before he moved it to the façade. The fragments of the Palazzo Mattei di Giove are still *in situ* today, despite the house changing owners.²⁹¹

Therefore, this hypothesis is one possibility.

Another possibility is that the Plaque could have come from Nunes' own collection. As attested by extensive catalogs documenting his collection from 1924 and 1927, Nunes was an avid collector of antiquities. While these catalogs do not appear to list the Plaque, they do list similar items. For example, item number 72 in the catalog from 1924 lists a "Marble Sarcophagus with Stand" from the third century.²⁹² The item is described as having "a fine relief representing a festoon of flowers," indicating Nunes was interested in objects like the Plaque.²⁹³ Nunes is also recorded as owning various other ancient works, such as vases and statues, further indicating his tastes in antiquities.²⁹⁴ However, as the catalogs only list objects Nunes was attempting to sell, it could be that the Plaque was a part of his permanent collection and would therefore not have been listed in the sales catalogs.

Based on this examination, the Oak Branch Plaque's reliefs look most similar to ancient *comparanda*, which suggests it originates from this period. The size and shape of the Plaque indicates that it was possibly a statue base or an altar, and may have originally been displayed on the Tiber Island. The island was home to a variety of shrines, which may have utilized oak as a motif. Later, the Plaque could have been collected by the Mattei of Trastevere or possibly was a part of Nunes' collection that he moved from Palazzo Orsini. Either way, the Plaque entered

²⁹¹ Brilliant and Kinney, *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine*, 141.

²⁹² American Art Association, *The Private Collection of Ilo Giacomo Nunes*, lot 72.

²⁹³ American Art Association, *The Private Collection of Ilo Giacomo Nunes*, lot 72.

²⁹⁴ American Art Association, *The Private Collection of Ilo Giacomo Nunes*, lots 70-75.

Nunes' possession at some point before it was inscribed in the twentieth century and placed on the southern façade of the Mattei House.

Conclusion

Through an examination of the micro, the macro has been given a chance to come back to life. The systematic exploration of the particulars of the Oak Branch Plaque has allowed a forgotten history to once again be brought into the light and reexamined. The Plaque is a white marble fragment that bears an oak branch relief. It was installed in its current location sometime between December 25, 1926, and 1930, although most likely in 1927, as recorded in the inscription. It was placed on the Mattei house to commemorate a restoration undertaken by Ilo Giacomo Nunes, a collector of art and antiquities. The Plaque is probably an ancient fragment possibly from either the collection of Nunes or the Mattei of Trastevere, and later inscribed and placed on the southern façade of the Mattei House, where it appears today. However, as indicated by the various chapters in this paper, these statements do not reveal the entire story.

Nunes was an important figure in Rome's art world during the twentieth century but has also been overlooked. He was involved with various organizations including ENAPI, the Fascists, and the America's Office of Strategic Services.²⁹⁵ He was also affiliated with many important historical figures including Edda Mussolini, Adolfo Venturi, and Pietro Fedele.²⁹⁶ By examining Nunes through his Plaque, his involvement with the Fascists could be traced. While clearly favored by the Fascists in the 1920s, Nunes' immigration and subsequent involvement

²⁹⁵ "Proroga della gestione straordinaria dell'Ente nazionale per le piccole industrie," *Gazzetta Ufficiale*; Figardi, "Un mondo di balocchi di legno," *Il Messaggero Sardo*; "Naval Aide's Files A-16 Italy and Sicily, August 1943-April 1945," appendix D.

²⁹⁶ "Un mondo di balocchi di legno," *Il Messaggero Sardo*; Silvestri, *Vendita di oggetti d'Arte antica spettante al Signor Avv. Ilo Giacomo Nunes*, "La Vendita Nunes."

with the Americans indicates he had fallen out of favor by the late 1930s and 1940s because he was likely Jewish.²⁹⁷ Similarly, examining the Plaque has highlighted Nunes' antiquarian interests, as exemplified by both his two sales catalogs and his 1927 historicizing renovation to the Mattei House.²⁹⁸

This examination has also revealed the various receptions of the Oak Branch Plaque. Its fragmentary nature helps to historicize the Mattei House and invokes other old buildings in Trastevere like the Anguilla tower or the Vecchia Sinagoga on Vicolo dell'Atleta. The fragment and 1927 restoration it commemorates is also evocative of the medieval/Renaissance revival by the Fascist regime from 1922-1945.²⁹⁹ Similarly, the Plaque may have been a Fascist monument. Not only does it bear an *Era Fascista* date, but it was also prominently featured during a 1936 Fascist rally. Though likely not the original intention, the Plaque may have later been appropriated by the Duilio Guardabassi group to help Mussolini's strategy of equating himself with Augustus who was associated with oak.³⁰⁰ The representation of oak also invokes ideas about Jupiter, who in turn invokes the Mattei who were the dukes of Giove.³⁰¹

Overall, the Oak Branch Plaque serves multiple functions. It commemorates a restoration by an owner, it historicizes the Mattei House, and it appeals to the interests of both a specific individual and the general period. This examination of the Oak Branch Plaque, which is walked

²⁹⁷ Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, "New York Passenger and Crew Lists, 1909, 1925-1957"; "Naval Aide's Files A-16 Italy and Sicily, August 1943-April 1945," appendix D; Rovighi, *I militari di origine ebraica nel primo secolo di vita dello stato italiano*, 163.

²⁹⁸ Silvestri, *Vendita di oggetti d'Arte antica spettante al Signor Avv. Ilo Giacomo Nunes*; American Art Association, *The Private Collection of Ilo Giacomo Nunes*; ASC, *Ripartizione V Lavori Pubblici*, "ispettorato edilizio | anno 1926."

²⁹⁹ Lasansky, *The Renaissance Perfected*, xxvii.

³⁰⁰ Follo, "The Power of Images in the Age of Mussolini," 68.

³⁰¹ Togstad, "Fontana delle Tartarughe, the Iconography of a Roman Fountain," 6; Chadwick, "The Oak and the Thunder-God," 35.

past and overlooked by hundreds of people daily, has provided a glimpse into rich narrative and history that can once again be brought to light and examined.

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