

## WHAT LIES BEHIND DECOR

**Rachel George** – At the end of the 16th century, at the Palazzo Farnese in Rome, two artists, the brothers Annibale and Agostino Carracci, were asked by the cardinal Edoardo Farnese to decorate a room in the palace. Their commission was to depict the loves of the Gods invoking ancient imagery. The room is a gallery that is about 20 metres long by 6 metres wide and almost 10 metres high. The latest restoration, completed in 2015, is the first complete restoration of the work since the gallery was created at the threshold of 1600. This is the first time that we have had the opportunity to take a behind-the-scenes look. Thanks to scientific imaging, we can read into the work using infrared, ultraviolet rays, pigment extraction, all sorts of other sampling techniques, so that we can understand the techniques of execution and begin to analyse precisely what is called the creative process.

The artist first traces the broad outlines of his concept on the fresh plaster of the wall or vault using compasses, rulers and tracing lines, then he returns to the preparatory drawings made on paper and he squares them, that is to say that he makes a regular grid on the drawing in order to transfer the content of his drawing to a 1:1 scale reproduction on the final composition. In the case of large works, it can be representing a portion or part of a person and the paper formats of the time being limited to the royal paper format, i.e. the equivalent of a current A3, several sheets will be glued to each other in order to reach the desired dimensions.

The artist then applies the cardboard to the fresh plaster. He may use the technique of piercing with a needle or a metal tip to reproduce the contours of the drawing on the cardboard so that the design can then be reproduced on the plaster by dabbing everywhere a gauze filled with charcoal. The powder then penetrates the small holes, and is deposited on the plaster, forming a picture. The transfer of the drawing by cardboard to the plaster must be quick, because the artist must insert the colours before the plaster dries. Its dimensions correspond to what are known as *giornate*, working days. Most of them were destroyed during the decorative process but very often there was a second cartoon, called an intermediate cartoon, that was also made on a 1:1 scale and placed under the work, probably on the floor beneath the scaffolding when vaults were involved and this allows us to deduce the preparatory work.

When you are faced with a masterpiece from the past that is several hundred years old, you want to know its secrets. Because this was a pivotal work that allows us to understand this era of mural painting, how did painting happen in Rome in the masterpieces of decoration in the palaces at the turn of 1600?

**03 min 30 s**