

Accommodating the ‘graces of sculpture’: drawings by Giovanni Battista Cipriani for the attic statuary of the Casino at Marino

WILLIAM LAFFAN AND KEVIN V. MULLIGAN

FEW BUILDINGS SO SUCCESSFULLY EMBODY THE IDEA OF ARCHITECTURAL PERFECTION AS the Casino at Marino. Designed by the Swedish-born architect Sir William Chambers (1723-1796) and dated to the period 1757-71, it is considered the acme of neoclassical taste, achieving a degree of architectural refinement entirely novel at this date not just in Ireland, but even along the Paris-Rome axis which provided the well-spring of European neoclassicism.¹ The building’s design marries the idea of a peripteral temple with a centralised plan – a Greek cross as its point of embarkation – while externally it draws in something of the imagery of Palladio’s Villa Rotonda with its opposing porticoed façades expressed with a Roman Doric order, its columns of an enriched Tuscan variety.² Much of the thrill of the building comes with the revelation that despite the evidence of the exterior, it was planned over three levels to contain some sixteen rooms – essentially a temple to the arts in which its patron could also reside. The Casino is as much a celebration of the art of sculpture as it is of architecture, and statuary has a key part to play in this visual paradox. The blind attic storey presented on the north and south sides, which is integrated as a vital aesthetic component of the building’s classical vocabulary (attractively alternating and contrasting with pediments on the intervening façades), is integral to the conceit, accommodating, as it does, the rooms of the upper floor. This fact is largely concealed by its sculptural treatment: the attic is decorated with swagged decorative panels framed on each side by two life-size classical statues and topped by an urn. The importance of these attic statues of classical deities to the building’s success is neatly illustrated by a comparison between James Malton’s view dating from shortly after

1 – Giovanni Battista Cipriani (1727-85), *VENUS*

1767, pencil, pen and black ink and brown wash on paper, 25 x 14 cm (private collection)