

THE GRAND STAIRCASE



The Grand Staircase retains the original frescoed decoration commissioned in 1649 by the palazzo's first owner, Francesco Moroni, from the painter Gian Giacomo Barbelli (1604-1656). **The frescoes are among the most important works created during the baroque period in Bergamo;** although the painter trained in Crema, he was active in Bergamo from the late 1630s in churches, oratories and private palazzos, including Palazzo Terzi. Described as the “only baroque artist in the region” and among the most prominent interior decorators of the period, his summons to Bergamo reflects his patrons’ awareness of the artistic innovations of the time. The frescoes in the staircase celebrate the Moroni family through episodes from the *Metamorphoses* by Apuleius. The decoration of the Grand Staircase betrays the importance of this space, the first that we encounter on entering. Barbelli painted the frieze, ceiling and walls with a stunning, immersive effect that gives the viewer a continuous narrative. At the end of the Grand Staircase, we come to the Vestibule, frescoed with religious subjects.



DID YOU KNOW...?

The frescoes were already celebrated in 1655 in the booklet called *The Mysterious Paintings of Palazzo Moroni*, by Father Donato Calvi (1613-1678), abbot of the nearby monastery of St Augustine, leading light of mid-17th-century culture in Bergamo, and the person responsible for conceiving the cycle of frescoes. Father Calvi was also one of the founders (along with Clemente Rivola and Bonifacio Agliardi) of the Accademia degli Eccitati, established in 1642.



The Grand Staircase in a photograph from the 1950-60s

The decoration of the Grand Staircase focuses on the relationship between **Cupid and Psyche**, figures in a mythical fable from the *Metamorphoses* (or *The Golden Ass*) by Apuleius, the 2nd-century Latin writer, orator and philosopher. The story of Psyche – a mortal woman who, after overcoming myriad trials, succeeds in marrying Cupid, the son of Venus, becoming immortal in the process – symbolises Francesco Moroni's social ascent.

Despite his lack of a noble title, thanks to his temperament he succeeds in achieving prestige and wealth.

In the story, Venus – envious of Psy-



Gian Giacomo Barbelli, *Venus on her Chariot*, 1649, fresco

che's beauty – asks her son, Cupid, to make her fall in love with the most monstrous creature on earth. Confronted with the young woman's beauty, Cupid mistakenly strikes his own foot, falling hopelessly in love with her. On the ceiling, we see the first episodes of the tale: *Venus on the chariot*; *Venus asking Cupid to ruin Psyche*; and *Cupid in love with Psyche*. On the frieze: *Psyche being led by her parents to the mountain*; *Zephyr leading Psyche to Cupid's palace*; *Psyche meeting the sisters*; *Psyche lighting a lamp to see Cupid*; *Cupid moving away from Psyche*; *Venus having Psyche beaten*; *Psyche's trials*; *Psyche being welcomed to Mount Olympus*.



Gian Giacomo Barbelli, *Wealth and Antiquity*, 1649

The Palazzo Moroni frescoes by Gian Giacomo Barbelli are also an homage to the patron, Francesco Moroni, who managed to create this wonderful residence without facing financial ruin. On the walls, paintings of nine bronze sculptures within a landscape generate the illusion of "breaking through" the wall. The figures that represent the qualities of a family worthy of being remembered through time are recognisable from inscriptions on the pedestals: *Antiquity*, *Nobility*, *Sanctity*, *Honour*, *Fortune*, *Wealth*, *Dignity*, *Courage* and *Learning*.



The Grand Staircase, view from the mezzanine



Gian Giacomo Barbelli, *Venus and Cupid*, 1649



Gian Giacomo Barbelli, *Sanctity*, 1649