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Introduction by Leonard Barkan
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The Art Institute of Chicago

Portrait-painting, once used to transmit the most exact likenesses of individuals through the ages, has died out completely.... Everyone so thoroughly prefers to display rich materials rather than likenesses by which they can be known; so in the midst of all this they fill their galleries with old pictures and collect images of total strangers, themselves believing that the only honor is in high price.... No likeness lives on: they leave behind portraits of their money, not of themselves.... Idleness has destroyed the arts, and since there are no portraits of our spirits, our bodies are also neglected. It was otherwise in the halls of our ancestors: portraits were displayed to be seen..., to be carried as likenesses in every family funeral procession in the company of all who had ever been part of the clan.

This lament for the death of portraiture among the great Roman families expresses the understanding that the continuities of power and family influence in Roman society depend on the making of portraits and their ritual display. But who is this Roman aristocracy, whose decay portends the death of art—and vice versa? European nobility has generally defined itself historically by its lands and by its relation to a hereditary sovereign. Rome has had neither. To be sure, popes have occasionally been succeeded by nephews; and landed foreigners (i.e., Italians from the north or south) have sometimes become powerful families in Rome. On the whole, however, the Roman nobility has for centuries needed to sustain itself more as an idea than as a center of power.

The lines above might offer us a starting date for these anxieties and the efforts of the aristocracy to define itself by portraiture. Perhaps 1870, when Italy had become unified at the price of a Piedmontese take-over of the capital city? Or 1797, when Napoleon humiliated the papal seat and its aristocratic families by stripping the city of hundreds of its greatest works of art? Or 1527, on the occasion of the devastating sack by Imperial troops? Or anytime in the fourteenth century, when the papacy had moved to Avignon and the city was left to the violent factionism of a few remaining powerful families? Perhaps one of the failed attempts of the Roman nobility to assert power over the Pope as late as 1511 or as early as 1305, or alternatively, the attempts of the populace to assert power over the nobility in 1143 or 1347? In fact, the lines were written by Pliny the Elder in the Natural History (35.4-6) a few years before his death in the eruption of Vesuvius that levelled Pompeii in the first century A.D. Already, Rome had begun to be a ruin that had seen better days; already, art and aristocracy were the focal points of the ruin.

The picture, like Patrick Faigenbaum's photographs, is not altogether bleak. Some great Roman families, like the Massimos, may go back to Pliny's time and beyond. The Colonnas, the Orsinis, the Savellis provided popes, patrons, and humanists—as well as street fighters—throughout the Middle Ages. Yet the very Renaissance that glorified Rome witnessed the eclipse and extinction of much of the city's rooted aristocracy. Near the beginning of the seventeenth century, however, a strenghtened papacy became for the first

time in centuries a native Roman institution. An aristocracy was born, or perhaps better, invented. Just how this could happen in Rome at a certain moment we have learned from Pliny's negative example: the artist and the noble patron fashion each other. Could the aristocratic Rome of the Barberinis and the Borgheses, the Ludovisis and Odescalchis have existed at all without the work that Gian Lorenzo Bernini and his fellow artists executed to honor these noble patrons? Impossible to say. What is clear is that the image-making of the seventeenth century gave the Roman aristocracy its legitimacy.

Which brings us to the very latest chapter of these inventions. Patrick Faigenbaum is a young photographer who has devoted his career to the portraiture of families. These range from photographs of single individuals understood *sub specie familiae* to group representations of a whole clan; they also range from his own relatives (with whom he began this work) to the portraiture of Italian aristocrats in the present exhibition. Given the persistent power of image-making as practiced in the time of Bernini, it comes as no surprise that we find its mark in these photographs. The nobility we see here, with its seventeenth-century pedigrees, live in seventeenth-century palazzi among seventeenth-century knickknacks. But even where the decor or the family origin reflects other ages, the seventeenth century emerges in the photographic eye that disposes the individuals and their surroundings. Throughout its history, aristocratic portraiture has derived its greatest energies from the tension between human subjects and their milieu—whether that milieu is a woolen cloak or a grand salon reproduced with every touch of realistic detail. The seventeenth century is the great age of the family portrait in a rich setting; it is also the great age for the depiction of interiors, with or without inhabitants.

Faigenbaum's family portraits are portraits of possessions; they are pictures of pictures. They often stage the individuals in formal groupings on different planes, arrayed in grand, up-sloping perspectives that speak of the conspicuous consumption of space at the same time as they enclose that space tightly. They are portraits of light and dark, with, at times, an almost violent emphasis upon the light source, itself often an expensive possession (though occasionally a humble holder for an incandescent bulb). Among the most highly decorated—and troubling—of the possessions are the children, sometimes gift-wrapped ornaments, sometimes miniature adults. All of these effects evoke that great age of interior portraiture. More precisely, they evoke the one work that expresses and encodes the history of interior portraiture with its enclosure, poses, possessions, children, light, disposition of figures: Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas (The Maids of Honor)*.

Velázquez's famous portrait of the royal family (1656; now in the Prado, Madrid), in which the artist depicted himself at an easel, with ladies-in-waiting, chamberlains, servants, and dwarves, has become the nursery of post-structuralist and post-modernist epistemologies of vision and representation, above all because of the self-consciousness of the creating eye. While Faigenbaum the photographer is not in person looking back at us, as Velázquez the painter is, his presence is every-

where, in the stagings, in the light, in the consciousness we read in the faces, and most obviously, in effects like the mirror that reflects a whole family or the lens opening that is really an elegent circular window in the palazzo. The reflexivity of *Las Meninas* translates well into camera consciousness. And while something of Velázquez is lost in this translation, there is an inevitable gain. For despite the provenance of the families, the interiors, and the staging, these are not—nor can they be—seventeenth-century pictures. The self-consciousness that arranges these images, so like Velázquez but three centuries later, creates not only an epistemological but also a historicizing distance between artist and subject. The (all but) visible photographer, in other words, interjects an even more alien point of view in these aristocratic interiors than does the visible painter of *Las Meninas* in the midst of the Spanish royal family. As a consequence, these images become disturbingly transhistorical, teasing us by showing off the gap between the ancient Roman aristocracy, immured in their safe houses, and the contemporary photographer, who has somehow gained access—though through no visible door. The question of this access becomes the subtext of the images. Is Faigenbaum a society photographer (in other words, a junior member of the club), paid to retail the images that the nobility wishes to convey? Is he a revolutionary pretending to be a sycophant? Is he a tripod-bearing Bernini who has persuaded these aristocrats to emulate their ancestors by submitting to the discomfort of posing and to the danger of being exposed? The last is the likeliest, but all are true in part. For these images do by turns glorify, humiliate, and capture their subjects. The "subjects," of course, are not merely the individuals but also the rich material surroundings in which they display themselves. These photographs may be noble likenesses to be transmitted through the ages; they may be portraits of money. Pliny's drama of the arts and the aristocracy lives on.

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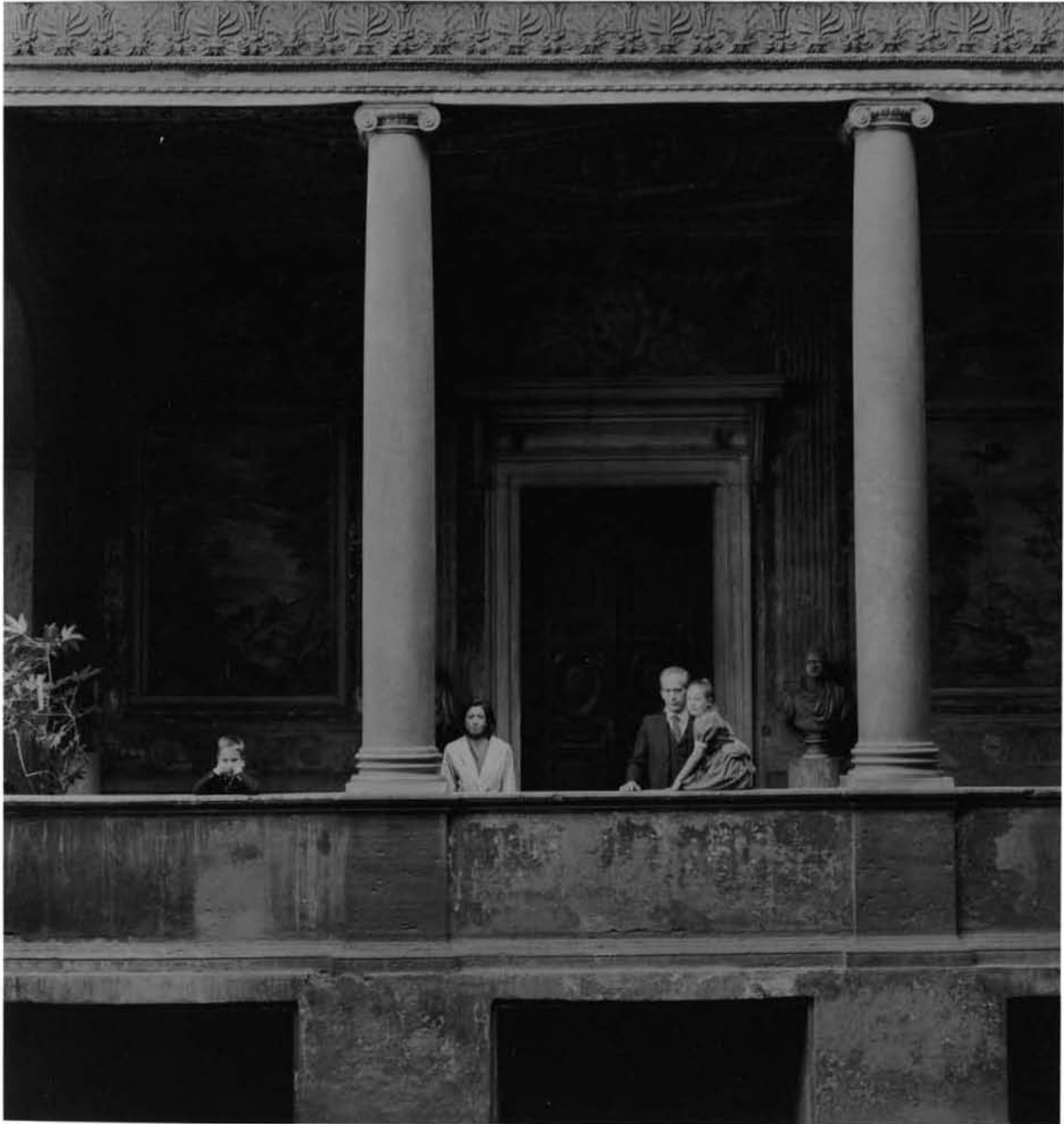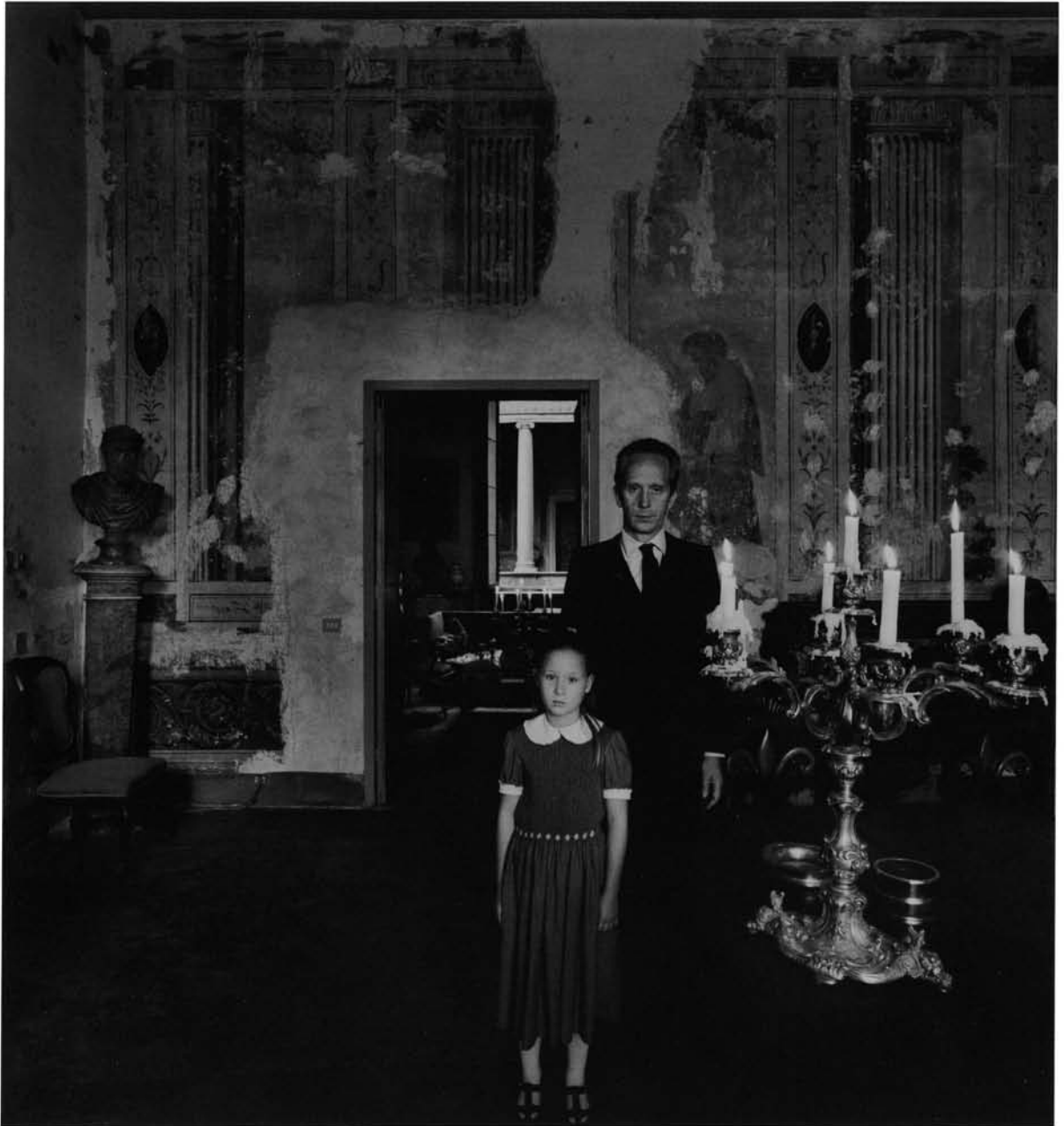
BARBERINI
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PATRICK FAIGENBAUM
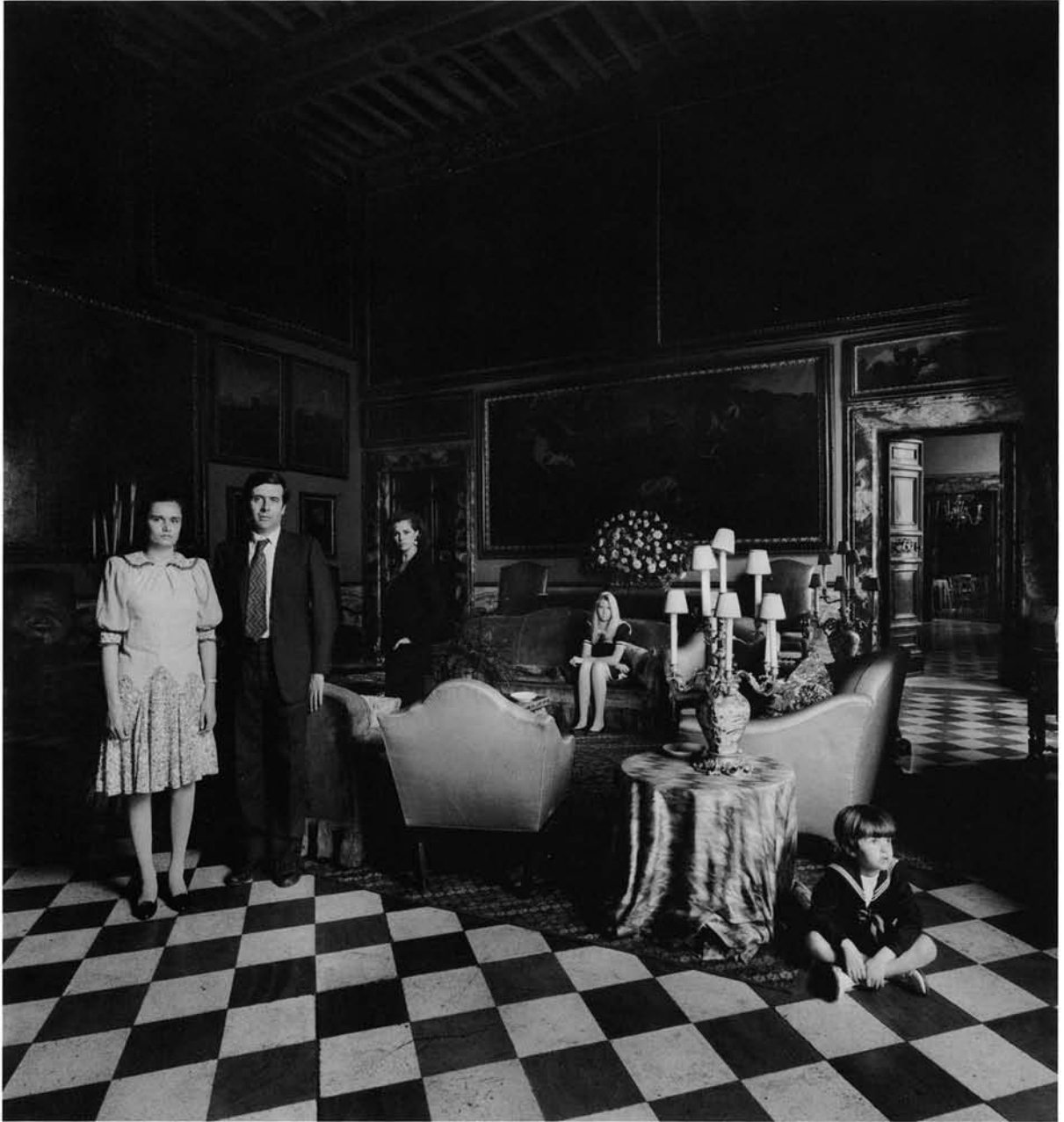
Patrick Faigenbaum is a portraitist. Although trained as a painter, he ultimately chose photography for its ability to describe facial features, capture likenesses, and firmly fix subjects in time, convinced that "for such tasks, photography as an art is inarguably superior to painting (1)." Today, he practices his art methodically, obsessively, never straying from his chosen path.

Born in 1954 in Paris, Faigenbaum studied painting and drawing from 1968 to 1973. He began photographing in 1973 with no particular introduction to photography and without classes in either a vocational school or an art school. There were no photographers among his friends, nor did anyone encourage him to pursue this route. An artist who was destined at first to be a painter, who chose photography along the way and became exclusively a portrait photographer, Faigenbaum, in effect, personifies an important transition in the history of art. For portraiture, a longstanding tradition in painting, has become a photographic specialty.

During the 1970s, when fine art, or "creative," photography in France was dominated by reportage or an illustrative approach to the medium, Faigenbaum continued his explorations apart from the mainstream, without concerning himself with the rules or practices of the professional discipline. He never sought commercial work, preferring instead to apply for grants for creative assistance. He did not pay hommage to French masters such as Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Doisneau, and Edouard Boubat. Instead his mentors were Richard Avedon, W. Eugene Smith, and, particularly, Bill Brandt.

In 1976, Faigenbaum made a series of studio portraits on white backgrounds in the style of Avedon. Later that year he visited Brandt, who advised him to give up this "abstract" studio approach and to examine his subject in greater depth by photographing them in the decor and surroundings of their everyday life. This proved to be crucial advice. The following year, he made a photograph of his mother lying on her bed that is the most powerful and troubling of Faigenbaum's early images. Fifteen days later, Faigenbaum visited Avedon and Smith in New York. When shown this portrait, both photographers recognized an exceptional vision and the beginning of a promising body of work. "I had never seen anyone photograph their mother in such a way," Avedon responded, and he recommended that Faigenbaum read Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. In Kafka, Faigenbaum recognized a similar spirit and method of working. The manner in which the writer created a powerful ambience through the minute and detailed description of situations and scenes paralleled the way Faigenbaum would later construct his photographs.

Upon returning to France, Faigenbaum at first photographed his parents, relatives, and friends in their own surroundings. For the photographer, this was an exploration of himself as well, perhaps even a therapeutic one. He sought the truth in fiction as well as in the humble, but acute, description of his subjects. The style and direction he would eventually follow in his Italian portraits is suggested in these early photographs: the formal point of view and frontal positioning of the camera, the careful arrangement of his subjects, the

relationships suggested between the figures and the surrounding objects and decor, the theatrical quality, the sharpness of detail, the meticulous framing, and the sculptural use of light. The ancestral galleries of the old patrician mansions of Rome carefully composed and bathed in chiaroscuro lighting were prefigured in Faigenbaum's Paris.

In the past four years, Faigenbaum's vision developed outside of the Parisian middle-class environment in which he has lived since childhood. He visited the Italian aristocracy in search of the subjects and interiors of the European pictorial tradition that has been in place since the Renaissance. His journey began, logically, in Florence in 1983 and 1984. He spent a large part of the following three years in Rome. It is not surprising that Faigenbaum began this exploration after first "ennobling" his family and friends through photographs. For the obsession is the same, transferred to another social sphere, though less intimate, less personal. Faigenbaum's method is further accentuated by the idea of systematic portrayal: he will travel next to Naples and then on to Sicily. With the Italian portraits he has transformed the subject of family mythology from the autobiographic to the historical, reconstructing a part of the distant past.

Although he had no initial contact with the aristocracy of Florence, Faigenbaum gained access to these families through persistance and determination. During brief visits to sheltered, remote, Florentine palaces closed around interior courts, the portraitist quickly adjusted to his surroundings and identified the appropriate sites for his photographs. With authority, he continued to orchestrate the formal positioning of his subjects in their environment, as would a stage director, to create true tableaux vivants.

These images, linking the ancestral portraits on the walls with the genetic lineage of the actual models, accentuate a particular relationship between the past and the present. The figures, carefully posed (as actors would be staged), take their places in a web of resemblances and analogies. These same themes are seen in Faigenbaum's Roman portraits, but in even greater force: the compositions are more complex and the space rendered in the pictures is vast and expansive. The prints themselves are larger and generally lighter than the Florentine photographs. Faigenbaum explored Rome as he did Florence, studying its geography and observing its architecture. He discovered another aristocracy with other palace interiors—larger, more sumptuous and more spacious. The resulting group of photographs suggests the distinct character of Rome, just as the preceeding series reflects Florence. Here, more than ever, the careful construction and staging of his scenarios are of principal concern to the foreign visitor. More so than the Italian aristocracy or ancient European tradition, it is the vocabulary and syntax of pictorial fiction that Faigenbaum redefines using photographic methods.

Jean-François Chevrier

1. Jean Cassou, cited by André Vigneau in *A Brief History of Art from Niepce to Today*, 1963 (Paris: Robert Laffont Editions), p. 73

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