

# THE MOST INFLUENTIAL ARCHITECT IN HISTORY: ANDREA PALLADIO TOOK THE ...

By Ada Louise Huxtable

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## THE MOST INFLUENTIAL ARCHITECT IN HISTORY

Andrea Palladio took the lessons of classical antiquity and turned them into some of the most beautiful buildings of the Renaissance.

**By Ada Louise Huxtable**

If architecture is the inescapable art, then Andrea Palladio is the inescapable architect. For more than 400 years, his work has dominated the style and substance of the Western world. It is no exaggeration to call Palladio the most influential architect in history.

And yet those who admired him most never saw the buildings they copied — his palaces adorned Vicenza and his villas were in the inaccessible, swampy and often desolate land beyond Venice called the Veneto. Some are as hard to reach today as they were in the 16th century.

Those who could made the pilgrimage; those who could not relied on Pal-

ladio's own words and drawings in what are certainly some of the most famous books on architecture ever written, the "Quattro Libri," published by Palladio in Venice in 1570. These books were translated, reprinted and circulated widely; the lessons that Palladio drew from classical antiquity and turned into some of the most elegant and beautiful buildings of the Renaissance were dis-

seminated through Europe and America in the following centuries. Palladio is the source for the England of Inigo Jones and Sir Christopher Wren, and for classical America from Colonial to modern times. His works were an important part of Thomas Jefferson's library.

Today the trip to the Veneto is a revered itinerary, but those who cannot go have an alternative this summer. An exhibition called simply "Andrea Palladio" can be seen at New York's Cooper-Hewitt Museum (2 East 91st Street) through Sept. 11, and it offers an opportunity second only to experiencing the originals to know what the genius of Palladio was all about.

The message comes across particularly well in the spacious rooms of the former Carnegie Mansion — now the home of the Cooper-Hewitt — with their end-of-the-line Renaissance and classi-

cal references in carved-wood walls and coffered ceilings. There are 16 huge models of Palladio's buildings, like giant dollhouses, that are totally at home in the axial symmetry of these traditional interiors. These churches and villas, executed in pale, unpainted wood and built to scale with exquisite delicacy and skill, fill the museum's whole first floor (the Villa Trissino at Vicenza is 15 by 16 feet.) They are supplemented by original Palladio drawings lent by the Royal Institute of British Architects, the Cooper-Hewitt's own copies of the "Quattro Libri," and superb photographs of the buildings as they appear today by Joseph C. Farber and Phyllis Dearborn Massar. The show is a lovely experience of several levels of the past.

There is, of course, no substitute for seeing the actual buildings, but in some ways this exhibition, organized by the

Centro Internazionale di Studi di Architettura Andrea Palladio in Vicenza and now touring the United States, crystallizes the Palladian ideal. There are examples, such as the Villa Trissino and the Villino Giovanile, where the buildings were never constructed or where only a fragment was completed, and the models for these projects have been made from Palladio's own drawings for an impeccable re-creation of his intentions. Since both the drawings and the intentions were better known than his buildings, this graphic work is an outstanding illustration of the influence of the projected ideal rather than of the realized result.

The models are a clear demonstration of Palladian principles. They instruct in Palladio's subtlety of proportions and his insistence on a pure geometry of architectural form. Their great elegance makes us very aware of the intellectual humanism that creatively transformed classical archeology into something totally new called the Renaissance.

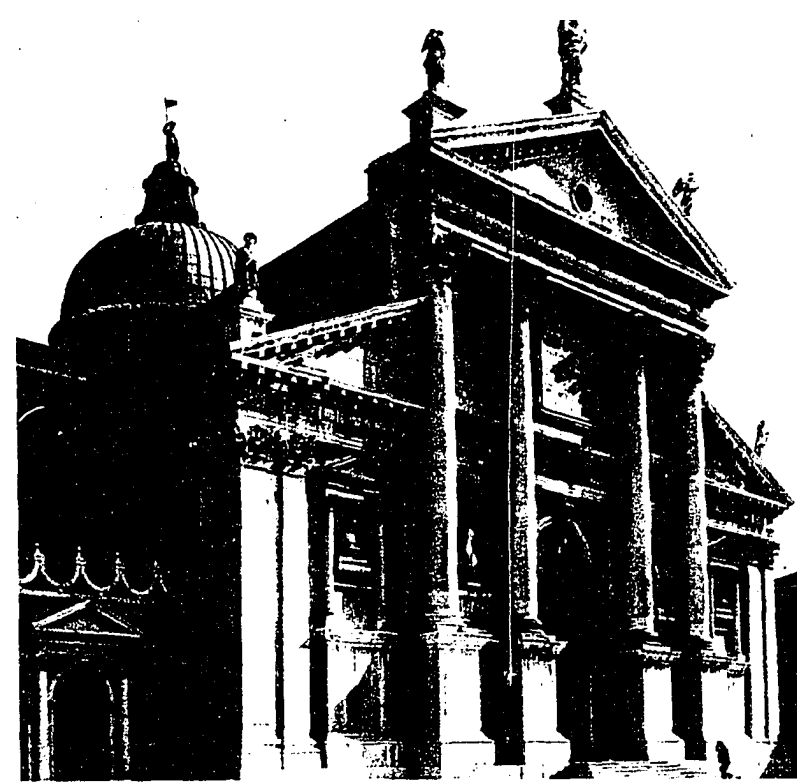
But the models are also abstract and theoretical, and their cool, diagrammatic clarity is something that travelers to the source will rarely experience. There is little to suggest this architecture's overwhelming power, its extreme sensuousity, the magic of frescoes and *trompe l'oeil* interiors painted by Veronese, the bittersweet patina of time. This is an architecture of magnificent presence. The buildings themselves have been mellowed, transformed and even ravaged by the centuries and the elements; their surroundings today range from pastoral tranquility to industrial pollution.

The real richness and romanticism of this work, Palladio's consummate understanding of the color and light that were so much a part of the Venetian sensibility, the impact of great art that is like a blow to the mind and the viscera, must be experienced in person, at the source. But the photographs suggest these qualities well, and the exhibition performs the rare feat of presenting Palladio on the two levels of his art — the intellectual and the sensory aspects that are so much the spirit of the cinquecento. It is no wonder that his work has evoked a universal response.

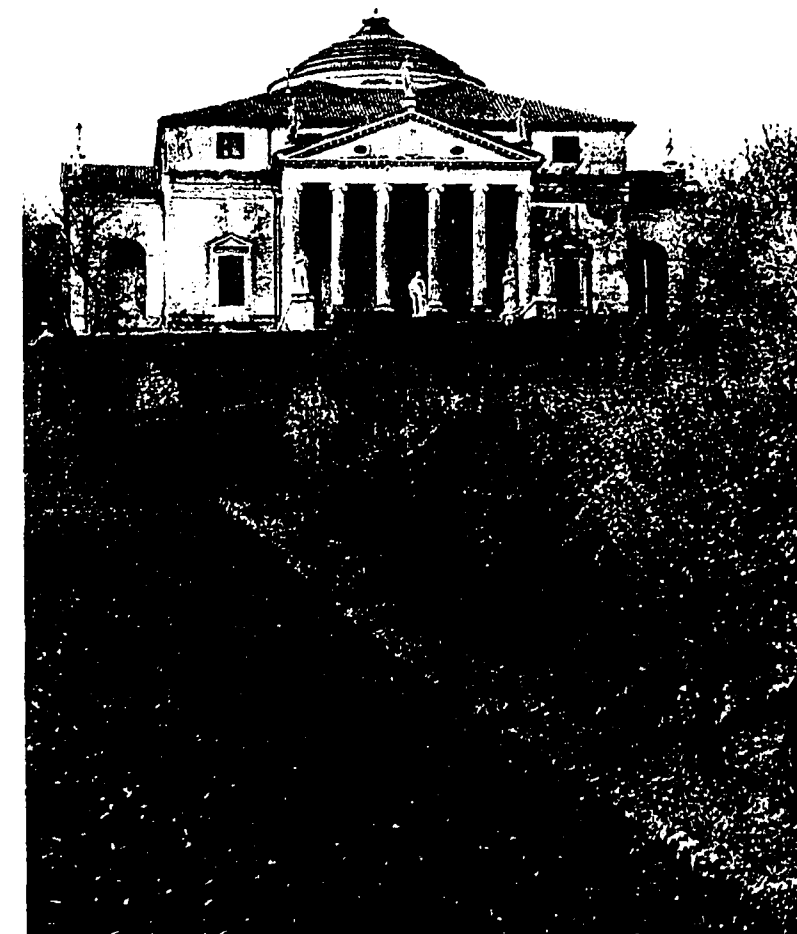
Palladian villas have marvelous, evocative names; one thinks of Malcontenta, and of the Villa Rotonda — a name and form that echo from Italy to Jefferson's University of Virginia. Their owners were Chiericati, Emo, Trissino, Thiene and Valmarana; it was a mellifluous, aristocratic roster.

But these villas were not glamorous rural retreats; they were working agricultural estates. Today, they are ruins, museums and monuments. Their owners moved from Venice because of that glorious city's declining economy in the mid-16th century; they pinned their hopes on an agricultural revolution and land reclamation that made the move financially attractive. New houses had

Ada Louise Huxtable is a member of the editorial board and is architecture critic of *The Times*.



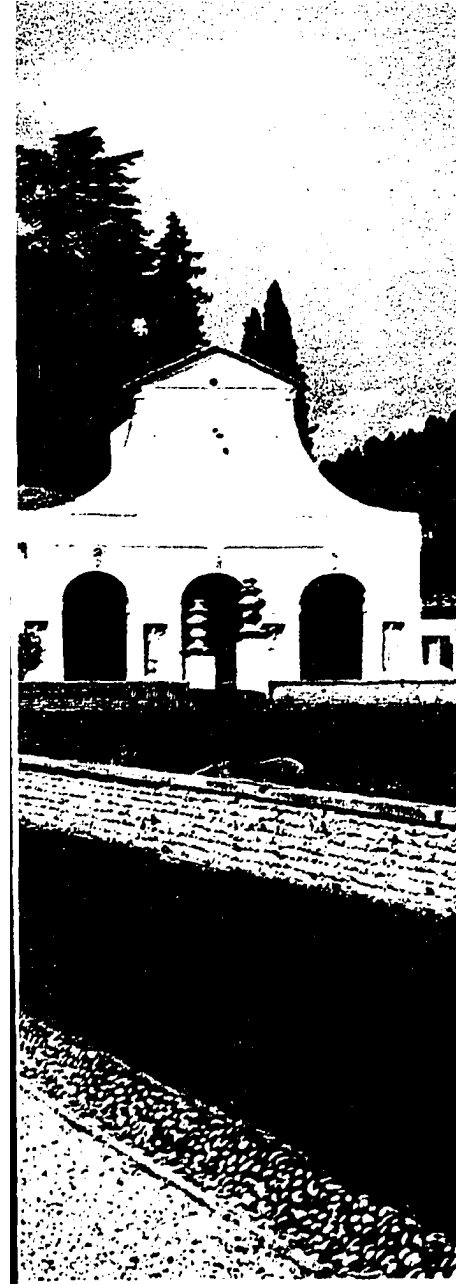
Seen across the Venetian lagoon, the giant columns of San Giorgio Maggiore have been part of the city's image and travellers' fond memories for four centuries.



The Villa Rotonda is one of Palladio's most famous works. It combines nobility and nature for one of the most beautiful, and most copied, buildings in the world.



Elegance and utility mark the Villa Barbaro at Maser, in northern Italy. This 16th-century palace was also a working farm. The templelike central pavilion linked to outbuildings by graceful arcades is a Palladian invention. The arcades were barns. There were hay and dovecotes under the eaves, and Veronese frescoes in the rooms.



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