

Palladio's Vicenza: an Unheralded Triumph in Late Renaissance Italy

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Abstract: In order to understand Palladio and Renaissance Culture in Vicenza, we have to explain how it was that a group of provincial aristocrats in a backwater city made a durable revolution in architecture and built the first permanent theatre in post-Roman Europe. It is very unusual that such a thing should have happened so late without the centralized patronage of a court. There is no similar effort south of the Alps, unless perhaps the invention of baroque painting and the final refinement of baroque music in seicento Bologna.

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At 11.30 on the night of March 3, 1585, in the city of Vicenza, in the Venetian mainland of northern Italy, the curtain went up on a new production of Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*. By the time the chorus began to sing, many of the spectators had been waiting in the theatre for more than eight hours. An eye-witness reported that 2,000 foreigners, including many foreign noblemen, had come to Vicenza for the event.

Although the production was sumptuous, most people were apparently more interested in the theatre itself than in the play - and no wonder, for this was the public unveiling of the first real, permanent theatre that anyone had built in Europe since the fall of the Roman Empire, more than a thousand years before. This was the Teatro Olimpico, the last work, many say the greatest work, of Vicenza's Andrea Palladio, one of the greatest architects in history. It was owned, and had been paid for, by the Accademia Olimpica, a group of Vicentine noblemen, scholars, and artists devoted to the cultivation of mathematics and classical literature.

What those first spectators saw, in their long eight-hour wait before the rising of the curtain, was a unique thing, a faithful reproduction of an ancient Roman theatre as

Palladio and his fellow Olimpiani understood it. If the spectators had read Daniele Barbaro's 1555 Venetian edition of the Roman architectural writer Vitruvius, a book on which Palladio had worked extensively, they would have noted how faithfully the new Vicentine theatre conformed to the published diagrams of ancient Roman theatres. It was an amphitheatre, with curving benches for seating and a semi-circular orchestra at the bottom. The backdrop behind the stage was the façade of an ancient palace, apparently built in stone, with three stories of columns, architraves, windows, and pediments. And all around – on the backdrop façade as well as on the colonnade that curved around the top of the seats, were statues, sixty-six of them, life-sized, all of men in ancient dress, all apparently of stone. It must have been astonishing. There was nothing like it in the world. Even the theatres at princely courts were merely temporary affairs, wooden stages erected in rooms that served other purposes at other times. This was a real theatre.

If you had been in the audience that night, waiting patiently in the new amphitheatre for eight hours before the start of the play, you would have had plenty of time, not merely to enjoy your surroundings, but to think about them. It would not have taken you long to conclude that Palladio and his fellow Olimpiani idealized ancient Rome, and that they were seeking to equal the grandeur of the ancients by copying their works. You would almost assuredly have approved of this - the desire to imitate the ancients was, of course, one of the distinguishing marks of the Renaissance, which you would presumably have shared; and you would have acknowledged that Palladio and his colleagues had imitated antiquity with unusual fidelity and unusual skill.

1. Coming to Vicenza

Perhaps, though, you would have taken the imitation of antiquity for granted. After all, the architecture and sculpture of the Teatro Olimpico were of a piece with the architecture and art that were common in Vicenza in the age of Andrea Palladio, from the mid-1530s to the 1580s. It was the very artistic air that Vicentines breathed. If you had been a Vicentine, in March of 1585, you would have been breathing that air all your life. If you had not been a Vicentine, if you had been one of those 2,000 foreigners who came to Vicenza for opening night, you might have come from a place where the

commitment to ancient practices was weaker, and Vicenza might have thrilled you, might even have shocked you.

Suppose you had approached Vicenza from the north, from Marostica or Bassano. You would have passed the Villa Trissino, just outside the city gates. Here, in 1538, the great literary nobleman Giangiorgio Trissino had created Vicenza's first work of true classical architecture. More momentously, during that construction project, Trissino had discovered a talented workman named Andrea dalla Gondola, brought him into the house, taught him Latin and the formal side of architecture, and given him a new name, Palladio.

If you had approached the city from the south, from the flat cornfields that were making Vicentines rich, Vicenza would have announced itself to you with an even greater astonishment, the Villa Rotonda, dominating the road like a fortress, the most perfect expression of classical order in all of architecture, perhaps the most famous house in the world.

If, like most visitors, you had approached Vicenza from the east or the west, from the big cities of Padua or Verona, or the much bigger cities of Venice or Milan, you would have entered the city on its main street (now the Corso Palladio,) and you would have found yourself running a virtual gauntlet of Palladian buildings. As you walked or rode along, you would have begun with Palladio, continued with Palladio, and ended with Palladio. Contemporaries marveled at the amount of construction in Vicenza during this generation, and historians would be well advised to attempt to explain it.

2. Vicenza: Unheralded Triumph

Well advised indeed, because Palladio's Vicenza is not supposed to exist. By that I mean that Vicenza doesn't fit the standard story that historians tell about Renaissance Italy. This story, the founding myth of The Renaissance as a concept, was concocted in the second quarter of the nineteenth century as a way of demonstrating that the *bourgeoisie* – rich merchants in big cities – could be trusted to run nations; and the English use of a French word, *Renaissance*, to describe what is mainly an Italian phenomenon is a good clue that the concept of the Renaissance was part of the political debates in France in the decades after the French Revolution. According to the story,

then, the *bourgeoisie* came to power in a number of independent city-republics in northern Italy in the late middle ages, and this was great for everybody. The arts and sciences flourished in the brisk air of freedom, and the modern world – that is the world of the nineteenth century – almost came to be. Almost, but not quite. The standard story ends sadly, sometimes tragically. Just as everything was finally coming together, with Brunelleschi’s dome and the multi-form genius of Michelangelo and Leonardo, a series of catastrophes struck: trade routes shifted, big nations like France and Spain crossed the Alps with murderous armies, the Church revved up the Inquisition, and the *bourgeois* experiment failed. By the middle of the 1500s Italy was a backward, priest-ridden land of lords and peasants. There was still a great art, but it was all commissioned at the courts of princes and popes.

That is the standard story, told in roughly the same way by nineteenth-century liberals and twentieth-century Marxists, and it offers little hope for Palladio’s Vicenza. The age of Palladio fell in the middle of the 1500s, at just the time when Italy was supposed to have become a backward land of lords and peasants and inquisitors, at just the time when princely and papal courts were supposed to have a monopoly on art and culture.

The standard story is not all wrong. It is undeniable, for instance, that princely courts and the papal court acquired enormous advantages in this period with respect to artistic patronage. A good example is Mantua, fifty miles southwest of Vicenza. Mantua had Dukes, the Gonzaga, and the Gonzaga Dukes of Mantua did a famously good job of turning taxes and war booty into art. When they had the money, they often focused it on remarkable works of painting, architecture, music, and drama. Thus, although Mantua was neither bigger nor more prosperous than Vicenza, the fact that much of its income and wealth were at the disposal of one individual at any given time allowed that individual to buy the best artists and craftsmen in Europe: paintings by Mantegna, buildings by Alberti and Giulio Romano, music by Monteverdi.

Vicenza could not do what Mantua was doing. Vicenza had no court. It was not even an independent city-state. It was merely one of seven subordinate cities in the mainland territory of Venice. No one in Vicenza had enough money to snap his fingers like a Gonzaga and summon great artists. If the standard story is right, there could have been no great art in Vicenza.

Yet Palladio's Vicenza created great art. Moreover, Palladio's Vicenza created lots of great art, not just a few isolated examples, created it for more than half a century, and created it in medium, architecture, that was, and is, very expensive. This was not supposed to happen in Vicenza, and historians hardly ever talk about it. Even architectural historians – and Palladio is a big business – ignore the community of people who commissioned and paid for Palladio's buildings.

Let us think about this community of people. They were important. As individuals and families, they hired Palladio to build villas and palaces. As members of groups and committees, they hired Palladio to rebuild their city hall, to enlarge their cathedral, to manage the decorations for important civic festivals, and, late in his life, to design the Teatro Olimpico. Who were these people? Why did they want the kind of architecture that Palladio gave them? How did they pay for it? How, in short, did a small provincial city, which had never before achieved artistic eminence of any kind, quite suddenly become an important center of a very expensive art?

To begin, it is well to understand that the political and economic facts of life in Vicenza do not fit the standard story of late-Renaissance history at all. While the story says that Vicenza should have been economically poor and politically backward, Palladio's Vicenza was a boomtown with a broad-based republican constitution.

Economically, the story condemns Vicenza to poverty, and all Italy with it, by asserting that Italy's wealth depended on international trade along certain long-distance routes that were becoming obsolete by the mid-1500s. It is true that Italy's long-distance trade was declining in Palladio's day, but Vicenza did not suffer from this decline. In fact, the decline of Venice as a maritime empire was an economic boon to Vicenza. As Venice lost piece after piece of her maritime empire, Venetians and their mainland subjects re-oriented their economy through a massive, unplanned, and successful effort of import substitution - making and growing things that had formerly been imported. For Venice, the effort of import substitution was big enough to balance the steady decline of the city's overseas trade. For Vicenza, which had never participated in overseas trade on any large scale, import substitution was a huge windfall. Vicentines were fully aware of this. They participated vigorously in import substitution and played an important role in it.

In manufacturing, Vicenza and several subordinate towns became important centers of cloth making, particularly in the high-value manufacture of silk cloth. In agriculture, with Venice's overseas supplies increasingly uncertain, Vicentine landowners embarked on vast projects to drain lakes and bogs and turn them into productive farmland. Vicentine farmers rapidly adopted American corn, which provided exemplary yields on the wet bottom lands newly created. And Vicenza benefited enormously from this, more perhaps than any city in the Veneto except Venice itself, because Vicentines owned an unusually high percentage of the land around their city. Things were very different in the territories around Padua and Treviso, where Venetian patricians had bought a high percentage of farmland and were earning a high percentage of booming agricultural profits. Vicentines owned the territory around Vicenza. They reaped high returns on large investments, and they spent their profits close to home.

Politically, the standard story of Late Renaissance decadence asserts that the republican institutions of the medieval commune had disappeared or become ceremonial by the mid-1500s, crushed by secular and sacred monarchy. But Palladio's Vicenza retained its communal institutions in full vigor and used them for important undertakings in a large territory. Although Vicenza had been a possession of the Venetian Republic since 1404, the city retained its own government, its own legal system, and its traditional position of political dominance over its surrounding countryside, the Vicentine. While the Venetian Senate and the Council of Ten made decisions on war and peace, the 25,000 citizens of Vicenza used their institutions to govern a rural and small-town population of about 100,000 people. Vicentine documents invariably referred to the city as *res publica*, and the political institutions of Vicenza were as republican as those of any independent city-state in the thirteenth century. There was no duke, nor any one dominant family.

It is worth noting the difference between the city halls of Mantua and Vicenza in that period. In Mantua, where the Gonzaga Dukes had reduced local government to a thing of shadows, the Ducal Palace swelled to six hundred rooms, while the city hall, the Palazzo della Ragione attracted no significant investment and retains its medieval form to this day. In Vicenza, by contrast, the rebuilding of the city hall was Palladio's first great project. This big, multi-decade civic investment gave the city its dominant image

and fixed the name “Palladian” on an architectural motif that Bramante had invented and Serlio published.

Vicenza’s republic was comparatively broad-based. The Grand Council, the basic city assembly from which all smaller councils and boards were recruited, had 500 members, almost as many as the House of Commons in England and fully twelve times as many as the House of Lords at the same period. Offices rotated frequently, and the man who kept the list of Vicenza’s noble families registered more than 200 of them – an astonishingly high number of families for a district with only 125,000 people. In 1585 a city of Vicenza’s size, 25,000 people, would have had only about 7,000 adult men. For 500 of these 7,000 to participate directly in government – more than seven percent of the total - is a remarkably high figure, higher than modern estimates of the citizen body of Periclean Athens, the birthplace of democracy.

This is not to say that the *res publica* of Vicenza was a democracy. Far from it. There were noble families, and families that were almost noble, and they pretty much ran the show. But no Italian city republic had ever been a democracy, and Vicenza’s political class, in the age of Palladio, was unusually large and open by the standards of any pre-modern society.

3. Vicentine Society – A flat-topped pyramid

Vicentine society, then, was a pyramid with a broad, flat top. In wealth and numbers the leading families were like the gentry of an English county in the eighteenth century. Although Italian historians tend to obscure this fact, speaking of local notables in small cities like Vicenza as if they were the equals of English earls or French dukes, there were far too many noblemen and gentlemen in Vicenza for any of them to have been individually very rich or powerful. They were a gentry, grand in a modest way, powerful to the extent that they could stick together. Their sense of class solidarity was predictably strong, and they devoted considerable effort to projecting images of unruffled patrician harmony, despite the conflicts between individuals and families that were always bubbling beneath the surface and sometimes breaking out in brawls and bloodshed. Moreover, the Venetian system of governing the *terra ferma* possessions of

the Serenissima was such as to give with one hand while taking away with the other: Vicenza's gentry was nearly supreme at home and nearly powerless everywhere else.

Almost every prominent Vicentine family owned land, but hardly any owned enough to support the dignity of a noble house, and hardly any derived all of its income from land. Most had members who traded goods, loaned money, or practiced a learned profession (sometimes all three;) and successful families of merchants, manufacturers, and professionals tended to gain acceptance as noblemen within a generation or two. Many Vicentine gentlemen were lawyers, juriconsults, or notaries – not only because Vicenza was argumentative and property-conscious, but also because the government of Vicenza exercised political and judicial authority over almost all of its countryside and needed trained men of law to do the work of government. Of the twenty-four administrative jurisdictions in the Vicentine, only two were administered by private families through feudal courts; the rest were governed by Vicentine governors and judged by Vicentine judges, all of them elected or appointed through the kind of complicated machinery that Italian communes developed in the twelfth and thirteenth century to prevent the consolidation of power. The lives of these men were not very different from those of English JPs – except that they held their posts by virtue of municipal election, not through hereditary lordship.

Unlike the English gentry, the noblemen and gentlemen of Vicenza had their primary residences in the city, and were required by law to do so; but this difference is less important to the student of society than to the student of architecture. And, in general, the flat-topped pyramid of Vicenza resembles the English gentry very closely. In general, the two societies needed to solve the same kinds of problems and solved them in similar ways, though not always in exactly the same ways. Consider the central problem of any ruling class that intends to remain stable over time, inheritance. Palladio's Vicenza and Georgian England both needed to balance the needs of multiple children against the strong desire of families to retain power by keeping estates intact. Unlike their English counterparts in the eighteenth century, Vicentine families could not use primogeniture to hold their estates intact from generation to generation. But a combination of ingenuity and family pride usually solved this problem, albeit sometimes in un-English ways. Wills were the first line of defense. Not surprisingly, they tended to be very complex, and, when they were not complex enough, lawsuits and physical

violence among brothers, step-brothers, half-brothers, and even cousins were far from uncommon. Then too, like the English gentry, Vicentines often used the Church and the army to absorb excess male children, and careers in the red and the black could bring noble rewards. Paolo Almerico, for whom Palladio designed the Villa Rotonda, had left Vicenza for Rome as a young man and risen through the ecclesiastical hierarchy to become a figure at the Papal Court; and hundreds of Vicentine gentlemen followed the profession of arms, both on behalf of the Venetian Republic and in the service of princes in Italy and elsewhere. When all else failed, brothers could, and often did, share the same house. Palladio's first independent commission, Casa Civena in Vicenza, was built to house no fewer than four brothers and had to be re-designed when one of them pulled out of the building partnership.

The pattern of land ownership in the Vicentine countryside confirms the sense that Vicenza's rulers were very small-scale people by comparison with English lords or the higher levels of the French nobility. Their holdings tended to be small and fragmented, with the result that management and rent-collection were laborious and litigious. Most Vicentine gentlemen managed their lands themselves – hence the importance of one of Palladio's greatest innovations, the revolutionary merger of palatial grandeur with farmhouse practicality that we call the Palladian villa.

Palladio's villas were the first small buildings in recorded history to strive for grandeur. With an average floor area of about 500 square metres, many of them are smaller than individual rooms in French chateaux or English country houses, but they make unabashed use of the grandest of architectural motifs. In particular, Palladio was the first architect to apply the temple front of ancient religious architecture to private houses, even very small ones. Palladio's villas, small houses that often incorporate barns and stables into compositions of deceptive grandeur, allowed their owners to run their agricultural businesses in a hands-on way without derogation.

4. Teatro Olimpico – a Masterpiece of Voluntary Cooperation

This, in brief, is the world that built Palladio's Teatro Olimpico. Illuminated by knowledge of Vicenza's social background, many apparently random details about the theatre suddenly shine forth as pieces of real historical evidence. On opening night, for instance, spectators had begun to arrive eight hours before the beginning of the play.

That is a telling historical detail. It shows that there was something like a free market for seats. The situation would have been very different at a court theatre, where seating (or standing) was assigned. The members of a graded court knew, as it were, where they stood, and they could afford to take their time.

The central fact about the Teatro Olimpico is that it was built by the voluntary efforts of private citizens. According to the (very detailed) minutes of the Academy, the members decided to build a theatre, used their influence to get the use of an abandoned municipal prison, and asked one of their members, Palladio, for a design. For the next four years, as construction moved haltingly forward, they wrestled with the problem of broad-based fundraising for an expensive structure. Through a bewildering succession of resolutions, committees, bright ideas, failures, and improvisations, they gathered enough money to nudge the building a little further every year, without somehow ever finishing it. Finally, as always happens when a large group tries to build a building, one man stepped up, made the project his personal mission, put in a lot of his own money, and pushed it through to completion.

The statues, incidentally, were part of the fundraising effort. Each was given by an individual member of the Academy; some are probably portraits of their donors, and the statue commissioned by Count Leonardo Valmarana, the man who finally finished the building, seems to represent the Emperor Charles V, a reminder of the close connections of the Valmarana with the Imperial court. As originally planned, the right to erect a statue cost sixty scudi. The sculptors received an average of seven scudi per statue, and the remaining fifty-three scudi went into the building fund. This was and remains an unusual thing in Europe, where expensive cultural monuments have generally risen at the behest of the state; but we Americans are used to this. It is our standard way of financing culture and charity. We buy bricks for playgrounds, name hospital rooms after our grandparents, and wallpaper the lobbies of our museums and concert halls with lists of donors. Alexis de Tocqueville famously noted that voluntary associations were an American peculiarity. Perhaps he should have read the minutes of the Accademia Olimpica

5. The Spirit of Palladian Architecture

Let us suppose, then, as seems plausible, that Palladio's Teatro Olimpico is an attempt to condense into durable art one or more important ideals that were current on the flat top of Vicenza's pyramid. What were those ideals? Let me suggest that the Teatro Olimpico gives us three important insights:

First, classicism. It is almost too obvious that this society held up classical antiquity as an ideal and was prepared to pursue the reconstruction of antiquity in a literal and sober way. By 1585 this kind of sober simplicity was out of style at princely and papal courts. Flamboyance, virtuosity, and individualism were hallmarks of Mannerism. But there is nothing Mannerist about Teatro Olimpico, nor anything even hinting at the Baroque. The stage set is particularly eloquent on this point. At a time when moveable sets were already common, and on the eve of the flowering of Baroque stage machinery – flying chariots, trapdoors, transformations of gardens into palaces – the society that built the Teatro Olimpico was sober enough, detractors might say unimaginative enough, to believe that one noble backdrop would serve for any play worth watching. That their approach turned out to be a theatrical dead end does not make it any less consistent with the rest of their world view, or invalidate it as an approach to other aspects of life.

Second, grandeur, even on a small scale. This society valued grandeur, and it built grandly whenever it could, as in the colossal veneer of columns and arches with which Palladio wrapped the old city hall. But this society did not limit grandeur to big buildings or public buildings. It felt comfortable bringing grandeur even to small spaces like the Teatro Olimpico or to small buildings like Palladio's villas. Most historical societies have felt that small buildings should be treated informally, and attempts to build grandly on a small scale usually attract pejoratives like “indecorous,” or “pretentious,” or “ridiculous,” or, in the United States today, the new noun “McMansion.” Palladio's Vicenza did not do this. Small-scale grandeur was celebrated, not stigmatized, and one of Palladio's enduring contributions was a series of techniques, both in design and in construction, that brought Roman grandeur within the reach of builders with modest budgets. On the flat top of Vicenza's pyramid, even the richest families were not rich enough to build really big buildings, and they adjusted the taste of their society to fit their pocketbooks.

Third, and most complicated, something that we can only call equality. A restricted equality, to be sure, by modern standards; an equality only of those on the flat top of the pyramid; but an equality nonetheless, very different from anything visible at a princely court, very different from the standard story that historians tell about the failure of the Italian Renaissance in the sixteenth century. This equality is best seen in the statues. In a court theatre, there is one statue. In the Teatro Olimpico there are sixty-six, each representing a member of the Academy, each statue equal in size, dress, and materials. The inescapable conclusion is that the builders of this theatre wanted to be, or at least to appear to be, equals. Some were titled noblemen, some were artisans and middle-class professionals; but they were all members of the Accademia Olimpica, and nothing else was allowed to matter within the precincts of the Academy

Sober classicism, grandeur on a small scale, restricted equality. It is easy to see how the architecture and decoration of the Teatro Olimpico would have seemed in harmony with a city republic. I would like to suggest that Palladio's entire body of Vicentine work expresses the same social image of grandeur, classicism and equality.

This is what we should have in mind when we look at one of the most famous pages ever written, or drawn, by an architectural historian. Rudolf Wittkower was able, in one page of simple diagrams, to demonstrate that the floor plans of all of Palladio's villas were variations on a single theme. This astonishing unity of approach illustrates an essential truth about Palladio and his patrons: he designed, and they paid for, buildings that achieved their individuality within a context of group solidarity – or vice-versa if you prefer. Perhaps it is this harmony between the aesthetic convictions of the architect and the social and psychological convictions of his patrons that accounts for the sense of authenticity, of honesty, of solid grounding that perceptive observers have always noticed in Palladio's villas.

6. Vicentine and English Palladianism

Palladio is famous today because he was famous in Georgian England. He was not famous in Italy after his death, nor was he ever famous in France. It was the British who rediscovered him, more than a century after his death, and made his architecture the model for their own.

Significantly, the catalyst for English Palladianism was not an architect but a patron. Beginning in 1717, the Earl of Burlington re-discovered the architecture of Andrea Palladio and devoted the rest of his life to creating a Palladian architecture in England. He was successful, and Palladianism was England's dominant approach to architecture for most of the eighteenth century. Burlington's pavilion at his own Chiswick House is England's Villa Rotonda. His Assembly Rooms at York, built by the voluntary efforts of the local gentry and modeled on Palladio's interpretation of Vitruvius's Basilica at Fano, is England's Teatro Olimpico.

This was no accident. Georgian England was a large version of Palladio's Vicenza, a flat-topped pyramid that looked to ancient Rome for elegance and grandeur. A large gentry, relatively open to trade and to new families, organized by counties, governed England through a series of institutions that allowed modest gentlemen to pool their resources of power and exercise a collective dominance over the countryside. The gentlemen of Georgian England recognized themselves in the society of Palladio's patrons and found in Palladio's buildings the same practical and emotional satisfaction that Palladio's patrons had felt. And they found these satisfactions at a price they could afford to pay, because Palladio had discovered how to build grandly on a small scale with a limited budget.

For more than a century and a half historians have lamented the failure of the Italian Renaissance. The Italians, they say, almost invented the nineteenth century, the *bourgeois* world of commerce and industry in big cities, of disestablished churches and de-fanged aristocrats. But they failed. Trade routes shifted, France and the Empire invaded, and the Church froze thought in the amber of the Inquisition. Italy became poor and backward, a stuffy picturesque land of lords and priests and peasants, and the nineteenth century arose in England and France.

Well, maybe so. Italy did not invent the nineteenth century. But the evidence suggests that Palladio's Vicenza did invent the eighteenth century, and did it in the middle of the sixteenth century. This is an unheralded triumph.