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Palladio in the Light of Day: The Crown and the Sliding Cornice

Guido Beltramini

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This story begins with Aldo Rossi leafing through Andrea Palladio's drawings in the mid-1980s. Walking down a London street, he had run into Howard Burns, a colleague at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. Burns took him to the Drawings Collection of the Royal Institute of British Architects, where most of Palladio's surviving four hundred drawings are preserved. In his autobiography, Rossi describes the experience:

"Leafing through the drawings, I was struck by the engineering-like, almost professional repetitiveness of Palladio's drawings. Then, in the midst of them, an exceptional drawing appeared, a drawing of unrivaled beauty. Burns duly informed me that it was by Raphael, and had been gifted by I don't know who to Palladio and kept among his sheets." ¹

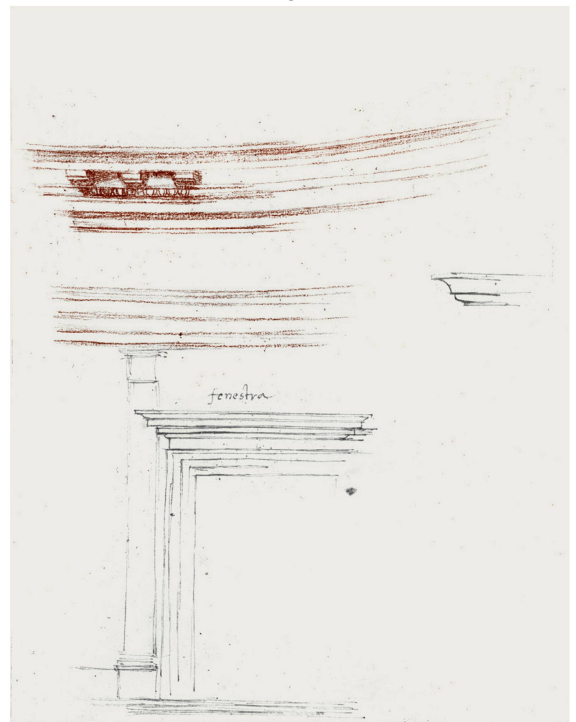
In that drawing, a red chalk image of the interior of the Pantheon, Raphael explores the effect of light on the cornice of the main order in the eye of the observer. ² **fig.1** Although not a drawing from life, it analytically renders the sequence between the concave parts in the shade and the flat bands on which the light reflects. By comparing the drawing with the related plate that Palladio made for the *Quattro libri*, one can make out the fillet, the cyma recta, a second fillet, the modillions, the ovolo with egg-and-dart decoration, the astragal, a third fillet, the fascia, a fourth fillet, the cyma reversa with the Lesbian kyma, and the last astragal joining up with the architrave.

The drawing is, as Rossi commented, beautiful. Palladio probably obtained it from the celebrated Vicenza gem engraver Valerio Belli, a friend of Raphael who had a collection of drawings and antique works in his house. Palladio kept the drawing among his own sheets, but nothing similar can be found among the drawings that he himself produced. I believe the reason for this is that Palladio did not need to see the effect of the cornice with his eyes: as a trained stone-cutter, not a painter like Raphael, he visualized the effect of the moldings in his mind's eye.

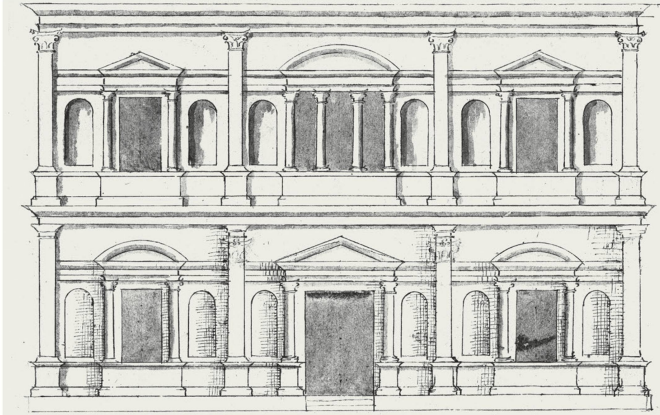
¹ Aldo Rossi, "Un'educazione palladiana," *Annali di architettura* 13 (2001), 8–13, here 10.

² Arnold Nesselrath, "Scheda 3.2.8," in *Raffaello architetto*, ed. Christoph Frommel et al. (Milan: Electa 1984), 420–23, here 420.

fig. 1 Raphael, *Detail of the interior of the Pantheon, Rome: Cornice of the main order, Elevation of the upper order, profile of the oculus*, ca. 1515. Source: London, Royal Institute of British Architects, XIII/1 verso



Palladio took great care over the sequences of the moldings. When he adopted the cornice of the Theatre of Marcellus for the Doric entablature in the loggias for the basilica (also known as the Palazzo della Ragione) in Vicenza, he was aware of the dark horizontal line cast by the cavetto, which ended the sequence, instead of the smoother transition that would have been possible with a cyma molding. But in the basilica, he wanted a horizontal line to contrast the verticality emphasized by the half-columns and the projections of their entablatures. Among Palladio's drawings are dozens of careful, meticulous studies of the entabla-



tures of ancient buildings, deconstructed with measurements for every element and drawn so as to obtain their exact dimensions. Many of them are the result of his firsthand observation of the monuments; others, copied from the sketchbooks of

fig. 2 Andrea Palladio, *Elevation of a Palazzo or a Villa*, late 1530s
Source: Royal Institute of British Architects, XVII/26

colleagues and friends, were subject to careful scrutiny. Surviving examples of these sheets show that Palladio remedied mistakes by personally pasting over with the correct version.³ The purpose of all these drawings was to measure and remember – not to explore an effect, as in the case of Raphael's drawing.

Palladio did not view ancient architecture as a dead language. It was a living language, to be modified and supplemented by interweaving ancient and contemporary models or even the "dialect" of the buildings of late medieval Vicenza. In a paper on the influence of ancient Veronese monuments on Palladio's architectural language, Burns emphasizes the search for continuity of forms along the vertical.⁴ Palladio preferred to round off the sides of the plinths with a *guscia* (cavetto joint), in harmony with the curves of the tori and scotias of the bases, and to use the rounded profile of the pulvinate frieze. The effect is fluid, in contrast to the sharp, brusque breaks between moldings typical of, for example, the Florentine Jacopo Sansovino.

But Palladio also searched for continuity between horizontal elements in his facades. In dealing with this topic, we must start by returning to what is arguably the earliest of Palladio's surviving drawings, dating from the second half of the 1530s.⁵ **fig. 2** Whether the facade in the drawing is of a palazzo or a villa is not clear. In any case, the outmoded central polyforate window presupposes an internal layout with the typical central hall (also circulation hub) of Venetian palaces, with various rooms giving onto it.

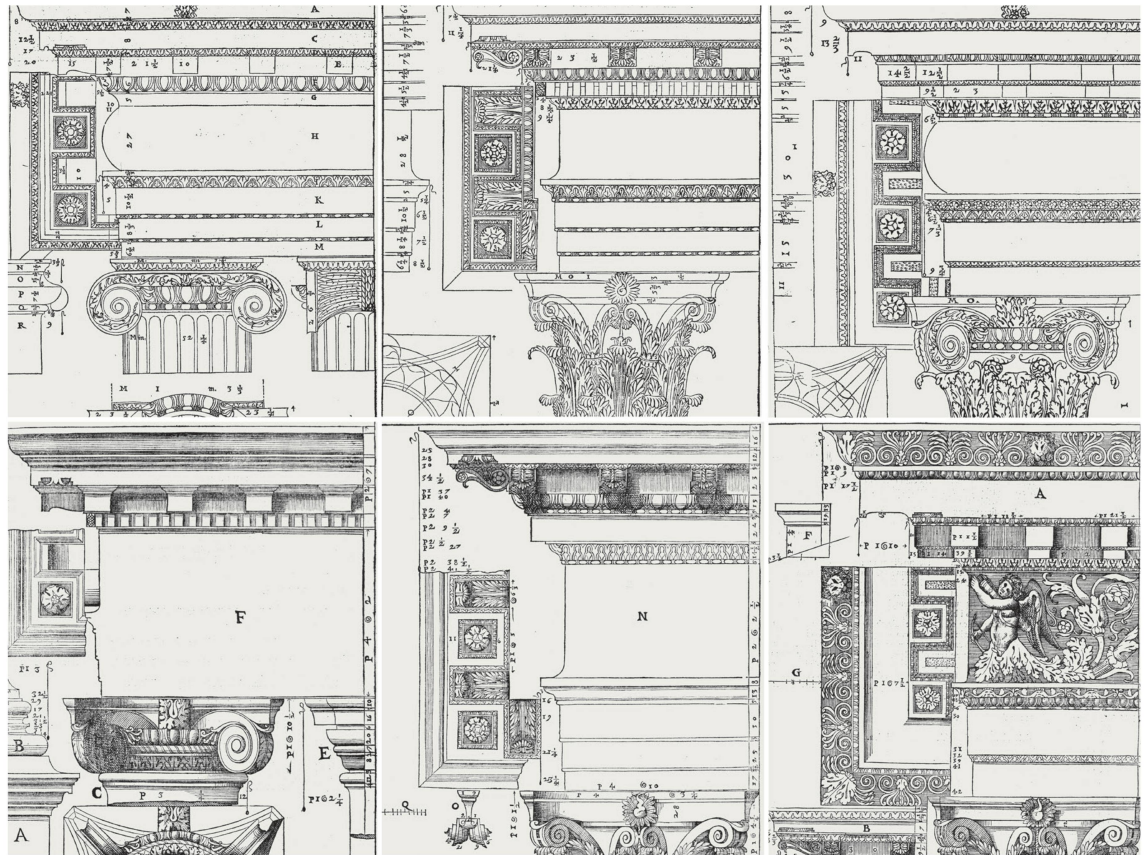
3 Howard Burns, "Entablature and Two Versions of the Capital of the Arch of Titus, Rome," in *Palladio*, exh. cat., ed. Guido Beltrami and Howard Burns (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2008), 58–59.

4 Howard Burns, "Le antichità di Verona e l'architettura del Rinascimento," in *Palladio e Verona*, exh. cat., ed. Paola Marini (Verona: Neri Pozza, 1980), 103–21, here 113–14.

5 Giangiorgio Zorzi, *Le opere pubbliche e i palazzi privati di Andrea Palladio* (Venice: Neri Pozza 1965), 30–31; Lynda Fairbairn, "Elevation of a Palace Facade," in *Andrea Palladio (1508–1580): The Portico and the Farmyard*, ed. Howard Burns, Bruce Boucher, and Lynda Fairbairn (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1975), 231–32; Douglas Lewis, *The Drawings of Andrea Palladio*, 2nd rev. and enl. ed. (New Orleans: Martin and St. Martin, 2000), 28–29.

The vernacular plan is from Palladian prehistory but, although Palladio had not yet visited the city, the facade shows a powerfully innovative element that came from the Rome of Pope Leo X (in office 1513–1521) – specifically, from the Palazzo Branconio dell'Aquila, built around 1520 and one of Raphael's most important

fig. 3 (From top to bottom, left to right): Entablature of the Ionic, Corinthian and Composite Order; Entablature of the Temple of Saturn, of the Pantheon and of the Temple of the Quirinal
Source: Andrea Palladio, *I Quattro Libri dell'Architettura* (Venice: Dominico de' Franceschi, 1570)



6 Pier Nicola Pagliara, "Palazzo Branconio," in *Raffaello architetto*, 197–216, here 198–99.

7 Andrea Palladio, *I quattro libri dell'architettura* (Venice: Dominico de' Franceschi, 1570), 2:48; available in English translation as Andrea Palladio, *Four Books on Architecture*, trans. Robert Tavernor and Richard Schofield (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 2:48.

8 Hubertus Günther, "Palladio e gli ordini di colonne," in *Andrea Palladio: Nuovi contributi*, ed. André Chastel and Renato Cevese (Milan: Electa, 1990), 182–97; Branko Mitrovic, "Palladio's Theory of the Classical Orders in the First Book of *I Quattro Libri dell'Architettura*," *Architectural History* 42 (1999), 110–40; Howard Burns, "Ornamenti and Ornamentation in Palladio's Architectural Theory and Practice," *Pegasus* 11 (2009), 37–84.

works of architecture. Palladio borrowed the motif of the aedicule-framed window flanked by niches, with the entablature projecting when over the windows and continuing flattened on rest of the wall, thus creating a continuous element running across the entire facade. Raphael had found the motif on the facade of the hemicycle in Trajan's Markets. ⁶ In this early Palladio drawing, the theme of horizontal "bindings" characterizes the entire facade and also involves the bases and cornices of the pilasters and aediculae. This "continuity" of horizontal lines, ultimately derived from the Pantheon, is an important factor when we come to study the cornice, the uppermost element on a Palladian facade. Palladio always designed it with great care, considering it a crucial element in the composition: "And the cornice runs round the house like a crown," he wrote of the Villa Badoer in the *Quattro libri*, a statement that can be applied to all his buildings. ⁷

Many scholars have dealt with Palladio's architectural language, but Burns focuses directly on the theme of the design of the cornice and demonstrates how Palladio's approach was far less prescriptive, and much more flexible, than might be expected from simply reading Book I of his *Quattro libri*. ⁸ In the treatise,

Palladio proposes three types of cornice (one each for the Ionic, Corinthian, and Composite orders), each supported in a different way. **fig. 3** In the case of the Ionic, the cornice is supported by abstract flat-headed modillions, with no carved decoration, which Palladio derived from the Temple of Saturn in the Roman



Forum. ⁹ This brilliant use of a highly refined quotation of a rare antique solution is particularly effective because the form is tapered but the light is captured by the sequence of vertical surfaces on the truncated heads. The Corinthian cornice rests on the more commonly found ornate scroll-like modillions, supported on the underside by acanthus leaves, modeled on those of the Pantheon. ¹⁰ The cornice of the Composite, the highest order with the richest capital, is supported by block-like modillions, the sources being the Temple on the Quirinal and the Temple of Hadrian, ¹¹ while the Doric cornice is presented in a version with no mutules. ¹²

Palladio's "language" of cornices, therefore, uses three terms carefully chosen from the vocabulary of ancient architecture. He looked for sources not only in the well-known Pantheon but also in other temples, enabling him to further develop what Sebastiano Serlio and Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola had already proposed. ¹³ But while Serlio and Vignola slavishly observed the association of a cornice with a specific order, Palladio was more flexible in choosing the type of cornice to be used in his constructed buildings. ¹⁴ On the facade of the church of San Francesco della Vigna in Venice, for example, two orders, both Corinthian, have different cornices: the lower one has flat-headed modillions (in the *Quattro libri* they are associated with the Ionic order), while the upper one has modillions in the form of blocks (associated with the Composite order in the *Quattro libri*). **fig. 4** The crucial factor appears to be distance from the eye: the further an element is from the observer's eye, the more its form is simplified and its size increased. In the monastery of the Carità in Venice, the cornice of the second Ionic order is supported by flat-headed modillions made of terra-cotta forms, but that of the Corinthian order at the top is too far from the observer to have scroll-like modillions and so has block-like stone modillions instead. ¹⁵

The same is true of the interior of the Church of the Redentore in Venice. The cornice of the Corinthian-order entablature running around the whole interior in a continuous band is

fig. 4 Facade of the Church of San Francesco della Vigna in Venice; photographer Pino Guidolotti
Source: Palladio Museum

⁹ Palladio, *I quattro libri dell'architettura*, 1:35–36, 2:124–27.

¹⁰ Palladio, *I quattro libri dell'architettura*, 1:42–43, 2:73–74.

¹¹ Palladio, *I quattro libri dell'architettura*, 1:49–50, 2:41–47, 55–60.

¹² Palladio, *I quattro libri dell'architettura*, 1:22–27; Paola Zampa, "Questo tempio è di opera dorica: Il dorico, da Antonio da Sangallo a Palladio," *Annali di architettura* 29 (2017): 127–34, here 130–33.

¹³ Donald Emrys Strong, "Late Hadrianic Architectural Ornament in Rome," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 21 (1953): 118–51, here 123–26; Mark Wilson Jones, *Principles of Roman Architecture* (New Haven: Yale 2000), 141–42.

¹⁴ Hubertus Günther, "Serlio e gli ordini architettonici," in *Sebastiano Serlio*, ed. Christof Thoenes (Milan: Electa, 1989), 154–68, here 154; Pier Nicola Pagliara, "Antonio da Sangallo e gli ordini," in *L'emploi des ordres dans l'architecture de la Renaissance* (Paris: Picard, 1992), 137–56, here 146; Scott Opler, "Palladio and Vignola on the Orders," in *Coming about ... : A Festschrift for John Shearman*, ed. Lars Jones and Louisa Matthew (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Art Museums, 2001), 255–65, here 261.

¹⁵ Mario Piana, "Il Convento della Carità: Materiali, tecniche, strutture," in *Annali di architettura* 10–11 (1998–1999), 310–21, here 316.

supported by flat-headed modillions, while the cornice from which the dome springs, at a much greater height, is supported by block-like modillions. On the exterior facade, however, the interplay is reversed, following a visual logic that takes into account a different situation: viewing from a distance. The modillions bearing the cornice of the majestic pediment (also supported by a Composite order) and the attic above are flat-headed. Why did Palladio not use the customary blocks? Because he had employed them on the level below to support the cornice of the minor Corinthian order running across the entire facade. The lower cornice is fragmentary because it is interrupted by the shafts of the major Composite half-columns and pilasters. The remaining features of the cornice need the more pronounced presence of the massive blocks to ensure that it can be read in its entirety. The Church of the Redentore stands on the island of Giudecca, on the edge of the historic center of Venice, and its facade is seen from a great distance. So, again in contrast with what he had published six years earlier, Palladio used the slenderer, flat-headed modillions with the powerful major Composite order and the massive blocks with the fragmentary minor Corinthian order to balance the overall visual impact.¹⁶

In the *Quattro libri*, Palladio associates elaborate scroll-like modillions with the Corinthian order, and they are among the most recurrent elements used to support the cornices of the temples illustrated in Book IV. They are

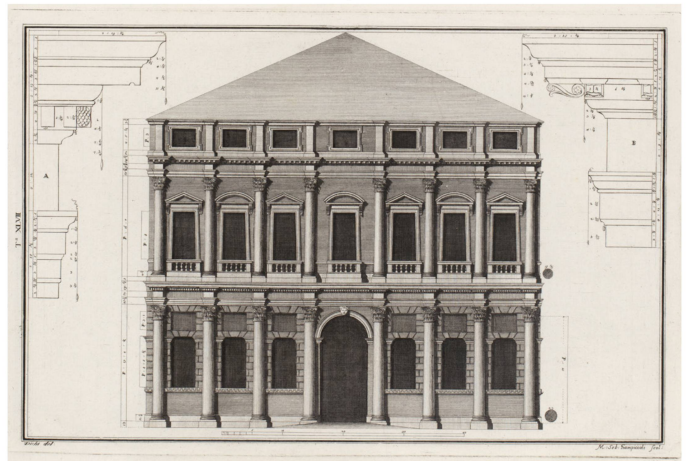


fig. 5 Bertotti Scamozzi
Ottavio, *Palazzo Thiene*
Bonin Longare
Source: *Le fabbriche
e i disegni di Andrea
Palladio* (Venezia,
1776–1782), I, tav. XLVIII

16 Guido Beltramini,
Andrea Palladio: *The
Complete Illustrated
Works*, ed. Guido
Beltramini and Antonio
Padovan (New York,
NY: Universe, 2001),
243–53, here 244–45.

17 On Sanmicheli,
see Paul Davis and
David Hemsoll,
Michele Sanmicheli
(Milan: Electra, 2004),
356–57, 361, 375–76.
On Sansovino, see
Manuela Morresi,
Jacopo Sansovino
(Milan: Electra, 2000),
118–25.

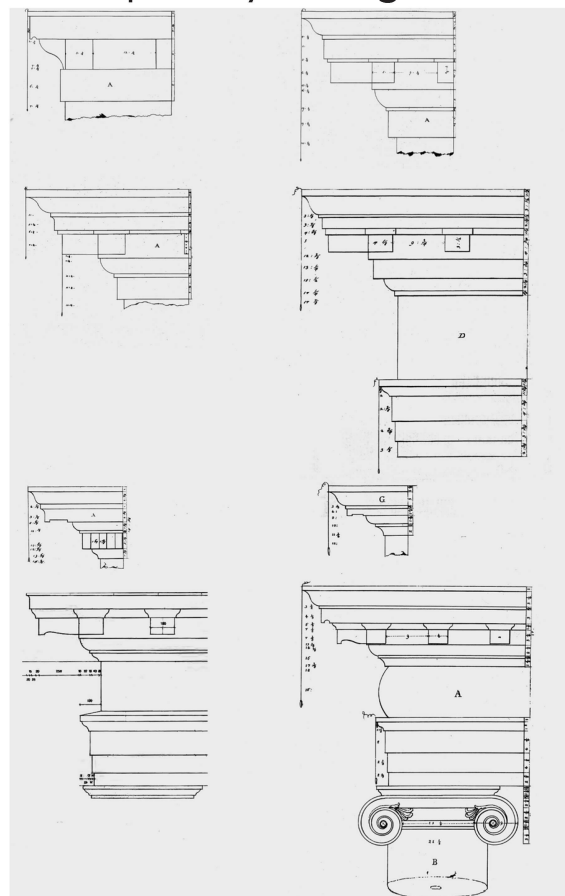
18 Beltramini, *Andrea
Palladio*, 49, 87–89,
here 87; 92–95, here 95;
Tracy Cooper, *Palladio's
Venice* (New Haven:
Yale University Press
2005), 188–95.

also part of the common vocabulary of buildings constructed by Palladio's contemporaries in the Veneto: for example, the sumptuous stone works by Michele Sanmicheli (such as the Palazzo Bevilacqua and the Pellegrini Chapel in Verona and the Palazzo Grimani in Venice), or by Jacopo Sansovino (the Palazzo Corner on the Grand Canal).¹⁷ On the other hand, Palladio rarely used scroll-like modillions in the buildings he actually constructed. They were associated with the Corinthian order only three times: on the side portal of Vicenza Cathedral, on the altar of the Valmarana Chapel in the Church of Santa Corona in Vicenza, and in the first order of the Mocenigo Tomb in the Church of San Giovanni e Paolo in Venice.¹⁸ In addition, on one occasion he used scroll-like modillions to support the entablature of the Composite half-columns of the piano nobile on the facade of the Palazzo Thiene

Bonin Longare in Vicenza, in line with his quest for the antiquarian refinement of all elements, including windows with slanting sides, a quotation from the Temple of Vesta at Tivoli. ¹⁹ *fig. 5* That Palladio rarely used costly, refined, scroll-like modillions points to a further factor (beyond the visual) in his choice of cornice: the cost of the material and of carving it. Palladio never used them in his villas and most often replaced them with simpler, block-like modillions, which he had seen in the cornices of the Temple on the Quirinal and the Hadrianaeum. This was typical of his approach to searching among ancient examples for his own requirements, whether expressive or economic.

When designing villa cornices, Palladio was particularly flexible – in contrast to the examples in the *Quattro libri*. His most innovative contribution to architectural types is that of the villa. *fig. 6* He invented a new residence in the countryside, one where the landowner's house is integrated with the spaces and buildings involved in running the estate farm. In the fifteenth century, rural residences consisted of large multistory city houses transplanted into the countryside. Palladio's new villa is built with a partially underground floor containing the services. Above

it is generally only one main story, surmounted by an attic used for storage. The crowning glory of this building is the triangular pediment with a meticulously designed connection between the top of the walls and the roof; that is, the cornice. The first villa, built for the Godi family in Lonedo, is a case in point. It is a sort of link between the previous city house-villas and the new type. Its cornice reflects a knowledge of Rome acquired through the study of treatises or drawings, not first-hand observation: brackets are inserted in the frieze between an architrave and a cornice, reduced to an abstract band, a quotation of the uppermost entablature of



the Colosseum and the external cornices of the Pantheon. The young Palladio was well aware of the need to visually reinforce the cornice, given its distance from the observer. ²⁰ Still not fully developed, however, this idea continued to evolve in the villas of both

¹⁹ Franco Barbieri, *Vicenza città di Palazzi* (Milan: Banca Popolare di Vicenza, 1987), 100–102.

fig. 6 (From top to bottom, left to right): cornices of Palladian villas: Villa Godi a Lonedo, Villa Poiana a Poiana Maggiore, Villa Saraceno a Finale di Agugliaro, Villa Pisani a Montagnana, Villa Foscari "La Malcontenta", Villa Rotonda in Vicenza. Source: Ottavio Bertotti Scamozzi, *Le fabbriche e i disegni di Andrea Palladio* (Vincenza, 1776–1782)

²⁰ Beltramini, *Andrea Palladio*, 108.

the 1540s and 1550s in cornices with block-like modillions, such as that used in the Ionic entablature of the Villa Madama in Rome, of which Palladio had made a survey drawing. These types of cornices are found in the Villa Poiana, the Villa Saraceno, and in the Ionic entablature of buildings such as the Villa Badoer, the Villa Pisani at Montagnana, and the Villa Barbaro at Maser, while the Ionic order of the Villa Cornaro at Piombino Dese has no modillions and its upper Corinthian order has flat-headed modillions.

In short, situation dictated the choice of cornice, despite the rules set out in Book I of the *Quattro libri*. Moreover, like Raphael, Palladio was well aware of the variety of the language of the ancient monuments he illustrated in Book IV, with all their profound differences and specificities. The factors in the choice of cornice were not determined by an abstract prescriptive logic but were based on the size of the building and the position of the observer, and these elements were brought into relation with the great variety of references provided by the ancient models. The economic aspects were also crucial. In the villas, *marmorino* (marble plaster) is used to cover wooden elements such as the architraves of the loggias and pronaos, or inexpensive brick columns, creating the illusion that they are made of stone.²¹ In the villas, money could also be saved by using simplified parts in the cornices, sometimes even made of brick, while in large church facades or palaces, which were actually made of stone, greater work could be lavished on producing more refined elements.

In the villas, the horizontal binding in the uppermost band of the building, however, concerns not only the cornice with large blocks but the entire entablature. Completely three-dimensional only in the pediment, the entablature continues flattened on the walls, like an abstract band, maintaining only the volume of the cornice itself. But, as usual, Palladio does not work to a hard-and-fast rule. When money was short, as in the Villa Chiericati at Vancimuglio, even the relief of the cornice could be eliminated by reducing it to an abstract band that simply projects slightly over the lower band (the architrave and frieze).²² In other cases, conversely, the cornice takes on a predominantly visual significance, as in the Villa Poiana, whereas in the Villa Rotonda the cornice is different again, due to the presence of the protruding pronaos and the attic above it.²³ **fig. 7** It is as if Palladio wished to restrain the centripetal thrust of the protruding elements by binding them firmly to the building, entirely crossed by horizontal ties. This approach has a fascinating effect: the sliding of the main entablature from the top of the walls downward, thus girding a “belt” around the building.

²¹ Mario Piana, “Building the Project,” in Beltrami and Burns, *Palladio*, 314–21; Damiano Paternò, “Un ben finito corpo: Alcune considerazioni sulle tecniche costruttive adottate nelle fabbriche di Andrea Palladio,” in *Annali di architettura* 30 (2018), 57–70, here 57–60.

²² Beltrami, *Andrea Palladio*, 138–41.

²³ Beltrami, *Andrea Palladio*, 64–67.

Even when the entablature continues on the walls, it is flattened, as in the Pantheon interior, but still has a strong personality: the architrave retains its three bands and the frieze has a bulging, pulvinate profile, while the cornice has only the top cyma molding as it becomes a flat band with no modillions. Consequently, the importance of the joint between the wall and the roof a few meters higher up is inevitably diminished. The cornice is thus reduced to a minimal profile of only four elements – cavetto, ovolo, corona, and cyma recta – and, similarly, only abstract bands mark the connection to the ground, the string course, and



the bases. In this way, the cornice that has “slid” down boasts a great visual prominence among the horizontal bindings of the building. In the Villa Malcontenta, the same effect is amplified by the violent contrast that originally existed between the white walls and the horizontal lines of the moldings, painted red. ²⁴ In this case, however, the connection between the walls and the roof is underscored by inserting a clearly visible line of denticles between the cyma reversa (which has replaced the cavetto) and the crown. Palladio’s atten-

fig. 7 Villa La Rotonda, Vicenza
Photographer: Pino Guidolotti
Source: courtesy of Palladio Museum

24 Damiana Paternò, “Un ben finito corpo: alcune considerazioni sulle tecniche costruttive adottate nelle fabbriche di Andrea Palladio,” *Annali di Architettura* 30 (2018), 57–70, here 64–65.

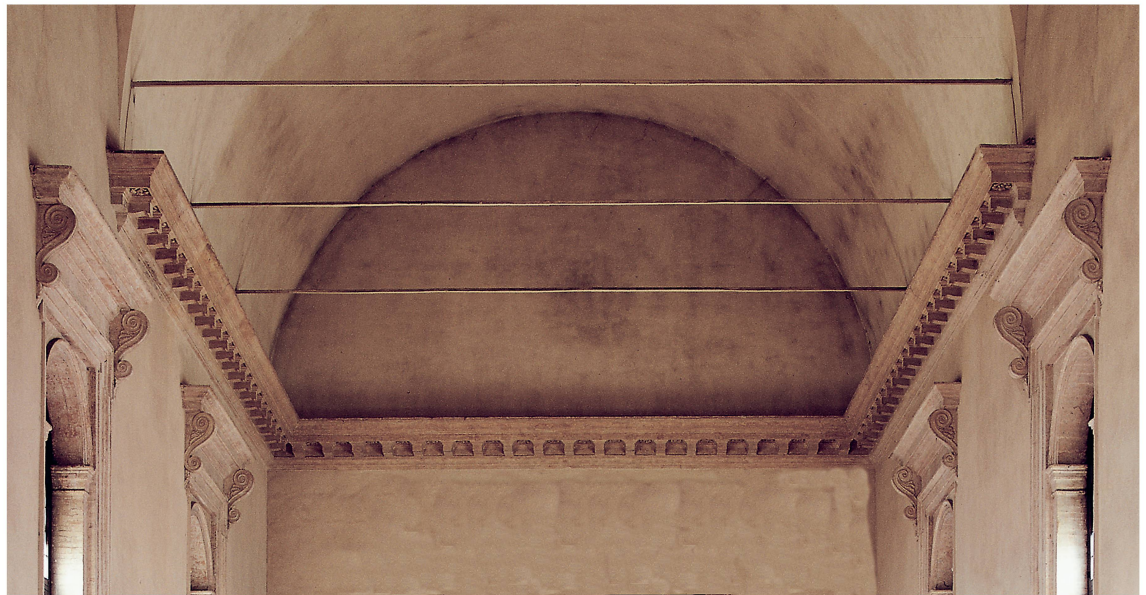
25 Manfredo Tafuri, *Ricerca del Rinascimento* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 1992), 152.

26 Barbieri, *Vicenza città di palazzi*, 43.

tion to horizontal bindings has Raphaelesque origins, as demonstrated by the aforementioned early drawing, although the first to be inspired by the motif present in Trajan’s Markets and the Pantheon was Sansovino in his project for the facade of San Lorenzo in Florence (1515). ²⁵ Sansovino then introduced the motif to Venice, where it is found, for example, on the side of the Palazzo Corner on the Grand Canal. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was widely used in simple Venetian *palazzetti* with their facades striped by repeated bands of stone, horizontally linking the ends of the windows and the imposts of the arches. But the same motif also has a Vicentine precedent in Palladio’s world, in various fifteenth-century palazzi, such as Lorenzo da Bologna’s Palazzo Valmarana-Bertolini (1480), one of the earliest examples of architecture inspired by Roman antiquities in Verona, where prominent moldings run across the entire facade, horizontally binding its elements. ²⁶

Cornice design can be considered a key factor in facades and, as such, a great focus of attention for Palladio. If we continued

fig. 8 Refectory of the Monastero di San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice
 Photographer: Pino Guidolotti
 Source: courtesy of Palladio Museum



27 Beltramini, Andrea
Palladio, 76–81.

28 Guido Beltramini,
 "Palladio e il refettorio
 del monastero di San
 Giorgio Maggiore a
 Venezia," in *Il miracolo
 di Cana: L'originalità
 della riproduzione*,
 exh. cat., ed. Giuseppe
 Pavanetto (Verona:
 Cierre Edizioni, 2007),
 86–97.

to analyze them, we would see that Palladio not only slid them downward; he also shifted them sideways. This is the case with the cornice of the minor Composite order on the side of the Loggia del Capitaniato in Vicenza, which appears on the main facade as the base of the three balconies, supported by pairs of out-of-scale modillions in the form of enormous triglyphs — one of the most Piranesian of Palladio's inventions. ²⁷ He also made them feature unexpectedly as a majestic ancient fragment at the base of the grandiose vault of the refectory in the monastery of San Giorgio in Venice. ²⁸ **fig. 8**

Studying Palladio's cornices is particularly rewarding. In designing them, he moved, as always, within the reference frame of the language of ancient architecture. But he did so with great freedom and creativity, combining visual and economic requirements. Examining his approach to cornices helps us to see all the limitations of interpreting only the Palladio found on paper in the *Quattro libri*. This does not mean calling into question his desire for prescriptive rules that would define an architecture constructed like a language, based on a finite number of words and on a compositional syntax of proportions. But, by observing the reality of constructed buildings as he implemented creative solutions for the boundary area between edifice and sky, we can understand Palladio the architect more clearly. We see him resourcefully responding to the stimuli of the site and the circumstances, with a freedom whose only constraint is to remain consistent with the language of ancient Roman architecture: a living language that can be spoken in the contemporary world.