

Palladio's drawings: a self-portrait on paper

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Palladio's drawings tell us a good deal about him as an architect and as a scholar of ancient ruins as well as providing some insights into his character, his way of conceiving the profession and also his vision of the world. Together with his buildings and the pages of the *Quattro Libri*, his drawings provide the largest window onto his creative activities. There are almost 300 sheets, a huge mine of information compared to the scanty written testimonies, such as the meagre construction site documents, a handful of personal letters, Vasari's short profile, Paolo Gualdo's posthumous biography and a few passing mentions in the diary of his friend Fabio Monza or in the verse of Giambattista Maganza.

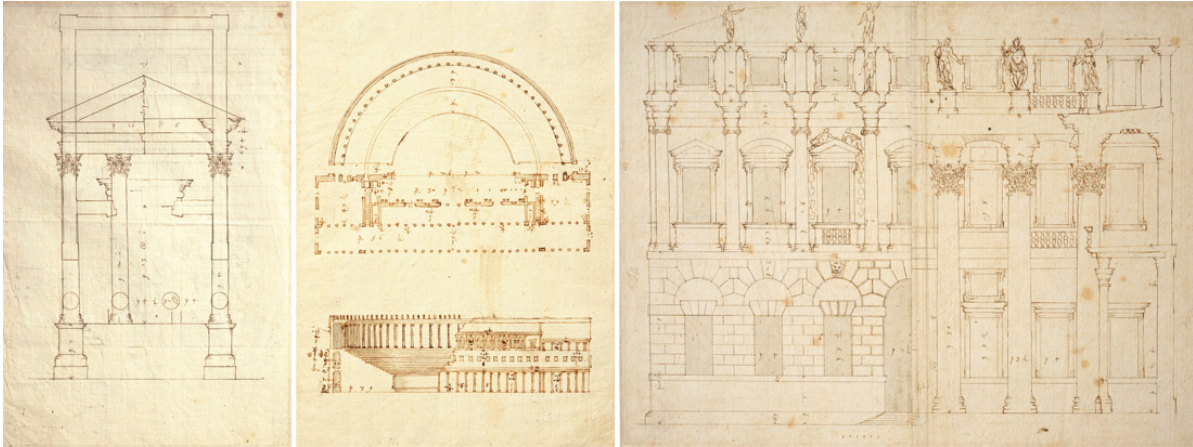
Andrea Palladio (1508-1580) earned his living by drawing. He thought and created with drawing, and through drawing he communicated with patrons, builders and readers. His introduction to draughtsmanship – at the age of thirteen, in the workshop of the stonecutter Bartolomeo Cavazza in Padua – must have been through the drawings of templates for architectural elements which informed masons how stone blocks were to be shaped.



(left) Leandro Bassano, A stonemason at work. 1590c (London, the National Gallery)
(right) Andrea Palladio, Template of a cornice. 1570c (Venice, Archivio di Stato)

These signs on paper generated three-dimensional elements. Palladio did not train in a painter's workshop and for him a drawing was not only an image, but a tool for acquiring knowledge, measuring and constructing.

That is why, as Giangiorgio Zorzi and Wolfgang Lotz have pointed out, Palladio rarely used perspective drawings, even in initial ideas sketched in one go, and adopted orthogonal projections in the plan, elevations and sections, which enabled him to represent the building and its parts in scale and to take measurements from the sheet.



(left) Andrea Palladio, Plan and elevation of a Corinthian temple. 1560c (London, RIBA XI/14r)
 (centre) Andrea Palladio, Plan, elevation and section of the roman theatre, Pola. 1540c (London, RIBA X/3)
 (right) Andrea Palladio, Study for the plate of palazzo Porto in the Quattro Libri. 1565c (London, RIBA XVII/3)

His drawings associated with projects for villas, palaces or churches always focus on the logical and structural coherence of the building represented. Since Palladio lived several weeks away from Rome, even the images of ancient buildings which he brought back to the Veneto are primarily dedicated to recording precise information about specific features and dimensions, at times also in fine detail. As Forssman has observed, this was the case even when Palladio's interpretation is not 'archaeological' but distorted to highlight a motif, or an 'invention'.

Palladio's drawings have come down to us from the whole span of his life's work. There are his early studies of ancient monuments which he only knew second-hand and copied from sketchbooks of colleagues visiting Vicenza, his initial Vitruvian studies, or his projects for the first *all'antica* villa for the Pisani family at Bagnolo. They date from the years when he was still simply called 'Andrea, son of Pietro monaro' ('the miller'), and had not yet established himself as Andrea Palladio, the classicising professional name coined for him by Giangiorgio Trissino, which was to bring him such good fortune. But we can also see him as an elderly man, while personally engaged in drawing the project for the church of the Redentore. By then 68 and with failing eyesight, his less firm hand has lost some of the extraordinary precision found in the sheets from his mature years.

Examining Palladian drawings means setting off on a journey of exploration. But as well as having the desire to do so, travellers must be equipped with a few elements to find their way. The drawings can simply be admired as fine images, or onlookers can try and explore further by asking

themselves how each individual drawing is constructed and what it is for. In some cases they seem to be an x-ray of the architect's mind, as he puts his thoughts to paper, combines ideas and checks out alternatives. In other sheets the drawings are a means of communication, at times even of seduction, given that – unlike painters and sculptors – architects depend on other people to realise their projects.

Authorship

On what grounds can we attribute a drawing to Palladio? There is a long tradition of studies of Palladian drawings, which begins in the 18th century with Lord Burlington and Ottavio Bertotti Scamozzi, who both reproduced printed versions of them, while Tommaso Temanza was the proud owner of the drawing of the Baths of Agrippa. The tradition continues in the nineteenth century with Antonio Magrini and Filippo Scolari and in the 20th century with Burger, Keith, Dalla Pozza, Zorzi, Lotz, Spielman, Forssman, Gioseffi, Puppi, Lewis, Boucher, Battilotti and especially Burns, who since 1973 has developed a structured approach to interpretation, taking into account technique, methods, dating and meanings, which has provided the basis for subsequent studies.

An initial elementary criterion for the attribution of a drawing to Palladio is his handwriting in the notes and figures that he writes on the sheet in clearly recognisable, personal ways. This criterion can then be associated with the Palladio's customary modes of representation. As we said, he preferred planar projections to perspective views and, indeed, his few perspective drawings are nearly always autograph copies of other architects' sheets. In drafting a drawing, Palladio proceeded by first incising construction lines on the paper with a stylus and then going over them again with the pen. In drawing some elements, Palladio resorted to standardised modes of representation, as can be seen by comparing, for example, the drawings of Corinthian capitals. Burns has identified a specifically Palladian mode of representation, which might be described as 'shorthand', for drawing mouldings. In fact, he only draws the beginning of the profiles.



Andrea Palladio, Elevation of palazzo da Porto, Vicenza (London, RIBA XVII/3r)

All of these elements must always be considered in the light of the purpose of each individual drawing, which could vary according to whether it was an initial idea on paper, a private preliminary study, a presentation drawing or a drawing to be used in the preparation of a text for publication.

Although handwritings not attributable to Palladio appear on some drawings, in general he personally drafted the entire drawing, with the significant exception of the ornamental elements on presentation drawings, for which he relied on the services of figurative artists, who were often also the same artists who painted the frescoes in his villas or palaces, such as Bernardino India, Battista del Moro, and Battista Zelotti. Moreover, how 'Palladio's workshop' functioned and the role played by his sons and collaborators is one of the promising fields for further research.

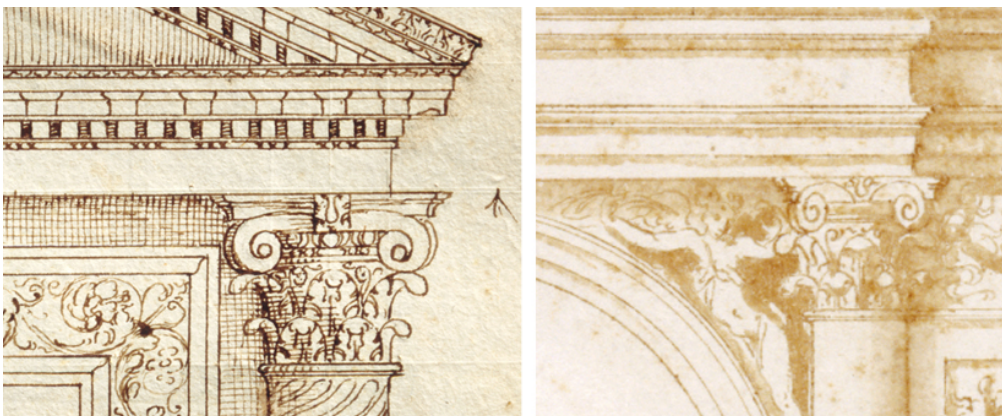
Chronology

Once we have established that a drawing is in the hand of Palladio, how can it be dated? The subject represented is obviously a necessary condition but not sufficient, especially bearing in mind that Palladio sometimes returned to a building many years later, for the purposes of publication. His drafting style certainly changed over time. Thus, for example, his way of representing Corinthian capitals in a drawing from around 1540 differs from that of a drawing from the 1560s.



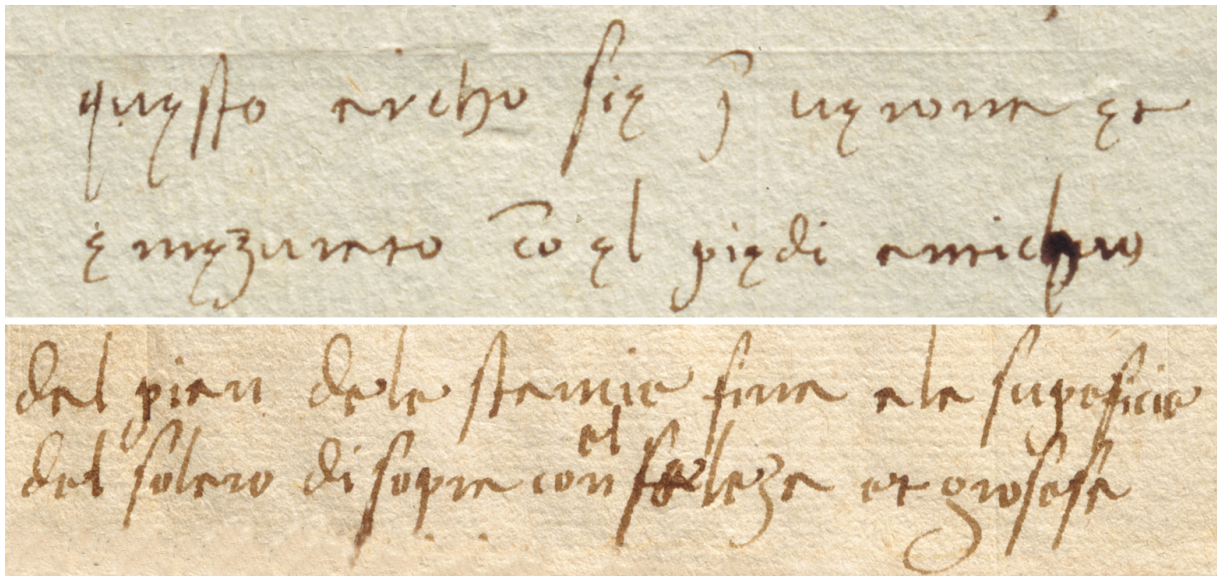
(left) Andrea Palladio, Corinthian capital - 1538 c (London, RIBA VIII/6r)
 (center) Andrea Palladio, Corinthian capital - 1545c (London, RIBA XV/9v)
 (right) Andrea Palladio, Corinthian capital - 1568c (London, RIBA XVII/3r)

Palladio's way of adding shade in the early drawings – orthogonal crosshatching with the pen – changed in later years, when he made greater use of the brush.



(left) Andrea Palladio, Elevation of the arch of Jupiter Ammon, Verona - detail. 1545 c (London, RIBA XII/22r)
 (right) Andrea Palladio, Study for the Rialto Bridge, Venice - detail. 1568c (Vicenza, Civici Musei D17)

But in dating drawings, the principal aid comes from analysing the changes in his handwriting over time. In the 1540s Palladio used the Greek epsilon 'ε' instead of the Latin 'e' – possibly due to Trissino's proposals to enlarge the Italian alphabet with Greek letters – but from the 1550s on he again used the Latin 'e'.



(above) Andrea Palladio, "Epsilon" handwriting. 1545 c (London, RIBA XII/22r)
 (below) Andrea Palladio, Mature handwriting. 1565c (Vicenza, RIBA XVII/24r)

Other elements can also contribute to establishing the date, such as the fact that the clean, finished drawings of Roman baths or triumphal arches may have been produced after the publication of the *Quattro Libri* in 1570, as part of preparations for additional 'Books', which are mentioned in written sources (cats 28-31).

Techniques

Palladio used various sizes of cotton paper sheets. The sizes are derived from a format similar to that of cat. 11 (56 x 42 cm), which when divided into two or four parts basically generates all the formats of the drawings on show.

The methods of drafting a drawing and the instruments used in Palladio's age are described in detail by Vincenzo Scamozzi in his treatise *l'Idea dell'Architettura Universale* (Venice 1615):

'In drawing the plans of buildings in a clean form we are accustomed to incising all the lines of the breadths of the walls with the ivory stylus [*stiletto d'avorio*] and then going over them with the pen.... Whether made of the wood of the pear, apple,

jujube, sorb or rowan... the rulers have a straight edge to guide the drawing of concealed or dead lines [i.e. incised lines] with the point of an ivory stylus, or the point of a small knife, or a non-pricking needle; but the other edge must be thinner at the corners on both sides by a third in thickness, so that when drawing the lines in ink they do not stain the paper...

The compasses, usually made of brass, or other material that does not rust, are very light and have slender legs, provided they do not quiver, and as far as their number is concerned, normally three will suffice, that is large, medium and small (since too many compasses creates confusion), and the point of one of the legs must have a burin, bevelled on the inside, so that when dipped in ink, as required, it produces the same effect as the pen in making portions of circles, arches and similar things...

As regards the squares, the large ones are made of pear or a similar supple well-seasoned wood and the small ones of brass.

The pens are made of flexible, light-coloured, transparent domestic goose feathers of an average thickness. They are sharpened by making longish cuts to look like the eagle's beak and the points are whittled down to half the size... But the pens used to outline and draw capitals and similar things must be much softer and more flexible, so that they can gracefully go over again as best as possible the areas requiring shaded parts.

In Palladio's drawings, only few are drafted without the construction lines made by the stylus. These kinds initial ideas on paper have rarely survived selections made by Palladio himself and by later collectors, who were more interested in the finished drawings as rich sources of motifs and information. .

On the *verso* of a sheet with a drawing of an ancient building on the *recto*, Palladio would sometimes sketch an idea for a project, inspired by the ancient building in question. Palladio carefully conserved his drawings after the antique, and returned to them many years later, as evidenced by measurements added in his mature handwriting on sheets that were drafted in his early years. It is now thought that Palladio went to Rome five times, the first time with Giangiorgio Trissino in Autumn 1541 and the last time together with 'some Venetian gentlemen' around 1554. For more than a quarter of a century, until his death in 1580, the drawings of antiquities which he bought back to the Veneto were his only firsthand images of Rome.

But as Gioseffi suggests, Palladio's way of representing them, generated a 'multiplication in the productivity of the sources': the elevation of the free-standing columns in the Temple of Minerva at Assisi, when drawn in an orthogonal projection, is indistinguishable from a sequence of half columns or pilasters projecting slightly from the wall. On these grounds, we can claim that the

façade of the Palazzo Valmarana is derived from the Temple of Minerva through Palladio's own orthogonal representation of it. The same can be said of the flat façade of the church of the Redentore based on the Pantheon.



For the Morgan exhibition, we selected thirty-one drawings to create an itinerary which enables us to see Palladio at work, as if we were looking over his shoulder. The first section shows him studying ancient Roman architecture. For 16th-century architects this meant exploring the ruins, but also interpreting the often obscure text of Vitruvius, the most important Roman treatise writer whose work had come down to them. We also see Palladio busy 'photocopying' surveys made by other architects, making annotations about a survey on his own sheet or re-drafting a survey using his own methods of representation. We can observe him as he explores ancient buildings firsthand and constructs images from the words of Vitruvius ('as best as I could understand them'). In the second section, we can envisage Palladio seated at the drawing table with some very lively initial ideas sketched on the sheet in front of him; he later perfected these ideas in studies which were essentially made for his own purposes, before eventually setting them out cleanly in presentation drawings for a patron, with shading to show the effect of the building in sunlight and ornamental

statues drawn by a figurative artist. The third section is dedicated to Palladio's inspired concept – revolutionary at the time – of narrating architecture in illustrated books. It shows drawings for the *Quattro Libri* and for some incomplete publishing ventures, such as a 'Book of Roman Baths' and a 'Book of Arches'.

An architectural drawing is never simply an image of a building, but the tool used by the architect to conceive the building. The sheet records the stages of its creation as well as the way ideas take shape and are communicated, and in this sense the exhibition enables us to 'enter' the architect's mind. But the drawings also tell another story, which is not so exciting but useful in preventing us from falling into the temptation of only viewing Palladio through the distorting lens of his posthumous success. Today we know that Palladio went through life in a very different way from the image of the unchallenged demiurge and genius promulgated in subsequent centuries. On the contrary, his difficult career was at times beset with failure and disappointments. Of the hundreds of projects, only a part was actually executed. Looking at Palladio through his drawings enables us also to tell the story of his setbacks and not only of the successes of his splendid buildings. In this sense, by gaining greater insight, we really can feel that we have come 'closer to the master'.

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