



# Pastoral Elegance

For wealthy Renaissance landowners of Northern Italy, country villas designed by Andrea Palladio and his followers were all the rage.

TEXT AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY Stephen Harby



Andrea Palladio (1508–80) was an architect based in the Veneto, the region in Northern Italy of which Venice was the capital. The peak of this powerful mercantile and seafaring republic coincided with Palladio's career. From a young age he became the favorite architect of the rich and influential merchants and politicians, designing their palaces, churches and civic institutions in the cities of Venice, Vicenza and Padua, the three principal cities of the region.

## THE WEALTH

Palladio, however, is most famous for the design of some 20 villas that dot the countryside surrounding the cities. There, the rich patrons had extensive landholdings put to use as farms. Hardly a mere farmhouse, the

While in Vicenza, I created the sketch **Villa Capra (La Rotonda); 1566–70** (graphite and watercolor on paper, 10x7¾). This depicts the most famous and perhaps most “perfect” of Palladio's villas, exploring the theme of a circle inscribed within a square, with the Pantheon as inspiration. This view shows the approach, ascending the hill on which the villa majestically sits in a cut between two raised terraces. On the right is one of the utilitarian farm structures, which sometimes are attached to the villa blocks themselves, forming flanking porticoes. Because this villa possesses a radial symmetry of four identical sides, there would be no way to append such wings.



My quick line drawing in color-fast ink uses watercolor primarily to denote the materials and parts of the composition of **Medici Villa, Poggia a Caiano; 1480** (pen and watercolor on paper, 4x5½). This early Renaissance villa, designed by Giuliano da Sangallo the Younger, was built not far from Florence for Lorenzo de' Medici. It set the precedent for the paradigm that Palladio would follow: symmetrical composition of plan and façade, a major grand story and upper story supported by a heavy base, and a columned portico supporting a pediment. In Palladio's hands, this latter feature would grow in proportion and become the dominant element of the façade's composition.



My sketch **Tempietto Barbaro, Maser; 1579–80** (graphite and watercolor on paper, 11x8) shows the private burial chapel of the Barbaro family, whose villa is across the road. Both structures are by Palladio. The elements of the chapel's spherical dome, classical pediment and columnar portico come from the Pantheon in Rome. The two bell towers were also part of the Pantheon at the time, although they weren't an original feature and were removed in the 19th century. When laying out this watercolor in situ, I found that the proportions of the façade were governed by a series of overlapping squares, the “harmonic” proportions which typically governed Palladio's designs. The diagonals of the squares lightly traced on my drawing are still visible.

villa, as a building type, emerged as a symbol of a landowner's power and an embodiment of the leisurely enjoyment of the countryside that wealth enabled. Rather than the toil of farm labor, it's the element of pleasure and a life of amusement that distinguishes these villas. Some, such as the Villa Capra (La Rotonda), opposite—the most famous of them all—didn't have extensive facilities for sleeping and extended habitation but were mainly intended to be used for daytime escapades from a nearby town.

Remarkable from the outset for their sought-after designs, these villas have continued through the ages to be desirable properties and are now considered “must see” landmarks for sketchers and painters. Qualities contributing to the attraction of these structures are their rigorous and skillful use of classical





LEFT  
**Villa Pisani (La Rocca Pisana), Lonigo; 1776**  
 (graphite and watercolor on paper, 10<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>x14) depicts a villa by Palladio's collaborator, Vincenzo Scamozzi, with a design based on La Rotonda (page ••); however, Scamozzi's design is quite different. There's only one principal façade with a deep portico, and the rotunda (octagonal on the exterior, circular inside) is larger in proportion to the overall plan. The rotunda and flanking rooms are more integrated and open to one another than those of La Rotonda.

BELOW  
 The influence of Palladio's villa designs spread to England and then to its North American colonies. Two centuries after Palladio designed La Villa Rotonda (page ••), Thomas Jefferson adapted the design for his estate in Virginia, Monticello. Like its predecessor, Jefferson's home commands a hillside location. Here you see my sketch **Monticello, Charlottesville; 1769–1808** (graphite and monochrome wash on paper). From Jefferson's time on, the temple front has been the paradigmatic symbol of residential architecture striving for grandeur.

precedent, gracious proportions, consistent plan organization and a harmony with the landscape.

### THE ARCHITECT

Palladio—whose surname, imbued with classical legend, was invented—was greatly inspired by the architecture of classical antiquity, which largely means temples. He was intimately familiar with Rome, a place he visited during his formative years, discovering and sketching the remains of ancient monuments. Primary among these would have been the Pantheon, whose form of colonnaded pediment and overarching spherical dome inscribed within a cube would be the inspiration for one of his own designs, the family chapel or Tempietto Barbaro (page ••).

### THE DESIGN

Each of the villas designed by Palladio, while a unique expression of its owner's aspirations and the locale, follow a consistent prototype arising from the architect's deep familiarity with classicism. This gives them their importance and elevates the entire opus to the level of mastery. The theme and variations start with a symmetrical façade consisting



of three major bays, the central one being the widest. Columns capped by a triangular pediment often encompass a recessed portico. On either side is a flanking flat façade with one centered window, or sometimes two. This composition is often framed by long lateral wings or curved porticoes.

Just as symmetry governs the composition of the façade, it also permeates the floor plan. A central T- or cross-shaped area leads from the entrance—a grand high space intended to impress and often

adorned with frescoes by the leading artists of the day. Completing the floor plan, which is frequently proportioned as either a square or as a rectangle with sides measuring in a 2-to-3 ratio, are the more intimate rooms. These salons or bedrooms fill out the four corners.

The main floor of the structure is elevated, resting on a solid-looking base with robust masonry or plaster detailing (rustication). This base houses the service and storage areas, including the kitchen. The highest

## VILLA CORNARO

As part of a group of painters lodging for many days in a nearby pensione, I had full access to Villa Cornaro (1552-53), thanks to the hospitality of the owners at the time, Sally and Carl Gable, who had just completed a restoration of the structure. Designed by Palladio, this villa is on the main street of the small town of Piombino Dese. It presents a high imposing front with the portico projecting forward and, due to perspective, appearing higher than the main roof. On the opposite side, facing the field, the portico is in the same plane as the block of the structure and, thus, appears lower. The plan consists of a square block with two lower, narrower wings flanking it. The interior scene of the hall shows the view [Stephen: Please add text to orient the viewer to this scene. Where is the hall located and in what direction (toward the front or the back or ???) is the viewer facing?]



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT  
**Villa Cornaro, Front Façade**  
 graphite and watercolor on paper, 10x16

**Villa Cornaro, Hall**  
 graphite and watercolor on paper, 16<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>x10

**Villa Cornaro, Back and Fields**  
 graphite and monochrome wash on paper, 10<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>x16



level of the structure, beneath a sloping tiled roof (or, in the most famous example, a domed rotunda), is a low attic story with square windows and rooms for sleeping.

The compelling and enduring quality of Palladio's villa designs is

demonstrated by the fact that the simple motif of columned porch surmounted by a pediment and sometimes a dome is ubiquitous in the American landscape from Jefferson's Monticello (opposite) to the nearest housing development. ♣

*Stephen Harby is an architect, watercolorist, former faculty member of the Yale School of Architecture and founder of Stephen Harby Invitational, which organizes travel opportunities for small groups.*