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Late Sixteenth Century Italian Architecture

Palladio

The greatest architect of late sixteenth-century Italy was Andrea Palladio (1508-80), who synthesized Mannerism with the ideals of the High Renaissance. He combined certain Mannerist tendencies with a humanist education that inspired his use of ancient sources, particularly Vitruvius.

Between 1566 and 1570 Palladio built the Villa Rotonda (figs. 17.8 and 17.9) near the northern Italian city of Vicenza, for a Venetian cleric. The facade replicates the Classical temple portico—Ionic columns supporting an entablature crowned by a pediment—in the context of domestic architecture. There are four porticos, all in the same style and one on each side of the square plan (fig. 17.8). In Palladio's view, the Classical entrance endowed the building with an air of dignity and grandeur. The strict symmetry was both a Classical and a Renaissance characteristic. Such features recalled ancient Rome, where the villa had originated as an architectural type.

The square plan of the Villa Rotonda is typical of Palladio's villas. Passages radiate from the domed central chamber to each of the four exterior porticos. They, in turn, offer views of the surrounding landscape in four directions. At the sides, each portico is enclosed by a wall pierced by an arch, thereby providing shelter as well as ventilation.

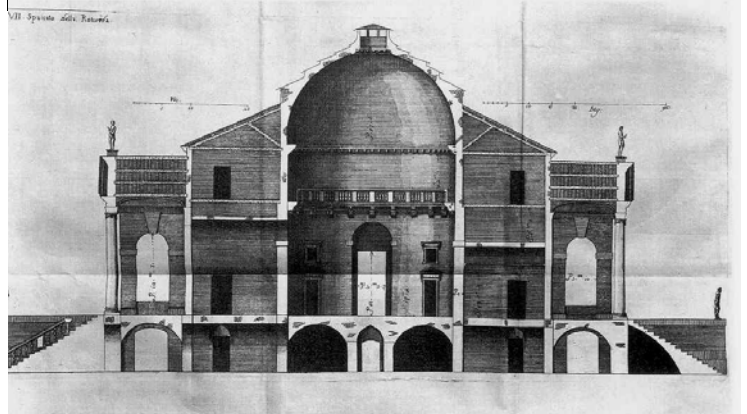
In figure 17.9 some of the classically inspired statues at each angle of the pediments are visible. Others decorate the **postaments** flanking the steps. Since the Villa Rotonda was a purely recreational building, used

exclusively for entertaining, it did not have the functional additions found in Palladio's other villas.

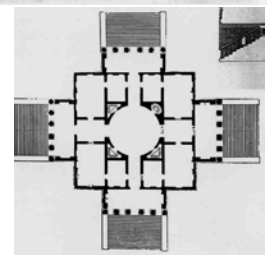
From 1570 Palladio worked mainly in Venice, particularly on church design. His Church of San Giorgio Maggiore (figs. 17.10 and 17.11), begun in 1565 but not completed until 1592, stands on an island facing the Grand Canal. In this building, Palladio solved the problem of relating the facade to an interior with a high central nave and lower side aisles. He did so by superimposing a tall Classical facade with engaged Corinthian columns and a high pediment on a shorter, wider facade with shorter columns and a low pediment. The former corresponded to the elevation of the nave, and the latter to that of the side aisles. This relationship between the facade and the nave and side aisles unified the exterior and interior of the church in a new way. They are further unified by the repetition of Corinthian columns along the nave and of shorter pilasters on the side aisles.



17.9 (below) Andrea Palladio, Villa Rotonda, Vicenza. Begun 1567-9. Andrea di Pietro Gondola was renamed Palladio (after Pallas Athena) by Count Trissino, a humanist scholar and poet who supervised his education and career. Palladio is known to have been involved in over 140 building projects, of which no more than about thirty-five survive. He also published *L'Antichito di Roma*, the first Italian guidebook, in 1554.

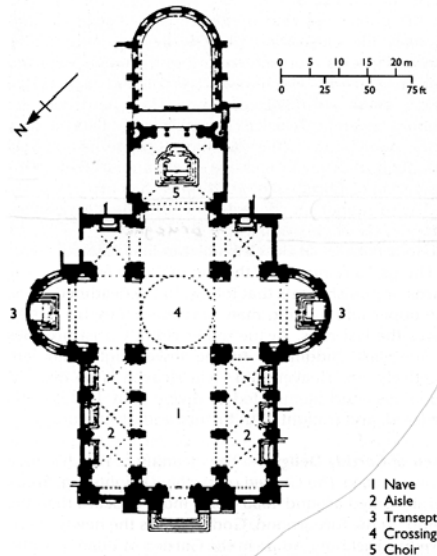


17.8 Plan and section of the Villa Rotonda (from the *Quattro Libri dell'Architettura*, 1570). 18th-century engraving. Bibliotheque de l'Arsenal, Paris.





17.10 (left) Andrea Palladio. S. Giorgio Maggiore. Venice. Begun 1565. 17.11 (below) Plan of S. Giorgio Maggiore. Venice.



In these solutions, Palladio incorporates Classical elements into religious as well as domestic architecture. Nevertheless, the order and the relationship of the elements are not strictly Classical. It would be difficult to demonstrate that Palladio's works are Mannerist, but they share with Mannerism the tendency to juxtapose form and space in a way that is inconsistent with Classical arrangements. For example, he breaks, or interrupts, one pediment in

imposing another over it. This feature, called a **broken pediment**, becomes a characteristic aspect of Baroque architecture in the seventeenth century. In superimposing larger and smaller facades, as in San Giorgio Maggiore, and in combining a temple portico with a domestic villa, Palladio recalls the unexpected juxtapositions found in Mannerist paintings.

Palladio was the single most important architect of his generation, and his influence on subsequent generations of western architecture was extensive. His palaces and villas are still imitated in western Europe and America.

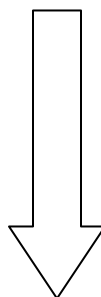
Despite efforts to characterize Mannerism, it remains a style whose qualities are difficult to pin down. It coincides chronologically with the political and religious turmoil of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, and expresses the extremes of the time. The subject matter of Mannerist paintings and sculptures ranges from the mystical to the lascivious, while the best of the architecture is a synthesis of new formal combinations.

Palladio and Pythagorean harmony

Palladio's *Four Books of Architecture* (*I Quattro Libri dell' Architettura*) form the first western architectural treatise to deal with the work of its own author, in addition to that of the ancient architects. Palladio studied Roman ruins and published an illustrated edition of Vitruvius in 1556. His own *Four Books*, published in 1570, reveal his interest in the Pythagorean philosophy relating musical ratios to the harmony of the universe. In the Renaissance, the structures and intervals of music were also linked with architectural harmony. Palladio illustrated the Classical Orders together with plans, elevations, and sections of his own buildings, thereby placing himself in the genealogy of western architects. In 1715 the *Four Books* were translated into English, and had a great influence on the eighteenth-century English designers Colen Campbell and Lord Burlington and the American Thomas Jefferson.

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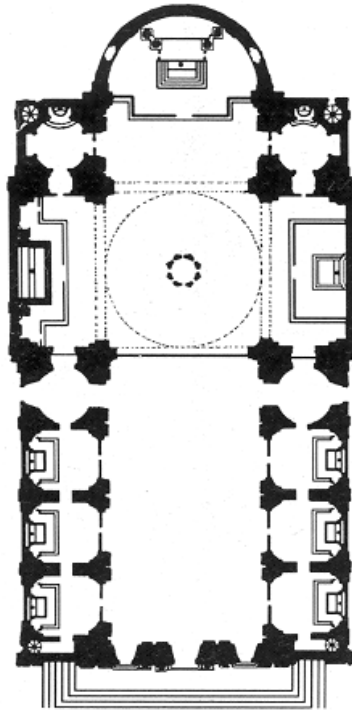
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Proto-Baroque Italian Architecture

VIGNOLA AND DELLA

PORTA. Palladio's immense authority as a designer keeps the conflicting elements in the facade and plan of S. Giorgio from actually clashing. In less assured hands, such a precarious union would break apart. The most widely accepted solution was evolved just at that time in Rome by Giacomo Vignola (1507-1573) and Giacomo della Porta (c. 1540-1602), architects who had assisted Michelangelo at St. Peter's and were still using his architectural vocabulary. Il Gesu (Jesus) is a building whose importance for subsequent church architecture can hardly be exaggerated. Since Il Gesu was the mother church of the Jesuits, its design must have been closely supervised so as to conform to the aims of the militant new order, founded in 1534. We may thus view it as the architectural embodiment of the spirit of the Counter Reformation.



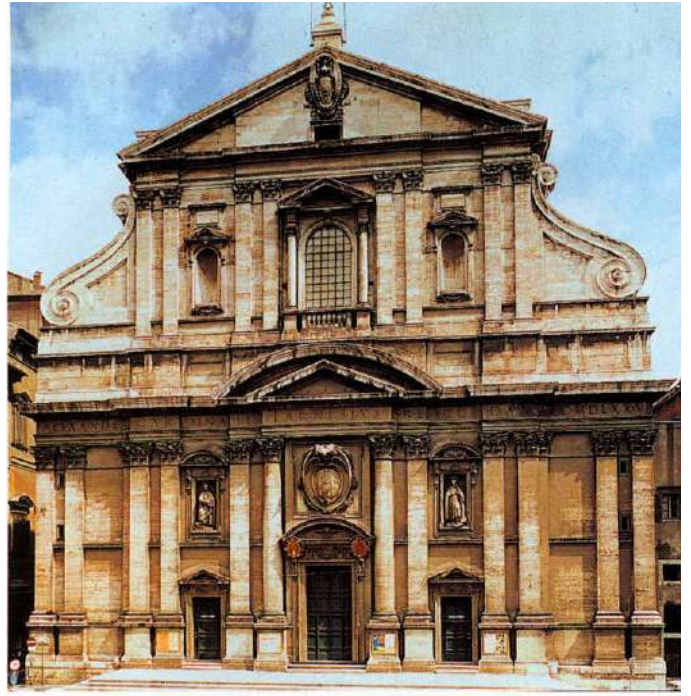
706. (left) GIACOMO VIGNOLA. Plan of Il Gesu, Rome. 1568.

707. (right) ANDREA SACCHI and JAN MIEL. *Urban VIII Visiting Il Gesu*. 1639-41. Oil on canvas. Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome

The planning stage of the structure began in 1550, only five years after the Council of Trent (see page 505). Michelangelo himself once promised a design, but apparently never furnished it. The present ground plan, by Vignola, was adopted in 1568 (fig. 706). Il Gesu contrasts in almost every possible respect with Palladio's S. Giorgio. It is a basilica, strikingly compact, dominated by its mighty nave. The aisles have been replaced by chapels, thus herding the congregation quite literally into one large, hall-like space directly in view of the altar. The attention of this audience is positively directed toward altar and pulpit, as our view of the interior shows (fig. 707). (The painting shows how the church would look from the street if the center part of the facade were removed.) We also see an unexpected feature that the ground plan cannot show: the dramatic contrast between the dim illumination in the nave and the abundant light beyond in the eastern part of the church, supplied by large windows in the drum of the dome. Light has been consciously exploited for its expressive possibilities—a novel device, "theatrical" in the best sense of the term—to give Il Gesu a stronger emotional focus than we have yet found in a church interior.

Despite its great originality, the plan of Il Gesu is not entirely without precedent. The facade by Giacomo della Porta (fig. 708) is as bold as the plan, although it, too, has its earlier sources. The paired pilasters and broken architrave on the lower story are clearly derived from the colossal order on the exterior of St. Peter's (compare fig. 660), and with good reason, for it was Della Porta who completed Michelangelo's dome. In the upper story the same pattern recurs on a somewhat smaller scale, with four instead of six piers of supports. The difference in width is bridged by two scroll-shaped buttresses. This novel device, also taken from Michelangelo, forms a graceful transition to the large pediment crowning the facade, which retains the classic proportions of Renaissance architecture (the height equals the width).

What is fundamentally new here is the very element that was missing in the facade of S. Giorgio: the integration of all the parts into one whole. Della Porta, freed from classicistic scruples by his allegiance to Michelangelo, gave the same vertical rhythm to both stories of the facade. This rhythm is obeyed by all the horizontal members (note the broken entablature), but the horizontal divisions in turn determine the size of the vertical members (hence no colossal order). Equally important is the emphasis on the main portal: its double frame—two pediments resting on coupled pilasters and columns—projects beyond the rest of the façade and gives strong focus to the entire design. Not since Gothic architecture has the entrance to a church received such a dramatic concentration of features, attracting the attention of the beholder outside the building much as the concentrated light beneath the dome channels that of the worshiper inside.



Giacomo della Porta. Façade of Il Gesu, Rome. c. 1575-84

What are we to call the style of Il Gesu? Obviously, it has little in common with Palladio, and it shares with Vasari's architecture only the influence of Michelangelo. But this influence reflects two very different phases of the great master's career: the contrast between the Uffizi and Il Gesu is hardly less great than that between the vestibule of the Laurentian Library and the exterior of St. Peter's. As we shall see, the design of Il Gesu became basic to Baroque architecture. By calling it *proto-Baroque*, we suggest both its seminal importance for the future and its special place in relation to the past.

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Excerpted from Wilkins, et. al., *Art Past, Art Present*, 3rd ed., 1997, 370-71.

BAROQUE ARCHITECTURE: FRANCESCO BORROMINI



7-23. Francesco Borromini. Dome, San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, Rome. 1638-41. Dedicated to a recently canonized saint, Carlo Borromeo, this church is also named after its location at an intersection with four fountains (*quattro fontane*) representing the four seasons, one on each corner. Commissioned by the Spanish Discalced Trinitarians.

This dome by Francesco Borromini (1599-1677) almost appears to be a hallucination. (fig. 7-23). The hovering oval form, with its elastic coffers, seems to bear no relation to the heavy, solid stuff of architecture. If we blink, will it disappear, descend, or snap back into a circular shape with regular coffering? Startling and unbelievable architecture is typical of the works of Borromini. His Baroque monuments tantalize us with their energy, complexity, and tension. The oval form used here is one that has an inherent dynamism, for an oval establishes an axial direction and presents a variation in curvature, but Borromini also exaggerates the diminution of the coffering to suggest that the dome is larger than reality, and by adding hidden windows at the base of the dome, he creates a

floating, levitating sensation. The excitement generated by the dome at San Carlo is resolved by the circle in the middle of the lantern, which is decorated with a triangle, symbol of the Trinity and emblem of the Trinitarian Order, which commissioned the church.

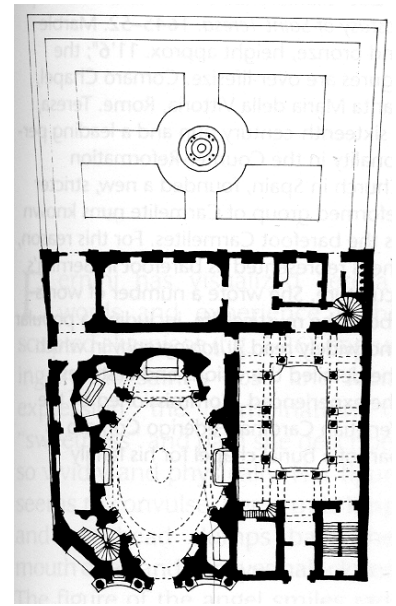
The demand that we be involved, the effect of captured movement, and the dramatic lighting of this architecture are consistent with the Baroque innovations—examined in the paintings of Caravaggio and his followers. This small church is only one example of Borromini's brilliant inventiveness in creating new and exciting experiences within the classical vocabulary of architecture.



7-25. Francesco Borromini. Façade, San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane. 1665-67. Although the façade was completed long after the rest of the church, it is probably based on plans that Borromini had drawn earlier.

The complexity that characterizes the interior of San Carlo (fig. 7 - 24) rivets our attention as we try to discern the logic and order we expect in a building based on the classical orders. The entablature is composed of contrasting flat and concave sections that surge around the small interior, while the patterns of columns and of triangular and semicircular pediments create two overlapping and interlocked systems. The design is both logical and brilliantly complex. Architectural historians have analyzed the mathematical formulas on which Borromini based his structures. In this case, he evolved his design from the triangle, symbolic of the Trinitarian Order. At its most basic level, then, the shape of San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane has a form and an iconographic content that can be related to both a particular religious order and the Christian religion in general.

The facade predicts the interior in the grouping of four evenly spaced columns, in the undulation of the surging entablature, and in the scale of the lower story of columns (fig. 7-25). When one is standing in the narrow street before the church, however, the complex energies of contrasting concave and convex forms overwhelm any sense of logic. The upper row of columns completely masks the dome, making it a total surprise for the unsuspecting observer entering the church.



7-24. Francesco Borromini. Plan of San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane. 1738-41. Note how Borromini has located his church within the irregular space available to him.