



ANDREAS PALLADIUS VICENTINUS.

Manfred Wundram · Thomas Pape

Photographs: Paolo Marton

ANDREA
PALLADIO

1508–1580

Architect between the Renaissance and Baroque

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The groundplans are in the "Quattro Libri" by Andrea Palladio
and in the "Fabbriche" by Ottavio Bertotti Scamozzi.

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Villa Barbaro

Maser (Treviso)

The phenomenon of the country residence (*villeggiatura*) is not one that would have arisen all at once and without any preparation. It has its origins in various areas, all of which are connected with the history of Venice at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Venice's wealth came from its overseas trade, whether as the result of the sale of imported goods, or of the processing of the imported goods for the Venetian luxury market; and one can safely say that, around 1500, the majority of the Venetian population was directly or indirectly connected with the sea trade. This went so far that even grain had to be imported; the fact that on the Terraferma outside the gates or the city fertile fields were turning into swamps appears not to have bothered anyone at the time.

If, however, a crisis were to develop in this all-important sea-trade, what would be the effect on a city with such a one-sided economic structure? In 1453, the signs of just such a crisis began to appear with the loss of Constantinople to the Turks, which was the beginning of an increasing expulsion of the Venetians from their trade centres in the Eastern Mediterranean by the Turks. The Venetian trade crisis began to take on threatening proportions, however, when in 1497–98 the Portuguese Vasco da Gama found a direct sea route to India. This caused the Venetian caravan routes to lose nearly all their significance. That alone already meant a marked economic loss for Venice; when the League of Cambrai then moved against Venice and involved the Republic in armed conflict, Venice's financial sources threatened to dry up due to the high cost of war.

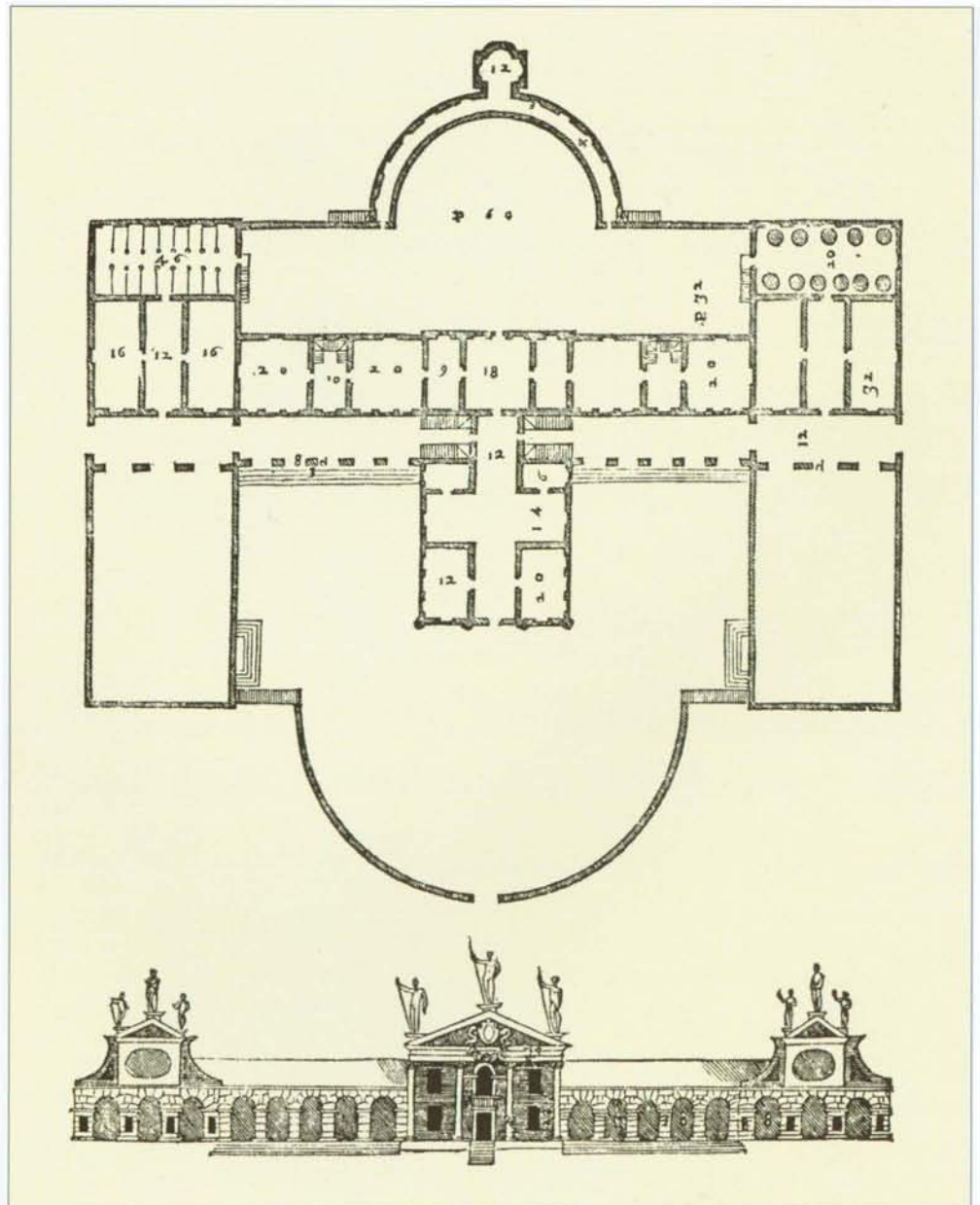
The financial losses which had arisen in Venice did not constitute the only problem, which confronted the Serenissima after the conflicts; the one-sided reliance of Venice on sea-trade meant that, should it become endangered, a sharp rise in the numbers of unemployed would be the inevitable result. Indeed this problem must have taken on quite considerable proportions in Venice. A third factor arose: the fact that Venice was dependent upon imports for its supply of grain led increasingly to severe difficulties in its providing supplies to the populace. The cause was a constant alternation between shortages of money and inflation, the extent of which was given by a contemporary

source in the admittedly lengthy period of time between 1400 and 1580 as being 50 percent of the value of gold. Even the opening up of new trade routes to north and eastern Europe could not counteract this development.

In 1523, Andrea Gritti entered upon his term of office as Doge. The situation, as he saw it at the beginning of that term, was more than merely serious. On the one hand he wanted to do everything that was within his power to make future difficulties in the provision of grain impossible. That his gaze, in the course of these endeavours, should fall upon the Terraferma, was quite understandable. On the other hand, the estates there had in many cases been neglected. Of the 800,000 fields on the Terraferma, 200,000 were no longer of agricultural use.

A thorough reorganisation of the public administration of the Terraferma now took place. In the course of these measures, the first step was the severing of Venetia from the Habsburg fiefdom, which resulted in the Doge of Venice becoming at the same time the duke of the surrounding mainland provinces. The next step was to start drain-

Right: ground-plan and elevation of the Villa Barbaro from the *Quattro Libri*. Like the Villa Rotonda, the Villa Barbaro was built for a client educated in humanism, who possessed the financial means for the realization of an ideal type of building. Unlike the Villa Rotonda, the Villa Barbaro was not emulated in later villa culture.



pp. 120/121: Palladio chose a colossal column order for the façade of the mansion of the Villa Barbaro. The forms of the Villa Barbaro go well with each other due to their simplicity and balance. They form an harmonic unity with the surrounding landscape.





Leonardo once wrote: "Where there is beauty, there cannot be any usefulness." While this opinion of Leonardo's may be contradicted in many Venetian villas, it is true in the case of the Villa Barbaro, that, despite its relationship with villas that were erected principally as functional buildings, it mainly provided for the relaxation and humanist studies of its owner.

ing the marshes. The Venetians had a centuries-old tradition where water was concerned. The need in the following period was to create an irrigation and drainage system on the Terraferma that would assist both the areas with little and with rather too much water. The discovery of such a system can be traced back to the Arabs. The increased use of this system in Italy originated in Lombardy, and Venice indeed made use of engineers from Lombardy to turn their plan into action.

If the external circumstances which can count as one reason for the country residence are now clear, one must nevertheless not overlook the fact that these alone are not sufficient to explain the phenomenon of the country residence. For in those areas in which from 1540 onwards an abrupt increase in the number of planned villas is to be noted, fields were at that time already being cultivated. But all at once a change took place in the way the Venetian nobility thought. The concept of agriculture was placed on a metaphysical level. The spokesman for this development was Alvise Cornaro. His family belonged to the old Venetian nobility and was closely connected with Venetian trading companies. In the general crisis, however, the busi-



Above: the mansion protrudes a good way in front of the arcades. Through the deliberate differentiation in the structure of the façade, of the middle compartment from the neighbouring façade compartments, Palladio is revealing a representational area inside the villa. The shape of the middle window of the piano nobile is worth a comment. Its concluding round arch is decorated with luxuriant fruit branches and breaks into the lower ledge of the gable.

pp. 124/125: "The level of the upper rooms is equal to that of the rear courtyard, where a fountain built into the hillside opposite the house lies, decorated with countless stucco ornaments and paintings." (Andrea Palladio, 1570). The possibility of having their villa built near a spring was extremely important for the humanistically educated Barbaro brothers. An iconographic programme which included the entire arrangement of the villa could be developed from its symbolic meaning.

ness enterprises of the Cornaro family collapsed. Alvise Cornaro came to the conclusion that any economic future would have to be appreciably oriented towards agriculture, and took the appropriate steps. He had settled in the vicinity of Padua, and within a short period of time he had managed to enlarge his estate greatly and to profit considerably from it. He had come to recognise the connection between water technology and the cultivation of land an early stage. Venice's orientation toward agriculture, which continued to increase after 1530, can be seen as his achievement. As a sign of his commitment, the "Magistratura sopra i beni incolti", which was an authority for unexploited lands, came into being in 1556.

His success should however not be ascribed only to the practical advantages of agriculture, which Cornaro was able to make clear to the Venetian noblemen by the example of his own success in agriculture. Having himself been influenced by a humanist education, he well understood the humanist ideals that could be seen in agriculture. With Varro, Cato and Columella, ancient literature was able to offer the works of authors who had formulated the ideals of agricultural



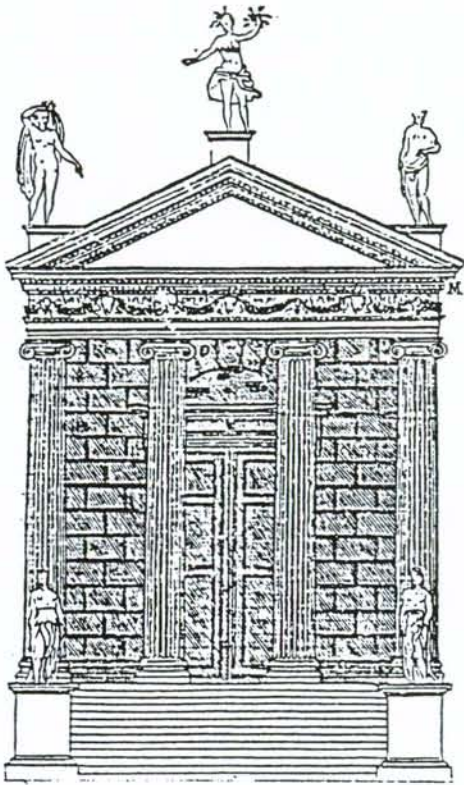
management. In the opinion of Alvise Cornaro, agriculture suddenly took on a sacral character. In his writings he constantly refers to it as “*santa agricoltera*” – “*holy agriculture*”. In his treatise *Discorsi intorno alla vita sobria* – *Discourses on a temperate life* – this sense of mission takes on a clear form.

His very words are, “I can therefore rightfully assert, that I have raised an altar and a temple to the Lord my God and have presented him with souls, that pray to him.” The concept of the villa came to fruition in the so-called “*villa books*”, which were widely circulated in the sixteenth century. At first sight we may see in that a reaction to the time of crisis, which in compensation for reality sought flight into a firmly-based peaceful ideal. We should however not overlook the necessity in Venice of relocating the excess that the economic crisis had caused. In fact the renewed agricultural activity after 1540 was supported to a high degree by the town-dwelling Venetians. The Venetian government supported would-be settlers by making necessary equipment and experts available. Moreover, credit as well as tax relief was granted. But in the main it was the Venetian nobility which settled on the Terraferma.

The conjunction of practical necessity and the idealisation of a life on the land as a result of humanist thinking was the precondition for the appearance of the country residence, although two differing tendencies in the building of villas came into being. Depending on the priorities which were set by the noble clients, there either arose villas which had predominately the characteristics of an estate, or those which as country residences sought to convert into concrete form the spiritual ideals of villa life as the creation of an “*Arcadia*”, of a charming place untouched by reality.

The giant among these villas is the one that Andrea Palladio built at Maser, near Treviso, for the brothers Marcantonio and Daniele Barbaro. One can without any reservations whatsoever describe it as the most complete villa creation of Palladio’s. In contrast to his brother Marcantonio, who played a leading role in the administrative affairs of Venice, Daniele Barbaro was a member of the clergy and, as the Patriarch of Aquileia, took part in the Council of Trent. He made no secret of his humanist ambitions, and the association between these two spiritual directions was quite natural to him. Sources assure us quite believably that Daniele, who was closely befriended with the protagonist of the country residence, Alvise Cornaro, sometimes gave his humanist interests precedence over his spiritual duties.

There are many indications that the Villa Barbaro must have been built around 1557–58. It could not have been more fortunately situated: the villa complex includes a spring, which was situated half-way up a gently sloping hill. There were at the time all sorts of conjectures connected with this spring, which amounted to the fact that there must in earlier times have been a place of worship there, possibly even a temple. Marcantonio Barbaro designed a nymphaeum for the spring, which was meant to accentuate its symbolic content as a mediator between the heavenly and earthly elements and give the place a sacred character, as it were.



In his monograph on Palladio, Lionello Puppi compares the façade of the Villa Barbaro with a sketch Palladio did of the Temple of Fortuna Virilis. There are indeed striking resemblances, suggesting a sacred interpretation of the Villa Barbaro need not be altogether ruled out.

View through an arbour at the side of the Villa Barbaro. The villa's arbours are closed off by arch arrangements. If one ignores their rhythmic qualities, then arcades are part of a simple formal language. By dressing the arcades with smooth stones, they have become an harmonic whole with the façade of the mansion.



Let us turn first of all to the front façade of the Villa Barbaro. Palladio had always arranged the façades of his buildings in pronounced vertical planes. This principle is taken to even further lengths on the façade of the Villa Barbaro. The alternation of segmental arch gables and triangular gables does not here occur in the horizontal, but in the vertical axis. The triangular gables crown the windows of the upper storey, and the segmental arch gables those of the lower storey. The farming wings are flanked by two columbaries. Two quadrant arches lead down from each crowning gable in a smooth descent to the level of the single-storey farming wing. We should notice, incidentally, that a slightly protruding building compartment is formed by this process which singles out a three-arch arrangement within the farming wings on both sides.



Sun dials decorated with astrological symbols have been incorporated into the square panels on each blind arch. In this process we can see the endeavour to give the Villa Barbaro a sacred splendour, for the importance of astrology for the Renaissance and its church architecture should not be underestimated. In connection with the Villa Barbaro, it is of some interest to us that a member of the family, Ermolao Barbaro, came to the public's notice with an astrological treatise concerning the influence of the heavenly bodies upon human life.

This display of astrological interest is however not the only clue that makes the endeavour to give the villa a sacred splendour, which can probably be attributed to Daniele Barbaro, comprehensible. There is the crowning of the façade by a gable connected with four Ionic columns, which is a motif that has been transferred from ancient temple architecture to secular buildings. For all that, the crowning of a façade by a gable is not at all uncommon. In the sixteenth chapter of the second of his four books about architecture, Palladio himself writes that in all his villas, and also in some of his town houses, he put the gable on the front façade, where the main doorway was, so that this gable could indicate the entrance to the house, and promote the greatness and glory of the work by raising the front part of the building over the remaining parts. Nonetheless, the gable on the front façade goes beyond its duty to the stately image of the building. Palladio

Above left: Marcantonio Barbaro was, apart from his position as Venice's procurator, himself a person who dabbled in sculpture and architecture. With regard to the conspicuous inconsistencies in the shaping of the nymphaeum, we can assume that he took part in the making of the sculptural decorations. Ten niches with sculptures are let into the semi-circle of the nymphaeum. Four further sculptures protrude in an almost free-standing plastic fashion in front of the architecture of the nymphaeum. While the sculptures in the niches are certainly no masterpieces, the four "main figures" betray the untrained amateurish hand of the sculptor very clearly.

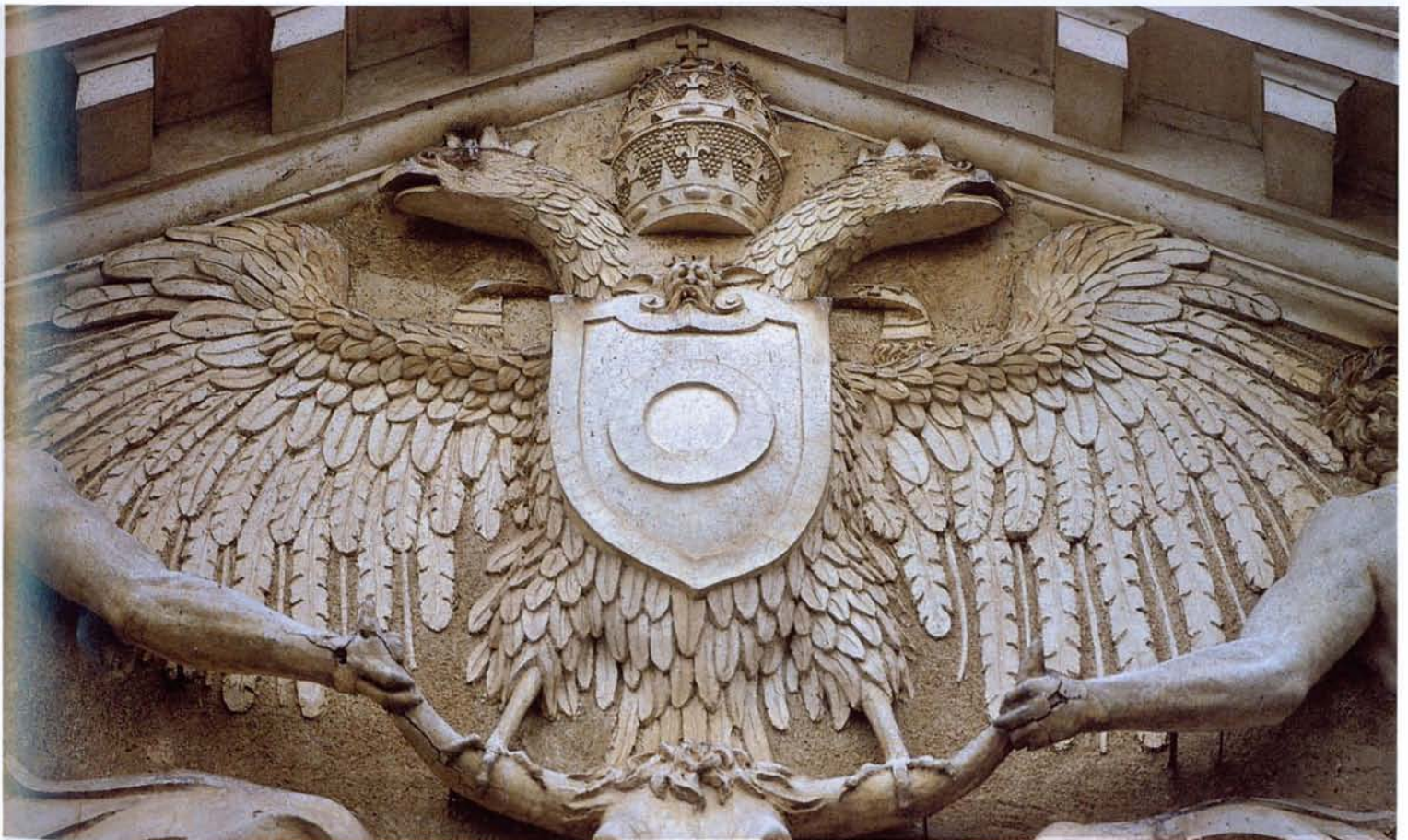
*Above right: "This spring forms a pool, which can be used for fishing. The water separates from here onwards. It flows into the kitchen and then, when it has watered the gardens, which lie to the left and right of the road that leads gradually up to the house, into two drinking troughs on the public highway."
(Andrea Palladio, 1570)*

himself gives a hint to such a further interpretation in his description of the villa in his *Quattro Libri*: "The façade of the mansion has four columns of the Ionic order, and the capitals of the side columns are shaped on two of their sides. I will describe in my book about temples how these capitals are to be made."

If we include this observation in our examination, then Lionello Puppi's conjecture, which connects the façade of the Villa Barbaro with the plan of a façade for the Temple of Fortuna Virilis, which Palladio had reproduced in the thirteenth chapter of his fourth book about architecture, gains a high degree of probability. Nonetheless, the main building does not derive its dominant function solely from the motifs borrowed from sacred buildings. The spectator's eye is drawn to this part of the estate by the rhythmic balance of the circular shapes, which begins in the columbaries and is greatest in the middle of the mansion's façade. In addition, the mansion protrudes a long way in front of the farming wings.

It seems fair to ask whether this fusion of sacred and secular elements has any equivalent within the villa. The plan of the villa gives us no direct information about this, even though the base of the main room is characterized by a cruciform shape. The frescoes are of importance in this context. Paolo Veronese's signature shows him to be responsible for them, just as he is for the decoration of the grotto behind the nymphaeum. It is here at the very latest that the endeavours of the clients to have an idealised illusory world built within the real world become apparent. In the paintings, motifs from everyday life are connected with ones of a sacred nature. Paolo Veronese's ability to

The stucco work in the gable of the Villa Barbaro is attributed to Alessandro Vittoria. In his description of ancient villas, Palladio gives his reasons for having used an entrance gable as, amongst other things, its suitability "for affixing the symbol, that is, the coat of arms of the builder". Here in Maser the Barbaro family's coat of arms is surrounded with rich stucco work.



create illusionistic paintings peaked at the Villa Barbaro. What is illusion and what is reality? one is often tempted to ask. Windows framed by columns afford a view of Arcadian landscapes, whose idealised character is underlined by the appearance in them of ancient ruins. Right next to them there are real windows, which make it possible to see the real landscape. The resulting interplay is impressive: is the real landscape ennobled by this new connection with the idealised landscape, or is the claim to reality of the painted landscape heightened and manifested by being next to the real landscape?

This question seems difficult to answer. Nonetheless, the illusory paintings extend over all areas of the villa's inner decoration. A painted halberd stands in one corner, and out of an illusory door there steps a painted hunter, returning home from the hunt with his dogs. What is interesting is that in the main room of the villa, the Hall of Olympus, we move from a secular realm to a sacred realm. On a surrounding balustrade we see various people who are dressed according to their era, are pictured in lifesize, and appear to be watching the goings-on in the villa. The iconographic programme of the main room reaches its zenith in the vault fresco over this balustrade. We are dealing with a representation of Olympus, in the centre of which there is the allegory of wisdom, surrounded by the gods of the firmament and their attributes. These sacred representations can all be found in the storey from which one can reach the nymphaeum and its spring.

If we take all this into consideration, then the Villa Barbaro can indeed be seen as a building whose lay-out was conceived with the aim of linking the secular with the sacred. If at first it is the secular aspect that predominates, we then find in the Hall of Olympus a reconciliation of both aspects, a kind of preparation for the estate's "Holy of Holies", the spring. Through the fact of its having as it were been built into the hillside, the Villa Barbaro becomes an attribute of the spring with a character that prepares us for it.

Beyond this, Palladio's endeavour to connect architecture and landscape harmoniously with each other attains a heightened expression through this device, which in the Villa Barbaro creates an ideal work which has remained unparalleled in all villa building.

p. 131: the frescoes in the cruciform room of the piano nobile are with respect to their themes closely connected to villa life. In this process, the illusory painting provides an impressive alternating play of appearance and reality.

pp. 132/133: Paolo Veronese is the master who carried out the fresco decorations in the rooms of the villa's piano nobile. Views through actual windows are contrasted with such painted on windows, which lead into landscapes with ruins from antiquity. As an expression of the harmony of villa life, musicians appear in painted niches holding in their hands instruments such as the hurdy-gurdy, which were, during the Baroque, still regarded as typical pastoral instruments.

