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"Palladian Studies in America"

An address by Carl I. Gable* presented at "Inter Moenia: Palladio and the City,"
a symposium sponsored by The Institute of Classical Architecture and Classical America,
New York, 25 October 2008

The Center for Palladian Studies in America—we sometimes call it CPSA—was founded 30 years ago to research and promote understanding of Andrea Palladio and of his influence in the United States. So you can see that our organization followed by only 20 years the founding of Italy's own Andrea Palladio International Center for the Study of Architecture, known as CISA.

It seems fitting that the founding of our American organization followed at a modest and respectful distance the founding of the Italian center, since Palladianism in America followed in a similar way the structures Palladio first designed in Italy. But I hope our organization also brings the same fresh spirit and sensitivity to local surroundings that American builders and architects have always brought to Palladio's ideas and buildings.

As we gather to commemorate Palladio's 500th birthday anniversary, my only regret is that most of us here for the celebration are professionals—architects, art historians, or others with a specialized interest in architecture or the arts in general. There are among us few—if any—farmers, small shopkeepers, truckdrivers or stonecutters. It was not always that way.

In fact, in the early days of our country Palladio was as American as apple pie. In 1788 Americans were celebrating another birthday—the birth that year of the United States of America. The United States Constitution had just received the minimum number of state ratifications necessary to launch the new country, and there were celebrations in all the major cities. In Baltimore there was a big parade with floats sponsored by all the major groups of the city. The carpenters decorated their float with two large portraits: George Washington, of course

George Washington.

–and then, beside him, Andrea Palladio.

George Washington and Andrea Palladio.

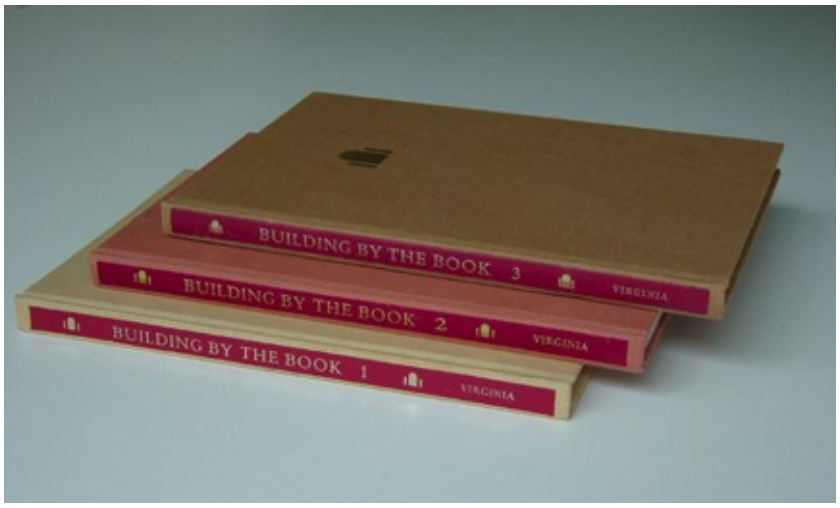
Pause a minute here to think about the dates. George Washington was 56 years old, the winning general in a war which had just ended. He was a fitting and immediately recognizable symbol of the new country. Andrea Palladio, on the other hand, was an Italian born in the fading and faraway Republic of Venice 280 years in the past. Nonetheless, the carpenters of Baltimore took him as the epitome of their vocation, a man to sit beside Washington—and presumably a man whom a certain number of parade goers would recognize.

Well, I don't for a minute think we'll ever recover for Palladio the level of fame and acclaim which he held at the time of that parade in 1788—even though his effect on our society today continues at nearly the same level. But at the Center for Palladian Studies in America and at other classically oriented institutions across the country we'll continue our efforts to understand Palladio, his insights into architecture, and his continuing significance. I suppose we'll never again have a parade where Palladio is placed on the same pedestal as the Father of our Country, but maybe we can find a spot for him at least equal to Brad Pitt or Madonna. (On second thought, Hollywood stars certainly outrank George Washington in the modern world!)

At the Center for Palladian Studies in America, we proceed on a variety of fronts, both

alone and in cooperation with other organizations when our interests intersect. We publish books ourselves and subsidize publications by others. We make grants for mounting exhibitions and for documenting Palladian structures; we organize focused group tours to the Veneto region of Italy to examine Palladio's own villas, churches and palaces, and elsewhere to inspect important examples of his influence. We co-sponsor an annual symposium on Palladian architectural history in America, as well as other educational events. And, finally, in our newest undertaking, three years ago we began publishing *Palladiana*, a journal devoted to Palladio and Palladianism around the world, with particular emphasis on America.

Our publishing program began with a series of three collections of essays on Palladian subjects, entitled *Building by the Book*.



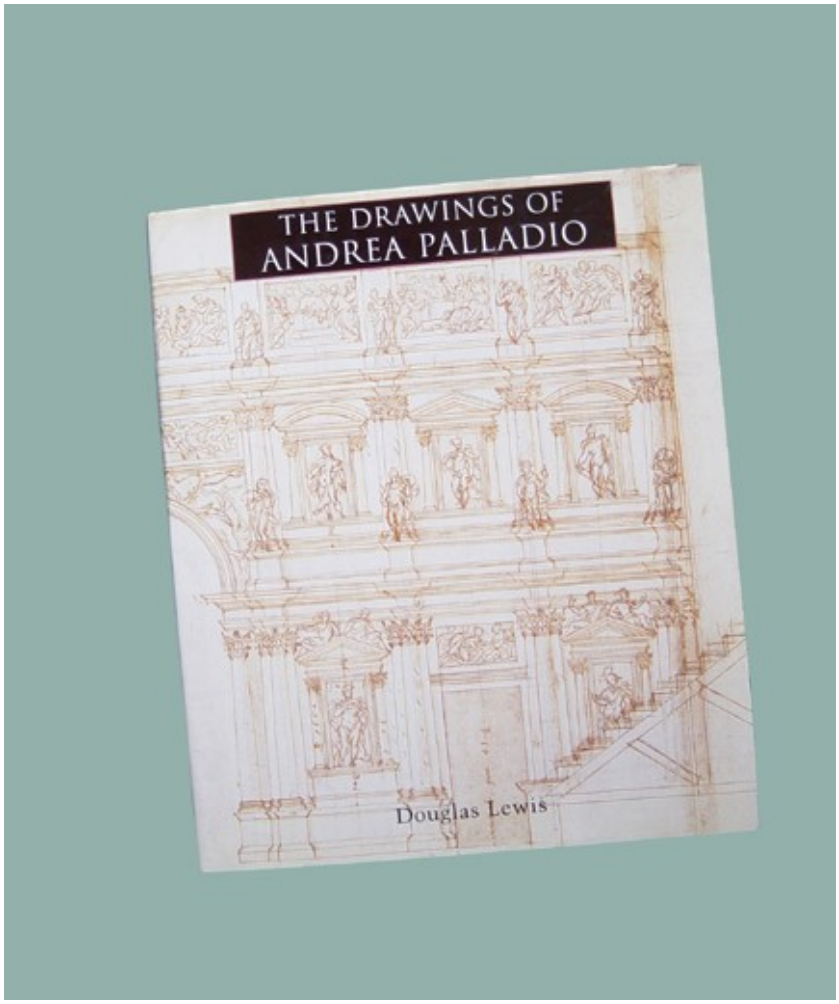
Mario di Valmarana, ed.,
Building by the Book series, volumes 1-3.

The editor of the *Building by the Book* series was Mario di Valmarana, whom many of you know. Mario, who was the prime mover in the founding of our organization, has many claims to fame, but two of them deserve particular mention here. First, he was a long-time and much-honored professor at the University of Virginia's School of Architecture. Second, he is, along with his brothers, the owner of La Rotonda, perhaps Palladio's most famous building.

La Rotonda, Vicenza, Italy.

The three books which Mario edited in the *Building by the Book* series form a remarkable introduction to Palladianism in America, with articles by a diverse roster of authors including Charles Peterson, Lionello Puppi, Marcus Binney, John Harris, Calder Loth and Howard Cox.

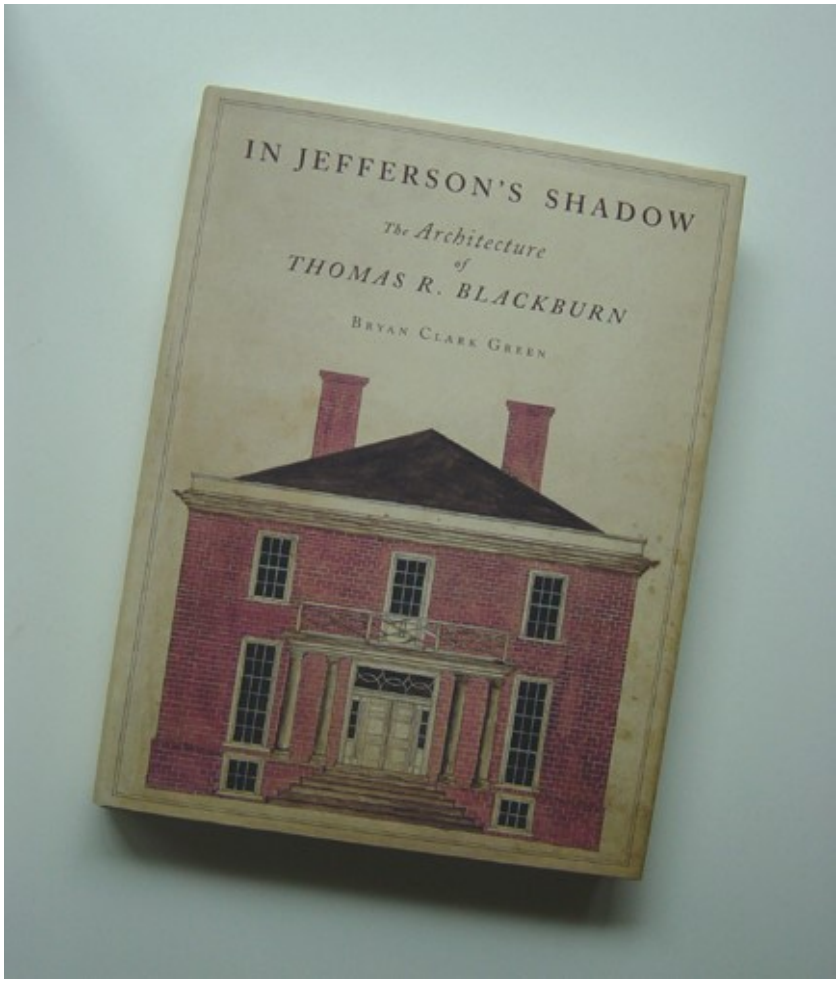
Our best-known publishing effort, a book you're certain to find in any Palladian library—even though you may have overlooked our role in it—is Douglas Lewis' authoritative *Drawings of Andrea Palladio*.



Douglas Lewis, *The Drawings of Andrea Palladio*.

The first edition of this book appeared as the catalog of a 1981 traveling exhibition of Palladio's drawings. The need for a more comprehensive book on Palladio's drawings was obvious, and we were pleased to provide a grant to assist in publication of an exhaustive second edition by Martin-St. Martin Press in 2000. Doug's expanded book was immediately recognized as one of the fundamental tools in Palladian studies.

Our CPSA also stepped forward when the Virginia Historical Society discovered a remarkable cache of drawings by Thomas Blackburn, an important but largely forgotten Palladian architect in the circle of Thomas Jefferson.



Bryan Green, *In Jefferson's Shadow: The Architecture of Thomas Blackburn.*

We made a key grant in support of the work of conserving and exhibiting the drawings, and preparing them for publication in Bryan Green's 2006 study entitled *In Jefferson's Shadow: The Architecture of Thomas Blackburn*. (Since I'm from Atlanta, I'll just add, as an aside, my perception that I don't think you can throw a rock in Virginia without hitting some protégé of Thomas Jefferson.)

One of our latest projects at CPSA has been to assist in documenting and conserving Battersea on the James River in Petersburg, Virginia, one of the earliest and finest examples of the 5-part Palladian villa form in America.

Battersea, Lynchburg, Virginia.

Poor Battersea began its life under excellent auspices. Construction was started in 1768 by John Banister, the first mayor of Petersburg; its second owner was a justice of the Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals. The house was actually well tended until 1985, when tragedy struck. In that year the loving, but misguided, owners of Battersea made the grave error of giving the estate to the city government of Petersburg. Now I can tell you from personal observation in Italy that government ownership is just about the worst thing that can happen to an historical structure. The roof may be leaking, but if repair is not in this year's budget, nothing will happen before next year—at the earliest. Nonetheless, the city of Petersburg launched with great enthusiasm a program to add Battersea to its roster of local attractions. An Historical Structures Report in 1988, even some stabilization work on the foundations. How long did this enthusiasm last? Three years. Then came elections, new personnel, new priorities, new shortages of funds. Battersea was basically abandoned, a wooden structure left to 15 years of deterioration.

Interior, Battersea.

Well, four years ago a local group of preservationists, with cooperation from the city government, began getting things back on track. Our organization, the Center for Palladian Studies in America, stepped forward to fund additional research to support an application for designating Battersea as a site of national significance on the National Register of Historic Places. That's a necessary stepping stone for achieving Historic Landmark status and opening additional funding sources. One of our individual CPSA Board members, John Zeugner, has been particularly energetic in getting a non-profit support group off the ground and developing a plan for restoration, study and creative use of Battersea and its grounds and outbuildings.

There seems to be general agreement among scholars that Battersea bears a remarkable resemblance to Plate 3 in Robert Morris' *Select Architecture*.

(above) Battersea, Lynchburg, Virginia;
(below) Robert Morris, *Select Architecture*, Plate 3.

That's the influential pattern book published in England in 1757. Robert Morris' Plate 3 itself is similar to the design his cousin Roger Morris created 20 years earlier for Whitten Hall in Middlesex, eight miles west of London.

(above) Roger Morris, Whitten Hall, Middlesex, England;
(below) Robert Morris, *Select Architecture*, Plate 3.

Similar, yes, but with some obvious differences. In fact, in some ways Battersea looks very much like the 5-part profile of Palladio's own Villa Barbaro, which is pictured at Plate 34 in Isaac Ware's edition of Palladio's *Four Books on Architecture*.

(above) Battersea, Lynchburg, Virginia;
(below) Andrea Palladio (Isaac Ware, trans.), *The Four Books on Architecture*, plate 34-Villa Barbaro.

No documentary evidence survives to identify the architect of Battersea. But ask yourself, Who in Virginia in this period had the insight, the creativity to combine these elements from Robert Morris and from Palladio himself to achieve this powerful new form? For some Virginians this seems like a no-brainer. After all, John Banister's *third wife* was a *cousin* of Thomas Jefferson. Now, it's true that Thomas Jefferson was only 25 years old in 1768, that he had never built anything up to that time, and that none of his surviving drawings was executed before the following year—but this is Virginia.

By this point in my speech I'm sure you've figured out that I'm not a trained scholar in American Palladianism, so the question has probably occurred to you, How does he know all this stuff about Battersea and Whitten Hall and Robert Morris and Roger Morris? The answer is that I learned it all from *Palladiana*.

Palladiana, Journal of the Center for Palladian Studies in America.

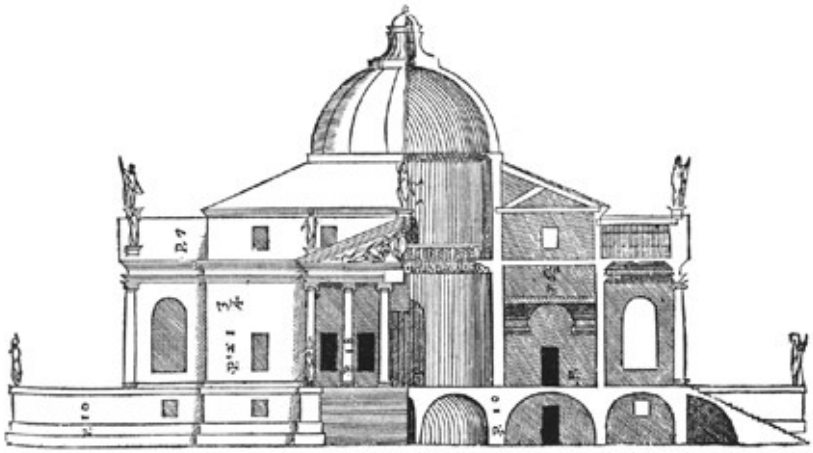
That's the new journal of the Center for Palladian Studies in America, which we launched three years ago. I've brought along copies of the latest issue for you to take a look at.

I want to review with you a few articles from recent issues of *Palladiana* as a way of showing you why it is useful, productive and even entertaining to study Palladio in the modern world—500 years after his birth. I hope I can also show you why America has some unique advantages in conducting such studies even though it is about 4,000 miles from the land where Palladio lived and worked.

The most recent issue of *Palladiana* features an article by Professor Charles Brownell of Virginia Commonwealth University which illustrates my point that Palladian studies can be entertaining as well as educational. The article, headlined "Leoni Haunts Palladio's Tomb," shows why Palladio may have been turning over in his grave for the last 180 years. Charles begins by reviewing how a great deal of what we think we know about Palladio is actually misinformation propagated by a minor architect in 18th-century England, Giacomo Leoni. The name is probably familiar to most of you, because Giacomo Leoni has one great claim to fame. Leoni is the man who produced the first complete English edition of Palladio's epic 1570 publication, *The Four Books on Architecture*. Leoni's work came out in installments from 1716 to 1720. But he got off on the wrong foot right away. The title page itself contains his first misrepresentation: This new book, he asserts, is "translated from the Italian original." In fact, his translator, a French-born military engineer and architect named Nicolas Dubois, did not translate from the Italian original. He actually worked from a French version which had been published 65 years earlier. The double translation led to a lot of mistakes, including one howler where the English version says the exact opposite of what Palladio wrote.

The biggest problems, however, arise from the illustrations. Leoni simply re-drew them,

adding—among other things--a lot of baroque-style details that would have made Palladio cringe. Leoni didn't fib about this change. In fact, he bragged about it. In his Preface he states that "true judges" who compared his plates with Palladio's originals would find a vast difference. Leoni had, he said, made "so many necessary Corrections with respect to Shading, Dimensions, Ornaments, &c. that this Work may in some sort be rather consider'd as an Original, than an Improvement." Let's look at what he did with the dome of La Rotonda.



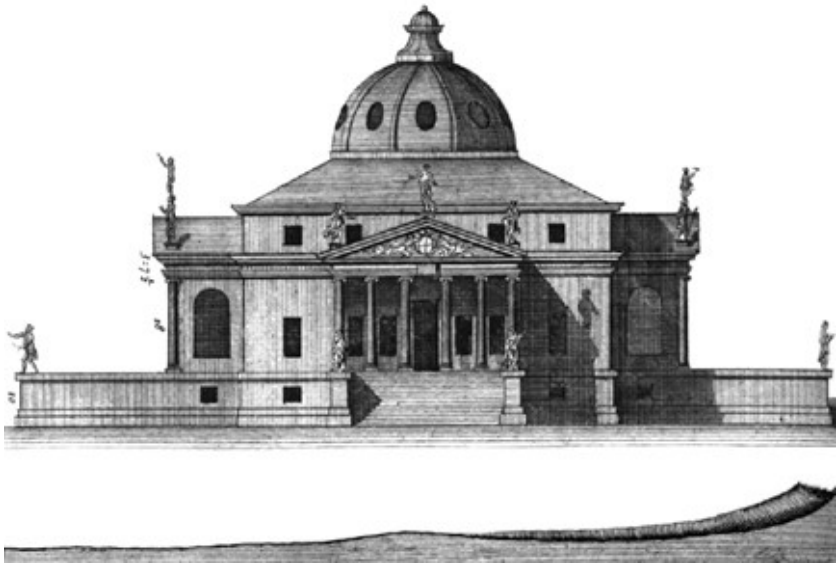
Andrea Palladio, *I quattro libri dell'architettura* (1570), La Rotonda.

Here you see Palladio's own 1570 illustration. And now compare Leoni's "improved" dome.

Andrea Palladio, *The Architecture of A. Palladio, in Four Books*
(Giacomo Leoni edition, 1715-1720), La Rotonda.

Portholes! Leoni has added porthole windows around the dome!

In the long-run, this might seem a harmless enough distortion, but Charles' article in *Palladiana* traces how in the English-speaking world the "phony Leoni" (as Charles calls it) became the accepted idea of how Palladio intended La Rotonda to look.



Andrea Palladio, *Andrea Palladio's Architecture in Four Books* (Cole-Hoppus edition, 1735), La Rotonda.

Here's the illustration that Benjamin Cole and Edward Hoppus used in their 1735 publication entitled *Andrea Palladio's Architecture in Four Books*. Portholes again! Then the portholes moved from library pages into real life.

B. Henry Latrobe, sketch for a University of Virginia rotunda (1817).

Here's Henry Latrobe's sketch, from a letter to Thomas Jefferson, proposing a University of Virginia rotunda with porthole windows in the dome. That one was never built, but Jefferson loved the portholes, which he once specifically referred to as being Palladio's design. (Remember that Jefferson had a copy of *Leoni's* Palladio in his library.) In 1808 Latrobe actually created an inspired variation of the "phony Leoni" dome—in the magnificent Old Senate Chamber in the United States Capitol building.

B. Henry Latrobe, Old Senate Chamber, United States Capitol (1808).

Most recently, an authoritative twentieth-century book by Sir Banister Fletcher published in more than 14 editions between 1924 and 1996 shows an illustration of La Rotonda with the porthole windows—and specifically states that it is "as designed."

Well, all that's the educational part of the story. Now we come to the great irony.

Giuseppe de Fabris, Andrea Palladio tomb monument,
Cimitero Maggiore, Vicenza, Italy (1845).

In 1845 the city fathers of Palladio's home town of Vicenza decided to honor their famous citizen by removing his body from the church where it was interred, and re-installing it at a spacious new site with a magnificent monument by Giuseppe de Fabris, an eminent sculptor of the period. An allegorical figure at the right holds a sheet of drawings which symbolize Palladio's work. What does it show?

Andrea Palladio funeral monument, with detail.

It shows La Rotonda—complete with Leoni's porthole windows in the dome. Leoni will now lurk in Palladio's own tomb forever.

I'd like to turn now to what I believe is one on the most significant discoveries in Palladian scholarship in recent decades. I believe that when the implications of this finding are fully explored, it could radically revise our thinking about Palladio, at least in his later years.

The article I'm speaking of appeared in the Fall issue of *Palladiana* last year. It's headlined "Palladio and Astrology at La Rotonda."

La Rotonda, Vicenza, Italy.

The article is by Alexandra di Valmarana. (I should explain a certain coincidence of names which you have probably noted; Alexandra, a prominent London-based

architectural conservator, is the daughter-in-law of Mario di Valmarana, whom I've mentioned earlier as one of the owners of La Rotonda.) Alexandra was struck by how little attention had ever been paid to the twelve statues, or acroteriale, which crown the rooftop of La Rotonda, three of them atop each of the building's four porticos.

Giambattista Albanese, La Rotonda rooftop statues Mercury (left) and Jupiter (1599-1602).

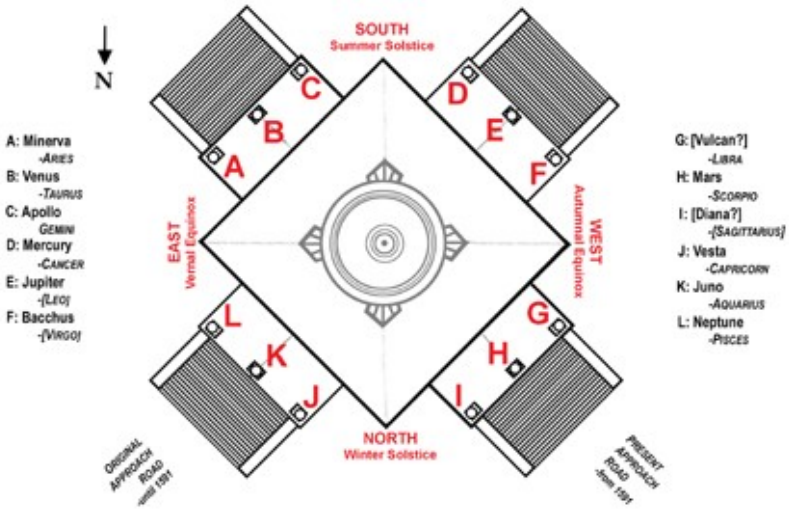
Her first idea was simply to inspect the statues and attempt to identify the mythological figures depicted through comparing their indicia with descriptions in the particular Renaissance treatises that were available to artists in 1599 to 1602 when Giambattista Albanese carved the statues. For example, the figure of Mercury can be identified here, on the left, by his winged hat. It was in the course of her work that Alexandra made her remarkable observation and had the experience and ingenuity to recognize what she saw: She found at the base of each statue a unique symbol for a constellation of the zodiac.

Statue of Mercury with sign of the constellation Cancer on its base.

Here on the base of Albanese's statue of Mercury you can see the traditional symbol for the constellation Cancer, the Crab.

Next, Alexandra's research confirmed that in the case of each statue the mythological god or goddess depicted was, according to the classical texts, the specific deity charged with "protecting" the constellation that was identified by the zodiac symbol on its base. For example, the statue of Jupiter has the symbol for Leo on its base, Juno has Aquarius, Neptune has Pisces.

Finally came her most provocative insight: The placement of the statues and the orientation of La Rotonda on its site resulted in having each zodiac symbol and related statue face in the direction of that constellation in the sky.



Plan of rooftop statuary and symbols, La Rotonda.

Take a look at this schematic chart of the statues and the orientation of Palladio's building. The letter D here in the southwest corner identifies the statue of Mercury, which—as I mentioned earlier—is associated with the constellation Cancer, or the Crab. As the building is positioned and as the statue is placed, the statue of Mercury actually faces the constellation Cancer in the sky on the day of the vernal equinox, which is the relevant date in astrology. The same is true for each of the other statues. In other words, the statues—corresponding to constellations—circle the building just as the heavens surround the earth.

So does this mean that the design and placement of Palladio's buildings was influenced by astrology? That would certainly inject a note into Palladian studies that we've never heard much about. In fact, isn't that a little embarrassing? Astrology today is outside the stream of serious thought. But we have to bear in mind that in Palladio's day astrology represented cutting edge thinking as men tried to explain the world around them, and although astrology itself was soon elbowed off the table, the intellectual effort that went into it ultimately created the foundation on which the scientific revolution was built. Remember that Sir Isaac Newton has been described variously as the first physicist and the last astrologer.

But, before we start associating Palladio with astrology, there are some troubling loose ends to address. The first critical point is in the chronology of things. Palladio died in 1580 and his patron Paolo Almerigo died nine years later. So Palladio had been dead for eighteen years when the statues at La Rotonda were carved, and by then the villa was owned by the Capra family. So far, no evidence has turned up to show that the identity and placement of the statues followed some plan laid out before Palladio's death. On the other hand, the physical alignment of the building so perfectly accommodates the zodiac symmetry of the statues that it's difficult to assume that it's mere coincidence. Moreover, in the case of La Rotonda's fresco decoration, which was executed in the same period as the statues, there is some suggestion that the themes follow a plan that originated before Almerigo's death. So perhaps the statues followed an early plan as well.

Finally, in his *Four Books on Architecture* Palladio forcefully expresses his admiration for the 1st-century Roman architect Vitruvius, who wrote in his treatise *De Architectura*, as follows:

Owing to the inclination of the twelve signs [zodiac]
and the course of the sun,
the disposition of houses ought to conform to
the characteristics of their geographical location
and the different aspects of the sky.

This Vitruvius language, coupled with the discoveries at La Rotonda, makes one passage in Palladio's *Four Books* more provocative. Palladio says:

If we consider this beautiful machine of the world,
with how many wonderful ornaments it is filled,
and how the heavens, by their continual revolutions,
change the seasons according as nature requires,
and their motion preserves itself by the sweetest harmony of temperature,
we cannot doubt but that the little temples we make
ought to resemble this very great one.

On balance, we have to say that the jury is still out on whether Palladio himself was

influenced by astrology, but one thing is clear: We've got to stop focusing just on floor plans and elevations and begin to look at the entire structure, including the decoration, if we are really to understand the full breadth of Palladio's vision.

My point in all this is to try and show that there are important things occurring in Palladian scholarship, and that American scholars and organizations have a big role to play in it. I'm hoping that all of you in this audience will be intrigued by what is occurring, and that some of you will want to be a part of it by bringing to our attention your own ideas for articles in *Palladiana*. And just as a dividend I want to throw out one intriguing idea in the hope that one or more of you will pursue it.

Phillip Galle, engraving after Marten Heemskerk,
"Destruction of the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem" (1557).
Collection of Bild-Archiv der Osterreichischen National Bibliotek, Vienna.

Here's a fascinating engraving which I came across recently. No, it's not La Rotonda; it's a 1557 engraving by Phillip Galle showing Marten van Heemskerk's conception of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. This is a low-resolution image, but you can see the temple is being destroyed, with flames shooting out on the left. What I want you to focus on is several fascinating similarities to La Rotonda.

Galle engraving, with La Rotonda.

You can see the dome, and then a porch projecting out from it--and columns with a small classical pediment above. Now, are those porches extending out to the left and right as well? Could be. Maybe some curious scholar will take on the project of investigating whether a copy of this engraving was available to Palladio in Venice or Vicenza, and whether Palladio at La Rotonda might have been attempting to recreate the form of Solomon's Temple, just as Phillip II, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, was attempting to do at El Escorial in Spain in the same period.

In the 20 years that my wife Sally and I have been associated with Palladio's Villa Cornaro in Piombino Dese, we've had a mania for buying every new book we come across dealing with Palladio and his buildings, not just in English but in Italian as well. We've also hosted a steady stream of students coming through the villa to research papers for their university degrees. Frankly, we've seen a tendency to repackage the same information over and over. Frequently papers are filled with citations to secondary sources, often works of their own professors, instead of new research into unexplored primary documents. In 20 years there have been too few exceptions.

I think American scholars are by and large too skeptical and irreverent to get caught in that trap. Our American approach, by contrast, emphasizes a constant quest for original research and new insights. Sometimes this can be carried to a fault, with too little understanding for what has been done before and too little respect for the work of earlier scholars, but I think it ensures a healthy future for Palladian studies in America.

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* Mr. Gable has served as president of the Center for Palladian Studies in America, Inc., since 2006. He and his wife Sally are the authors of *Palladian Days: Finding a New Life in a Venetian Country House* (Knopf, 2005), describing their experiences as owners of Palladio's Villa Cornaro in Piombino Dese, Italy.