

The Landmark Trust

VILLA SARACENO, FINALE

The Villa Saraceno was built in c.1545 (and finished by 1555) for Biagio Saraceno. It is one of the earliest and most modest of Andrea Palladio's twenty or so surviving villas. Palladio (1508-80) was one of the greatest Italian architects of the Renaissance, whose influence spread across the world in the following centuries. Through his careful studies of ancient Roman architecture, Palladio aimed to recapture the splendour of antiquity. His reinvention of the concept of the villa, a place to recapture the Roman ideal of escaping the bustle of the city in a cultured but self-sufficient existence in the country, had particular resonance for the humanist nobility and gentry of the Veneto.

The Saraceno family had come to Vicenza from Rome in the late 13th century. They were members of the minor nobility and pursued professional careers in the Church, law and medicine. They also built up agricultural estates, improving the land and introducing new crops and methods, in this case at Finale near Agugliaro. Their first fine house there is the privately owned Palazzo delle Trombe (early 16th-century) at the crossroads in the hamlet of Finale (turn left at the entrance to Villa Saraceno), so named after its rainwater spouts in the shape of trumpets. Note too the little chapel in a field near the road between the two villas, also privately owned and now an outbuilding.

The villa house Palladio built for Biagio Saraceno was added to a much older working courtyard. Biagio (whose portrait is thought to be above the door from the loggia) commissioned Palladio to build a new house on the main axis of his existing farm courtyard. This house outshines the other buildings on the site, but did not replace them, even though it seems this was Palladio's original intention, from the design he published retrospectively in his *Quattro libri dell' architettura* (1570).

The retention of these older buildings means that the evolution of a typical villa farm of the Veneto can be clearly seen in the Villa Saraceno, with the survival of a much-altered medieval dovecot (*colombara*) of c1500, the old house (*casa vecchia*) of c1520, and the barns surviving on the east side of the courtyard (c1500 with later alterations), and the 17th to 19th-century colonnaded barn (*barchessa*). Although the *Quattro libri* tells us that Palladio envisaged symmetrical *barchesse* and pavilions clasping the beautifully proportioned principal house on either side, these were never built. Rather, as O. Scamozzi observed in 1778, 'it was added to as necessary, either with buildings that already existed or by later ones.' The current *barchessa* is therefore the latest version of several well-meaning but rather clumsy attempts to realise Palladio's elegant scheme at least partially.

The villa house is placed on the site with great precision: it faces roughly due south and is carefully aligned to frame the view of the Dolomite mountains through the loggia entrance and north door of the *sala*, an alignment that also acts functionally to catch the breeze. The house is raised up by five Vicentine feet to avoid floodwater. The owner's dwelling (*corpo padronale*) had two sets of formal steps up to the south-facing loggia and hall (*sala*), and also down to the orchard (*brolo*) beyond (both sets today are later, and altered, replacements). To either side were two-room apartments, each with a smaller vaulted room (*camerini*) overlooking the court, and a larger one, (*stanza maggiore* and *cucina grande*) to the north, each with a fireplace. The proportions of the larger rooms as built match those given in the *Quattro libri*: 'a square and five eighths long and as high as they are wide.' There is a cellar beneath the *cucina grande* and another beneath the east *camerino*. A granary above is reached by an ingenious staircase tower within the *sala*.

The villa house was much altered over the centuries. Soon after it was built, the loggia vault was decorated with frescoes, as were the *sala* and west *stanza maggiore* and *camerino*, probably for Biagio's son Pietro in the later 16th century. The *sala* frescoes have been identified as depicting Pietro Aretino's play, *Orazia* (1546) and, on the basis of a letter written in 1552 by Aretino to Lucietta Saraceno, it has been suggested not only that Aretino (a leading writer of the time) visited the Villa Saraceno, but also that *Orazia* might have been written at Finale.

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In 1604, the Saraceno heiress Euriemma married Scipione Caldogno and improvements continued. The vaults of the east *camerino* were knocked down in 1659 by Lucietta Thiene Caldogno, when a mezzanine floor was inserted in the east apartment and an east wing was added; this upset the harmony of Palladio's fenestration on the north and south facades. A bad fire in 1798 in the *barchessa* spread to the villa house, so that the east roofs and all the rooms beneath, and later the *barchessa* itself, had to be rebuilt. This fire explains the asymmetry of the roofs to the villa, with further damaging modernisation around 1900. The villa and its farm remained in the ownership of the Caldogno family until 1838. From the late 18th century, the Villa Saraceno was mostly used as a farmhouse, with consequent utilitarian alterations and partitioning of its rooms. It was used as tenements during the Second World War and by the 1980s had been left empty and derelict.

In 1989, the villa was bought by the Landmark Trust, a British charity. Landmark was established in 1965 to rescue significant historic buildings at risk. By restoring them and offering them for self catering holidays, these buildings bring enjoyment and education to those who stay there and also generate income for their future maintenance. Today, the Landmark Trust has almost 200 buildings in its care, four of them in Italy. By 1989, when Landmark intervened, the Villa Saraceno had been unlive in and neglected for fifteen years. The 16th- and 17th-century surfaces in the house were decaying; the farm buildings were near to collapse. All the roofs were renewed and a custodian's cottage created out of the farm buildings while the fabric of the buildings and documentary evidence were carefully studied. As a result, the original arrangement and noble proportions of the *sala* and west apartment in Palladio's house were recovered, with remarkably complete late 16th-century frescoes and ceilings. Conservation of these frescoes and the careful repair of external and internal plasters formed a major part of the work carried out. To keep interventions to Palladio's house to a minimum, the new kitchen is sited in the adjoining west room of the *barchessa* and much of the modern accommodation is contained within the *casa vecchia*.

The main restoration was completed in March 1994. Since then, thousands of people have been able to experience life in a Palladian villa by staying here for a holiday. The income generated helps to fund the site's ongoing maintenance and conservation. The main rooms are open to the general public every Wednesday afternoon from 1st April to 31st October, from 2-4pm.

In 1998, the global importance of Palladio's work was recognised when Palladio's Villas in the Veneto Region were included in Vicenza's designation as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

To book a holiday at the Villa Saraceno or any other Landmark building, or to find out more about the work of the Landmark Trust, please visit www.landmarktrust.org.uk or contact the Booking Office on + 44 1628 825920, or Landmark's Italian representative, Lorella Graham on + 39 041 5222 481.

THE FRESCOES AT THE VILLA SARACENO (based on Antonio Verlato's book, *Agugliaro*, 1999).

The Loggia

Biagio Saraceno himself welcomes the visitor, positioned above the entrance door. He has just received the Palatine crown from the goddess above. In his left hand he holds the staff of command. He wears a plumed helmet and the short, green tunic of the 'ancient' *condottiere*. Above the inside arches of the loggia, winged Victories in ochre monochrome gather to glorify the patron, some sounding trumpets, others holding laurel crowns.

In the centre of the vault above is the goddess of Abundance against a blue sky in an elaborate octagonal frame. She holds the crown of a knight of the empire and an olive twig to symbolise peace, which she hands to Biagio. The winged wand with two serpents in her left hand symbolises peace and economic prosperity (a symbol also associated with Mercury, god of messengers and trade). In two side frames dance two winged *putti* or cherubs.

Framing this octagon in each corner are four monochrome female figures (Floras) representing the four states of 'Holy Agriculture'. From right to left, these are: Working the Land (the ox yoke); Irrigation (the tipped jug); Harvest (a sheaf of canes or ears of wheat) and the Glorification of Peace (an olive garland).

The Floras look at four oval scenes, in black monochrome, of tales embodying *Virtus Romana*, or the virtues of the Roman citizen, and also perhaps the four cardinal Christian virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance.

From the right:

1. Camillo, nominated Dictator by the Senate says to Brenno, chief of the Gauls, the fateful phrase that 'Rome is conquered by iron, not gold.'
2. Muzio burns his right hand over a sacrificial flame as he tells King Porsenna 'Look and understand how the Romans scorn life.'
3. Marco Curzio, a young Roman knight, sacrifices himself by leaping into a crevasse in the Forum to fulfil an oracle that the abyss can only be filled with that which was most precious to Rome. Curzio realised that this meant his youth and soldiers, and after his sacrifice the precipice did indeed miraculously close.
4. The subject of the fourth scene is less certain. A Roman warrior draws his sword at a person on a throne, who tries to calm the soldier with his right hand. It may represent The Error of Muzio, contrasting self-restraint with anger.

The fresco on the west end wall of the loggia is probably 18th-century. A Corinthian colonnade with high entablature stands against a sky with scattered clouds. No sign remains of any matching scene on the east wall. This loggia cycle is attributed to the Verona artist Anselmo Canera (1522-83). That in the vault is similar to the one at nearby Villa Pojana, also by Palladio c.1550.

Sala (main entrance hall)

The cycle of frescoes in the *sala* depicts the tragedy *Orazia* (1546) by Pietro Aretino (1492-1556), one of the most colourful literary figures of mid-16th-century Italy. The cycle begins above the rear door.

A lord sits writing at a desk in a room recognisable as the *sala* at this very villa. On the basis of a letter written in 1552 by Aretino to Lucietta Chiericati Saraceno, (Biagio's cousin by marriage, married to Gasparo Saraceno, owner of the Villa delle Trombe) it is suggested that the lord represents Aretino himself, shown writing *Orazia* in a room perhaps recognisable as the *sala* at the Villa Saraceno. Through an open door, the story begins. Orazio has conquered the Curiazi tribe and gallops towards the Roman army near Rome, while the Alban army waits on the other side. The tragedy of how Orazio murders his sister Celia unfolds through the cycle, which starts from the left of the entrance from the loggia and runs anticlockwise:

1. The old nurse brings news that Celia's Curiazio husband has been slain by Orazio and shows her as proof her husband's golden collar.

2. In a Roman street (though depicted with Renaissance *palazzi*), Celia laments the death of her husband to her father, Publio. Her brother Orazio, angry with his sister for her disloyalty, is restrained by his friends on the right. On the left, Marco Valerio, a Roman *fecial*, invokes the response of a high magistrate.

3. For the disloyalty of her grief, Celia, still with her nurse, is taken by her father before the magistrate, flanked by Roman officials. (The fourth image, with Aretino, has been described above).

5. The Roman people follow Celia and her nurse, while Orazio speaks to Spurio, a friend of his father. The perfect perspective of the buildings and crowd culminates in the triumphal arch bearing the letters S P Q R, the motto of the Roman Empire.

6. Publio calls for the sentence from one of the *duumviri*, who is seated on a throne between *lictores* with *fascas*. On his left are his Orazio, Celia and her nurse.

7. The climax of the tragedy: Celia is stabbed by her brother. The nurse screams, covering her eyes. A butcher's shop is placed symbolically placed behind the victim.

8. Celia's bloody body is carried away, accompanied by her loyal, distraught nurse. On the right, Orazio, the fratricide, closes the scene exclaiming: 'This is the fate of one who dares to lament the death of our enemies.' (third act).

The finely painted and coffered ceiling in the *sala* is original, its fine detail the crowning richness of this late-Renaissance space.

Stanza Maggiore (today's sitting room)

The frieze in this room seems to be dedicated to the myth of the foundation of Rome, with scenes from Virgil's *Aeneid* in six panels, flanked by images of imprisoned men (east and west walls), goddesses, winged *putti* and festoons of fruit. Four corner ovals in blue monochrome (now indistinct) link the sections.

1. Anticlockwise from the south wall: The Judgement of Paris. Seated on a rock, he hands the prize for beauty, a golden apple, to Aphrodite above Hera and Athene – a choice that eventually led to the Trojan War.

2. The cave where Dido and Aeneas, caught by a sudden downpour, made love (*Aeneid*, Book IV). Hunters with their dogs pass above the cave. Dido wears the royal crown, as the lovers make their way toward distant Carthage.

3. Aeneas lands at Carthage (*Aeneid*, Book I). The hero and three companions look down at their ships anchored in the port, as soldiers descend a long ladder.

The remaining three scenes are now hard to decipher. The sixth may show the Glorious Descendants met by Aeneas in the Elysian Fields (*Aeneid* Book 6).

A bust of a young man dressed as a Roman dignitary, who may be one of Biagio's sons (Leonardo or Pietro), is shown in a shell at the centre of the east wall. Verlatto attributes the frieze in the *stanza maggiore* to Giovanni Antonio Fasolo (1530-72), though Battista Zelotti's (1526-78) style is also suggested. There are also fragments of decoration in the *camerino* beyond.