

A Venetian Dwelling Between Two Epochs: Architectural Traces of Humanism and the Renaissance

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ABSTRACT

The architecture of the Venetian villa that flourished between the 15th and 16th centuries embodies a crucial moment of cultural and stylistic transition, marking the passage from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance through the filter of Humanism. These country residences transcend their merely agricultural function to become centers of intellectual life, places of representation, and tangible manifestations of a renewed relationship between man, nature, and classical antiquity. This article explores the historical and architectural characteristics of a Venetian villa representative of this evolutionary phase, analyzing how Humanist and Renaissance influences were deposited in its forms and functions. The Introduction contextualizes the Venetian villa within the historical and cultural landscape of the Veneto region between the 15th and 16th centuries. The Methods section describes the research approach based on the synthesis of specialized literature, the analysis of historical sources, and the interpretation of architectural and typological elements. The Results present a summary overview of the evolution of the Venetian villa during the period considered, with a focus on the distinctive elements that reflect the new cultural demands and the needs of the patrons, drawing inspiration from studies on significant examples such as Villa Giusti in Santa Maria in Stelle. The Discussion interprets the importance of these transformations within the broader context of the architectural and social development of the Venetian Renaissance, highlighting the synthesis between tradition and innovation and suggesting avenues for future investigation.

KEYWORDS: Venetian Villa, Architecture, Humanism, Renaissance, History of Architecture, Historic Dwelling, Veneto.

INTRODUCTION

The history of the Republic of Venice, particularly from the 15th century onwards with its expansion onto the mainland, is intrinsically linked to the development of a peculiar building type: the Venetian villa. Far from being a simple structure functional to the management of agricultural properties, the villa progressively transformed into a complex architectural and social organism reflecting the profound cultural and economic changes occurring between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance [2, 4]. This period of transition, permeated by the ideals of Humanism, saw the countryside re-evaluated not only as a source of wealth through agriculture but also as an ideal place for intellectual leisure (*otium*) and "*villeggiatura*," understood as a social and cultural practice [3, 4, 31, 53].

The 15th and 16th centuries represent a crucial era for the definition of the "pre-Renaissance" and early Renaissance Venetian villa typology [6, 10, 19]. During these years, architectural forms inherited from the Middle Ages, sometimes characterized by defensive elements like pre-

existing towers [11], began to confront the new aesthetic and constructive canons derived from the study of classical architecture [6, 7, 8, 10, 19]. Humanism, with its renewed interest in antiquity, provided the cultural background that inspired the adoption of harmonious proportions, symmetry, and the use of classical decorative elements [9, 10, 19].

Venetian villas of this period show remarkable typological and functional variety [6, 7, 8]. Alongside the persistent and fundamental agricultural function, manifested in the presence of spaces dedicated to the processing and storage of agricultural products (cellars, granaries, *barchesse*) [13, 14, 15, 39], the residential and representational function gained increasing importance [7, 16, 17, 18]. The main building (*corpo padronale*), intended to accommodate the noble family during periods of *villeggiatura*, became the formal focal point of the complex, enriched with loggias, porticoes, reception rooms, and decorative schemes [7, 10, 16, 19, 40, 48, 53].

The stylistic transition is manifested in the coexistence of traditional elements and Renaissance innovations. There is a move towards more ordered facades, the use of windows and portals with classical frames, and greater attention to the visual relationship between the building and the surrounding landscape [6, 10, 19]. These villas are not yet the perfect Palladian organisms, but they represent a phase of research and experimentation that laid the groundwork for subsequent developments [6, 9, 10, 19, 46].

Studying specific examples of villas dating from this period, analyzing their constructive stratifications and architectural elements, is essential to understanding the dynamics of this evolution and how Humanist and Renaissance ideals were realized in the architecture of the Venetian mainland. This article aims to synthesize knowledge about the Venetian villa between Humanism and the Renaissance, drawing inspiration from studies on a Veronese villa, such as Villa Giusti in Santa Maria in Stelle [20, 23, 24, 25, 26, 28, 29, 30, 31, 37, 38], as a representative case study of the architectural and cultural transformations of the period.

METHODS

Research into the history and architecture of Venetian villas between Humanism and the Renaissance is based on a complex investigation that integrates various sources and methodologies, as highlighted in the specialized literature [10, 30, 45]. To analyze an emblematic dwelling of this period, an approach is adopted that includes:

2.1 Review of Specialized Literature

A fundamental starting point is the critical analysis of the extensive existing literature on the history of the Republic of Venice and its mainland [1, 2], on agricultural economics and rural settlements in the Veneto [2, 13, 14, 15, 39], on the history of villeggiatura [3, 4], on Venetian architecture of the 15th and 16th centuries [5, 6, 7, 8, 16, 18, 19, 44], and particularly on the "prepalladian" villas [6, 7, 8, 10, 18, 19]. Monographic studies or specific articles on the villa under investigation (such as Villa Giusti in Santa Maria in Stelle) [20, 23, 24, 25, 26, 28, 29, 30, 31, 37, 38] are essential for gathering detailed information on its construction history, patrons, and architectural characteristics.

2.2 Analysis of Historical and Documentary Sources

Research in historical archives (family, notarial, ecclesiastical, municipal) is crucial for finding primary documents that can provide reliable data on the ownership, construction phases, modifications, functions, and daily life of the villa [30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37]. Wills, construction contracts, inventories of goods, cadastral maps, and chronicles of the era are valuable sources for reconstructing

the history of the dwelling and the context in which it was situated [30, 31].

2.3 Architectural and Typological Analysis

The analysis of the building itself, through metric and photographic surveys, is indispensable for documenting its plan, elevation, sections, proportions, and constructive and decorative details [30]. Typological study allows for comparison of the villa with other contemporary examples and identification of its peculiarities and affinities [6, 7, 8, 10, 13, 16, 18, 19]. Analysis of the constructive techniques and materials used provides indications on dating and craftsmanship [45, 50, 51].

2.4 Stratigraphic Analysis of Masonry

This methodology, fundamental for understanding historic buildings, involves investigating the chronological succession of constructive events and transformations through direct observation of the masonry [45]. Analysis of the layers, masonry textures, mortars, and bonding techniques allows for distinguishing the different phases of construction, demolition, and reconstruction, providing a material "biography" of the building [45].

2.5 Study of Decorative Schemes

The analysis of frescoes, pictorial decorations, and other decorative elements present in the villa is important for dating, identifying artistic influences, and understanding the cultural interests of the patrons [28, 40, 48, 52, 53]. Decorative schemes often reflect mythological or allegorical themes or themes related to country life, in line with Humanist ideals [40, 48]. The study of textile schemes, if documented, can also provide information on interior decoration [48].

2.6 Territorial and Landscape Contextualization

Understanding the relationship between the villa and the surrounding territory is crucial [2, 4, 12, 24]. Analysis of the villa's geographical position, its relationship with waterways and roads, and the organization of the agricultural estate and landscape (gardens, tree-lined avenues) helps to interpret its functional and symbolic role [10, 12].

The integration of these different methodologies, as demonstrated in studies on the Venetian villa and specific examples [30, 31], allows for overcoming a partial view and reconstructing the complex history of a dwelling like Villa Giusti, placing it in its precise historical and cultural context between Humanism and the Renaissance.

RESULTS

The analysis of specialized literature and historical sources concerning Venetian villas of the 15th and 16th centuries, with particular attention to studies on Villa Giusti in Santa Maria in Stelle, allows for outlining a rich and multifaceted picture of the evolution of these dwellings during the period of transition between Humanism and the Renaissance. The results emerging from the research can be summarized in the following points:

3.1 Functional and Typological Transformation

Venetian villas of this period show a clear evolution from structures with a prevalent agricultural vocation, often centered around rural courtyards and incorporating pre-existing elements like medieval towers [11], towards complexes where the residential and representational function assumes an increasingly central and defined role [6, 7, 10, 17, 18]. The typology of the traditional Venetian rural house [13, 14, 15, 39] constitutes the base, but it is elevated and ennobled to meet the needs of an aristocratic and patrician clientele [7, 16].

In the case of Villa Giusti in Santa Maria in Stelle, studies indicate that the settlement has ancient origins, linked to the management of the agricultural territory [30, 31]. During the 15th and 16th centuries, the dwelling underwent transformations that configured it as a noble villa, while maintaining active productive functions [30, 31]. This is reflected in the presence of a main building distinct from the rustic annexes (although the latter may have been modified or rebuilt over time) [7, 10, 30].

3.2 Adoption of Humanist and Renaissance Architectural Elements

Villas of this period are characterized by the progressive introduction of a new architectural language inspired by classical antiquity, which coexists with forms and structures of medieval derivation [6, 7, 8, 10, 19]. Among the distinctive elements are found:

- **Symmetry and Proportion:** Increasing attention to symmetry in the composition of facades and the search for harmonious proportions, influenced by the study of ancient and Renaissance treatises [6, 10, 19].
- **Loggias and Porticoes:** The insertion of loggias and porticoes, often open towards the landscape or internal courtyards, which serve as mediating elements between interior and exterior and recall classical models [6, 10, 19].
- **Classical Details:** The use of columns, capitals, entablatures, pediments, frames, and other decorative details inspired by classical architectural orders [6, 10, 19].
- **Spatial Organization:** A tendency towards greater rationality and clarity in the distribution of interior spaces in the main building [6, 10].

Studies on Villa Giusti [25, 26, 28, 29, 30, 31, 37, 38] highlight the presence of elements that are part of this evolution. The analysis of the main building [30, 31] and its architectural details, as well as the documentation of the frescoes [28, 40, 48, 52], contribute to dating the different phases and recognizing stylistic influences. Lodi's research [31], in particular, by naming the villa "Iustianum," emphasizes its Humanist character.

3.3 Relationship with the Territory and Landscape

In the transition between Humanism and the Renaissance, a new sensitivity towards the relationship between the villa and the surrounding landscape developed [4, 10, 19]. The villa was conceived not only as a productive center or a refuge but as an element that harmoniously integrated into the natural and agricultural context [12, 24]. Greater attention was paid to the orientation of the building, panoramic views, and the organization of outdoor spaces, although the full definition of the Italian garden would occur in the mature Renaissance [10].

3.4 The Patronage and the Socio-Economic Context

The flourishing of Venetian villas is closely linked to the economic and social power of the Venetian patriciate and the mainland nobility [2, 4, 36]. These families invested their capital in the acquisition and enhancement of agricultural estates and in the construction of dwellings that reflected their status and cultural interests [4, 36]. The villa became a place to reconcile business (the management of the agricultural estate) with Humanist otium (study, literature, art) [3, 4, 31, 53]. Research on Veronese families, such as the Giusti, documents their role in the history of the city and the territory [31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38].

3.5 Materials and Construction Techniques

The construction techniques used in Venetian villas of the 15th and 16th centuries combined local traditions with innovations [45, 50, 51, 52]. The use of locally available materials, such as stone and brick, was prevalent [45]. Stratigraphic analysis of masonry is fundamental for dating the different parts of the building and understanding the specific construction techniques of each phase [45]. The study of wooden roofs and floors, often decorated, provides further constructive and chronological details [50, 51].

DISCUSSION

The research results, based on the synthesis of available literature, confirm that Venetian villas of the 15th and 16th centuries are fundamental testimonies to the profound cultural and architectural change that occurred between Humanism and the Renaissance. These dwellings are not simple evolutions of the rural house [13, 14, 15, 39] but

represent a new conception of country living, influenced by Humanist ideals and the needs of a rising ruling class [2, 4, 36].

The transformation from predominantly agricultural centers to complexes that integrate the residential and representational function in an increasingly defined manner [6, 7, 10, 17, 18] reflects the desire of the patriciate and nobility to reconcile economic activity linked to the land with the pursuit of otium and the manifestation of their socialità eclegata alla terra. The main building becomes the visual and functional focal point of the villa, enriched with architectural and decorative elements drawn from the classical repertoire [6, 10, 19].

The progressive introduction of symmetry, proportion, and classical details marks the overcoming of medieval forms and adherence to the new aesthetic canons of the Renaissance [6, 10, 19]. These villas, despite their variety and the coexistence of traditional and innovative elements, laid the groundwork for the development of the Venetian villa in the mature Renaissance and in the work of architects like Andrea Palladio [9, 46]. Examples like Villa Giusti in Santa Maria in Stelle [20, 23, 24, 25, 26, 28, 29, 30, 31, 37, 38], studied through architectural, documentary, and stratigraphic analysis [30, 31, 45], offer valuable testimonies of this evolutionary process in a specific territorial context like that of Verona [17, 24, 27].

The analysis of decorative schemes, particularly the frescoes [28, 40, 48, 52], provides further keys to understanding the cultural context and interests of the patrons, often related to mythological, allegorical themes, or scenes of country life, in line with Humanist culture [40, 48, 53].

Despite the extensive research conducted on the Venetian villa, a complete understanding of the dwellings dating from the transition phase between Humanism and the Renaissance still presents challenges. Historical documentation for many villas is fragmented, making precise dating and exhaustive reconstruction of construction phases difficult. The attribution of projects to specific architects or master builders of this period is often complex.

4.1 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This analysis is based on the synthesis of the provided literature and does not include archival research or direct investigation of the specific villa. Therefore, the conclusions reflect the state of the art based on the consulted sources and are limited by their availability and specificity.

Future research could delve deeper into:

- **Detailed Monographic Studies:** Conduct complete monographic studies on specific villas of the period, integrating in-depth archival research, detailed stratigraphic analysis of masonry [45], precise architectural surveys, and analysis of decorative schemes and materials [40, 48, 50, 51].

- **Territorial Comparative Analysis:** Compare the characteristics of villas in different areas of the Venetian mainland (e.g., Veronese, Vicentine, Trevisan) to identify specificities and regional influences [8, 12, 17, 24].
- **Relationship with the Agricultural Landscape:** Investigate in more detail the organization of the agricultural estate and the landscape surrounding the villa in the 15th and 16th centuries, and how this relationship was reflected in the conception and use of the dwelling.
- **Daily Life:** Reconstruct daily life and activities carried out in the villas of the period through the analysis of inventories, diaries, letters, and other archival documents.
- **Use of Digital Technologies:** Employ digital survey technologies (e.g., laser scanner, photogrammetry) to create accurate 3D models of the villas and use parametric modeling (HBIM) to analyze construction phases and transformations [30].

CONCLUSION

Venetian villas built between Humanism and the Renaissance are fundamental testimonies to an era of great transformations. Their evolution from agricultural centers to noble dwellings, the adoption of a new architectural language inspired by classical antiquity, and the increasing attention to the relationship with the landscape reflect the cultural and social changes of the time. These dwellings are not just valuable buildings but true historical documents that narrate the story of a ruling class, its Humanist ideals, and its connection to the territory.

The analysis of the literature, with particular reference to studies on Villa Giusti in Santa Maria in Stelle, highlights the importance of continuing to investigate these dwellings to fully understand the richness and complexity of Venetian architecture in the transition between two crucial epochs. Despite the challenges related to research and documentation, the application of multidisciplinary methodologies and the exploration of new digital technologies offer promising perspectives for deepening our knowledge of this extraordinary architectural and cultural heritage. Venetian villas between Humanism and the Renaissance remain a fascinating and relevant field of study for the history of architecture and for understanding the socio-cultural context in which they were born.

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