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# *The Tradition of the* Soffitto Veneziano *in Lord Burlington's Suburban Villa at Chiswick*

*by* PAMELA D. KINGSBURY

*Altro diletto che imparar non trovo.*[1]

Richard Boyle, third Earl of Burlington (1694–1753) was an architect with a mission. His architecture is didactic and lucid in character, and he employed it to demonstrate how Britain could create an architecture worthy of classical Rome. Burlington based his architecture on what he considered the epitome of the classical tradition: that of Inigo Jones, Andrea Palladio and Roman architecture filtered through Palladio's drawings of the antique and through discussions and representations of the antique in *I Quattro Libri Dell'Architettura*. From the smallest architectural detail to the largest forms and structures of rooms and buildings, Burlington's custom was to rely upon a model or a series of models. Because he rarely obscured or totally transformed his model, it is normally possible to follow his design process. Nowhere is the didactic, expository nature of Burlington's architectural ideas more clearly stated than in the beamed ceilings of the *piano nobile* of his suburban villa at Chiswick.

In 1720 Burlington began what was to be a lifelong project: the transformation of his estate at Chiswick into a paradigm of classical architecture. At Chiswick he designed and built a villa, four garden buildings, several gates and the estate's formal gardens. The most ambitious of these projects was the extraordinarily small, compact villa, 68 feet square, facing the Thames, built between 1726 and 1729. The villa was situated in close proximity to the Jacobean family seat and was designed without the amenities of a residence, which were provided by the house.

In a villa dedicated to the classical ideal one would expect to find ceilings modelled on those of classical Rome, and, indeed, the Villa has domed and semi-domed ceilings copied from Roman examples. But the dominant ceiling tradition is the *soffitto veneziano*, accessible to Burlington through Jones's beamed ceilings in royal residences in London and its environs. On the flat ceilings of the Banqueting House, the Queen's House and Somerset House chapel Jones designed a series of interlocking beams gilded and decorated with classical detailing, between which were inserted oil paintings on canvas. The source of this ceiling type is Renaissance Venice, and it was Jones who introduced the *soffitto veneziano* to England.[2] The first and finest of his examples is the opulent beamed ceiling in the Banqueting House (1619–22), to which was added in

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the early 1630s Rubens's painting cycle glorifying the reign of James I. But Burlington undoubtedly also saw *soffitti veneziani* on his 1715 grand tour, which included Venice, and on his return there and to the Veneto in 1719 to study Palladio's architecture.

Burlington employed the *soffitto veneziano* to great advantage throughout the *piano nobile* of his Villa. One encounters the first beamed ceiling on the villa's portico. Although this ceiling is not a copy of Jones, it has all of the characteristics of one of his beamed ceilings. The standard Corinthian entablature, as illustrated in Palladio's treatise, frames the ceiling, in which a large oval dominates the central panel, flanked at either end by small rectangular panels. Except for the guilloche decorating the beams, the panels are devoid of decoration.

Once through the narrow entrance, one is in the Tribune at the heart of the Villa. Rising 50 feet from the floor is an octagonal dome, with coffering copied from Vespasian's Temple of Peace in Rome, as illustrated in Book IV of Palladio's Treatise. Beyond the Tribune is the central room of the Gallery facing the garden. At each end of the Gallery an apse supports a half-dome with gilt coffering copied from the Hadrianic temple of Venus and Rome, also illustrated in *I Quattro Libri*. The Gallery ceiling, which epitomizes the *soffitto veneziano* tradition, is divided by beams into nine panels, into which oil paintings are inserted.

The process Burlington followed in designing the interiors of the Villa began with his despatching his draughtsman Samuel Savill to Jones's royal residences to execute working drawings of chimneypieces, overmantels, beamed ceilings and other architectural details. Savill's drawings were then put into final form by Burlington's chief draughtsman, Henry Flitcroft. The model for the Gallery ceiling is the ornate ceiling in the Queen's Cabinet Room at the Queen's House in Greenwich. Although none of Jones's drafts for this ceiling survive, we do have Flitcroft's meticulously rendered drawing of it, which was probably copied from Savill's working drawing, which has not survived.[3] The nine-panelled structure of the Cabinet Room ceiling, its entablature, festoons and cherub heads decorating the beams, was copied, but the iconographic details relating to King Charles and Queen Henrietta Maria were eliminated. The Italianate character of the ceiling is continued in the painting in the central panel, which was once thought to be by Paolo Veronese,[4] but is now believed to be a copy or pastiche by Sebastiano Ricci of Veronese's ceiling painting *The Defence of Scutari* in the Sala Maggior Consiglio of the Palazzo Ducale, Venice.[5] The military theme continues in the four surrounding panels with bound slaves, pitched tents and war trophies. These and the corner panels decorated with grotesques are probably by William Kent, who was working on a series of decorative paintings of a similar nature in the state apartments of Kensington Palace between 1722 and 1727.[6]

The Green and Red Velvet Rooms occupy the side elevations of the Villa. They are identical in size, each with a Serliana window flanked by marble chimneypieces and overmantels with paintings in gilt frames. Both have the same nine-panelled beamed ceiling modelled on the basic structure and decorative motifs found in Jones's Somerset House chapel ceiling, but without the circles, ovals and other divisions that characterize the ceiling. The only extant record of Jones's chapel is Flitcroft's exquisite pen-and-ink drawing, together with three others by Flitcroft chronicling the adaptation of Jones's ceiling to those in the Green and Red Velvet Rooms.[7] The

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striking difference between the ceilings in the two rooms is the absence of paintings in the panels of the Green Velvet Room. This is in marked contrast to the paintings that fill all nine in the Red Velvet Room. Surely Burlington intended to put paintings in the panels of the Green Velvet Room ceiling also. The ceiling seems barren without them, and their absence disrupts the symmetrical arrangement of the two rooms as well as the symmetrical character of the Villa.

The subject of the central panel in the Red Velvet Room, the Allegory of the Arts, establishes the theme of the ceiling and the room. Presided over by Mercury, who looks down from the heavens, three female personifications sit in front of a triumphal arch: Painting holds a portrait of Kent, Sculpture has a chisel and mallet at her feet, and Architecture points to the ground plan of the Roman temple of Fortuna Virilis, as an ideal exemplar. Above and below the central panel are profile portraits in oval frames of Burlington and Alexander Pope crowned with laurel wreaths and thus recalling the Renaissance revival of classical portraiture. Flanking the central panels are Apollo, Diana and Mars along the left and Jupiter, Venus and Saturn along the right. Each is accompanied by his zodiacal sign. We have no record of who executed these paintings, but the artist is probably Kent, because they have a strong stylistic affinity with his paintings in the state apartments of Kensington Palace.[8]

The Bedchamber with its closet and the Blue Velvet Room with its Red Closet occupy the corners at the front of the Villa. The outstanding feature of the small square closets is their beamed ceilings, modelled on Jones's ceiling in the north-east Cabinet Room on the ground floor of the Queen's House. Following his scheme, the beams are decorated with guilloche.

In contrast to the Bedchamber's modest undecorated coved ceiling, that in the Blue Velvet Room is the most extraordinary and complex ceiling in the Villa, and one of the most unusual in all Palladian domestic architecture. Departing from the patterns used in the rooms surrounding the Tribune and elsewhere in the Villa, Burlington did not choose a beamed ceiling for the Blue Velvet Room. Instead he created a multi-layered ceiling that is Baroque in its intensity and theatricality. In keeping with the colour scheme of the room, the ceiling is rendered in deep blue, heightened with gilt. Palladio's standard Corinthian entablature, embellished with leafy scrolls, leads to the ceiling. In the centre of each of the four sides of the frieze Burlington's initials 'RB' alternate with 'DB', those of his wife Dorothy. The lower section of the ceiling consists of eight pairs of 5-foot-tall consoles, two pairs to each wall. All the surfaces of the consoles as well as the walls and the ceiling surfaces between them are covered with architectural detailing, grotesques and foliage. At the centre, in a sunken panel, framed by a gilt torus moulding, is a painting of the *Apotheosis of Architecture* (Fig. 1). It depicts Architecture floating aloft on clouds, seated on a column drum and attended by three putti who hold architectural instruments.[9] In her right hand Architecture holds a pair of dividers with which she points to the ground plan of a Roman temple cradled in her left. Crowned with a Corinthian capital, the order that defines the Villa, she bestows the fruits of good architecture on those below. Kent probably was the artist of the painting, as well as of the decorative aspects of the ceiling. Not only does this apotheosis bear a strong resemblance to the Kent's *Apotheosis of Inigo Jones* in the

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Fig. 1. *Chiswick Villa: ceiling in the Blue Velvet Room*

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staircase ceiling at Burlington House, but the decorative work recalls that at Kensington Palace and Houghton.[10]

What was Burlington's purpose in designing so unusual a ceiling, seemingly so unrelated to the others in the Villa? An analysis of the model for it will reveal the logic of Burlington's choice. Consulting his drawing collection, he took a drawing from John Talman's album of architectural designs and ornaments.[11] This drawing is composed of an elaborate architectural frame of eight pairs of richly decorated consoles, two pairs to each side, in the centre of which, within a sunken panel, is a drawing of God the Father, held aloft by cherubs, bestowing his blessing on those below (Fig. 2). The signature of the Roman artist Cherubbino Alberti (1553–1615) in the lower right corner is misleading and has prevented a stylistic analysis of the drawing as well as a consideration of it within its historical context.[12] In all probability the drawing is not by Alberti but is a mid-sixteenth-century Lombard drawing executed by two hands. As is customary with such drawings, the elaborate architectural frame is by one hand, in this case that of an unidentified architectural draughtsman working in the illusionistic ceiling tradition pioneered by the Bergamese brothers, Cristoforo (b. 1517/18) and Stefano Rosa (b. 1524/25), who worked throughout Lombardy and the Veneto, painting *quadratura* or fictive architectural settings framing historical and mythological ceiling paintings. The drawing of God the Father, on an octagonal sheet of paper placed within the architectural frame, can be attributed to Giulio Campi (1502–72), a Cremonese artist and contemporary of the Rosa brothers who, like them, worked in Lombardy and the Veneto during the middle of the sixteenth century. The drawing is stylistically similar to Campi's Cremonese frescoes of the *Pentecost* in S.Sigismondo and the *Assumption of the Virgin*.[13]

Why did Burlington select this drawing as the model for the ceiling in the Blue Velvet Room? During his sojourns in Venice and the Veneto in 1715 and 1719 he had many opportunities to see *quadratura* paintings, which succeeded the Venetian beamed-ceiling tradition. On his 1719 trip he visited Palladio's Villa Maser, where he first saw a collection of Palladio's thermal drawings, which he eventually purchased.[14] In the villa's Hall of Olympus he would have seen Veronese's dramatic *quadratura* fresco of the *Allegory of Wisdom*, set within an octagonal frame in the centre of the ceiling. Another *quadratura* ceiling painting that Burlington undoubtedly saw in Venice, and one that bears a marked resemblance to the Lombard drawing in the Talman album, is that in the vestibule of Jacopo Sansovino's Marciana Library. This is composed of two parts. The illusionistic architectural frame is by the Rosa brothers and consists of a gallery of twelve pairs of Ionic columns supporting an elaborate entablature; and at the centre in an octagonal frame, is Titian's painting of *Sapienza*, seated on clouds and crowned with a laurel wreath (Fig. 3).

Burlington chose the Lombard drawing for his model not only because it provided historical continuity with the beamed ceilings elsewhere in the Villa, but also because it was a ceiling type employed by Palladio in his architecture. Yet he did not slavishly follow his model. First, he replaced the religious subject-matter of Campi's drawing with Kent's personification of architecture. Second, and more radically, he transformed the drawing's fictive architectural frame into a three-dimensional reality. By dispensing with the illusionistic frame and replacing it with a multi-layered ceiling defined by a

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Fig. 2. *Drawing for a ceiling with God the Father in the central panel (Giulio Campi* et al.*, sixteenth century) (Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth: reproduced by kind permission of the Duke of Devonshire and the Chatsworth Settlement Trustees)*

series of sixteen boldly projecting consoles, Burlington endowed the Blue Velvet Room with an Addisonian sense of 'Greatness of Manner', in which a small building, or in this case a room, 'shall give the Mind nobler Ideas than one of twenty times the Bulk'.[15]

Burlington reserved the most dramatic and complex of the Villa's ceiling for the Blue Velvet Room, which in all likelihood was his inner sanctum, the British

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Fig. 3. *The Marciana Library, Venice: illusionistic ceiling painting in the Antisala (Cristoforo & Stefano Rosa, after 1560) (Osvaldo Böhm Fotografo Editore, Venice)*

equivalent of the Italian Renaissance *studiolo*. The decoration of the room is overwhelmingly Venetian and personal. The repetition of the initials of Burlington and his wife in the frieze, William Dobson's portrait of Inigo Jones over a pedimented door, and Burlington's muse, the personification of architecture, in the centre of the

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ceiling are persuasive evidence to suggest that the room was his private retreat.[16] There he was free to work on his architectural projects and converse with friends. Perhaps it was in the Blue Velvet Room that Burlington stored his collection of architectural drawings, and that George Vertue, on his visit to the Villa in 1734, saw

a great number of drawings, sketches, pasted on cards — drawings of buildings &c. by Inigo Jones — the great Collection of Palladios drawings he purchased. out of Italy.[17]

The six beamed ceilings and that in the Blue Velvet Room function as part of the decorative ensemble of the Villa but they are also bearers of meaning. Through his understanding of the Venetian beamed-ceiling tradition and its successor the *quadratura* ceiling, Burlington demonstrated the way toward a British classical architecture worthy of Rome. Through Jones he reintroduced the beamed-ceiling to Britain, and in the Blue Velvet Room he expanded upon that tradition with an imaginative interpretation of a *quadratura* ceiling.

NOTES

1 'There is no greater delight than learning': quotation from Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, *I dieci libri dell'architettura di M. Vitruvio tradutti et commentari da Monsignor Barbaro eletto d'Aquileggia* (Venice, 1567), p. 32. I am indebted to Gordon Higgott for bringing this quotation to my attention.

2 Juergen Schulz, *Venetian Painted Ceilings of the Renaissance* (Berkeley, California, 1968), pp. 3–5, 52–54.

3 Devonshire Collections, Chatsworth: Boy Collection [2].

4 [R. & J. Dodsley], *London and its Environs Described*, 6 vols (London, 1761), II, p. 122.

5 Jeffery Daniels, *Sebastiano Ricci* (Sussex, 1976), p. 57.

6 Michael I. Wilson, *William Kent: Architect, Designer, Painter, Gardener, 1685–1748* (London, 1984), p. 91.

7 John Harris, *Catalogue of the Drawings Collection of the R.I.B.A.: Inigo Jones and John Webb* (Farnborough, 1972), no. 39, p. 15; Devonshire Collections, Chatsworth: Boy [8], 20, [16] 1–2.

8 Wilson, *William Kent*, p. 91.

9 During the 1990 restoration of the Blue Velvet Room the column drum was inexplicably transformed into a cannon barrel.

10 Wilson, op. cit., pp. 92–95. For the attribution to Kent of the Burlington House paintings see Rudolf Wittkower, *Palladio and English Palladianism* (London, 1974), p. 117.

11 Devonshire Collections, Chatsworth: 'Public Ornaments, Arches, Bridges', Album 35, fol. 6.

12 For the attribution of this drawing to Alberti see Wilson, op. cit., p. 95; Cinzia Maria Sicca, 'On William Kent's Roman Sources', *Architectural History*, 29 (1986), p. 139; Michael Jaffé, *The Devonshire Collection of Italian Drawings*, 4 vols (London, 1994), II, no. 152, p. 38.

13 I am grateful to the late Philip Pouncey for initially identifying the Lombard characteristics of the drawing, to Professor Giulio Bora for his attribution, and to Robert Miller for placing it within its artistic context.

14 [Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington], *All'Intendente Lettore* [Introduction], Andrea Palladio, *Fabbriche' Antiche Disegnate' Da Andrea Palladio Vicentino* (London, 1730).

15 Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, no. 415, 26 June 1712: see Donald F. Bond (ed.), 5 vols (Oxford, 1965), III, p. 555.

16 For a different interpretation of the Blue Velvet Room ceiling see Jane Clark, 'Lord Burlington is Here', in Toby Barnard & Jane Clark (eds), *Lord Burlington: Architecture, Art and Life* (London, 1995), pp. 293–94.

17 Vertue, 'Notebooks', *Walpole Society*, III (Oxford, 1936), p. 73.

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