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Georges M. Cantacuzino

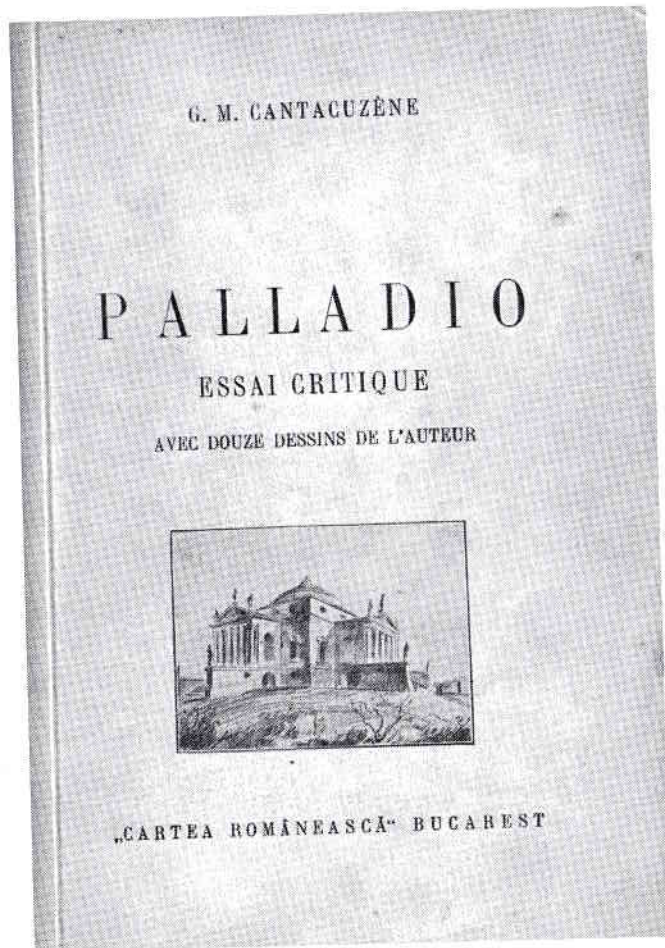
# PALLADIO

## A Critical Essay

With ten drawings by the author

Edited, translated from the French,  
annotated, with an introduction and index by  
Dan S. Teodorovici in consultation  
with Deborah Howard,  
With a foreword by Deborah Howard

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1 Cantacuzino's *Palladio*, facsimile of front cover, c. 1928 (1932)

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2 Georges M. Cantacuzino on the steps of Palladio's *Villa Capra*, c. 1925/1926

## Introduction

**I**N FRONT OF the simple and pure façade of the Malcontenta«, writes the Romanian architect Georges M. Cantacuzino during one of his visits to Andrea Palladio's masterpiece on the Brenta around 1925,<sup>1</sup> »could we not agree? Could we not sincerely believe, without any doctrinal motive, in what this house seems to teach us?

»A perfect balance between knowledge and feeling.

»Here, proportion is the basic element of design: the module can only be [...] an element of control coming as a final collaborator of harmony, [...] when all things have already been created by the individual rhythm.«<sup>2</sup>

Here, »proportion«, »harmony«, and »individual rhythm« or freedom are keywords of »the essential and lasting laws« of architecture that Cantacuzino is seeking.<sup>3</sup> Equally dissatisfied with the »disarray« of »contemporary education«,<sup>4</sup> he is doubtful of the doctrinal application of any system:<sup>5</sup> be it Modernism – when it is a hasty expression of doctrinaire arbitrariness or hubris –;<sup>6</sup> or Traditionalism – such as a deference to aesthetic principles, or Vitruvianism;<sup>7</sup> or political abuse of regional traditions as expression of national vanities.<sup>8</sup>

Here, argues Cantacuzino, »Palladio could still teach us wisdom. It would consist in considering the classical spirit as a state of balance and moderation which remains in accordance with human scale, and which allows ease and composure both with regard to innovations and in respect of old laws.«<sup>9</sup>

These thoughts may seem as topical as they seem mature. Maturity, too, seems to characterise the method Cantacuzino is applying: it is not a prophetic manifesto. Remarkable, for when *Palladio. Essai critique* appeared in 1928, its author was still a student, and Europe was marked by political extremes. Yet the essay invites us to carry on a dialogue on what he calls a »classical attitude«, which weaves through his career like a red thread.

Georges Matei Cantacuzino (b. Vienna 1899, d. Jassy 1960),<sup>10</sup> was raised speaking German, French and Romanian in Vienna and on the Moldavian family estate. He was educated in Montreux (Switzerland), Bucharest, and at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris (1920–1929).

From 1926 onwards he publicly advocated a ›classical attitude‹, linking modernism to tradition and aesthetics to ethics. Thanks to his personality, erudition, and intellectual integrity, he became one of Romania's leading intellectuals and artists, and the *doyen* of modern architecture and urbanism in the 1930s.

On Patrick Leigh Fermor (1915–2011), the British travel writer,<sup>11</sup> Cantacuzino ›left an indelible impression [...]. Painter, architect, politician, urban planner, historian and author, Georges and his wife, Sanda [...], epitomized civilized Romanian society.‹<sup>12</sup>

Virgil Ierunca (1920–2006), the writer and *eminence grise* of Romanian Diaspora in France, called him posthumously ›a chronicler of Romanian spirituality.‹<sup>13</sup>

Cantacuzino was the first Romanian architect to have published outside Romania (1927, 1929, 1931), and was the first Romanian correspondent of the French journal *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* (1934–1936). He was the first, and, until 1945, probably the only architect to speak on Romanian radio, particularly on the history of art and architecture of places and regions he had visited.

As a committed anglophile, Cantacuzino was a member of the Anglo-Romanian Society (est. 1917 in Cluj, Transylvania) and the Society of Friends of the USA (est. 1925 in Bucharest). In 1938 he was elected an honorary corresponding member of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA). In 1939/40, together with Octav Doicescu (1902–1981), his office partner at the time, he designed the Bucharest headquarters of the Anglo-Romanian Society (British Council) – a project that never came to fruition. For his design of the official Romanian pavilion at the World's Fair 1939/40, he was made an honorary citizen of New York by then Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia (1882–1947).

As a liberal politician and MP, Cantacuzino advocated social reforms and fought the extreme right-wing Iron Guard. He suffered considerably from the shift to the political extreme right that Romania took at the beginning of September 1940, after King Carol II (1893–1953) was forced into exile in Portugal.

As a professor of the history and theory of architecture in Bucharest (1942–1948), Cantacuzino, who, like Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968), was ›sceptical of periodization‹,<sup>14</sup> renewed the teaching of architecture.

As an inspector of historical monuments in Moldavia (1954–1957), Cantacuzino oversaw the restoration of Bukovina's monasteries, including Sucevitza, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

As a painter, he participated in several group exhibitions and had five solo shows – the last of which, in October 1956, was such a success that the communist authorities closed it after three days for fear of revolutionary unrest. This occurred in the run-up to the Budapest revolts; as an opponent of the regime, Cantacuzino himself had been imprisoned for six years (1948–1953, 1954) and declared an enemy of the state in 1957. He then lived on the fringes of society in Jassy until his untimely death in 1960.

Afterwards, he was partly forgotten, like many colleagues of his generation, or the previous one, who had helped build modern Romania in the interwar period – to name only a few other anglophiles such as the politicians Armand Călinescu (1893–1939), I.G. Duca (1879–1933), Grégoire Gafencu (1892–1957) or Viorel Tilea (1896–1972), the sociologist Dimitrie Gusti (1880–1955), the economist Virgil Madgearu (1887–1940), the historian Nicolae Iorga (1871–1940), or the archaeologist Vasile Pârvan (1882–1927).<sup>15</sup>

Even after the fall of communism in 1989, their accomplishments remained somewhat overshadowed by the later generation – that of Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), Emil Cioran (1911–1995), and Eugène Ionesco (1909–1994), who achieved fame in the West after 1945. In a way, their fame seems to have been projected back to the interwar period. For when the ›boys‹ gained initial recognition, they were far from playing the leading role in the cultural life of the country that has subsequently been credited to them.

Of that ›younger generation‹, only a few were close to Cantacuzino. Ionesco was one of them. In 1932 he wrote a supportive review of the architect's contribution to a group exhibition, and later shared in the same notion of classicism as a strategy of modernisation:

›In the long run I am all for classicism: that is what the ›avant-garde‹ is. The discovery of forgotten archetypes, changeless but expressed in a new way: any true creative artist is classical ... the petit-bourgeois is the person who has forgotten the archetype and is absorbed in the stereotype. The archetype is always young.‹<sup>16</sup>

A passionate traveller and travel writer, Cantacuzino visited most of his home country, then travelled in Italy, France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Greece, Egypt, Persia, the Middle East, Great Britain, and the United States.

Italy exerted a singularly strong attraction on him: Through the internship in the early 1920s with the Venetian architect and monument conservator Domenico Rupolo (1861–1945) during the modernisation of the Mogoșoaia palace of 1702, which blends late Byzantine-Wallachian and Venetian architecture (near Bucharest, 1920–1931); in his studies in Paris, where Georges Gromort (1870–1961),<sup>17</sup> professor of the history and theory of architecture and expert on Italian Renaissance became one of his mentors; through study trips in the 1920s and '30s; in the exhibition of Guido Cadorin (1892–1976) curated by him at the Italian Cultural Institute in Bucharest in 1938; over the first translation of Vitruvius's writings into Romanian (1947); in his essay on Giotto (1958); and finally in his last project (he was then enemy of the state), the extension of the metropolitan church in Jassy, the capital of the former Principality of Moldavia, where twin pavilions together with open staircases, ramps, terraces and gardens frame the existing Orthodox cathedral creating a coherent urban ensemble. This last project relates to his first major building, the Chrissoveloni Bank in Bucharest (1923–1928): both are committed exercises in historical Palladianism. Andrea Palladio (1508–1580), the master of the Italian Late Renaissance, was Cantacuzino's most important model.

#### HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND FRANCOPHILE TRADITION

*Palladio. Essai critique* was written in Paris and Vicenza – in French –, and first published by the Bucharest publishing house Cartea Românească in 1928. The choice of language was a deliberate and symbolic decision. Thanks to his network at the École, and closeness to French literary circles, Cantacuzino could equally have had his book published in France.

Nonetheless, he chose to forge for himself a career in Romania. Like his compatriots and student friends at the École, he longed to contribute to the building of a modern Romania. What is more, his awareness of his socially privileged position imbued him with a spirit of civic duty and responsibility. Since the unification of the Danube Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia as Romania under

prince Alexander Ioan Cuza (1820–1873) in 1859, the country's independence from the Ottoman Empire and the establishment in 1881 of a kingdom under Carol I, a Hohenzollern prince (1839–1914), Romania was already a country of great opportunities. With the creation of 'Greater Romania' after the First World War, this impetus for progress grew even stronger.

At the same time, Cantacuzino was fully aware of the fragile harmony he helped to create as a defence against the back-ground of political extremisms and economic difficulties, both in Romania and elsewhere. Democratisation and modernisation went hand in glove with the strengthening of international relations. For instance, Marthe Bibesco (1887–1973), his aunt and mentor, was inspired by Aristide Briand (1862–1932), the French politician and her fatherly friend, »to believe that, after the horrors of war, the time had come to speak European«. <sup>18</sup> This optimism was expressed, for instance, in the friendship between Briand and Gustav Stresemann (1878–1929) that illustrated the *rapprochement* between France and Germany within the framework of the League of Nations; or in the Briand-Kellogg Pact of 1928, Briand's idea of creating a European federation; or in the Pan-European ideals of Richard Nicholas Coudenhove-Kalergi (1894–1972).<sup>19</sup>

Cantacuzino's book self-consciously echoes the optimistic side of this context: simultaneously cosmopolitan, and rooted in Romania. His essay on Palladio is a contribution to the integration of Romanian architecture into Europe. The choice of the French language was natural, not only because of family ties (his maternal grand-mother was French), friendships, and his education in Paris. Since early in the eighteenth century, French was the undisputed language of international relations. In the interwar period it remained – alongside English – both an official language of diplomacy and an informal language of international travel. Romania was a francophone and francophile country, and for the cultural elite French and Romanian were on the same level.<sup>20</sup>

The essay is dedicated to Lucien Fabre (1889–1952), the French writer. Fabre and Cantacuzino met through Matila Ghyka (1881–1965; an aesthetician, distant cousin, and one of his mentors) at the Parisian salon of Antoine Bibesco (1878–1951), a Romanian prince, diplomat, and patron. On the outstanding quality of Palladio's works and personality, Fabre, Ghyka and Cantacuzino would agree perfectly.<sup>21</sup> Those vivacious conversations inspired him to conceive an

essay on the Vicentine master, in whose works he would discover the poetics of architecture realised in a consummate way.

Georges Gromort, too, was a great admirer of Palladio, one of the classic figures studied at the École. »One can hardly realize«, writes Gromort 1922 in his *Italian Renaissance Architecture*, »how considerable was the prestige of Palladio at a certain period: in England, and especially in France, a small number of his great schemes were adapted (and there according to the propriety and the taste of the national temperament). This gave birth in the Seventeenth Century to the so-called French architecture.«<sup>22</sup> This is illustrated by the monumental mural painting of 1841 by Paul Delaroche in the *Hémicycle* of the *Palais des Études*, where Palladio is a key figure in this imaginary reunion of classical masters.

#### CAREER SETTING

Although still a student, Cantacuzino succeeded in positioning himself on the architectural scene in Romania, through both writings and architectural projects, completed and ongoing. Profiting from the informal Beaux-Arts tradition of freedom of choice as to the place and duration of practical training, he had first been trained as a mason under Rupolo at Mogoșoaia. Thanks to Marthe Bibesco, the proprietor, Cantacuzino was entrusted with the supervision of the restoration site in the early 1920s.<sup>23</sup> Together with August Schmiedigen (1883–?), an experienced architect and developer, Cantacuzino then established an architectural office in Bucharest in 1923. Their first major building, the Chrissoveloni Bank in Bucharest, is a »full-blooded exercise [...] in Palladianism«.<sup>24</sup>

Because the monograph on this work, *Le Palais de la Banque Chrissoveloni*, was not published until 1929 (Vincent Fréal et C<sup>ie</sup>, Paris), the essay on Palladio probably accompanied the inauguration of the building in March 1928. With Palladianism scarcely rooted in Romania, Cantacuzino obviously sought to strengthen it. This endeavour was honoured by support from Georges Gromort:

»My dear friend«, wrote Gromort in his preface to the monograph on the Chrissoveloni bank, »it is always a pleasure to preface a beautiful work. But what a delight it is if that work involves a successful student of yours, particularly if you realize, after the effort of a number of years, that you still agree with him on so many essentials.« And he added: »Undoubtedly the powerful art of Palladio is as Italian as it is universal. Indeed his architecture is suited to most

climates and regions, to the point that he so brilliantly inspired the works of Jones and Wren, these two great Englishmen. For this very reason Palladio's legacy cannot but be most appropriate to enhance a Latin country.«<sup>25</sup>

The essay on Palladio was Cantacuzino's third publication. In *Introducere la studiul arhitecturii* (»Introduction to the Study of Architecture«, Bucharest 1926), he outlined his approach to architecture as a »classical attitude« which seeks to contribute to reinvigorating architecture in terms of variations on the theme of »call to order«. He sought to link modernism with tradition, both classical and local, based on human scale, and the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. Then in 1927 he wrote »L'architecture roumaine d'aujourd'hui«, the first article by a Romanian architect published abroad. It appeared in *L'architecture*, the leading French architectural magazine at the time, and closely linked to the École des Beaux-Arts.<sup>26</sup>

#### IN THE CONTEXT OF PALLADIO LITERATURE

In some ways, Cantacuzino's essay has become outdated. To begin with, there are erroneous remarks in terms of architectural history. For instance, it lacks chronological accuracy when it places Michele Sanmicheli at the beginning of Renaissance. Sanmicheli (1484–1559) was one of the master architects admired by Palladio during his own lifetime. Probably they met for the first time as early as 1541/42, when Sanmicheli stayed in Vicenza as a guest of Giovanni da Porlezza, the master of the Pedemuro workshop, where Palladio was an apprentice from 1524 until probably the late 1530s.<sup>27</sup>

Likewise, Cantacuzino is astonished that Vitruvius hardly mentioned the »vast and monumental public works« of the Roman Empire.<sup>28</sup> As Vitruvius (c. 90–c. 20 BC) was writing for Augustus (63 BC–14 AD), the first Emperor, most of the constructions Cantacuzino refers to are imperial structures erected later. This echoes a misconception common among Renaissance architects, including, for instance, Raphael (although the latter was one of the first to appreciate the internal historical development of ancient Roman architecture).<sup>29</sup>

A further surprising comment is that Palladio would have met Veronese and Vittoria for the first time in Rome, a detail not confirmed by modern research. In this remark, Cantacuzino was most probably following Georges Loukomski (1884–1952) and his then

brand-new monograph on Palladio (Paris 1927). Referring to Palladio's short visit to Rome at the invitation of the Vatican in 1549/50 with regard to the construction site of St Peter's,<sup>30</sup> fruitless as it turned out to be, due to the death of Pope Paul III (10 November 1549), Loukomski writes: »But once in Rome, Palladio wasted no time; he studied the ancient ruins, measured them and drew them. He made friends with Paul Veronese and Vittoria, who were later to collaborate on the embellishment of his buildings.«<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, the classification of Palladio's buildings and projects, as used by Cantacuzino, is outdated too. This also holds true for some architectural terminology. In both cases, he follows Loukomski.

Cantacuzino's essay is now one of the lesser known writings on the Vicentine architect.<sup>32</sup> A number of other publications from the 1910s and 1920s have similarly faded from the historiography – no matter whether they are favourable to Palladio, such as the monographs by Banister Fletcher (London 1902), Cornelius Gurlitt (Berlin 1914), and Loukomski, or, in the wake of John Ruskin (1819–1900), rather reserved, such as W. J. Anderson's *The architecture of the Italian Renaissance* (London 1909),<sup>33</sup> or Geoffrey Scott's *The Architecture of Humanism. A Study in the History of Taste* (London 1914).<sup>34</sup>

Unlike most of these writings, Cantacuzino's publication is not a biography, but a critical essay. No review of it seems to have appeared at the time, but some copies containing a 1932 drawing of the Villa Foscari suggest a second edition was then published. It was not translated into Romanian until 1977, as part of an anthology of writings of Cantacuzino's, when it met with posthumous praise. In his review of *Izvoare și popasuri* (»Stops and Breaks«),<sup>35</sup> the art historian Pavel Chihaia (1922–2019) highlighted Cantacuzino's »fervour for Vitruvius, Vignola, and above all for Palladio, to whom he dedicates an important study.«<sup>36</sup>

The book is mentioned in the bibliography of Lionello Puppi's standard monograph on Palladio, and is available at some public libraries in Europe:<sup>37</sup> Berlin, Bucharest, Fribourg, Oslo, Paris, and Zurich – along with six Italian cities, including Vicenza and Venice.<sup>38</sup> Venice seems more than fitting, as Cantacuzino adored *La Serenissima*, and the aforementioned Mogoșoia palace of 1702 is inspired by palazzi on the Canal Grande. And the Biblioteca Marciana is a testimony to the close historical connection between Venice and the Byzantine Empire,<sup>39</sup> as its »core« was formed by the »celebrated

collection of manuscripts of ancient texts [...] donated by Cardinal Bessarion« in 1468.<sup>40</sup> In the Biblioteca Marciana, there are copies of books by or related to John VI Kantakouzenos (c. 1295–1383), his most prominent ancestor.<sup>41</sup>

For the classification and nomenclature of Palladio's buildings and projects, Cantacuzino relies on the systematic and thorough description and bibliography provided by Loukomski.<sup>42</sup> Although his work is now outdated as well, Loukomski was one of the authorities on Palladio at the time.<sup>43</sup> One of Loukomski's chief merits may be that he drew attention to the derelict state of many of Palladio's buildings. He denounced not only the lack of money, but the lack of a conclusive strategy of restoration, and, in some cases, attacked »unconscious vandalism«, and »lack of a little piety and taste«.<sup>44</sup> He also argued in favour of preserving the historical ensemble of the Piazza dei Signori in Vicenza: He opposed plans to replace the historical urban fabric around the Piazza with modern buildings, and to add three bays to the Loggia del Capitaniato.<sup>45</sup>

#### CANTACUZINO'S ESSAY ON PALLADIO AND THE »CLASSICAL ATTITUDE«

Perhaps Cantacuzino used his essay on Palladio as a gift for those he met on his extensive travels. As related by Antonio Foscari in his 2012 book on Palladio's Villa Malcontenta (Villa Foscari),<sup>46</sup> Cantacuzino partook in the »moveable feast« hosted by Albert Clinton Landsberg at the restored villa in the interwar period. The review by Andrew Mead of Foscari's book in *The Architect's Journal* starts by quoting from Cantacuzino's essay, and concludes by highlighting his approach of Palladio.<sup>47</sup>

Cantacuzino takes Palladio as his role model, a lesson in taste, commensurability, and the »classical attitude«. Using a contextualizing approach, he tries »to situate Palladio in relation to his time and field of action«, and »to define the elements that influenced his training«,<sup>48</sup> such as the interest in Graeco-Roman antiquity and Vitruvius:

»To speak of Palladio is necessarily to evoke his contemporaries and to recall, beyond the Renaissance, Vitruvius.«<sup>49</sup>

A true Bergsonian, Cantacuzino welcomes »the vibrant pulsations of life«<sup>50</sup> and the plethora of connections they entail. He thus opposes opinions that favour a strict separation between antique Greece and Rome, even holding the latter to have been of minor importance. He also disapproves of opinions promoted, among