



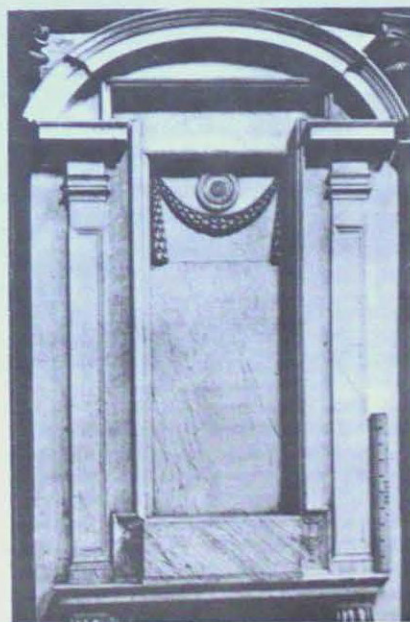
MANNERISM

by William Mark Pinlott.

An analysis of 'irrationality' in an age of Reason...

MANNERISM is a term that was born in the 1920's, used to describe a body of work, dating roughly from 1520 to 1600, which could be neither defined as a part of the High Renaissance nor Baroque periods. A sometimes skittish and surprising reaction to the former movement in the eyes of modern art historians, Mannerism co-existed with both of the aforementioned styles, and as such, cannot be defined as a specific 'period' in the history of architectural development.

Its reception during its beginnings was mixed, divided almost perfectly between 'moderns', young architects and Renaissance art historians. For the former group, the master architects/artists Giulio Romano, and most importantly, Michelangelo, exercised tremendous influence, through their revolutionary (rather than reactionary) manipulation of surface, volume and architectural language. The revolutionary practices were quite possibly interpreted as





were quite possibly interpreted as irreverent reactionism by many, resulting in a movement which encouraged fracture from the strict and logical art and architecture of the Renaissance.

The boundaries of artistic licence formed by that period are discussed by modern historian Colin Rowe:

...the Renaissance...conceives Nature as the ideal form of any species, as a mathematical and Platonic absolute whose triumph over matter it is the purpose of art to assist; so, in painting, it seeks an infallibility of form. Scientific perspective reduces external reality into a mathematical order; and, in so far as they can be brought into this scheme, the "accidental" properties of the physical world acquire significance.¹

Rowe, through this, asserts that neither natural instinct nor purely emotive form-making were justifiable within the realm of Renaissance sensibility. He continues:

Therefore, the artistic process is not the impressionistic record of the thing seen; but is rather the informing of observation by a philosophical idea; and, in Renaissance architecture, imagination and the senses function within a corresponding scheme.²

In the 1520's, this attitude denied credibility for both romanticism and eclecticism, for as indications of these new attitudes appeared, they were met with derision by Renaissance critics such as Ludovico Dolce. The insult was named *la Maniera* - derived from the Italian "mano" (hand), used to signify an ascendancy of manual practice over visual observation and clarity.³ This *manneristic* activity was seen, in the context of an age of reason, by these same critics as common and decadent (notably, an



opinion that has been shared, until quite recently, by modern historians).

Controversial discussion, however, would not have arisen around these new works if they had not been considered to be enchanting and progressive by many others at that time, and thought to be indicative of 'a more cultured age'. Progressiveness from the 1530's onwards, it seems, was seen to mean a conformity with "the tastes of the present century".⁴ Satisfying the tastes of one's critical peers was an objective which carried great influence in the formation of a large body of Mannerist work in the three major visual arts. John Shearman, in his analysis of all facets of Mannerism in the arts, details Paolo Pino's advice to painters (c.1584):

...in all your works you should introduce at least one figure that is all distorted, ambiguous and difficult, so that you should thereby be noticed as outstanding by those who understand the finer points of art.⁵

In another case, the writer Bernardo Tasso (who spoke earlier of tastes), refers to some of his intentions (c.1549). He wished to achieve "the greatest possible artifice, so that they (verses for madrigals) shall satisfy universally".⁶

The Mannerist attitude, unlike that held during the Renaissance, took sympathy with the *imperfection* of man: his various quirks and his need for eclectic variety - directly in opposition to the Renaissance's dominant concerns for logic, perfection, and as the Mannerists argued, monotony.

Thus, the lines of combative dialogue were drawn - a dialogue presently interpreted as having to do with order and 'disorder'.

The body of Mannerist work in all



areas of the arts which became increasingly popular with the decline of the Renaissance (and said to have passed away after the Sack of Rome in 1527), is seen as a *malaise* by art historian Frederic Hartt, and has been categorically qualified by him as follows:

Content: Abnormal or anormal. Exploits strangeness of subject, uncontrolled emotion.
Narrative (or allegory): Elaborate, involved, abstruse.
Space: Disjointed, spasmodic, often limited to foreground plane.
Composition: Conflicting, acentral, seeks frame.
Proportions: Uncanonical, usually attenuated.
Figure: Tensely posed; confined or overextended (powerless or weightless).
Colour: Contrasting, surprising.
Substance: Artificial.⁷

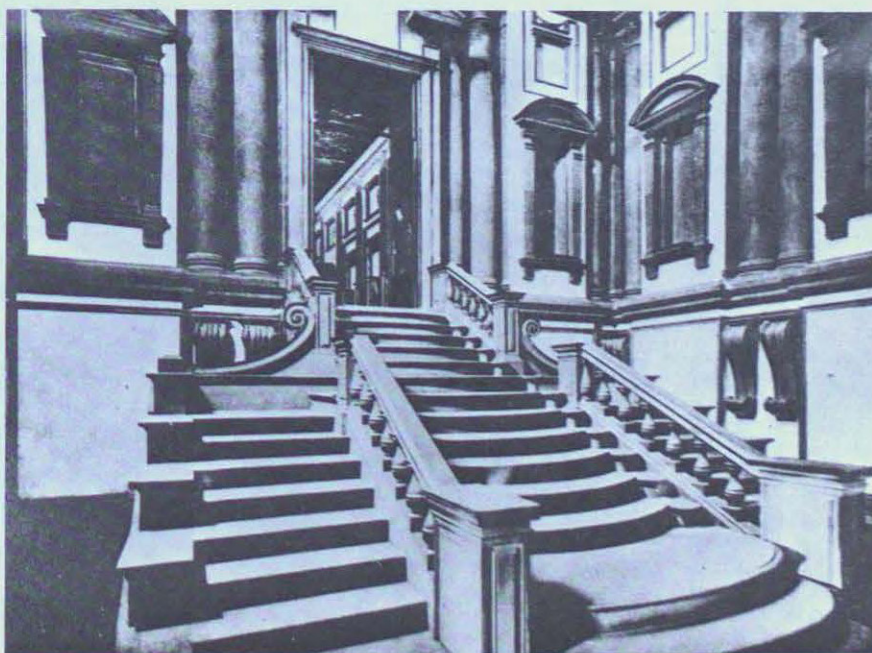
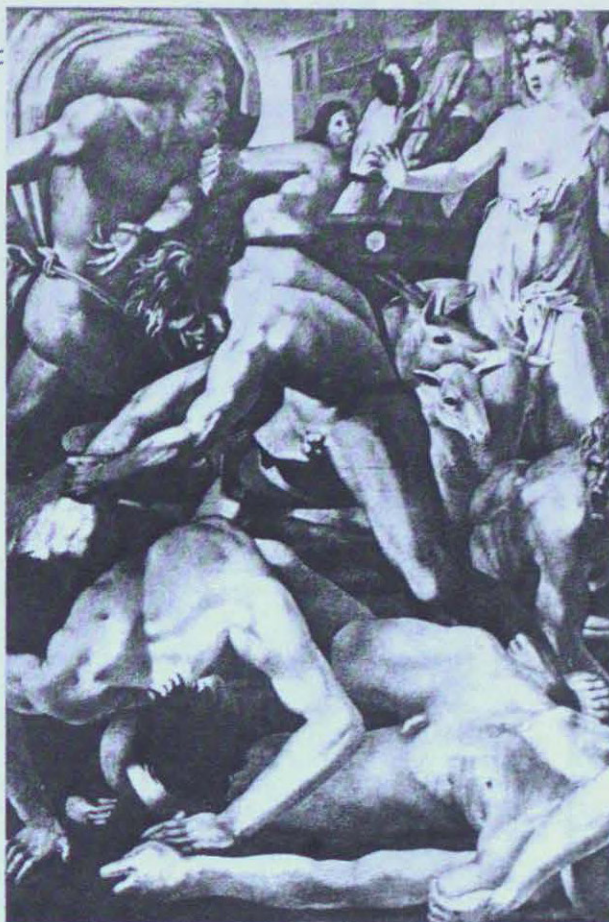
Although the above constitutes an



Above: Donato Bramante, *Tempietto di S. Pietro in Montorio*, 1502
Rafael, *La Transfigurazione*, 1517
Domenico del Ghirlandaio, *The Massacre of the Innocents*, 1485-90
Pontorino, *The Entombment*, 1525-28

*Rosso Fiorentino.
Moses and Jethro's Daughters,
1523*

*Michelangelo,
the stair of the Ricetto
of the Laurentian Library,
1524-59*

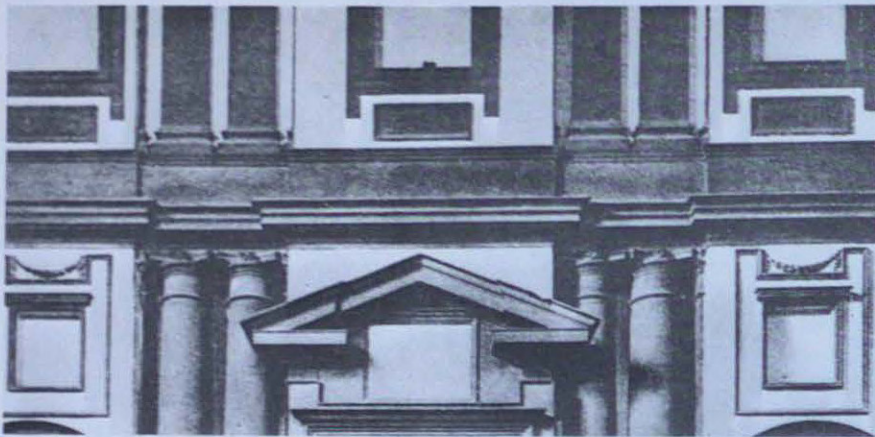


observation of properties of Mannerist painting, from it, one may easily draw parallels applicable to architecture. Art Historian Linda Murray derives such comparisons:

...it (Mannerism in architecture) concentrates on violations of the rules governing accepted usage of the classical orders

and an irrational and unpredictable disposition of space, combinations of features, treatment of surfaces. It is invariably accompanied by rich decoration and often by elaborate illusionism.⁸

It seems, through these two latter interpretations, that our contemporary



opinions about Mannerist intent deal solely with some sort of perversion - "the very human desire to impair perfection when once it has been achieved".⁹

It is perhaps fitting, then (and presumably embarrassing for participants in arguments of this sort) that Mannerist works frequently stand as some of the greatest achievements in the history of architecture. One such achievement was the Laurentian Library (1524-60) in Florence, particularly its *ricetto* (entrance lobby), engineered by the great Master, Michelangelo. He was indeed 'guilty' of breaking the rules of Renaissance ordering - the notion that this should be done by the unquestioned leader of Renaissance sculpture, painting and architecture, carries an element of surprise, and is essential to the credibility of the Mannerist thesis. Mannerist historian Giorgio Vasari says of Michelangelo:

...the man who bears the palm of

has proceeded from conquest to conquest, never finding a difficulty which he cannot easily overcome by the force of his divine genius, by his industry, design, art, judgement and grace.¹⁰

The *ricetto* is an essay in organic playfulness, despite its omnipresent severity. In this room, each architectural element is given licence: the half-column pilasters do not obey the traditional hierarchies (lighter with ascent), becoming shorter, thicker and untapering in the highest portions of the space. These same pilasters, rather than sitting on the walls, press into them - 'pushing' the walls out, thereby rendering the enclosure unusually plastic. Large brackets beneath these half-columns, intended to be perceived as support for them, are left to hang, perversely, off of a wide, continuous horizontal moulding, leaving them supportless. Rectangular pilasters, again contrary to tradition, are hidden by the pregnant walls, rather than resting upon them. The

and stair - autonomy. Were they capricious gestures of irrationality on his part? Modern appraisals of Mannerist theses would suggest that this is so, but knowing of the seriousness of this master (and the solemnity of a 'theatre' such as has been described), one must conclude that this is **not** so, and that other motives were intended. Vasari, the architect and art historian who along with Ammanati was responsible for the completion of construction of the stair,¹¹ thought (because of their acquaintance, probably most rightly), that Michelangelo's manipulations were to provide **varietà**,¹² an all-pervasive concern of the time.

Vasari had praise too for Giulio Romano (1492-1546), based on very similar premises. Romano was: "...learned, bold, sure, capricious, varied, abundant and universal". A similar opinion, referring to Romano's work, was held by Vasari's contemporary, Serlio: "Variety among the elements is a source of pleasure

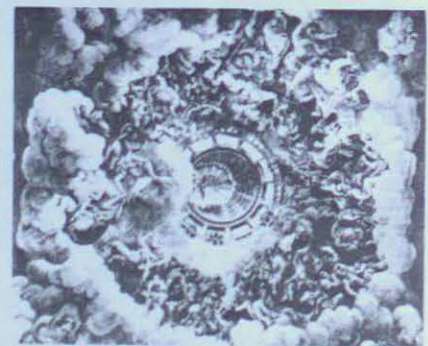


all ages, transcending and eclipsing all the rest, the divine Michelangelo Buonarroti, who is supreme not in one art but in all three at once. He surpasses not only all those who have as it were, surpassed Nature, but the most famous ancients, also, who undoubtedly surpassed her. He



staircase, the showpiece of the room, fabulously curved, pours downward from the doorway of the reading room into the *ricetto*, filling the entire room.

The techniques used by Michelangelo give each component of the room - wall, pilaster, moulding, bracket, niche



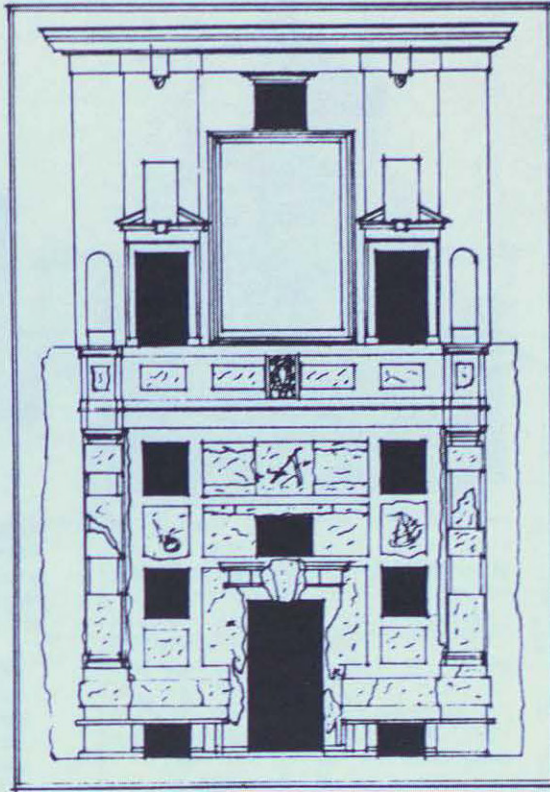
Above:

Michelangelo, the *Ricetto*, detail

Above, from left:

Giulio Romano, Palazzo del Te, 1527-34
Entrance elevation
Courtyard elevation
La Sala dei Giganti, detail

Federico Zuccheri,
Casino dello Zuccheri, 1578



to the eye and satisfaction to the mind",¹³ Romano's Palazzo del Te (1526-34), extremely popular at that time, and inspiration for much imitation, has remained today the Mannerist archetype.

The building, recently, has been spoken of primarily with respect to one of its courtyard elevations, in which monstrous keystones, curiously placed over blind openings, are contained by bottomless pediments; in which the entablature over the grotesquely rusticated, columniated wall shifts out of place in each bay to suggest dropped keystones; and so on. What has escaped much attention, because of that devoted to Romano's perversions of Vitruvius' rules, is the fact that each facade of this building, both on its outer edges and within the courtyard itself, are quite noticeably different. Notable, also, is that each room of the building is profoundly dissimilar to the others: this, in a complex which does not carry any real organisation (the great number of rooms are simply strung in a line around the courtyard). The chambers' characters range from refined and antique to off-beat, as in the case of the Sala dei Giganti which is simply a small, two-way vault, 'sans murs', with a heroic fresco, depicting a scene of a cataclysmic earthquake (replete with suitably contorted giants). The original design of the room included a fireplace which cast its light on the figures of the painting as if they were real, reinforcing the fantastic image, imbuing the room with the "reality,

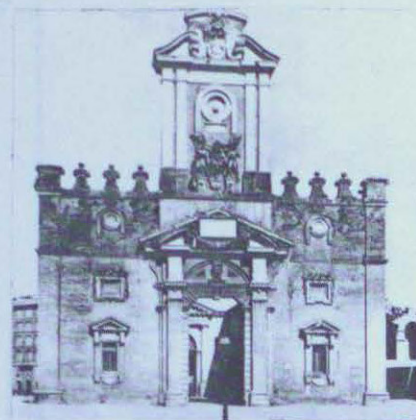
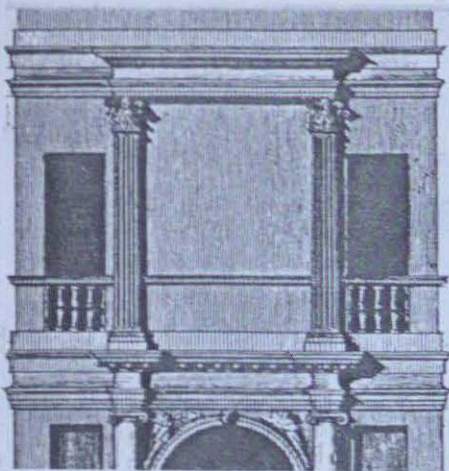
myth and surprise"¹⁴ which made it the favorite of owner and patron Federico Gonzaga, his distinguished house guests and the ladies and cavalieri of the Mantua courts.¹⁵ The Palazzo del Te became, with great speed, a champion of the Mannerist spirit of *varietà*. Unlike the opinions concerning its 'disturbing' nature forwarded by Hartt and Murray, one must surely admit that the building is enchanting, although perhaps a threat to architectural (which some equate to cultural) sobriety.

There exists, however, a thin line that is drawn between enchantment through caprice (irreverence?) and decadence, where the rational or the normal is lost sight of altogether. Many maintain that Mannerism - its attitudes in architecture, painting, sculpture, the decorative arts, literature and music, crossed this line. The 'crisis' then, is the period of 'decadence', which we contend in this discussion, is at worst, to be considered as a time of some 'irreverent' activity. Unique to this time, though, were horrific, extreme works which have fueled arguments and accusations of Mannerist 'pre-meditated sin'. And, in the interests of fairness of this discussion, one should illustrate one such extreme. Federico Zuccheri's casino in Florence (1578), a confusing and clearly uneducated work (decadent in its egotistical isolation), is brought to our attention by Colin Rowe in his essay *Mannerism and Modern Architecture* (1950). Zuccheri's 'composition', a jeu

d'esprit using both applied and excised architectural and sculptural detail and 'over-Mannerist' trickery, is simply inexplicable. The rusticated base, its sometimes shattered stones floating somewhat freely on a smooth field, seems to support nothing. The piano nobile is disproportionately compressed and lacks structuring rigour altogether. Traditionally ordering pilasters are of ungainly width, and surprisingly (or maybe not so) violated by openings, their framing, in turn, conspicuously incomplete. The attic story, too, escapes identification, its one opening hovering above the central blank panel. The panel too, unlike its contemporaries (by Palladio, et al), is rendered meaningless, because of its lack of focus, and in turn, inability to generate necessary dualities within the facade.

Projects such as the Casino dello Zuccheri, and the architectural promiscuity it represents, have unfortunately been seen to be representative of all Mannerism, thus leaving the movement to be viewed with confusion and disdain until recently (Robert Venturi's love for the complexities and contradictions of the movement's work - as illustrated in the book named similarly (1966) - have brought Mannerism to light somewhat; however the body of work remains largely unknown today).

Mannerism has been traditionally relegated to scornful little passages at the back of chapters (or whole books) about Renaissance architecture. Texts



such as *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, a standard educational tome in departments of Art History (notably at McGill University), devotes slightly more than a snippet of discussion to Mannerist architecture, and curiously, places Michelangelo's Medici Chapel and Laurentian Library in the scope of the Late Renaissance (surely, Michelangelo could not be guilty of the conscious sins of a Mannerist architect?). His 'mannerisms' tend to be attributed to his awareness of plasticity as a sculptor, and are thus accepted into the High Renaissance's realm of perfection. Palladio, too, can be said to have been a Mannerist (note particularly the facades of the Venetian churches), but his compositional rigour, seen both in plan and elevation, stemming from his use of harmonics to derive ideal proportion, tends to overshadow his mannerisms, and justifies his isolation by historians as a phenomenon - Late Renaissance - neither High Renaissance, Mannerist nor Baroque. With exclusions of Michelangelo and Palladio from discussions of Mannerism, a one-sidedness arises which allows the perpetuity of accusations of capriciousness, irreverence and decadence. Hence, the 'Mannerist Crisis'.

Courtauld Institute Art Historian John Shearman believes that Mannerism, being examined again (although somewhat superficially) in the twentieth century, earns poor hearing because interpretations of it are derived from twentieth century terms of references (our prejudices and problems). Indeed, Mannerists were guilty of the same fault in assessing the High Renaissance as 'boring'.

Historians such as Hartt and Murray, and others who have dealt with Mannerism during the last sixty years (Nikolaus Pevsner, Anthony Blunt and Colin Rowe), have seen the movement as an aberration of an architectural methodology which was logical and perfect - and quite 'Modern' in this

regard. The sympathy towards the functional logic of the Modern Movement and its supposed absence of eclecticism is very closely tied with a corresponding empathy towards Renaissance dogmae. Coincidentally, disdain towards Mannerism has been, by these same critics, also been held for Victorian Gothic architecture and the Picturesque style, and even until quite recently, for Art Nouveau.

One must conclude that assertions establishing Mannerism's position as a 'crisis' in the history of art should be considered fundamentally untrue. The movement enriched us with an invaluable resource of references, among them, the works of Michelangelo, Palladio, Romano, Vasari (the Uffizi, Florence), Ammanati (Palazzo Farnese, Rome) and Peruzzi (Palazzo Massimo alle Colonne, Rome). Their efforts broke essential ground which allowed the Baroque movement, as well as, even, attitudes of freedom within the Modern Movement, to flourish.

The licence taken within the domain of Mannerism, which some see as frivolity or vassilation constituting a crisis, was simply indicative of flux within a transitional period - just as in any such time. These characteristics were not borne, for the most part, of an ignorance of nor a rejection of the constituent elements of a fine architecture; rather, they were based upon the knowledge and manipulation of these elements. Mannerism was an educated style, quite naturally a part of 'a more cultured age'.¹⁶

Postscript

It is not surprising, then, that Mannerism is enjoying some renewed interest today, as Robert Venturi and many others who share his concerns, find these reflected in Mannerist work. Correspondingly, the non-Modernists will find fault with Modernism based on similar grounds as those which

Mannerists found with the High Renaissance. As well, as in 1520, architectural opinion in our century is placed into a condition of dialogue, not dedicated to any single thesis.

Mannerism was not the style of the whole of sixteenth century art, but it was like one part of a dialogue; similarly the ideas it fed upon were not unopposed. It was partly because opinion was divided that it became sharpened to the point of complete consciousness....¹⁷

Now, again, the lines of combative dialogue have been drawn between opposing fields of theory; the nature of these debates will be illuminated in the next issue ●

1. Colin Rowe, *Mannerism and Modern Architecture*, 1950, p.7
2. Rowe, p.7
3. Frederic Hartt, *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, 1975, p.482
4. Bernardo Tasso as quoted by John Shearman, *Mannerism*, 1968, p.139
5. Shearman, p.138
6. Shearman, p.140
7. Hartt, p.518
8. Linda Murray, *Late-Renaissance and Mannerism*, 1967, p.31, reprinted in Omer Akin's article: *A Style Named Post-Modern, Architectural Design*, Aug-Sept, 1979, p.225
9. Rowe, p.5
10. Leonardo Benevolo, *The Architecture of the Renaissance*, Vol.I, 1979, p.232
11. Henri Stierlin, *Encyclopaedia of World Architecture*, Vol.I, 1978, p.196
12. Shearman, p.75
13. Shearman, p.141
14. Akin, p.225
15. Hartt, p.522
16. Shearman, p.136
17. Shearman, p.137

Above, from left:

Andrea Palladio, *Casa di Palladio*
Andrea Palladio, *Il Redentore*
Michelangelo, *Porta Pia*,