Perfection in Proportion: The
Legacies of Palladio and Scamozzi
in the Golden Age/Schoonheid
op maat: De erfens van Palladio en
Scamozzi in de Gouden Eeuw
Royal Palace/Koninklijk Paleis,
Amsterdam
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Architectural exhibitions, especially those
devoted to early modern architecture,
rarely succeed in reaching new audiences.
To present and explain a selection of
buildings or the ideas or thoughts of indi-
viduals about architecture, or to synthe-
size a group or style with the aid of varied
media in a temporary setting usually
attracts only cognoscenti and architecture
aficionados. The exhibition Perfection in
Proportion: The Legacies of Palladio and
Scamozzi in the Golden Age, organized by
the Royal Palace Foundation in collabo-
ration with the Centro Internazionale di
Studi di Architettura “Andrea Palladio” in
the Royal Palace in Amsterdam, was more
successful. A better location to present
and explain a complex episode in interna-
tional architectural history is hardly imag-
inable (Figure 1).

Built as the town hall in the Golden
Age (1648–65) after designs by Jacob van
Campen, the Royal Palace has recently
been reopened after years of intensive
restoration, and it has quickly regained
popularity, even though the outside of the
building is still hidden behind scaffolding.
This massive gray sandstone block of a
building with giant orders of composite
and Corinthian pilasters with superbly
sculpted capitals, pediments set against
high-pitched roofs, and crowned by a
tempietto-like belfry, was commissioned
by the Amsterdam burgomasters at the
end of the Eighty Years War to match the
city’s rise in the world economy. The high
point of the interior is the central public
space, the burgerzaal on the main floor,
flanked by courtyards with circulating
interior galleries, a plan inspired by Solo-
mon’s temple and Scamozzi’s reconstruc-
tion of the senator’s palace in Rome. In the
exhibition the town hall is represented in
various seventeenth-century prints and a
model that concludes the show. A leaflet
invites visitors to track down Scamozzian
detailing in the decoration of the town
hall’s main floor. Exhibition and building
might have merged and bridged three-
and-a-half centuries were it not for the
massive, black, and boxy elements that
hold the exhibited objects and refuse to
communicate with their refined surround-
ings. The use of numerous full-size pho-
tographic reproductions of drawings from
overseas collections is excusable because
the most important originals, such as Inigo

Figure 1 Schoonheid op maat (author’s photo)
Jones’s copy of *L’Idea*, and drawings by Scamozzi, John Webb, and several Dutch architects are there.

The three-part exhibition starts with Scamozzi’s life and work, recapturing in brief the big exhibition in Vicenza of 2003. The largest part focuses on seventeenth-century Dutch classicism; in between a smaller part stresses England’s key role in the advent of Dutch Scamozzian classicism. Studying Palladio when traveling to Italy in 1614, Inigo Jones met Scamozzi—although he would have preferred to meet his predecessor. Constante Huygens, secretary to prince Frederik Hendrik of Orange, was present at the official opening of Jones’s Banqueting House at Whitehall in 1622. Huygens became the key figure in the propagation of the new classicism in the Republic, and his friendship and collaboration with Jacob van Campen accelerated the acceptance of the new style throughout Holland.

The seminal importance of Scamozzi for the Dutch Republic is demonstrated by contrasting a manuscript translation of Palladio’s *Quattro Libri* (1570) to numerous Dutch publications of parts of Scamozzi’s *Idea della Architettura Universale* (Venice 1615) from 1640 onward, of which the 1658 edition contained prints from the original wooden plates bought in Venice. It seems the Dutch preferred Scamozzi simply because his treatise was the most recent and comprehensive one available, a resourceful companion to architecture in a country where classicism was still considered novel and somewhat exotic. Princely interest was soon followed by that of an elite of wealthy and entrepreneurial burghers. Classically inspired architecture became an object of intellectual curiosity perfectly suited to express cultural and socio-economic standing or sustain social mobility. Educated painter-architects with superior drawing skills, such as Salomon de Bray, Van Campen, Pieter Post, and Philips and Justus Vingboons replaced traditional stonemasons and master carpenters. Their knowledge and literacy improved communication with demanding and often studious patrons who were seeking distinction.

Scamozzism pleased many and stimulated the application of the new style to a variety of building types. In the exhibition, the question arises of what Scamozzi would have made of this northern appropriation of his life’s work, in protestant churches, on façades of canal houses, country houses, and villas for Amsterdam merchants. It is questionable that he would have approved of the extravagant decoration, with a giant Corinthian order in sandstone, of the façade of the house of the Trip brothers, who made their fortune manufacturing and trading arms. In the modern economy of Holland traditional hierarchies, those of architecture included, were undermined by the industrial revolution and conspicuous spending. Bending the rules of the orders in the Dutch environment facilitated the application of Italian models, which were not universal at all. Scamozzi’s wonderful sketchbook of his journey from Paris to Venice of 1600 documents his interest in medieval churches, but how these relate to his ideas on universal architecture and the continuing relevance of classicist rules remains unclear. Also doubtful is the presentation of Nicolaus Goldmann’s “theory,” taught in Leiden and claimed to be a complete system of architecture; this is only superficially linked to Scamozzi’s *L’Idea*.

Walking through the exhibition, it becomes clear that Palladio only made it to the title of the exhibition to attract a wider audience. His name is omitted in the title of the accompanying book, only available in Dutch but based on work already available in recent Italian and English publications. Despite various attempts to show Scamozzi’s legacy in Dutch architecture of the Golden Age, his name has hardly spread outside the scholarly community. One hopes that this attractive, insightful, and compact exhibition will at least succeed in acquainting the many visitors of the Royal Palace with Palladio’s Vicentine successor, and how a small group of enthusiasts in the young Republic succeeded in giving Scamozzi’s architecture an intense afterlife, assimilating it in an environment that the architect would have had trouble appreciating.

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**Related Publication**


**Notes**

