

Palazzo Antonini

Udine Branch of the Bank of Italy until November 2009



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Background



Palazzo Antonini is without doubt the most famous building in the city. Also known as *Casa Grande* (the large house), it was designed by the greatest Venetian architect of all time, **Andrea Palladio**. As art historian **Giuseppe Bergamini** wrote, 'Undoubtedly the finest building in Udine, it was the first to depart from the stereotypical mansions of local wealthy families, using a prestigious design to introduce Friuli to the rhythm and forms of the architecture of noble Venetian residences'.

The building epitomises the break between the medieval concept of the manor house (walled, secluded, fortified) and the new Renaissance style of building, gaining popularity in a city whose defence was no longer the responsibility of the inhabitants but was provided by the central authority and its troops. It was a crucial step towards modernity. The structure of the building evokes an innovative vision of the city's functions in relation to the surrounding territory.

The palazzo was commissioned by Floriano Antonini, an ambitious young member of one of Udine's leading aristocratic families. He revived the tradition of minting a medal to mark the foundation of the building, no doubt wishing to prove that sophisticated taste was not a prerogative of the aristocratic circles of Venice, capital of *La Serenissima*.

Antonini's decision to entrust the construction of his new home in Udine to Palladio himself was nothing more than a way of asserting his financial power, as well as a clear demonstration that he understood the changing times as well as the most enlightened Venetian aristocrat and wanted to play a

prominent role, not only for personal advantage but for the benefit of the whole region of Friuli that he represented. After it was conquered by the Venetians in 1420, Friuli had made enormous progress in terms of culture and innovation, and in 1524 Udine was awarded the status of 'metropolis of Friuli' by the Cardinal Patriarch of Venice Domenico Grimani.

When Palladio designed the building in 1556 as 'a very commodious habitation' – according to Giorgio Vasari in his list of the most beautiful buildings designed by the Venetian architect – it was located at the city limits, the rear façade looking out towards the countryside and for that reason designed on the model of a suburban villa. The palazzo dominated the city, as yet unacquainted with the Tuscan-Romanesque and even Venetian styles of building, especially in the districts of San Cristoforo, Santa Lucia and Gemona and in the urban area. It epitomised the Antonini family's desire to assert itself as the most enlightened in the city thanks to acquaintances in Venetian high society, such as the famous Daniele Barbaro, high-ranking cleric and translator of Vitruvius, who was another patron of Palladio. The palazzo in Udine also reflects the influence of Giulio Romano, whom Palladio met during his visits to Rome.

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The palazzo's location in the city is unusual: while the imposing façade overlooks a group of old buildings on the opposite side of the street, the rear opens onto the large park that slopes down to the *Giardin Grande*, or large garden. The northern side occupies one side of a small square, in the centre of which was located one of the five city wells, no longer visible.

Palladio had already experimented with innovative arrangements for the ground floor of other houses, giving the area an official function as the space where the family interacted with the neighbourhood and conducted important business. This new concept overturned the vertical distribution of domestic functions adopted beforehand, including by Palladio himself, with some important consequences.

Entering the palazzo from the portico, we see two copies of ancient statues, probably portraying Bacchus and a cymbal player. They are placed in recesses on either side of the rear entrance, a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century portal embellished with a central mask. The two reproductions indicate the interest of the Antonini family in collecting work of arts.



At the time of construction of the palazzo, the passage between the various floors of a building was generally realised with great economy of means. The size of the staircase reflected the different function of each floor. Thus, if the ground floor were given a similar function to the traditional *piano nobile* or 'stately' floor, usually the first, the passage between the two levels would also become a 'stately' feature of the house. The system of vertical connections thus acquired an important role in the overall layout, adding a new element in the distribution of space that was not present in Palladio's earlier projects.

Such a choice entailed moving the 'amenities', that is the service areas such as kitchens, small eating rooms and so on, away from the ground floor where they were usually located. As the importance of the ground floor increased, new architectural solutions were adopted for the entrance hall: a portico with four columns (tetrastyle) harmonised with the design of superimposed loggias on the façade in a refined manipulation of ancient principles. The plan of Palazzo Antonini in Udine, which resembles a small Roman *domus*, incorporated an Ionic tetrastyle entrance portico.



In the four corners of the hall are four copies of Greek statues, portraying Diana, a female figure with a cup, a Chaste Venus and an Amazon. The neoclassical statues were probably made in the early nineteenth century, at the time of Francesco and Rambaldo Antonini.

By 1559 the palazzo was already partially habitable, although work was still under way in 1563. The construction process was extremely difficult and lengthy. Palladio did not oversee the work and there are substantial differences between his design and the execution, including the absence of the pediment above the façade and the lowering of the roof, as well as various other changes such as the framing of the windows, which the architect had not envisaged.

The eighteenth century



A wing was added to the palazzo at the beginning of the century, which was converted in the 1930s to house the State Treasury Service run by the Bank of Italy.

The decorations in the main reception room on the first floor were executed by **Martinus Fischer** in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. They depict, in stucco and paint, a succession of telamones and caryatids, panoplies (complete suits of armour exhibited as trophies), giant monochrome frescoes and large, chubby putti playing with telamones. As a result, the room is about 1.70 metres higher than in Palladio's project (6.60 metres). The ceiling was raised and two symmetrical galleries with balustrades were incorporated above the small side rooms, from which spiral staircases probably once led upwards.

It is not known who altered the original design for the palazzo, creating a new axial plan, the staircases, the middle floors, and the views of the lower loggia. Additions were also made to the tetrastyle entrance hall. Major work was carried out on at least two occasions which substantially altered the appearance of the building, replacing all the windows except the one to the right of the loggia on the rear façade and the interior staircases. In 1709 the addition of the decorations completely revolutionised the Palladian interior. What remains of Palladio's original project is the plan (except the stairs) and overall volume of the building, the front and rear loggias (except the tympana, which were never constructed) and the elements of the four-pillared hall. One of the rooms of the palazzo also housed some paintings in simple, stucco frames by the Venetian painter **Domenico Fossati**, graceful depictions of architectural fragments, backdrops of arranged foliage, and gardens with views of flowers and fountains.



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The nineteenth century



In 1818 the neoclassical architect **Valentino Presani** was commissioned to renovate part of the interior of the palazzo. A room on the ground floor, next to the entrance, was to become an elegant two-storey apartment.

The frescoes on the mezzanine floor leading to the garden are by **Odorico Politi**, a neoclassical painter from Udine. They were executed between 1818 and 1825 in the classical style and depict episodes from ancient history. The balanced compositions are simple and elegant, with clean lines and rendered in a few basic tones. They were intended to be hung on the wall inside stucco frames.

The twentieth century

In 1977 work was carried out to reinforce and restore the building after the earthquake of 1976. It became necessary to remove the paintings for the purpose and in 1984 they were transferred onto mobile supports and moved to the main floor of the building for conservation. Unfortunately, the security measures necessary for the Bank of Italy to be able carry on its business made access to the paintings difficult.

When the Bank of Italy relocated its offices in 2009, at the suggestion of the Monuments and Fine Arts Department it arranged a three-year loan of the paintings to the Civic Museums of Udine in order to display them to a wider public, ensure proper protection, and enhance their cultural value. The frescoes became part of the museum collections and are displayed at the very end of the permanent exhibition of the *Galleria d'Arte Antica*, thus attesting to their importance as examples of local style and taste in the historical and artistic context of the early nineteenth century.