

# Filippo Farsetti and the Dream of a Drawing Academy in Venice

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## *Abstract*

After visiting Rome in the mid of XVIII century the Venetian nobleman Filippo Farsetti decided to establish in Venice a Drawing Academy. For this purpose, he commissioned the duplicates of the most important ancient and modern works of art so that young artists could train copying them. First, Farsetti exhibited his collection of plaster copies in the largest rooms of his palace on the Grand Canal; later, he decided to transform his mansion into a real Drawing Academy. Farsetti asked the most famous architect of his time, Charles Louis Clérisseau, to design a project for the transformation of his palace; it, however, will never be realized.

Considering the noble didactic purpose of Farsetti and the artistic value of Clérisseau, we performed a virtual reconstruction that attempts to give a digital life to the Drawing Academy. In particular, the 3D model, the virtual images and movies are going to be used to promote and disseminate the artistic and architectural heritage of Venice [1].

## *Keywords*

drawing academy, Filippo Farsetti, Charles-Louis Clérisseau, 3D model.



## The Birth of a New Drawing Academy in Venice

In the middle of the XVIII century, after the main archaeological discoveries that triggered an intense cultural debate, Johann Joachim Winckelmann and Anton Raphael Mengs founded in Rome a new art movement, the Neoclassicism. These two scholars believed that art should follow precise rules to achieve perfection and, according to them, such rules had already been discovered and put into practice by the ancients. From these considerations the need to train artists through the study of ancient's works arose. Thus, it happened that the Academies, the designated places of learning, collected *exempla* to copy from a glorious past to train young students [Cioffi 2015, pp. 32-39].

The Venetian nobleman Filippo Farsetti, a rich and erudite man, decided it would be appropriate to provide a similar apprenticeship for artists in his homeland. For this reason, he commissioned the copies of the main works of art realized by ancient artists as well as the works of art created by the modern artists, as Michelangelo Buonarroti, Raffaello Sanzio, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Guido Reni who had adhered to ancient's teachings.

Upon his father's death in 1733, Filippo Farsetti inherited a huge estate and the noble title. As often happened to the Venetian patricians, he too was called to hold public office; thus, from April 1734 to April 1736, Farsetti was appointed *provveditore sopra dazi* (superintendent of duties). He realized, however, that these political commitments limited his freedom, indeed he would have preferred to devote completely his life to study. Therefore, we should not be surprised that, when in April 1736 he was appointed *podestà* (governor) of Feltre, a role that would have forced him to leave Venice, Farsetti refused the assignment and, for this reason, he was banished for three years by the *Serenissima* Republic of Venice. Following this ban, Farsetti went to Paris where he was part of Louis XV's Court [Vedovato 1994, pp. 87-91].

As soon as Farsetti came back to Venice, he was proposed for other public offices, which he refused. This time Farsetti took refuge in Rome, where, between 1745 and 1749, he renounced the noble title to become abbot with the aim to resolve definitively his political *impasse* [Vedovato 1994, pp. 95-96]. Indeed, this new condition had two advantages: it did not provide for votes or particular obligations in the religious field and, in addition, it allowed Farsetti to be permanently exempted from any type of public office of the *Serenissima* [Brunelli Bonetti 1942, pp. 93-114]. In the papal city, Abbot Farsetti met and befriended important figures of the Roman court, such as cardinals Girolamo Colonna, Andrea Corsini and the Pope's secretary Silvio Valenti Gonzaga, as well as important artists and writers including Winckelmann [Vedovato 1994, pp. 44-48]. While he was living in Rome, Farsetti participated in the great cultural debate, which led to the birth of a new artistic movement: Neoclassicism. In a century in which every aspect of reality had to mirror the reason, even art had to do the same. Scholars thought that art should adhere to precise rules, which revolved around the concept of beauty. In particular, Neoclassicism was born in contrast to the Baroque and Rococò, which in the eyes of the new artists were governed by capricious choices, far from scientific rules, rigor and canons. According to

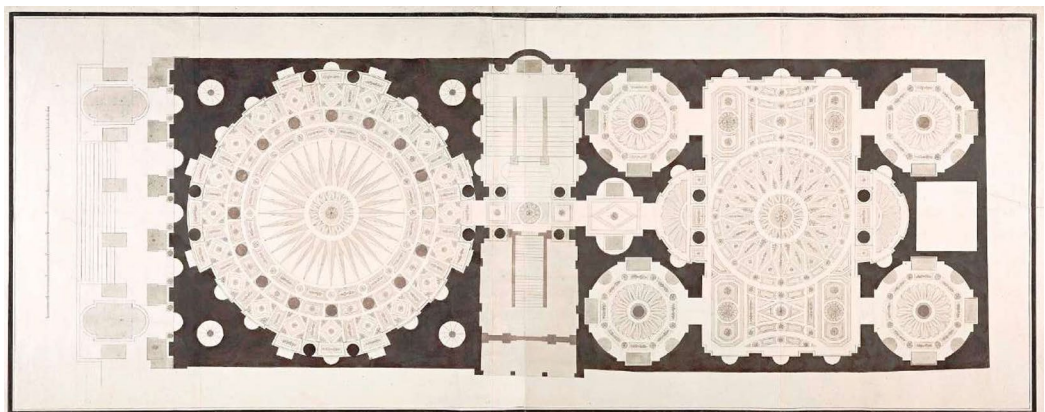


Fig. 1. C. L. Clèrisseau.  
Plan for the Drawing  
Academy Project, 1764.

this idea, the discovery and application of rules would lead the artist to the creation of the perfect work. Searching for these artistic canons, it was soon clear that some specific rules had already been discovered and applied in ancient times, as evidenced by some works, examples of perfection and ideal beauty [Larson 1976, pp. 390-405]. To discover the rules of beauty, it was sufficient to study the works of art of the ancients and those of modern artists who had followed their teachings. For this reason, it was essential to renovate the academies of fine arts, basing them mainly on the study of the works of the past. So, the academies became places where students could practice through drawing the precise outline of bodies following the correct proportions of single parts.

Farsetti had the idea of promoting a new Drawing Academy in Venice, hoping that the government of the *Serenissima* would have arranged for a suitable place. He thought to contribute mainly with the base material, providing plaster copies of the most important ancient and modern artworks preserved in the museums, palaces and churches of Rome. Farsetti realized soon that it would have taken a long time before the Venetian government built a new Drawing Academy, so he decided to temporarily host his collection of plaster sculptures and other works of art in his palace on the Grand Canal, allowing anyone to visit his house and, in particular, students. Initially the collection occupied only some rooms on the noble floor, but with the increasing of the works, it was everywhere, as evidenced by the French economist and politician Jean-Marie Roland who visited the palace in 1777: “[...] toutes les pièces du premier étage en sont remplies”, adding: “La collection est la plus complète que je connoisse” [Roland 1780, pp. 43-44]. A register, dating back to 1775, of the artistic works exhibited at Farsetti’s palace [2] testifies that the pictorial copies have been lost, while a good part of the plasters sculptures still exist and are preserved in Venice, at the Gallerie dell’Accademia, and in Bologna, at the Accademia d’Arte and the Liceo Artistico Statale.

Since the government of the *Serenissima* did not seem interested in establishing a Drawing Academy, Farsetti decided to modify his home and entrusted this task to one of the most famous architects and artists of his time: the Frenchman Charles Louis Clérisseau. This project was never realized, but recently the Getty Museum in Los Angeles bought a Clérisseau’s plan drawing, relating to the Farsetti project (Fig. 1). Although no other drawings have been discovered, Clérisseau’s plan for the Drawing Academy contains a sufficient number of information to virtually develop a hypothetical model of its design. Not having elevations and sections, we were forced to formulate some hypotheses. Since it would take too long to explain all the choices made, here we want just to underline that, to anchor our conjectures to facts and documents, we have: contextualized our reconstruction in the theory of architecture dedicated to academies; analyzed the treaties; compared the plan of the Getty Museum with the archetypes of ancient architecture, with other Clérisseau projects, and with famous Neoclassical buildings. Finally, we added the digital survey of plaster sculptures to the 3D virtual model [Genevois, Merlo 2020]. Considering the noble didactic purpose of Filippo Farsetti and the artistic value of Clérisseau, this virtual reconstruction brings to digital life the project of the Drawing Accademy, with the aim of promoting and disseminating the artistic and architectural heritage of Venice.

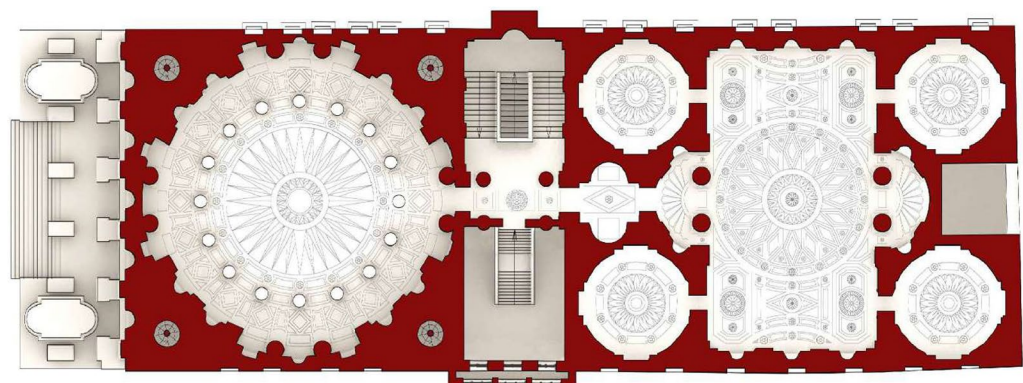


Fig. 2. Digital reconstruction of the plan for the Drawing Academy Project.

### 3D Reconstruction of the Farsetti's Drawing Academy

After having carefully studied the plan created by Cl risseau, after a continuous comparison with the historical literature dedicated to architecture and after having analyzed similar projects, inspired by the Pantheon or intended for analogous functions, we went on with the hypothetical reconstruction of the Farsetti's Drawing Academy.

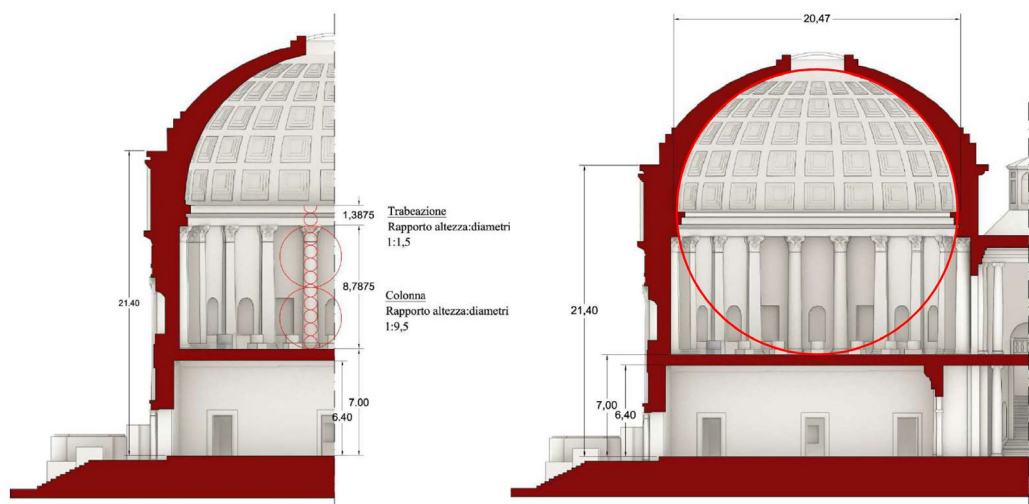
In a first phase, the noble floor of the Farsetti's Academy was drowned with a CAD software. To obtain a vector duplicate of the plan, all the lines were faithfully traced, also following the asymmetries and imperfections between the architectural elements, in order to be able to carry out a complete analysis regarding the scale of representation and the geometric proportions used by Cl risseau. Since the concept of symmetry was scrupulously respected by artists and architects during Neoclassicism [Vettese et al. 2016, p. 23], our vector drawing was modified to eliminate distortions or inaccuracies, in order to restore absolute symmetry (Fig. 2). Cl risseau's plan of the Getty Museum is an extremely detailed graphic document realized on a large scale. From a careful analysis it is possible to establish both the units and the scale of this important drawing. Since the front of the building is 29.4 cm, comparing this measure with the real dimension of the actual palace, it follows that the unit used by Cl risseau is 0.3248 m, which corresponds to the eighteenth-century Parisian foot, so the scale of the drawing is equal to 1:50. The entrance to the Academy from the water is on a wide staircase that leads to a base on which Cl risseau places 6 minor pedestals in correspondence with the pilasters, and 2 major ones, located between the two most extreme podiums. Given the similarity, the main two pedestals have been modeled like those that support the statues of the Dioscuri which Farsetti had duplicated in plaster and flank the steps leading to Piazza del Campidoglio in Rome.

The large circular hall, which is accessed crossing the entrance door on the Grand Canal, is dominated by a huge dome reminiscent of that of the Pantheon. Eight columns are located at the ends of the median axes, while twelve pilasters have been placed at the ends of the diagonal ones. Four large niches are created in the space that connects the three sectors located at the ends of the median axes. Semicircular and rectangular niches are distributed between columns and pilasters, all having the same width, inside which the statues were to be placed. The central space shows circular pedestals to accommodate other statues and we can hypothesize that these podiums were made on wood in such a way as to be removable for greater comfort of the students.

Continuing with the virtual reconstruction of the project, we also took into consideration the stairs that allow access to the building from the public road. In this case, Cl risseau's drawing does not show perfect symmetry, because the French architect wanted to adapt his project to the existing building. For these reasons, the arrival landing appears to be the same size as today and the designed staircase reflects the dimensions of the existing staircase.

Fig. 3. Andrea Palladio's rules of the Corinthian order applied to the main circular hall.

Fig. 4. Geometric matrix for modeling the dome of the main circular hall.



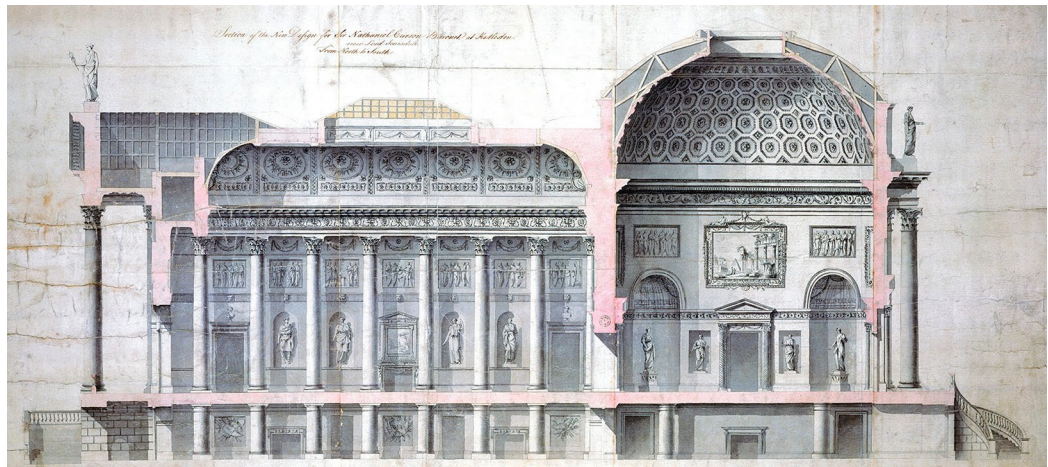
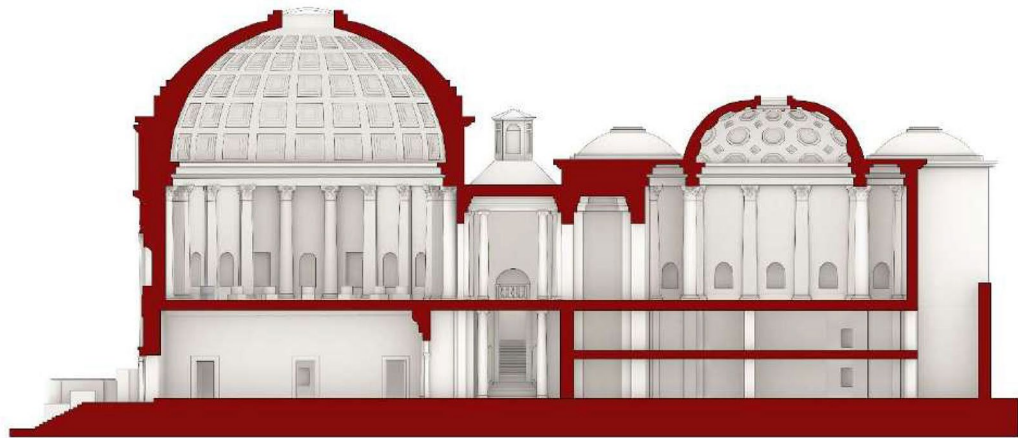


Fig. 5. R. Adam. Section of Kedleston Hall, 1759.

The remaining space of the plan (a rectangle with sides in the ratio of about 3:4) was used by Clérissseau to create a large rectangular room in the center with two anti-halls opened on its longer sides and four circular rooms at the corners. In this way he achieved a double symmetry and a variety of shapes with respect to main circular hall. About the vaulting system that cover these spaces, we can hypothesize that the rectangular hall is covered by a cloister vault with a rectangular opening of adequate size on the top to allow the light to penetrate inside, while for the two anti-halls we intended a flat ceiling, while for the four circular rooms we modeled hemispherical vaults with oculus on the top, as for the main circular hall. Finally, to carry out a faithful reconstruction of Clérissseau's project, we digitally drew also the decorations of the floor. After the reconstruction of the plan preserved in the Getty Museum, we hypothesized that the French architect probably had no intention of demolishing the abbot Farsetti's palace that we can now admire on the Grand Canal. More simply, he could have changed and upgraded the actual configuration. In particular, Clérissseau would probably have chosen to eliminate the current roof, keeping the existing roof molding. Therefore, the heights of the perimeter walls of Palazzo Farsetti could be considered the same as those of the project for the Academy. To sketch out a plausible section, having a probable reference height available, we resorted to specialized literature and, in particular, the proportional rule of architectural orders, proposed by Andrea Palladio [Palladio 1570, pp. 15-51]. Basically, we considered the diameter of the columns at the base as the module from which to start to size all the architectural elements of the project (Fig. 3) and we went on by analogy. A couple of examples will suffice to clarify this procedure. For instance, it is evident that one of the key features of the main hall is its striking resemblance to the Pantheon. Therefore, in the absence of an original section, some geometric and decorative features present in this ancient building have been considered as a reference, in order to reconstruct a possible section. First, we verified that the inner space could circumscribe a sphere, thus determining the height and size of the oculus that serves to illuminate the circular hall, then we created a digital coffered dome following the model of the Pantheon (Fig. 4). Robert Adam's Kedleston Hall offered a solution for the reconstruction of the rectangular room (Fig. 5), basing on the fact that there were constant contacts between Clérissseau and the Scottish architect [Eustace 1997, pp. 743-752]. Indeed, observing the section of this building, we can find a rectangular hall covered by cloister vault that follow a circular hall, like in the case of Clérissseau design. Furthermore, given the widespread use of this type of vault by Neoclassic architects, we considered appropriate to equip with a similar ceiling the rectangular hall of Clérissseau's project and maintaining the same proportional rules used for the circular hall, because the Getty Museum plan shows equal columns in both spaces (Fig. 6). Furthermore, we opted for a coffered vault following as an example a painting by Clérissseau relating to the *Room of the Ruins* at Trinità dei Monti convent in Rome (Fig. 7). Once the restitution of the noble floor, the heart of Farsetti's Drawing Academy, has been completed, we virtually modeled the other floors. Since these spaces are intended for secondary purposes with respect to academic functions, such as warehouses, they has been created basing on the current situation.

Fig. 6. Digital reconstruction of the section for the Drawing Academy Project.



### The Farsetti Collection: Digital Survey and Exhibition Criteria

There is a manuscript catalog of Filippo Farsetti's collection, compiled around 1755 and later updated in 1778 [2], therefore, this document can be considered a useful reference of the situation in which Clérissseau started his design of the Academy. Part of the original Farsetti collection remained in Venice. This part is now mainly preserved by the Galleria dell'Accademia, after most of the art pieces moved between 1799 and 1800 to the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg [Noè 2008, pp. 224-269]. Luckily, copies of the collection exist also in Bologna, at the Accademia d'Arte and the Liceo Artistico Statale in Tolmino street. These plaster statues replicate some of the most important sculptures of Farsetti collection. These artworks are in Bologna because Filippo Farsetti promised to replicate sculpture also for the pope Benedict XIV, agreeing on a refund of about 6,000 ducats. The Pope later donated such plaster statues to his hometown, Bologna [Pagliani 2003, pp. 63-127].

For the arrangement of the plaster sculptures in the 3D model we selected the following spaces: main front, small passage, stairwell, circular rooms, circular hall, and rectangular hall. The statues for the front are quite certain, thanks to the analysis of the statuary that was generally proposed in art academies and thanks to the known dimensions of the niches and bases to house them. There is some certainty also for the small passage and the stairwell, as these spaces preserved their original configuration over time and the inventory of 1755 indicates some artworks located in these specific places. After the flight of stairs, entering the noble floor, there is a room oriented along the length of the building, which at its ends would have hosted the largest sculptures of Farsetti collection: Hercules and Flora Farnese. The same reasoning can be extended to the small circular rooms, where Clérissseau had foreseen pedestals arranged in their centers, probably to set up equally important statues. For the main circular hall, unfortunately there is not much information but, basing on the size of the niches and keeping in mind which side the statues presumably should have shown, we decided to place the medium-sized plaster sculpture, whose back has no particular relevance, in the perimeter niches, and the most important copies on the revolving pedestals. Probably, from an educational point of view, the main circular hall would have been more instructive for students, because there would have been the opportunity to sit in the center of the hall and copy the sculptures illuminated by natural light coming from above. The same distribution principles were also applied to the rectangular hall.

No doubt that Clérissseau's Academy would have been enriched by these magnificent works of art. To faithfully reconstruct the artistic world that would have surrounded the students, we performed a digital survey of the plaster copies (Fig. 8), which were then put into the virtual model. We used Agisoft Metashape software which, as is widely known, is based on the principles of photogrammetry. After obtaining the authorizations, we began the photogrammetric survey of the sculptures starting from October 28th 2020. Many hours of work were spent on the survey for an average of 200 photographs per statue. These photographs



Fig. 7. C. L. Clérissieu, Rooms of Ruins, 1766.

are well defined and very sharp, moreover the images are not distorted due to the lens, having used the optimal focal length of 50 mm and the 24x36 format [Di Bello 2018, pp. 2-3]. Since the survey has been performed in the interiors of the museums place, crowded with objects, and since we were not allowed to move the plaster sculpture that usually were located along the walls, the photographic shots did not entirely cover the surface of the statues. Moreover, since natural lighting was not sufficient, it was necessary to add artificial lights. The operations took place without the flash, as the shadows would have changed their position every time, making the recognition of homologous points impossible. A reflective and uniform surface (as in the case of newly restored plaster sculptures) greatly complicated the survey operations. In all these cases it was necessary to create many frames to ensure a correct reconstruction. The shots were performed with a Nikon D7000, digital camera with a 16.9 Megapixel sensor. The sensor was set at ISO 100 for all sessions and the lens opening was set at 5.6. The file format we have chosen is the Tagged Image File Format (TIFF) also recommended by the software specifications.



Fig. 8. Digital survey of the Belvedere Torso plaster copy .

## Conclusions

The work performed is an experiment of a method for the reconstruction of a unbuilt architecture, basing the outcome on literary and artistic sources related to Filippo Farsetti, Charles-Louis Clérissseau and the Drawing Academy. Given the importance that Clérissseau's design, if realized, would have had for the history of art and architecture in Venice, we broaden the research to other contemporary Drawing Academies of the time and to the works of other architects such as those by Robert Adam. The extension of the analysis to similar projects made it possible to justify some of the most important choices in our 3D reconstruction, such as those of the vault system and the orders of architecture. Our virtual model cannot obviously consider itself scientifically equal to Clérissseau's design, which was handed down to us only thanks to the plan preserved at the Getty Museum but our purpose is to evoke the neoclassical idea of a public building with educational aims addressed to young artists. However, although hypothetical, since each of our reconstructive hypothesis is based on a precise reasoning, anchored to historical-architectural sources, this 3D model can still be considered plausible.

Our digital reconstruction of Farsetti's Drawing Academy is a good base for virtual and augmented reality applications. This innovative aspect of the representation appears particularly interesting, since it would allow a contemporary observer to enter the Farsetti's Academy walking through the halls of an eighteenth-century museum. The development of these technologies has advanced rapidly in recent years, increasing their applications to spread the knowledge of archaeological sites and, more generally, of the artistic, historical and cultural heritage. In our case we are in the process of developing, basing on the 3D reconstruction of the Drawing Academy already performed, virtual and augmented reality applications for 3 important institutions interested in this topic and in the dissemination of the cultural heritage that they preserve: the Gallerie dell'Accademia and Domus Grimani in Venice; Villa Farsetti, owned by the municipality of Santa Maria di Sala in the province of Padua.

## Notes

[1] The author of *Abstract, The Birth of a New Drawing Academy in Venice* and *Conclusions* is Cosimo Monteleone; the author of *3D Reconstruction of the Farsetti's Drawing Academy* is Lorenzo Merlo; the author of *The Farsetti Collection: Digital Survey and Exhibition Criteria* is Eric Genevois.

[2] *Inventario di tutte le statue, busti, modelli, bassirilievi e quadri della galleria Farsetti*. Biblioteca Universitaria di Padova, MS. 1997.

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