

Designed Spaces and Constructed Spaces. The Curtain of the Court Theatre and its Analogies with the Royal Palace of Caserta

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Abstract. This article focuses on research carried out on a little known feature of the Royal Palace of Caserta. The study analyses the perspective image on the large piece of fabric which was originally used as the curtain in the Court Theatre of the palace. The aim was to reconstruct the space portrayed on the curtain and its spatial and symbolic relationships with the constructed space of the Royal Palace.

Key Words: perspective, reconstruction, Royal Palace of Caserta, Royal Theatre in Caserta

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1. Introduction

The Royal Palace of Caserta was built by CHARLES III (CHARLES VII of Naples) who was struck by the beauty of the surrounding countryside and was searching for a suitably prestigious government building for Naples, the capital of his kingdom. He wanted to build a palace that would rival the grandeur of the French palace of Versailles.

As is well-known, the king commissioned the architect-engineer Luigi VANVITELLI to undertake the project. Not only was VANVITELLI asked to design the palace but also the park and the layout of the surrounding urban area whose water supply was to be ensured by a new aqueduct which reached the complex of San Leucio. The new palace was supposed to symbolise the new Bourbon state and to project an image of power and grandeur, as well as being efficient and rational.

The palace comprises various structures but this article focuses on the interesting case of the Court Theatre which was opened in 1769. It has a horseshoe plan and five tiers of boxes decorated with fillets of pilasters from twelve columns taken from the Temple of Serapis in Pozzuoli. Acknowledged by experts to be one of the most outstanding examples of theatre

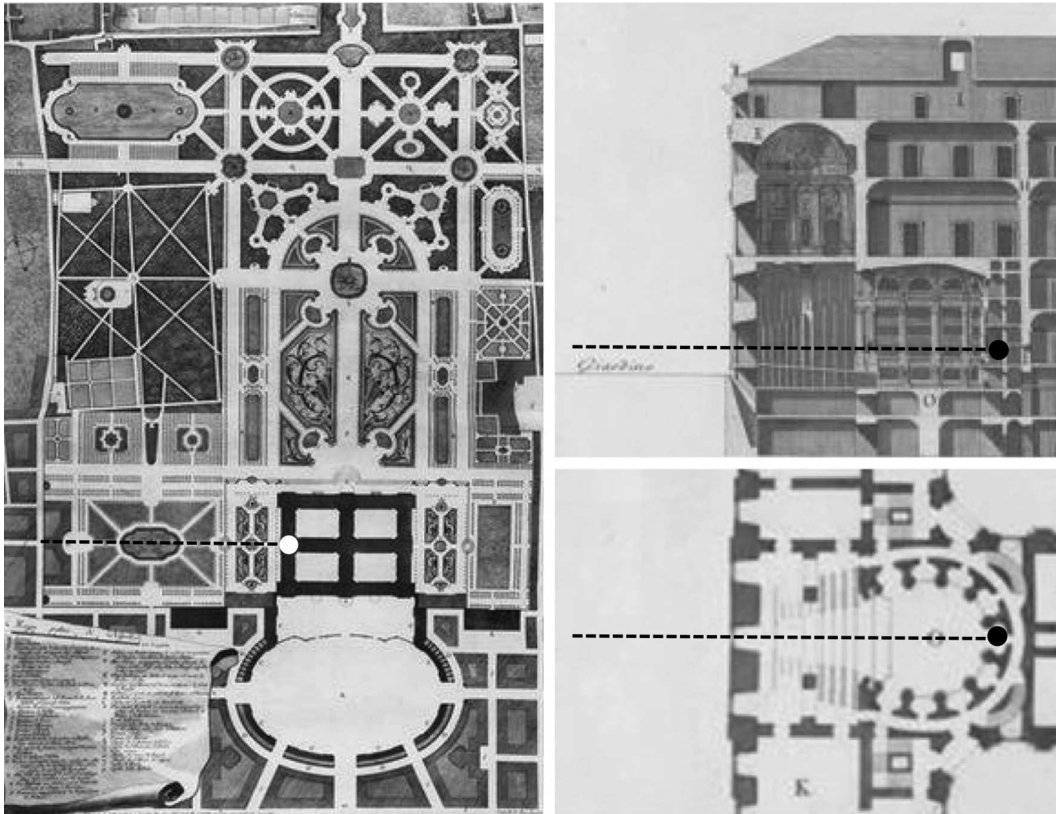


Figure 1: Royal Site in Caserta. Plan of the Palace and Garden.
Plan and section of the Court Theatre.

architecture, the construction of the Court Theatre is intricately linked to the history of the palace in which it is incorporated. The entire building reflects the close attention paid by VANVITELLI to its construction and this is also displayed in the theatre. Besides frequently attending performances, he often took part in the staging preparations. VANVITELLI's numerous set designs demonstrate the immense care he took in preparing them and display the same meticulousness found in his architecture [8].

To reinforce the relationship between constructed space and the surrounding countryside, VANVITELLI devised a way of combining the backdrop with the area outside the theatre: the stage, which is almost as large as the theatre itself, culminates in a large gateway that looks out onto the side garden of the Royal Palace, creating a spectacular effect. The attention to detail shows the care taken by VANVITELLI when studying spaces and incorporating the natural world into works of architecture (Figure 1).

VANVITELLI personally supervised all the technical aspects of the construction of the theatre, including the problems related to building the vaulted roof and the large proscenium arch, as well as the decoration of the large theatre. Antonio JOLI was only required to prepare the stage setting by designing and building six variations as well as creating the stage machinery. The stage-setting that was eventually built differed from the version illustrated in the drawings in the "*Dichiarazione*" [14] and no details of it are contained in the plate of the Stalls by SANCIO. Indeed, an inventory compiled in 1846 by Fortunato QUÉRIAU records the existence of 16 devices known as '*telari*' (for moving the wings) for each side of the stage as well as a series of other mechanisms designed to meet the requirements of the performance, the stage lighting and the creation of special effects using the same light source. The stage-



Figure 2: Royal Theatre in Caserta: Shot/Countershot. From the royal box to the stage; from the stage to the stall area (photo by Luca CANONICI).

setting was completed by the large piece of fabric that can be identified as a curtain (Figure 2). The stage curtain has no attribution in recent historical sources and may, according to some scholars, be the work of Girolamo Starace FRANCHIS who was already active at the Bourbon court in Caserta. The stage curtain, which is the subject of this article, portrays an urban scene shown at two levels (Figure 3). The upper part portrays an open area enclosed by a semicircular colonnade that ends in a shrine with a classical pronaos, while the lower part shows a large double staircase with balustrades, of which only one is clearly visible. The scene also features other figures and groups of sculptures [3].

2. The cultural context

The layout of the perspective scene portrayed on the curtain corresponds fully to the principles of the period and other contemporary examples. The history of methods of representation reveals the significant influence of the BIBIENA family on the innovative use of perspective during the eighteenth century. Even KEMP [7] recognises that the final phase of Italian perspective painting cannot ignore the innovative contribution of the BIBIENA family of whom at least eight members chose to specialise in stage design. Ferdinando Galli BIBIENA, the founder of the family line, trained at the Accademia Clementina, an academy that produced many stage designers and illusionists. BIBIENA wrote a treatise on the subject of stage design and perspective entitled *“Paradossi per praticare la prospettiva senza saperla”*. The work introduced significant innovations both in purely geometric terms and in terms of architectural design. The major new feature introduced by the work was *‘angled perspective’ (scena per angolo)* (Figure 4) which was a real innovation compared to existing models, and the approaches to perspective used until then which had been highly symmetrical and regular [10].

In this solution, which was subsequently drawn on by Filippo JUVARRA and other stage

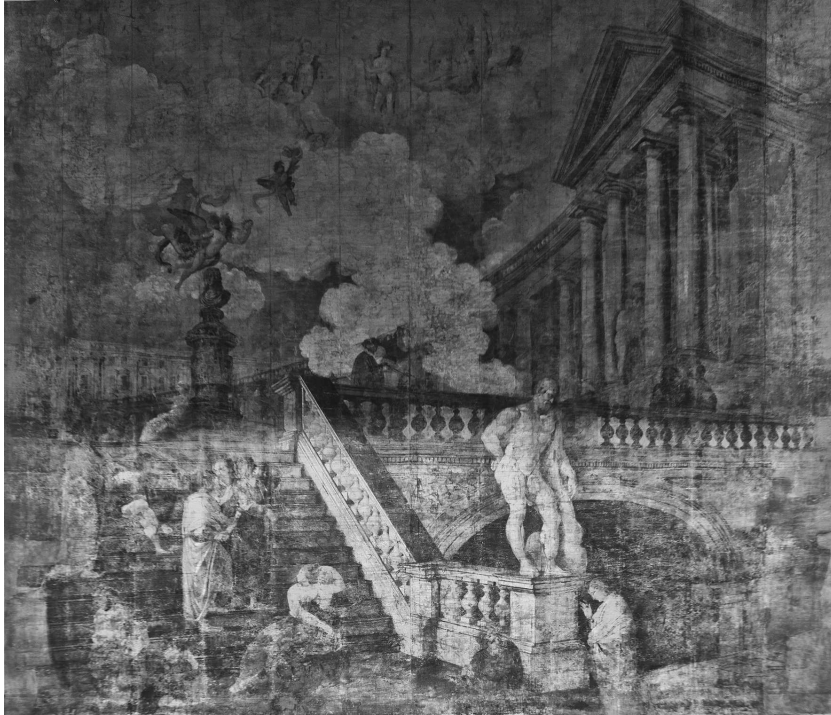


Figure 3: Royal Theatre in Caserta: the curtain (photo by Luca CANONICI).

designers, the vanishing point was placed at the edges or even outside the perspective scenery, so that it was hidden from the view of the audience, in a different position from the central vanishing point of classical tradition, thus ensuring a more dynamic representation of space and a much greater sense of illusion. The illusory effect was further heightened by the bold use of proportions which draw the viewer into the scene being portrayed. The layout of the *'scena per angolo'* involved the arrangement of scenery so that it was portrayed at an angle with regard to the viewer. It was therefore placed in a completely different position with respect to baroque scenery which focused on the point of view of the royal box at the expense of other positions within the auditorium from which the scenery could only be partly seen. The new approach to scenery ensured improved visibility of the image which could be portrayed from different points of view within the theatre and reduced distortions and aberrations in perspective from the stalls and the boxes situated to the sides. The end result proved extremely striking and ensured a greater perception of the illusion of the scenery portrayed, taking the viewer into a dynamic environment. The classical symmetrical layout of symmetry was replaced by a layout that enabled the audience seated on the edge of the auditorium to see what can be seen in a real environment [4,5,9].

3. An analysis of the theatre curtain

The space portrayed and referred to in the large theatre curtain was analysed using perspective correction. Using exclusively graphic techniques, this application of descriptive geometry reconstructs the 'actual form' of the portrayed object using procedures that are the reverse of perspective construction, taking account of the bijective relationship between the drawn space and the real space [6]. The method, which was also applied to photographic images on the basis of the projective similarity between them and perspective, was introduced by

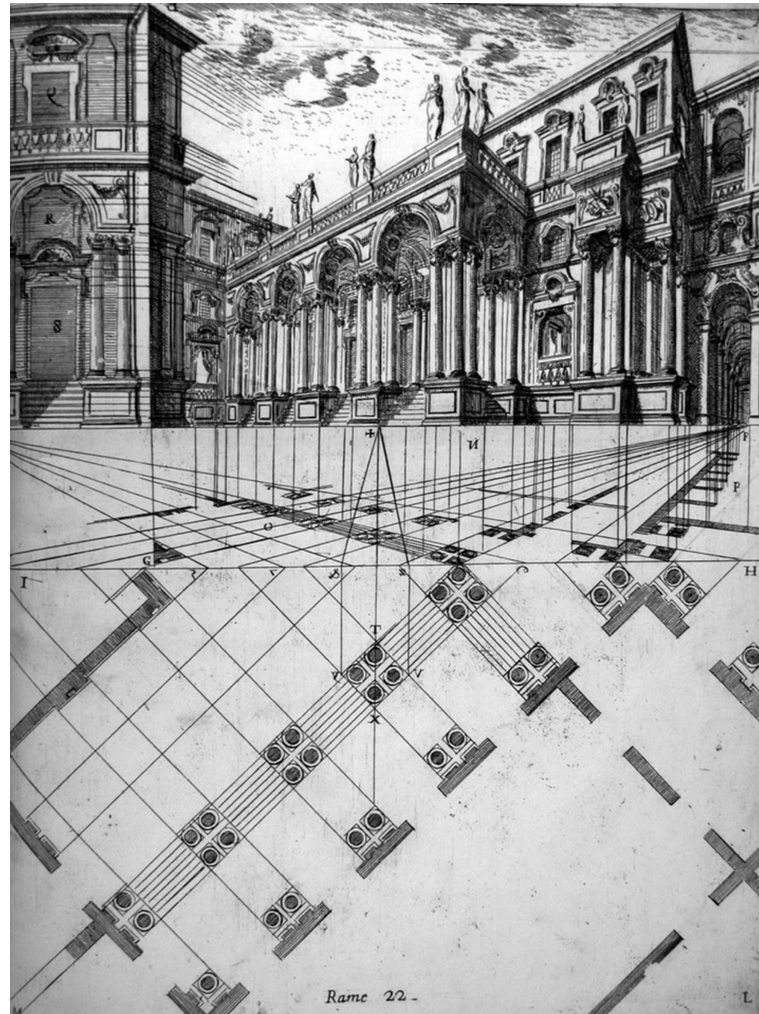


Figure 4: Ferdinando Galli BIBIENA. Scenic design.

the French inventor Colonel Aimé LAUSSE DAT (1819–1907) who initially adopted it for topographic surveys and later applied it successfully to architectural surveying. LAUSSE DAT also wrote the treatise on the subject entitled “*Histoire de l’application de la photographie au levé des plans*”. During the application of the aforementioned method to the image on the theatre curtain, it was possible to identify the artist’s decision to use two points of perspective, one for the enclosed semicircular space with the columns and another for the system of staircases situated below it.

For both points of reference, the main point of the representation is placed on the right-hand edge of the image, almost on the same vertical line. What may vary is the position of the vantage point¹ or the distance of the vantage points from the framework of the perspective representation. Assuming that the image is a perspective vertical framework, since the representation of the vertical edges is provided by vertical segments which are parallel to each other, the first data to be gathered were the positions of the two main points V_{01} and V_{02} and the main distances d_1 and d_2 which, together with the horizontal line o , constitute the ‘internal orientation’ (Figure 5).

The data made it possible to reconstruct in plan form and in elevation a metric image of

¹i.e., the point of view of the observer inside the theater.

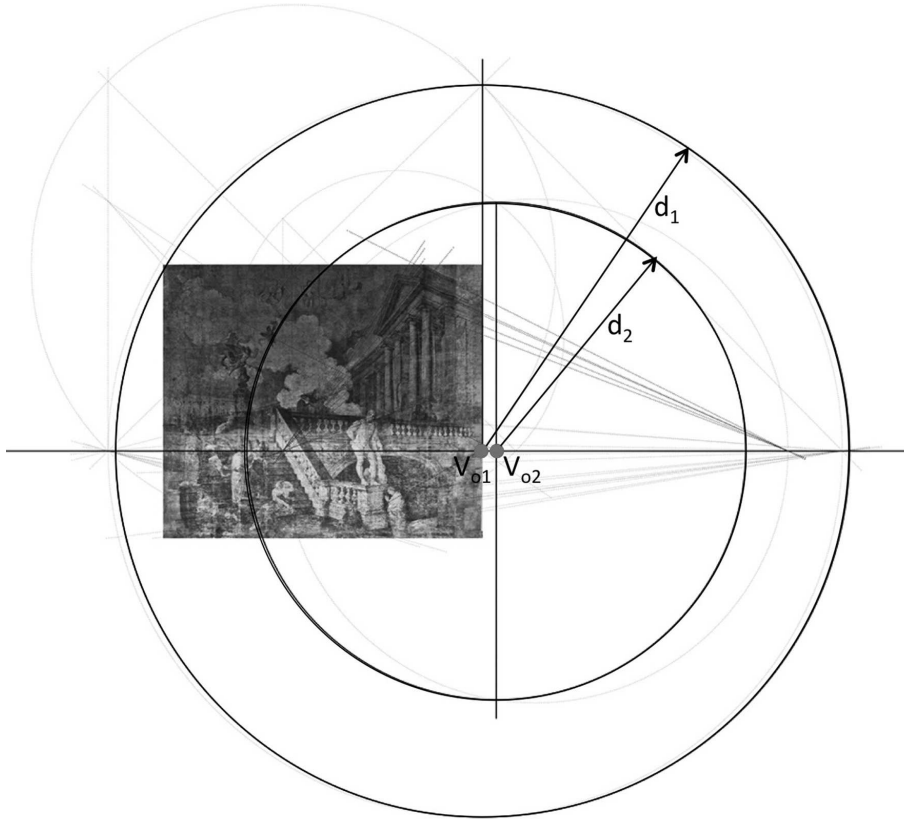


Figure 5: Royal Theater in Caserta: Double perspective reference system in the curtain image representation.

the portrayed space, both at the upper level ‘the terrace’ (Figure 6) and the lower level ‘the staircase’ (Figure 7), and, using reverse perspective procedures, redraw the space according to the method of Mongean projections by assembling the results of the two reverse perspective procedures (Figure 8).

4. The position of viewers

Redrawing was necessary in order to test the assumptions made in this study, namely the view of the curtain from within the Court Theatre and the analogy between the space portrayed in the curtain and several constructed spaces (the grand staircase) of the Royal Palace of Caserta. The way the image of the curtain would have been perceived from within the theatre was assessed by checking the positions of the vantage points of the perspective image. In particular, the assessment of how it would have been perceived was carried out by comparing the current position of the curtain with the position it originally occupied, as the sources suggest, in its role as the theatre curtain [11,12]. Interestingly, this comparison immediately shows that the current position (justifiable due to the logistical requirements of using the stage for a variety of functions) means that the two points of view V'_{1a} and V'_{1b} , with regard to which the perspective image has been constructed, fall on the stage in an extremely disadvantageous position for viewing for all members of the audience (Figure 9) [13].

By contrast, the original position of the piece of fabric as a theatre curtain means that the points of view V'_{2a} and V'_{2b} fall within the theatre and therefore lie in a better position for the

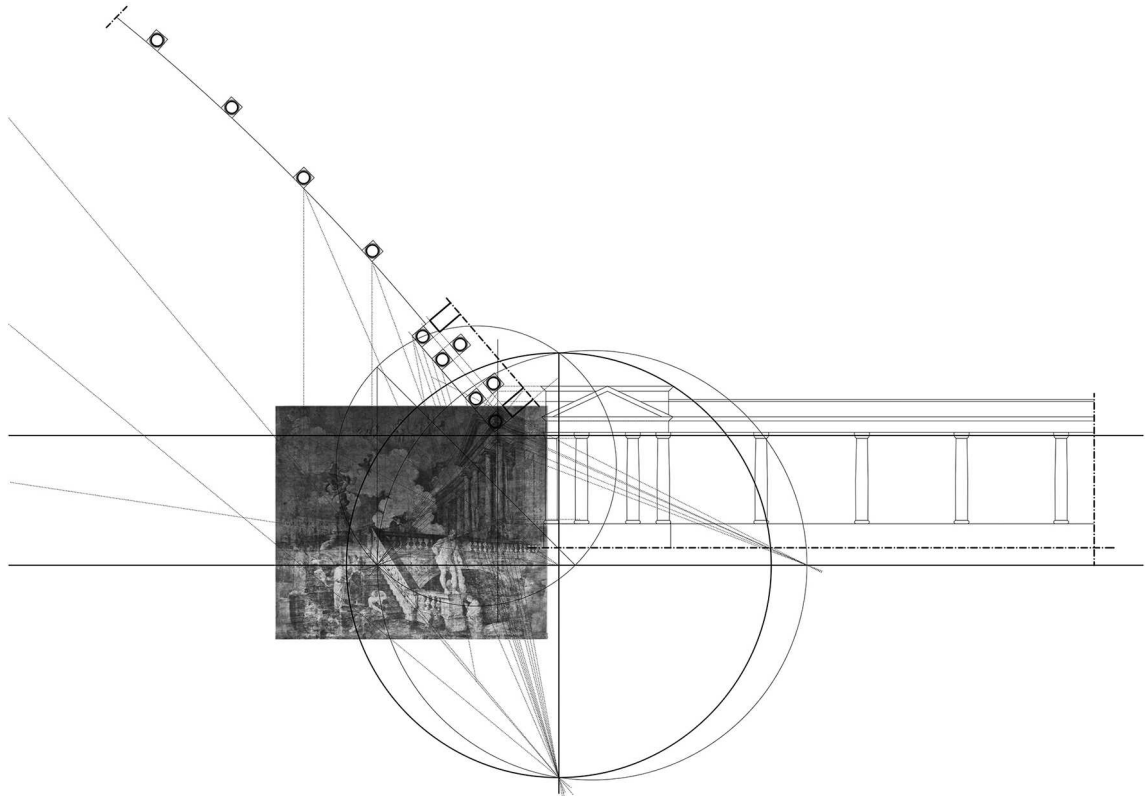


Figure 6: Royal Theater in Caserta: Reconstruction of the painted space of the higher part of the curtain.

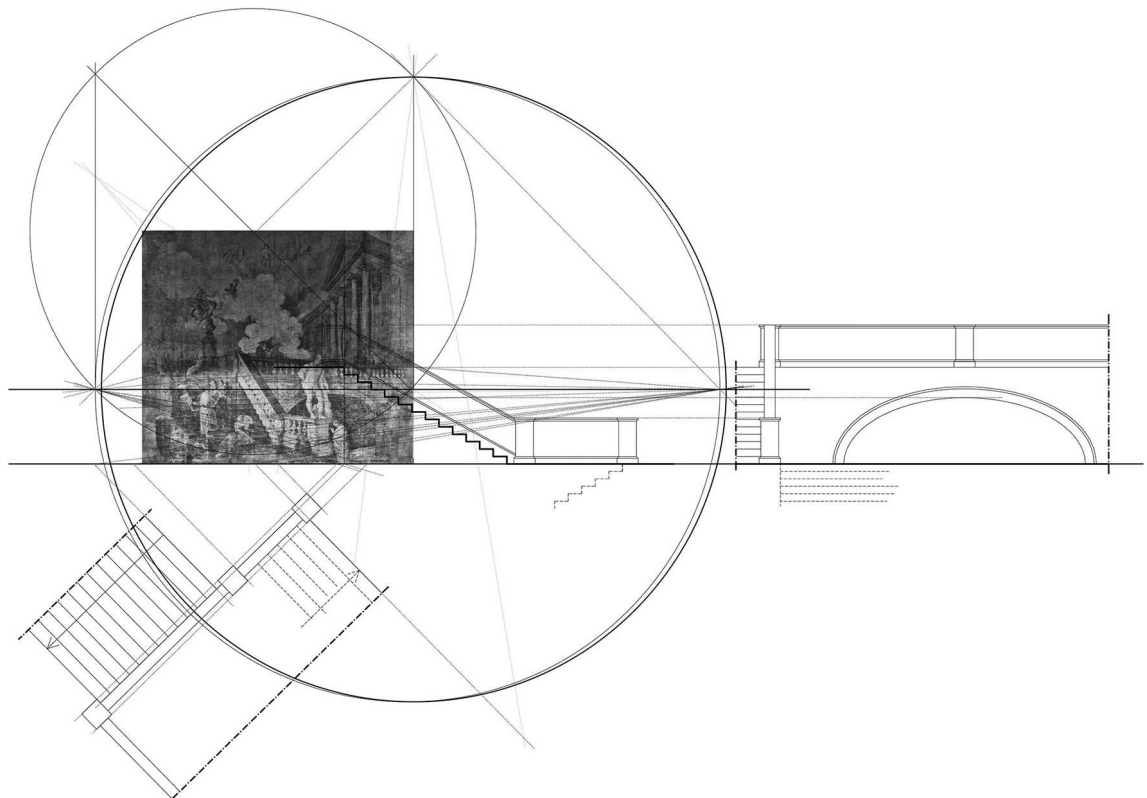


Figure 7: Royal Theater in Caserta: Reconstruction of the painted space of the lower part of the curtain.

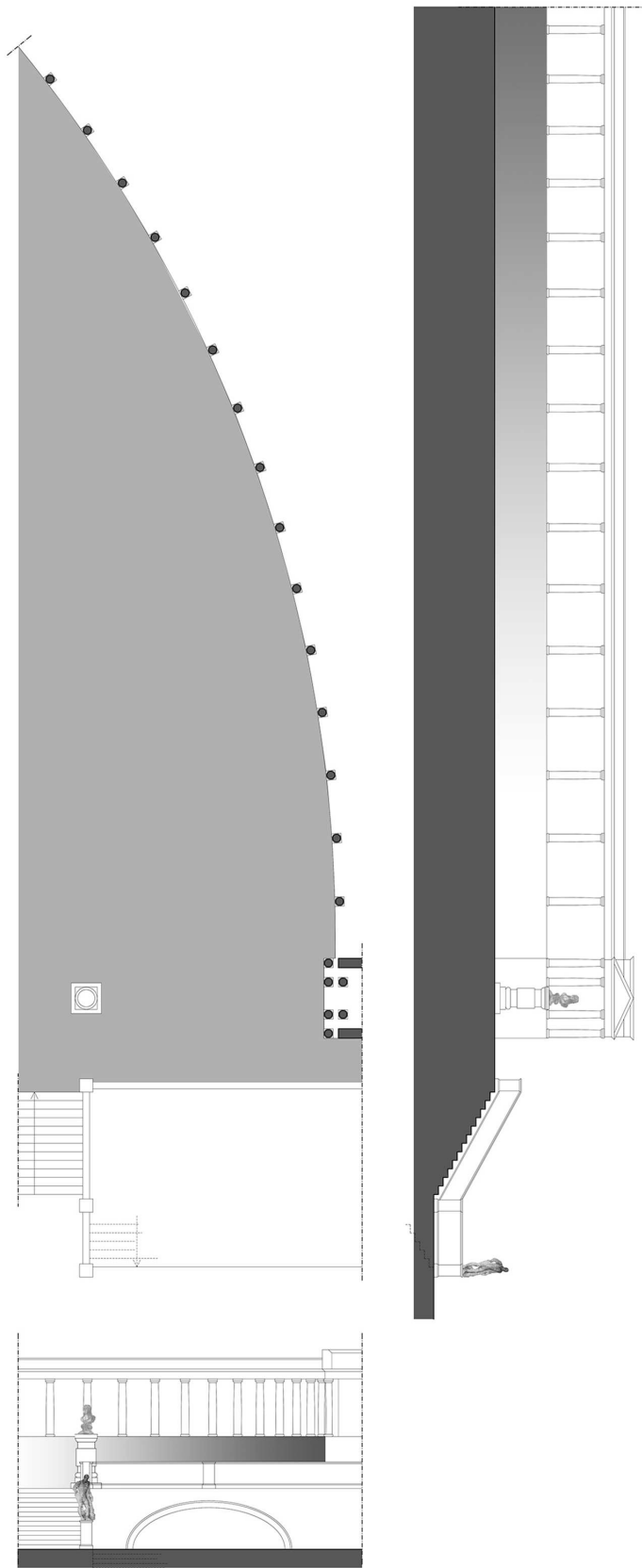


Figure 8: Orthographic projection of the painted space.

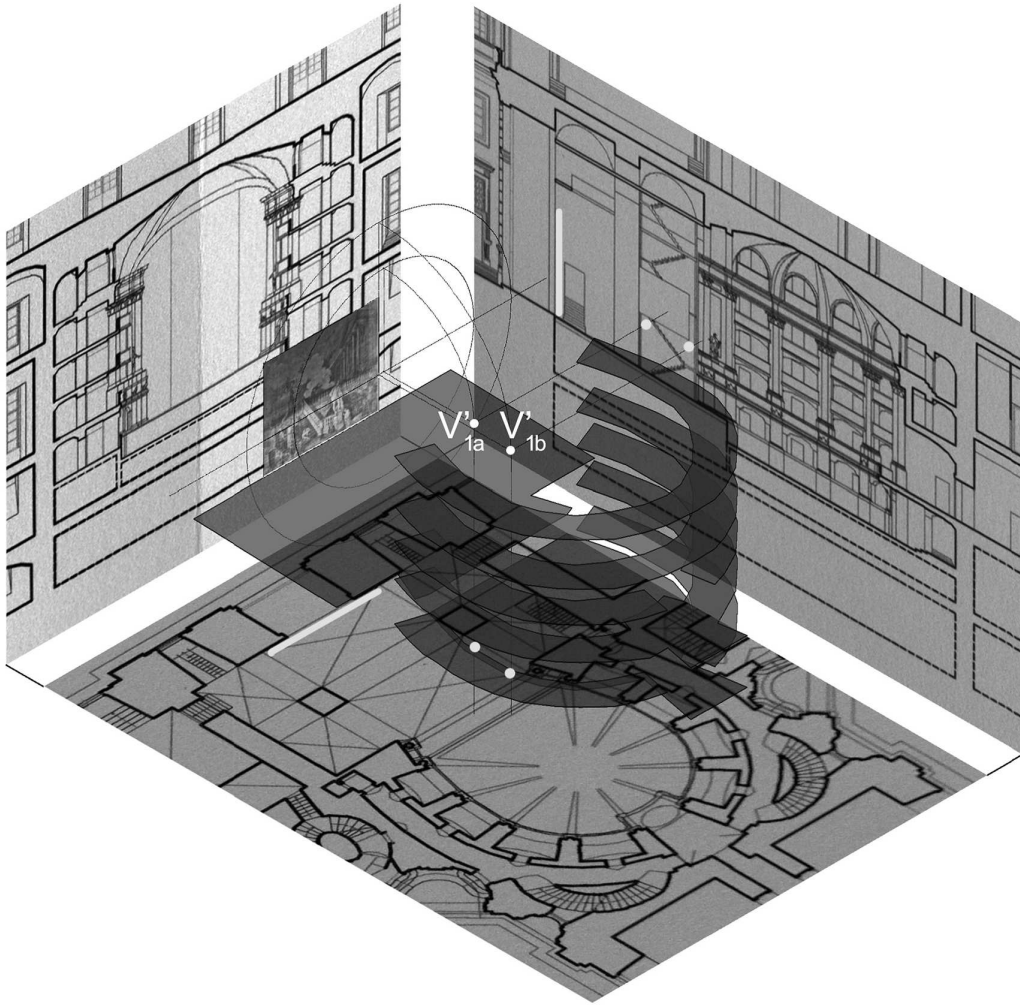


Figure 9: Royal Theater in Caserta: the actual position of the canvas and the two points of view.

audience. As mentioned previously with regard to the angle perspective (*'scena per angolo'*), it is true that a non-frontal and less rigorous approach to the perspective layout enables an improved perception of the stage itself, whether painted or in solid perspective, from almost all the positions of the theatre [2]. However, it should be noted that the horizontal plane of the image of the large curtain of the Court Theatre of the Royal Palace of Caserta lies precisely at the height of the viewers seated at the same level as the royal box, ensuring an excellent view from this vantage point. The perspective layout, designed according to the indications followed by the members of the BIBIENA family for their scenery, thus ensured a dynamic illusionary image through the angled position of the point of view. This enabled spectators seated at the height of the royal box, and therefore the king himself, to see the image of the theatre curtain from an optimal vantage point (Figure 10).

5. Formal and symbolic analogies

It is worth making a few final observations about the statements of several scholars regarding the analogy between the illusory space portrayed in the curtain of the Court Theatre of the

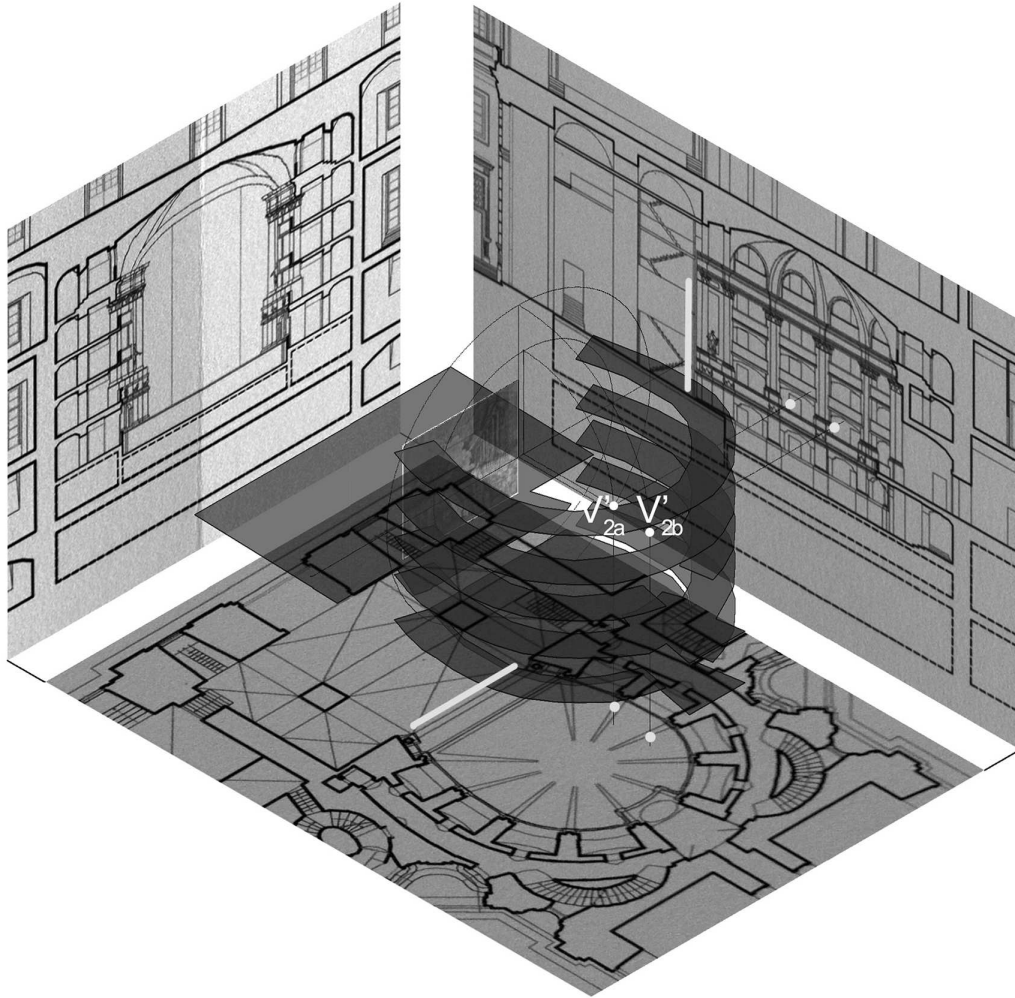


Figure 10: Royal Theater in Caserta: the original position of the canvas and the two points of view.

Royal Palace of Caserta and the constructed space of the palace itself (Figure 11).

In his description of the portrayed image and, in particular, in relation to the presence in the foreground of the figure of Hercules placed on the balustrade of the staircase, also present in the central antechamber of the portico of the palace, CIAPPARELLI states:

“The reproduction of the famous Farnese sculpture is perfectly consistent with Bourbon symbolism. Links have been highlighted between the myth of Hercules and the figure of Charles III (Charles VII of Naples) due to the fact that the sovereign was identified with the mythical hero [...] The entirely original aspect lies in the idea of portraying a stage set alluding to the central antechamber of the palace on the curtain, where the statue of Hercules by Andrea Violani leads to the royal staircase facing the statue of Maestá Regia by Tommaso Solari placed on the first level. Similarly, the figure of Hercules painted on the curtain leads to a grand staircase surmounted by a simulacrum whose features resemble the appearance of Charles III”. [1]

The formal analogy between the image of the scenery, and more specifically the lower part of the curtain, and the grand staircase is supported by the reverse perspectives discussed above: the arch surmounted by the balustrade rises above the first flight of the grand staircase

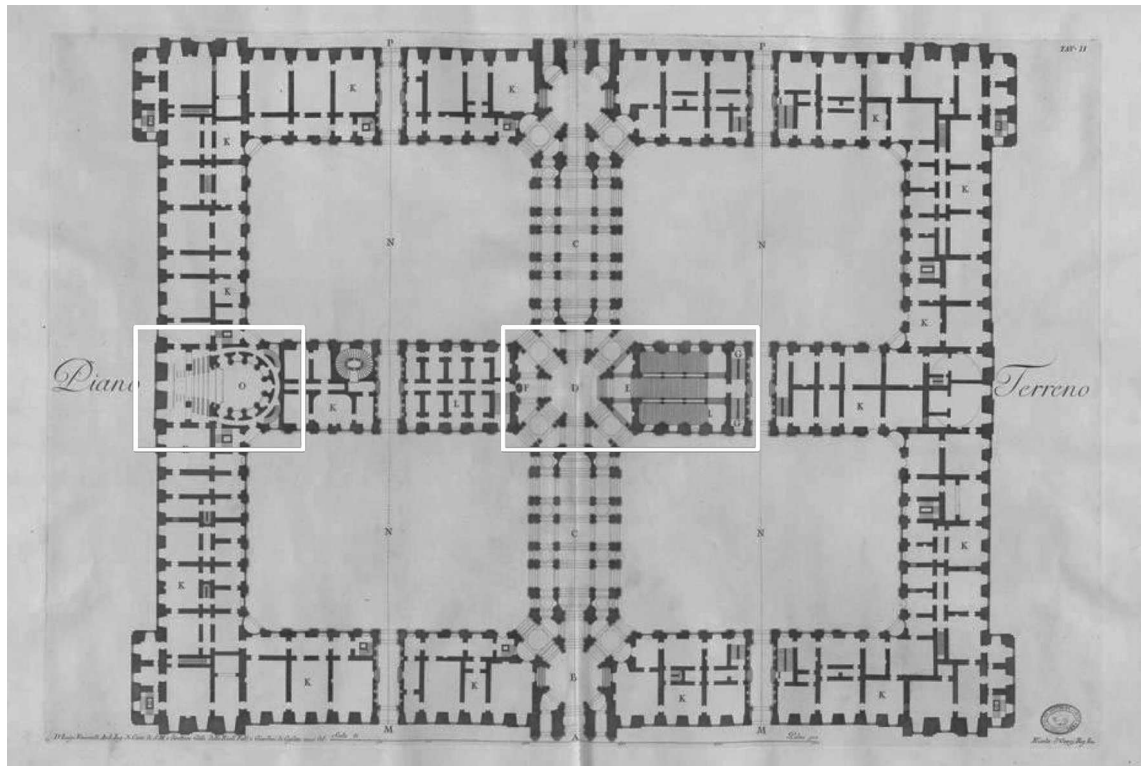


Figure 11: Royal Palace in Caserta: ground floor plan from “*Dichiarazione dei disegni...*” by Luigi VANVITELLI. In the boxes the Court Theater (on the left) and the main stair on the right).

in both cases; the difference lies in the number of flights of which there are two in the perspective image while, in reality, the flight that begins from the antechamber, once it reaches the first landing, splits into two parallel arms that both lead up to the upper antechamber (Figure 12). However, there is a clear analogy between the positions of the sculptures of

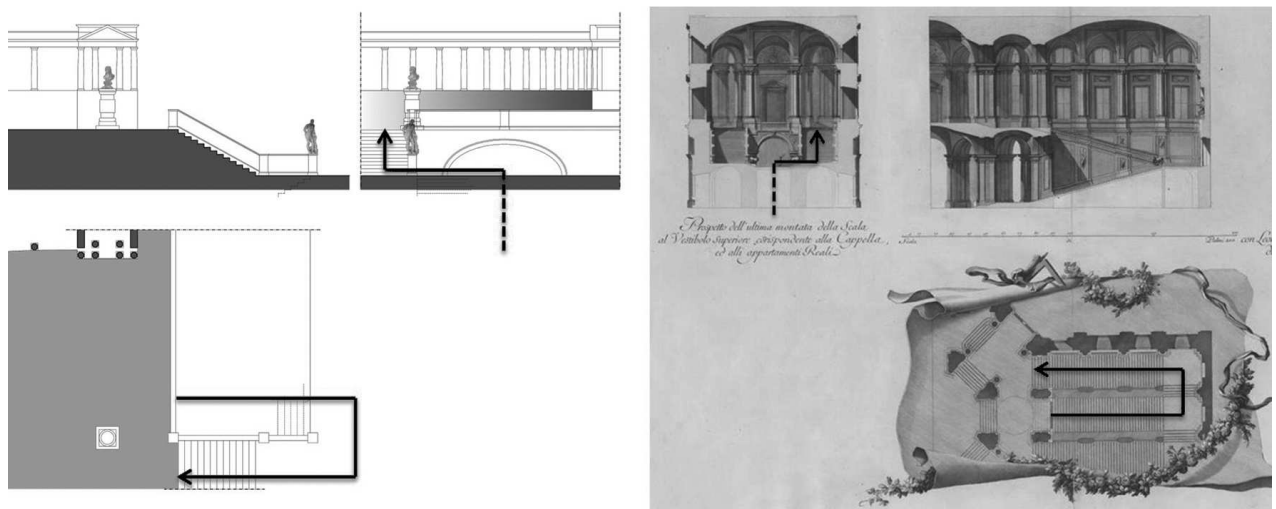


Figure 12: Comparison between the reconstruction of the represented space and the staircase as represented by L. VANVITELLI, “*Dichiarazione dei disegni del Real Palazzo di Caserta*”.

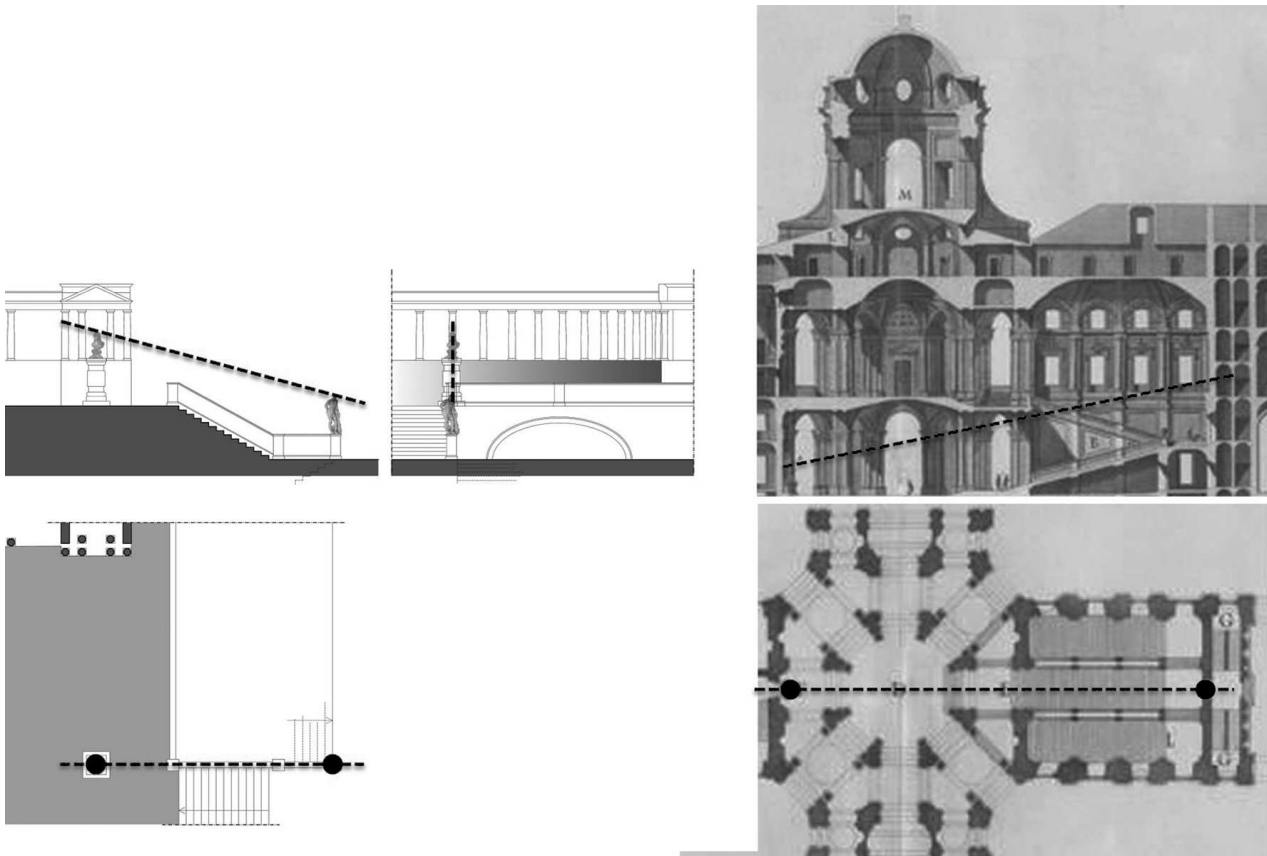


Figure 13: Comparison between the position of CARLO III and Hercules in the reconstruction of the represented space and in real space by L. VANVITELLI, “*Dichiarazione dei disegni*”.

Hercules and the king which, in both cases, are aligned according to the direction of the staircase with the sovereign placed at a higher level than the hero: in the theatre curtain, Hercules is placed on the balustrade separating the two flights while the bust of CHARLES III is situated on the pedestal placed at the intersection of the axis of the balustrade with the pronaos of the semicircular colonnade; in reality, the statues of Hercules and Maesta Regia stand opposite each other, looking at each other, between the long antechamber known as the ‘cannocchiale’ on the ground floor of the palace and the first landing of the royal grand staircase (Figure 13).

It is also worth highlighting the semicircular public space portrayed in the upper part of the curtain. While the representation presents numerous formal and symbolic analogies with the constructed space of the palace, the part of the large public area may refer, formally rather than dimensionally, to the building situated in line with the large window of the Court Theatre itself which lies behind the stage itself and is portrayed in the plate of the “*Dichiarazione*” with the general layout of the palace and the park. The building, which no longer exists or may never have been built, was originally supposed, according to VANVITELLI’s design, to represent the visual and constructed boundary beyond the garden which the king would have admired from the royal box. The theatre curtain may have been the portrayal and anticipation of what lay beyond the constructed boundary.

6. Conclusions

Based on the use of methods of descriptive geometry, this essay is intended to offer a contribution to our knowledge of a lesser known aspect of the Royal Palace of Caserta, included by UNESCO in the World Heritage List. The aim is to shed further light on the theatre curtain and enhance its cultural importance, also in the light of the close ties between science and art during the period when the palace was built.

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