

# Telling Stories from Academia, Design, Construction, and Life – Carlo Scarpa through the Voices of his Collaborators

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**The Italian architect Carlo Scarpa has received attention from scholars and critics throughout the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st Century. Explorations frequently focus on the poetry apparent in his projects, on his strong interest in expanding the local craftsmanship of the Veneto region, and on the tectonic dimensions of his details. Scarpa's work processes and reinterprets several 20th-century tendencies without fitting into any of them exclusively. Research related to Scarpa's design process goes far beyond analyzing his buildings and exhibitions or the archives of his drawings. A substantial amount of knowledge about Carlo Scarpa's design methods is found in the stories of the people who were involved in the process. Personal stories shared by Scarpa himself and experiences published by his collaborators, clients, and contractors document the complex evolution of the continuous formal and constructive research he engaged in. He was eager to find tectonic and material expression of architectural elements not for one specific project but for all of them in parallel. According to the principles of "Storytelling Sociology," the stories provide shared narratives and expanded knowledge about Carlo Scarpa. They could be part of architectural anthropology, the study of the science of humanity around the design and building process. Colleagues and craftspeople can speak to work habits, drawing techniques, and atmospheres in the studio and on the construction site. The stories reveal voices typically not heard or listened to, giving a stage to the contractors, the engineers, or young architects on the team.**

**This paper traces patterns of the design and construction process, identified in stories from academia, practice, and construction focusing on the observations and memories of the people involved. Expanding architecture history and theory research by another mode of representation, storytelling offers a different type of knowledge around Scarpa's work and provides insights into an ongoing generative process that was embedded in everyday context and life.**

## INTRODUCTION

The Italian architect Carlo Scarpa (Fig.1) and his work is known for a close connection to local craftsmanship, bridging history and 20th-century tendencies through layered spaces and expressive details, telling stories about culture, materiality, and the Veneto's building traditions. Scarpa's professional context and the related knowledge archive have always been much more than his buildings, the different archives of his drawings, and the relevant scholarly work. Informal sources and personal stories offer important insights in design process, behavior and conventions around Scarpa's practice. There continues to be a steady production of scholarly work and research projects around Scarpa and his architecture. At the same time, informal, and more personal narrative works are emerging as well, produced by former colleagues, collaborators, clients, and craftspeople. Carlo Scarpa had many collaborators in his studio over the years, frequently graduates from the IUAV in Venice who had worked with him during their thesis studies. A crucial area of knowledge about Scarpa's way of working resides in the stories of these collaborators and contemporaries. The combination of sociology-based resources and traditional scholarship can be a tool for the classroom, allowing empathy and personal interest to combine with the systematic rigor of history/theory scholarship.

The story-based sources are typically autobiographic, recounting places and experiences that are not quantifiable but anecdotal, speaking their own truths.<sup>1</sup> The stories examined below are selected from academia, practice, and construction. The categories provide an organizational framework – at the same time they all unfold simultaneously. The findings confirm that the work evolved as part of a complex set of connections, collaborations, and relationships linked that transcend the different areas of work and life.

As is evident from the records of Carlo Scarpa's studio lectures,<sup>2</sup> he was an avid storyteller himself, creating a conversation in the studio classes that went in a spiral-like fashion from everyday topics and occurrences to historic buildings serving as examples of design ethics, frequently ending with a project Scarpa was currently working on or had recently completed. Conversations with his artisans, clients, and former collaborators bring up vivid narratives surrounding the conception and execution of the work.<sup>3</sup>

Frequently these oral histories and informal archives reveal voices rarely documented in the past; they bring architecture history to life and add relevance to the relationship between designers and architecture, work and life. Stories are a suitable tool for architecture education because they “stick”<sup>4</sup> and “build familiarity and trust.”<sup>5</sup> As described above, the narrative in the stories don’t represent orderly accounts, they are lived autobiographic experiences, at times chaotic and without obvious order. Cohesion emerges in finding parallels in the different stories, and our own context – not necessarily looking for facts but for empathy and understanding.

Former collaborators and artisans have recently published their experiences with Carlo Scarpa – representing personal memories and architectural testimony at once. Knowledge about Carlo Scarpa and the era he worked in is expanded by these recorded lived experiences. This paper examines different examples of informal histories and identifies new knowledge about the design process, construction methods, and collaborative relationships. Included in the accounts of the individuals who joined Scarpa’s journey at times for just one project, at times for decades are descriptions of light, sound, taste, and other perceptions that go beyond the common representation of the design process, structure, and form. This exploration suggests an expanded approach to architecture history/theory that includes context and narratives based on personal stories, allowing a subjective and at times emotional framework to complement the traditional repositories of architecture history.

### STORIES FROM ACADEMIA

In 2010 long-time collaborator Franca Semi who worked with Scarpa in his practice and as an assistant at IUAV (Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia, the architecture school at the University of Venice), published the transcriptions of 21 recordings of Scarpa’s studio lectures and the charcoal sketches that accompanied them. Franca Semi’s transcriptions of the lectures not only give a sense of the nature of topics presented (ranging from light, museography, Frank Lloyd Wright, Antonio Canova, Scarpa’s Gipsoteca in Possagno and the Brion Memorial, architectural elements in general, and, Japanese architecture in particular, and much more) but also offer a clear understanding of the free-flowing narrative, random-seeming topics oscillating between technical instructions around drafting, life lessons, and architecture design at all scales. Most lectures in the design studios were presented with the help of assistants (for example Franca Semi or Guido Pietropoli). They were accompanied by Scarpa producing charcoal sketches supporting his words, illustrating thoughts formed as he was talking, and connecting everyday situations and objects with practical and philosophical lessons in architecture. In the introduction of the book Franca Semi recounts what Scarpa said about sound in one of his lectures (after having described the sound of water in Japanese gardens in detail):

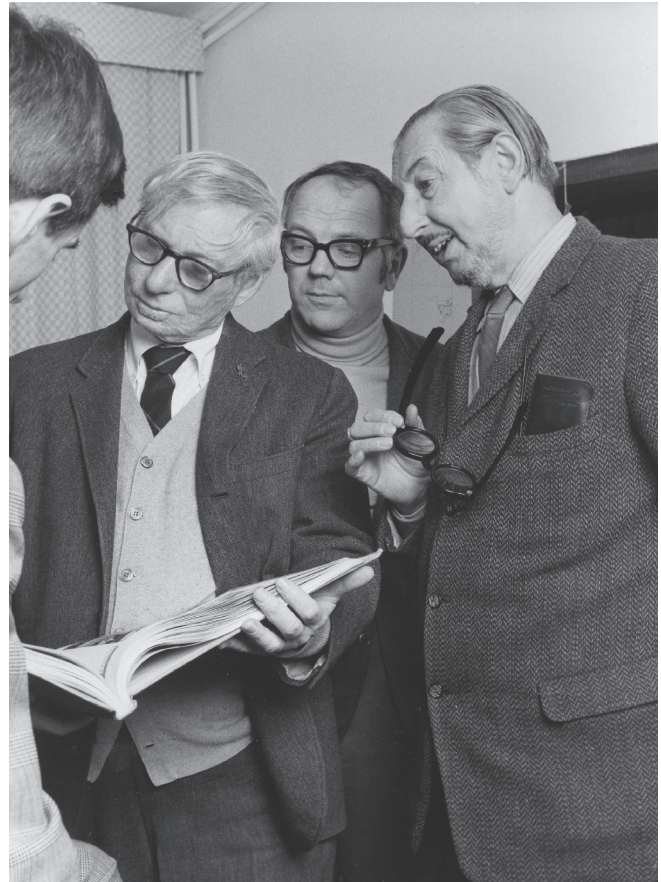


Figure 1. Louis Kahn, Giuseppe Davanzo e Carlo Scarpa in casa di Carlo Scarpa ad Asolo, 1969. Francalb89. License: CC BY 2.0

“Scarpa, who declared – regretfully – not to know much about music, was obviously fascinated by sounds, especially by solitary notes, small and sensible details of known environments, with evidence directly taken from Japan, from his travels.”<sup>6</sup>

– Franca Semi, A Lezione con Carlo Scarpa

One of Scarpa’s favorite sayings was “Nullo dies sine linea”<sup>7</sup> (no day without a line). It seems that he formed his thoughts through drawings – they are a research and communication tool. Marco Frascari describes Scarpa’s drawing process as “the vehicle for his architectural ideas, which are transformed into representations of a continuous meditation on the union of a theory with a practice.”<sup>8</sup>

Giuseppe Barbieri and Giuseppe Mazzariol write about Scarpa’s lectures:

“His lessons were never predictable, growing – like his own thought – out of an image: The happy accents of a detailed, precise, impassioned description of a peach tree in blossom, apprehended in an instant. The road from Asolo to Venice that very morning. The story of a love affair. That tree and the gaps

between branch and branch, the color of the blossom and the space around, in between. The life of forms, the form of forms.”<sup>9</sup>

The importance of expression, material composition, and human interaction is evident in many instances when Scarpa lectures. During a studio lecture on February 18, 1976, Scarpa describes one element of his intervention at the Brion Memorial in San Vito di Altivole, sharing his initial thoughts about the design and placement of the coffins at the site of the grave (Fig.2).

“I had found the idea to create a type of arcosolio – that how it is called in Pre-Christian times, reemerging from the times of the catacombs – therefore an arch that holds an urn that is more important than many others that were forgotten and that turns into a cover, a bridge if you want, for two spouses. One spouse is dead and is in the coffin. The other coffin is still empty. Therefore, there is the arch, with the two spousal urns tilted towards each other and the terrain descends a bit: for a type of flirtation of formal symbolic order (a liberty that one can have sometimes if there are no functional or rational obligations), because I thought that there in the evening they would say: ‘hello Nini, how are you’ [...] But the formal reason..., that means there is a bit of truth in this: I wanted to exaggerate with the plastic dynamism that otherwise would be lacking. They would have been too immobile.”<sup>10</sup>

– Carlo Scarpa, A Lezione con Carlo Scarpa

In the quote above Scarpa explains how he links motifs from architecture history (arcosolio) to human interaction (the emotional relationship of his clients) and to a compositional and expressive intent (dynamism).

## STORIES FROM PRACTICE

As mentioned above, Carlo Scarpa had numerous collaborators over time but mostly ran a very small practice from his residence. The stories from contemporaries who worked with him frequently offer autobiographic information about their relationship to Scarpa and the projects worked on. They also confirm a sequential design process conducted through a specific sequence of drawings.

In 2020 architect Guido Pietropoli, a long-term collaborator of Scarpa published “A Fianco di Carlo Scarpa,”<sup>11</sup> an extensive account of their 10-year lasting work relationship and friendship. He recounts personal moments and professional decision-making. He states: “Carlo Scarpa was an instrument of unimaginable precision: he was able to see things that only after he pointed them out became visible also to us.”<sup>12</sup> Pietropoli’s book – while combining subjective impressions, memories, and facts – shares information about client relationships, inspiration, everyday life, and the architecture profession simultaneously, an empathetic account that goes far beyond critical analysis.

Pietropoli recounts unexpected thematic shifts that characterize the aesthetic research Scarpa conducts. He also tells several stories about encounters with clients, and contractors, outlining important relationships in Scarpa’s career and life. He describes the atmosphere of places of work, negotiation, construction, and life. Describing the way Scarpa’s studio operated he writes: “The studio in Asolo had nothing professional about it: there was no secretary or telephone to answer; from the fall of 1970 until April of the following year, when I left for military service, I was the only collaborator.”<sup>15</sup> Being self-published, and of this personal nature, the book provoked a reaction published by an unnamed critic in the Italian journal *Casabella*. The author points to the fact that author and publisher are one and the same person, calling the author an “orphan of Carlo Scarpa,”<sup>13</sup> using a somewhat disrespectful tone, discounting first-hand experience and confusing a personal account with a work of research. The author of the book review states that “All this unfolds in an alternation of superficial annotations.”<sup>14</sup>

Another voice rarely examined, is the one of the structural engineer. In an interview conducted by Sandro Giordano on June 16, 1983, the structural engineer Carlo Maschietto discusses his working relationship and friendship with Carlo Scarpa. He mentions that they met in Venice in 1926 when Maschietto was a student at the faculty of Engineering in Padova, Italy and Scarpa had just graduated from the *Accademia di Belle Arti* in Venice and was assistant of Guido Cirilli. They met again later when Maschietto began to work as a practitioner. He states that he was consulted especially for complex structural issues and “together we strived to solve them.”<sup>16</sup> [...] He also delineates that “he [Scarpa] did not only see the aesthetic part but was attentive to the statics of the respective structures.”<sup>17</sup> Maschietto continues the interview by describing “the work relationship with Scarpa was interesting and stimulating. We understood each other. [...] Besides the long-term friendship, we were professionally bound by one thread: it was the thread of taste. Seen how mechanical the study of a structure could be, it always allows several solutions: my choices were always very close to the ones selected by Scarpa.”<sup>18</sup>

The examples above provide insights into the design process that resulted in design decisions, possibly expanding what can be learned from precedent studies of the built work. The stories give a human dimension to the designer as a person, their cultural framework, professional life, and everyday experiences, representative not just of one individual, but offering a portrait of their time and contemporaries. The non-linear nature of Scarpa’s design process becomes clear through the stories surrounding conception and construction, steps forward and back revealing the complex inspirations through which the buildings evolved.

In 2016 the *Centro Internazionale di Studi di Architettura Andrea Palladio (CISA)* in Vicenza produced a portrait of Scarpa’s context by interviewing seven architects, four artisans, and one historian all of whom had collaborated with Scarpa during their careers.



Figure 2. Carlo Scarpa, *Arcosolio at Brion Memorial*, San Vito di Altivole, Italy. Anne-Catrin Schultz.

The interviews are available as video recordings and a book publication.<sup>19</sup> These expanded oral histories acknowledge the teamwork involved in Scarpa's buildings, by convention attributed solely to him. The architect Sergio Los defines Scarpa's work as "networked architecture,"<sup>20</sup> meaning that for example, his intervention at Castelvechio improves the legibility of the building and simultaneously improves the legibility of the sculptures and paintings it displays. With his architecture, Scarpa renders the artwork eloquent, for example, the sculptures of Canova in Possagno. Los writes: "As I said many times, in Possagno, his architecture is a critical architecture. Instead of writing criticism, he constructs it as a building that illuminates, also in a literal sense, the quality of the work of Canova."<sup>21</sup> Los also describes Scarpa's practice as "not a simple one,"<sup>22</sup> as it reflected his being a designer, his thinking in figures. Scarpa used "design as a language, with specific references."<sup>23</sup> Los continues to discuss the role of drawings which allowed Scarpa to understand not so much the building he was working on but the place and context he was designing it for and the behaviors of the users. Los also walks the listener through the different phases of a project using the example of the Theater Carlo Fenice in Genoa (unbuilt). He explains how different types of paper and drawing tools were used for different phases and levels of detail, clearly indicating how close to completion a project was through the type of paper, ink, and type of representation. According to Los construction

was just another phase of the ongoing "figurative reflection", executed at a 1:1 scale in collaboration with the craftspeople.<sup>24</sup> He confirms that Scarpa was very interested in technological questions and building systems and that compositionally Scarpa aimed at an "unbalanced balance."<sup>25</sup>

Guido Pietropoli also was interviewed in this project and presented many anecdotes about different projects. He recalls a conversation he had with Scarpa about the entrance of the apartment building *Contrà del Quartiere* in Vicenza (Fig.3) and his idea of using sandblasted wood which she questioned as a Disney-like treatment faking an age that wasn't accurate. He responded that he expected it to turn out fine if it was the thing he liked and wanted to do.<sup>26</sup>

Most of the stories coming from the context of practice point to the absence of a rigid theoretical framework, individual projects seem to be part of one larger design exploration that was a well-informed but subjective journey traveled by Scarpa. There appears to be a clear routine related to drawing conventions and representation, outlining the phases of design and construction. Collaborators seem to agree that Scarpa was extremely educated about culture and art. Giuseppe Tommasi calls it a "very broad cultural background," stating that Scarpa "read extensively, immersed himself in poetry, and had omnivorous tastes."<sup>27</sup>



Figure 3. Carlo Scarpa, *Apartment Building Contrà del Quartiere*, Vicenza, Italy. Anne-Catrin Schultz.

Architect Valter Rossetto noted that Scarpa had “vast culture,”<sup>28</sup> meaning that he was extremely well informed about culture.

### STORIES FROM CONSTRUCTION

From the stories shared it becomes obvious that academia, practice, and construction evolved concurrently, and all were a place of Scarpa’s continuous research for the right expression and technical solution. Several personal testimonies explain that the aesthetic and tectonic expression in his work is the result of an ongoing exploration that unites all elements, construction, program, users, structure, and culture. As the construction phase simply represents an extension of the continuous research, iterations of design and execution continued to take place during the building phase.

The architect Roberto Calandra describes the way the exhibition *Antonello da Messina e la pittura del ‘400 in Sicilia* at Palazzo Zanca in Messina in 1953 was planned and executed in a very short period of time: “[...] we didn’t have detailed drawings due to time constraints and project organization. For example, the blacksmiths created the supports for the double-faced crosses or the frame that held up the roof of Antonello’s hall based on impromptu sketches and on-site instructions given directly at the construction site.”<sup>29</sup> He also shares observations about

Scarpa’s personality: “With this exhibition, Carlo gained confidence, and his evident shyness, which manifested itself in disproportionate forms of familiarity, was partially attenuated [...] But Carlo was a man who made everyone love him, whether it was representatives of political or administrative power, craftsmen, or colleagues.”<sup>30</sup> Asked about the short timeframes for the Sicilian projects (it is common knowledge that Scarpa’s projects could take a long time to complete), Calandra explains that when working on details Carlo Scarpa departed from past solutions, just to expand them and adapt them to the specific projects at hand.<sup>31</sup> Metal artisan Francesco Zanon (Fig.4) speaks in the interview for the CISA project about his early interactions with Carlo Scarpa (during the Olivetti Store project). At the time of the first encounters, he was 14 or 15 years old, at the time of the video he and his brother had continued his father’s metal shop for 55 years. He recalls Scarpa’s frequent visits to the shop and an intensified collaboration between him, his brother Paolo and Scarpa during the work for the Querini Stampalia Foundation. He describes how closely they worked together and how enjoyable and instructive it was for all.<sup>32</sup> Plasterer Eugenio di Luigi (Fig.5) reveals insights about how colors were chosen for plasterwork:

“Colors? He would choose them from paper samples: they were beautiful, and he always used strong colors. Later on, we adopted a book as a reference, a book by Rothko.

Magnificent, it was fun to work in that way; the workers would work at any time of the day and night, they dedicated themselves to the work because they found satisfaction in it and appreciated the result, which was very beautiful. [...]

Yes, he would oversee us. We would make the samples and then he would say, “Go ahead!” and then he would come to see. He was unique as a supervisor because he gave us satisfaction: we were satisfied with what we were doing, which was very important.”<sup>33</sup>

– Eugenio de Luigi, *Voci Su Carlo Scarpa*

## CONCLUSION

At times lacking objectivity and proof, the stories around an architect’s professional and personal relationships, successes, and failures, nevertheless produce a well-rounded picture of the community involved and a complete understanding of the work in its context and time. Sharing records of lived experiences in the classroom in addition to examining published research, illustrates the complexity of the design process and the collaborative nature of architecture and design. The stories give insights into failures, contradictions, and the tiring process of collaborative practice and building. The narrative lines encountered in the stories can serve as a teaching tool that represents the architects not as singular geniuses but as members of their cultural, professional, and social context. The authorial strategies around storytelling suggest the sorting and ordering of experiential accounts to offer a coherent reading of design approaches or collaborative methods. T

Carlo Scarpa’s career was shaped not only by being an architect, but also by being a teacher, an industrial designer, and an exhibition designer. Teaching the audience of his museums and exhibitions about what was shown through the architecture was part of Scarpa’s pedagogical approach to design. Despite revolving around the professional life of one specific architect, the stories examined stand for design customs common at the time – in practice and teaching. The rich resource of stories and narratives that accompany Carlo Scarpa’s practice and pedagogy confirm storytelling as a teaching tool AND a design principle. The diverse narratives illustrate design pedagogy that can connect seemingly contradictory frameworks of vernacular and contemporary (modern), stemming from the everyday and beyond. The approach serves as a model to suggest that architecture archives should be expanded by diligently preserving the stories of teams and contemporaries, thus creating more complete records to learn from.



Voci su Carlo Scarpa: Eugenio De Luigi

PalladioMuseum

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Figure 4. *Voci su Carlo Scarpa: Eugenio de Luigi.* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OeLXUUK1LAY>.



Voci su Carlo Scarpa: Francesco e Paolo Zanon

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Figure 5. *Voci su Carlo Scarpa, Francesco e Paolo Zanon.* [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1kAE\\_m5KNM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1kAE_m5KNM).

## ENDNOTES

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2. Franca Semi, *A Lezione con Carlo Scarpa* (Venezia: Cicero Editore, 2010).
3. The author interviewed several collaborators who have since published their stories or been featured in documentaries.
4. Vanessa Boris, “What Makes Storytelling so Effective for Learning?,” [harvardbusiness.org](https://www.harvardbusiness.org/what-makes-storytelling-so-effective-for-learning/#:~:text=Storytelling%20also%20helps%20with%20learning,derived%20from%20facts%20and%20figures), December 20, 2017, <https://www.harvardbusiness.org/what-makes-storytelling-so-effective-for-learning/#:~:text=Storytelling%20also%20helps%20with%20learning,derived%20from%20facts%20and%20figures>.
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6. Franca Semi, *A Lezione con Carlo Scarpa* (Venezia: Cicero Editore, 2010) 20 and 21.
7. Marco Frascari, “The Body and Architecture in the Drawings of Carlo Scarpa,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* No. 14 (Autumn, 1987): 126.
8. Marco Frascari, “The Body and Architecture in the Drawings of Carlo Scarpa,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 14 (Autumn, 1987): 123-142.
9. Francesco Dal Co and Giuseppe Mazzariol, *Carlo Scarpa: The Complete Works* (New York: Rizzoli, 1985), 14.
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11. Guido Pietropoli, *A Fianco di Carlo Scarpa : Gli Ultimi Dieci Anni Di Vita Di Carlo Scarpa Raccontati Da Un Suo Stretto Collaboratore* (2020).
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13. “Guido Pietropoli – A Fianco di Carlo Scarpa”, *Casabella* 919, March 2021: 93.
14. “Guido Pietropoli – A Fianco di Carlo Scarpa”, *Casabella* 919, March 2021: 93.
15. Guido Pietropoli, *A fianco di Carlo Scarpa*, 2020, 93.
16. Sandro Giordano, *Il mestiere di Carlo Scarpa: collaborator, artigiani e committenti*. Doctorate Thesis, IUAV: Istituto Universitario di architettura di Venezia, 1984, 25. Translation by the author.
17. Sandro Giordano, *Il mestiere di Carlo Scarpa: collaborator, artigiani e committenti*, 25. Translation by the author.
18. Sandro Giordano, *Il mestiere di Carlo Scarpa: collaborator, artigiani e committenti*, 26. Translation by the author.
19. Ilaria Abbondandolo and Elisabetta Mechelato, *Voci su Scarpa*, (Venice: Marsilio, 2016).
20. Ilaria Abbondandolo and Elisabetta Mechelato, *Voci su Scarpa*, 92.
21. Ilaria Abbondandolo and Elisabetta Mechelato, *Voci su Scarpa*, 92.
22. Ilaria Abbondandolo and Elisabetta Mechelato, *Voci su Scarpa*, 85.
23. Ilaria Abbondandolo and Elisabetta Mechelato, *Voci su Scarpa*, 96.
24. Ilaria Abbondandolo and Elisabetta Mechelato, *Voci su Scarpa*, 85.
25. Ilaria Abbondandolo and Elisabetta Mechelato, *Voci su Scarpa*, 102.
26. Ilaria Abbondandolo and Elisabetta Mechelato, *Voci su Scarpa*, (Venice: Marsilio, 2016), 92.
27. Ilaria Abbondandolo and Elisabetta Mechelato, *Voci su Scarpa*, 162.
28. Ilaria Abbondandolo and Elisabetta Mechelato, *Voci su Scarpa*, 169.
29. Ilaria Abbondandolo and Elisabetta Mechelato, *Voci su Scarpa*, 36.
30. Ilaria Abbondandolo and Elisabetta Mechelato, *Voci su Scarpa*, 40.
31. Ilaria Abbondandolo and Elisabetta Mechelato, *Voci su Scarpa*, 45.
32. “Voci Su Carlo Scarpa-Francesco e Paolo Zanon,” Venezia, 22 Marzo 2010, Intervista di Alba Di Lieto, Video, 1:41, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1kAE\\_m5KNM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1kAE_m5KNM).
33. Ilaria Abbondandolo and Elisabetta Mechelato, *Voci su Scarpa*, 184.