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MEDICI VILLAS AND GARDENS IN TUSCANY

“The villa stood on the top of a hill. From the terrace, in front of it you had a magnificent view of Florence; behind was an old garden, with few flowers, but with fine trees, hedges of cut box, grass walks and an artificial grotto in which water cascaded with a cool, silvery sound from a cornucopia.”

Up at the Villa, William Somerset Maugham

The villa described by Maugham in the incipit of his novel is fictitious, but condenses various characteristics of the residences of the Medicis, in the surroundings of Florence and around Tuscany: the isolated position, which is almost always panoramic; “the dialogue” with an idyllic nature, in which human genius has followed the harmonious expressiveness of the land and the taste for an exuberant and refined decoration. Built between the 15th and the 17th centuries, the 14 marvels (12 villas and two gardens) which form this serial site marked a clean break from the models of the farms owned by the nobility and the castles of the feudal heritage, representing not only one of the most brilliant testimonies of the Medici era, but also the emblem of renewed principles and values which then spread through the ruling classes of the whole of Europe.



SERIAL CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

UNESCO DOSSIER: 175

PLACE OF INSCRIPTION: PHNOM PENH, CAMBODIA

YEAR OF INSCRIPTION: 2013

CRITERIA FOR SELECTION: The Medici villas represent the expression of the new political, economic and aesthetic ambitions which, from the end of the Middle Ages, and more completely in the Renaissance, took shape in sumptuous buildings in which to practise the arts, pursue knowledge and dedicate oneself to leisure activities. The solutions adopted by the Medicis were innovative in form and function, capable of influencing the patronage of the arts all over Europe and, in relation with the rural environment, of developing a particular relationship with the landscape.





“By a single movement, the whole grotto can be filled with water, and all the seats will squirt water over your breech; then, as you flee from the grotto and run up the staircase into the mansion on the other side, a pleasant trick will make the water stream from two of the steps in a thousand jets which drench you till you reach the top. The beauty and splendour of this place cannot be set forth properly by details.”

In his *Journey to Italy*, the philosopher Montaigne fell desperately in love with the grottoes of the Garden of Pratolino. Add the visit to three other Medici villas to this one and you will have composed the perfect tour.

The villa built by the visionary Francis I de' Medici in 1568 was demolished in the early 19th century; the gardens, famous all over Europe for their water organs, the machines that simulated birdsong, the theatres of automata moved by water power and the fountains, are no longer as they used to be.

However, the **1 Medici Garden of Pratolino** is still a splendid place for an excursion, with its fountains and grottoes, woods and the 99 species of fauna, but above all the Apennine Colossus by Giambologna, one of the most amazing works by the Flemish sculptor. And still on the subject of astonishing works, it is compulsory to mention the courtyard of

2 Medici Villa La Petraia, frescoed by Volterrano in the 17th century. The cycle celebrating the Medici dynasty is in itself superb, while the roof in iron and cement, made in 1872 to transform the space into a ballroom, makes it unusual and fascinating. The building is well known for having hosted the Savoy family (Victor Emanuel used to stay there often), as well as the Medici and the Lorena families, and for the presence of the lunettes of Giusto Utens, an extraordinary document which illustrated with calligraphic precision 14 Medici villas at the beginning of the 17th century. Not far away there is the **3 Medici Villa of Castello**. It was for this villa that Botticelli painted his most iconic

masterpieces. Today its sumptuous rooms are almost always inaccessible (the building is the seat of the Accademia della Crusca), but the terraced garden is a fine consolation, thanks to the multitude of fountains, the collections of rare citrus trees and the bizarre Grotto of Animals. The last place is the **4 Medici Villa of Poggio Imperiale**, which reached the height of its splendour in the 18th century, when the Lorena family chose it as their official residence, alongside Palazzo Pitti. The roofed courtyards and the large ballroom are the most picturesque rooms, but during your visit, you will notice that refinement is everywhere: in the painted decorations, in the sculptures and in the furniture.



MAP



LOVE, BEAUTY AND HOLIDAYS

“When we say ‘love’, understand ‘the desire for beauty’. For this is the definition of love among all Philosophers. Beauty is a certain grace which most often originates above all in a harmony of several things.”

Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love, Marsilio Ficino

There is one villa, amongst those of the UNESCO serial site, in which an epochal turning-point was given to the history of philosophy: the Medici Villa of Careggi, the third of the residences which belonged to the Medicis in order of time

and the closest to the city. The Neo-Platonic Academy, was founded in 1462 by Marsilio Ficino, appointed by Cosimo de' Medici, bringing together the greatest intellectuals of the time, from Pico della Mirandola to Nicola Cusano, from Agnolo Poliziano to Leon Battista Alberti. Humanism flourished here, exalting human dignity, structuring the bases for a scientific approach to nature and to the mind, rediscovering the value of Greek and Latin classicism. This way, the beauty which Marsilio Ficino pays tribute to in his homage, in the most famous literary manifestation of the spirit of the time, is also the one that is opened up to the visitors of the building, with its sumptuous frescoes, the trapezoid courtyard, the loggia, the study of Lorenzo the Magnificent (where he died) and the large park full of exotic plants and tall trees.



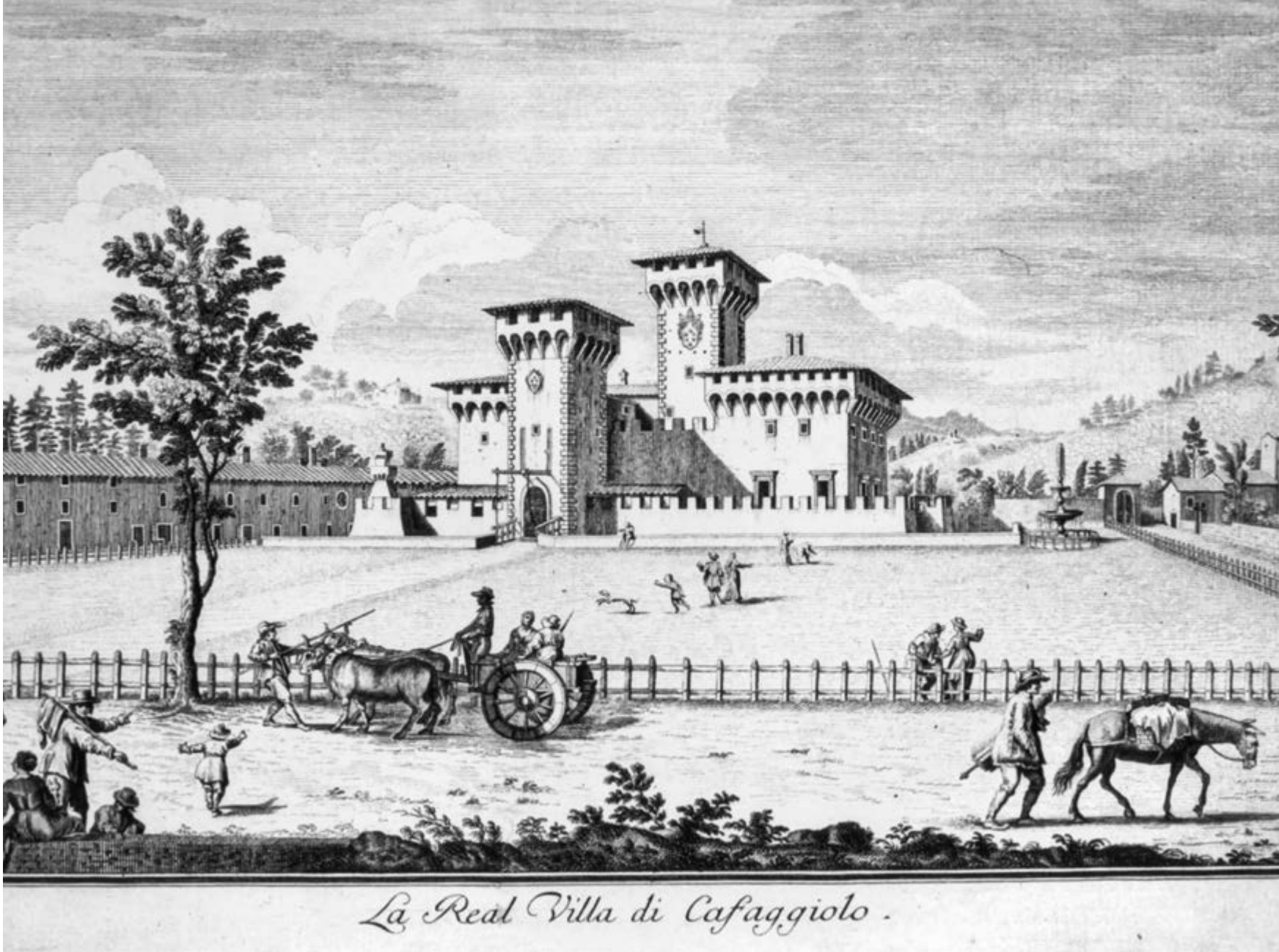
“Meanwhile Giuliano had come into even greater credit with Lorenzo [the Magnificent]; and the latter, who was intending to build a palace at Poggio a Caiano, a place between Florence and Pistoia, and had caused several models to be made for it [by Francione and by others], commissioned Giuliano, also, to make it one of the sort of buildings that he proposed to erect. And Giuliano made it so completely different from the others, and so much to Lorenzo’s fancy, that he began straightaway to have it carried into execution, as the best of all the models.”

To confirm the excellence of the project of the Villa of Poggio a Caiano by Giuliano da Sangallo, we have to rely on the words of Giorgio Vasari in his *Lives*. However, to ascertain the extraordinary nature of the site, more than 500 years after it was built, it has to be visited.

The **1 Medici Villa of Poggio a Caiano** stands out in the catalogue of the dynasty’s residences for the search for a synthesis between the typical rurality of Tuscan architecture and the rules of Vitruvian classicism. On the top of a hill and full of mystery due to the enigmatic death of the Grand Duke Francesco I and his wife Bianca Cappello, it surprises with its sumptuous Leo X Room, with an important cycle of frescoes by Andrea del Sarto, Pontorno and Franciabigio. Obscure events also envelop the history of the **2 Medici Villa of Cerreto Guidi**, which Cosimo I wanted as a hunting residence: Isabella de’ Medici died here in 1576: according to legend,

she was strangled by assassins paid by her husband, but most probably due to a simple kidney occlusion. In addition to the four access ramps by Buontalenti, you will appreciate the furniture reconstructed according to the historical inventories, the collection of portraits and the Historical Museum of Hunting and of the Area. The **3 Medici Villa La Magia**, is also west of Florence and its name immediately evokes enchanted and marvellous atmospheres. The original nucleus of the settlement dates back to the 15th century, but it was towards the end of the 16th century, with the purchase by Francesco I and the renovation by Buontalenti, that

it enjoyed the period of its greatest splendour. Today, it is “The spirit of the place” that makes the difference. This is a route of contemporary art which starts in the historic garden. The itinerary comes to an end in Versilia, where the presence of important deposits of marble and silver mines made Cosimo I build the **4 Medici Palace of Seravezza**. The building has a military aspect and indulges less in decoration than its counterparts around Florence, but the Museum of Work and Popular Traditions of Historical Versilia is more than enough for a pleasant spring afternoon.



MEDICI CLASSICISM

“As I frequently contemplate and call to mind the times of old, those men in general seem to me [...], to have been supremely happy, who, while they were distinguished with honours and the glory of their actions in the best days of the republic, were enabled to pursue such a course of life, that they could continue either in employment without danger, or in retirement with dignity.”

De oratore, Marcus Tullius Cicero

Between 1443 and 1451, Cosimo the Elder commissioned his trusted architect Michelozzo to convert the enclosed fortress of Cafaggiolo, near the Mugello, into an aristocratic villa, where he could relax and go hunting. In the renovation, attention continued to be paid to the defensive needs (towers and walls with openings for arquebuses and moats), but at the same time, roads, fountains and gardens were repaired and improved. With Lorenzo dei Medici, the building was to be transformed into a fully-fledged place for holidays, suitable for intellectuals and artists. In the architectonic and functional evolutions of the villa of Cafaggiolo, it is therefore possible to appreciate, after whole centuries, the reassertion of the classic values in the relationship between political engagement and attention to leisure time, according to the Ciceronian model. It is one of the most elusive but decisive transformations, with which the Renaissance reveals itself.



'SPEAKING OF THE BOBOLI GARDENS, I CANNOT FORGET THE SMALL POND, WITH THE SPRAYS OF WATER AND GOLDFISH, WHICH GAVE ME HOURS OF PLEASURE.'

What Hermann Hesse relates in *Wandering* is one of the many surprising corners in this green oasis, which will give the same gifts to those who travel with children or those who have remained children at heart. Find yourself a map, because the **Boboli Gardens** are very big (about

11 acres) and there are lots of things to see: as soon as you leave Palazzo Pitti, this brilliant example of an Italian garden, laid out from the 16th century by the Medicis and taken as an exemplary model by many European courts, immediately flaunts a sculpture that all children inevitably like: the **1 Fountain of the Bacchino**; it actually portrays the Dwarf Morgante, Cosimo I de' Medici's favourite, who is grotesquely straddling a tortoise. The **2 Grotto of Buontalenti** also guarantees expressions of jubilation and fun, because its three chambers are inhabited by statues and frescoes by Bernardino Poccetti, but also rocks,

stalactites and shells, mixed together into something which is both chaotic and harmonious at the same time. It is one of the most bizarre and extreme expressions of Florentine Mannerist art. At this point, you have to walk a little to reach the Garden of the Knight, one of the most pleasant corners of the park, where the **3 Fountain of the Monkeys** reigns in the centre, with three cute bronze animals at the base of the structure in sandstone and white marble. Immediately below, once you have passed the **4 Fountain of Neptune** (also called "of the Fork" because of the trident the god of the sea is portrayed with), here is the **5 amphitheatre**, the solemnity of which is tangible by visitors of any age: an object of countless renovations over the centuries, the Egyptian obelisk and the red granite basin are impressive for their dimensions, which help you imagine the sumptuous *fêtes champêtres* for which it was once the backdrop. And whimsical and bizarre images will also certainly come to mind going down the **6 Great Ring**, the avenue covered like a tunnel by trees with intervals of evergreen shrubs which crosses the park on the east-west axis. Approaching the western edge of the Boboli Gardens, you will then come across one of its most fascinating structures: the **7 Basin of the Island**. It is a sort of small pond, with an islet in the centre where there is the Fountain of the Ocean, dominated by a copy of the bellicose Neptune by Giambologna. The last stopping place, as you return towards Palazzo Pitti, is the **8 Lemon Grove**, where your sense of smell will delight in the perfume of the citrus trees still present.



KIDS



MEDICI VILLAS AND GARDENS IN TUSCANY in books

Reading suggestions to fall in love with the Medici villas.

• **De oratore**, Marcus Tullius Cicero (between 55-54 B.C.). In this composition structured in the form of a Platonic dialogue, Cicero deconstructs the various competences necessary to develop oratory skills. As well as being a fundamental work of rhetoric, in several points the classic concept of *otium* comes to the surface, which at the time of the Medicis was immensely successful.

• **Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love**, Marsilio Ficino (1469). By far the best known text produced by the members of the Florentine Neo-Platonic Academy, which had its seat in the Medici Villa of Careggi, is the commentary by Marsilio Ficino on Plato's *Symposium*. Its influence was enormous, in intellectual circles but also in artistic milieus: the ideal beauty of Botticelli's *Spring* and *Venus*, for example, show the clear influence of Ficino.

• **The lives of the most eminent painters, sculptors and architects**, Giorgio Vasari (1550). The first book on

art history ever published guaranteed lasting fame for Vasari, which goes beyond his artistic abilities. In outlining the figures of his colleagues, the writer from Arezzo is particularly attentive to events in Florence and Tuscany; as a consequence, there is no shortage of references to these villas. The work on them, which took place towards the middle of the 16th century, occupied considerable space in the agenda of the Medicis.

• **The Diary of Montaigne's Journey to Italy**, Michel de Montaigne (1580). If on the one hand Montaigne dialogued systematically with the philosophy of classic antiquity, on the other he foresaw the trends of future eras: he made his journey to Italy, between 1580 and 1581, before formative experiences in the peninsula caught on, becoming the prerogative of all the great intellectuals in the 18th and 19th centuries, from Goethe to Stendhal and from Shelley to Dickens.

• **Wandering**, Hermann Hesse (1904-20). Hesse dedicated poems, short stories, diaries and novels to travel; he got to know Singapore and Sumatra, he explored Sri Lanka and India, he travelled across the most remote areas of Italy. The volume brings together various writings on the topic of walking, in the mountains and forests,

but also the Gardens of Boboli, a place which was to remain indelibly imprinted in the mind of the German writer.

• **Up at the Villa**, William Somerset Maugham (1941). A true prowess by the great English writer, this is a short novel, set amongst the members of the large English colony who lived in Florence between the 19th and 20th centuries; it tells the story of the misadventures of a beautiful woman contended between two suitors, mixing irony and suspense, love and violence, drama and lightheartedness.

Children's books:

• **Due ragazzi nella Firenze dei Medici**, Marco Di Tillo, Giacomo Agnello Modica (2019). Two boys, Pietro and Giuliano, become close friends, but their families are sworn enemies; Giuliano is a Medici, Pietro's mother is a Pazzi and her family is weaving a plot which for Giuliano will have a tragic epilogue.

• **I Medici. Signori di Firenze. Le grandi dinastie**, Paolo Cantatore, Mattia Simeoni (2023). The Medicis, a family of bankers who at a certain point in their history proclaimed themselves the rulers of Florence, shaped not only the political history of the city, but above all the figurative art and literature of the Italian Renaissance.