

OTIUM ET NEGOTIUM THE VILLAS & GARDENS OF FLORENCE

TUESDAY 7 – SATURDAY 11 MAY 2019 (5 DAYS)

LECTURER: CAROLINE HOLMES

£1945

- Visit the renaissance villas & gardens of Florence & their surroundings
- Three important early Medici villas included
- Private visits to the gardens at Villa Le Balze & Villa La Pietra
- Private lunch & visit at famed Villa Gamberaia
- Gentle pace with time to enjoy comfortable 4* hotel at Fiesole with spectacular views overlooking Florence



Fiesole, Villa Gamberaia

OVERVIEW

The rise of Cosimo de' Medici and his family during the fifteenth century saw Florence physically transformed through the example of his family's patronage: secular palaces, new churches and remarkable works of art bear ample testimony to their dominant role. By the end of that century the Medici had turned to a new fashion sweeping Italy, the *villa suburbana*. These were villas built either just outside the walls of cities or an easy day's ride away, where owners could enjoy the benefits of relaxation, yet remain in direct touch with political and economic events in town. This is what ancient Roman writers such as Cicero, Pliny the Elder and others described as *otium*, the much needed opposite of *negotium* – rural bliss as opposed to the busy life of the city.

After centuries of chaos following the collapse of the Roman Empire, medieval Italy witnessed an increase in both economic activity and personal security. Many felt able to remodel their fortified farmhouses, converting them into comfortable dwellings informed by a revival of interest in classical architecture. This is reflected in the patronage of families like the Medici, the work of architects such as Michelozzo and Giuliano da Sangallo and theoretical writers such as Leon Battista Alberti. These exciting innovators embraced the manner in which the ancients decorated and used their villas, integrating these dwellings within their surrounding landscapes.

In the context of gardens, horticultural harmony was furthered by the belief that 'nature is better if cultivated'. The senses of Medici guests were awakened by enclosed *giardino segreto* within enclosing walls, whilst without pastoral surroundings were transformed. This humanist inspired geometry evolved into high renaissance and mannerist gardens with the addition of classical statuary and the revival of ancient features such as the *grotto*.

Further refinements were added in subsequent centuries and while many historic gardens eventually fell into neglect, rescue was at hand via the intelligent and wealthy Anglo-American community who settled in the hills around Florence at Fiesole and elsewhere from the late nineteenth century onwards. This is the world of Edith Wharton, Bernard Berenson, Arthur Acton and their friends, many of whom employed the peerless Cecil Pinsent (1884 – 1963). A genius, Pinsent not only restored gardens but also created new gardens in a manner that would have astonished and satisfied the Medici had they had the luck to have him as their advisor.

From our wonderful location at magical Fiesole, directly overlooking Florence, our visit will trace the development of the Florentine villa and garden both outside and within the city: Poggio a Caiano, Castello and La Petraia from the Medici era; the modern 'greats' such as Le Balze, Fonte Lucente, La Pietra and above all Villa Gamberaia will all be visited and in some of which we shall be entertained to lunch.

We stay in the 4* **Hotel Villa Fiesole** ideally located half-a-mile just below Fiesole, overlooking Florence. The hotel has a lovely panoramic terrace and an excellent restaurant.

ITINERARY OUTLINE

Day 1: Tuesday 7 May – We fly from Heathrow arriving into Pisa airport late morning. We drive to **Fiesole** for a late lunch (not included) after which we visit **Villa Medici**, one of the, if not *the* first villa created for the Medici family, in this case the patriarch of the family, *Cosimo il Vecchio*. It is a simple villa built on a severely sloping site, its garden now a simple layout but with outstanding views of Florence laid out below. We continue the very short distance to our hotel. Later that evening we have a group dinner in the hotel. Wine, water and coffee are included with all group lunches and dinners.

Day 2: Wednesday 8 May – We begin at **Villa la Petraia**, originally created in 1537 for Duke Cosimo I. In 1587 his second son Ferdinando had it laid out over three terraces, said to reflect the family's recent elevation as Grand Dukes of Tuscany, rising as they did from humble origins (to become first Dukes of Tuscany via the Emperor Charles V, and then Papal Grand Dukes). The villa features an extraordinary frescoed courtyard space, luckily roofed over by the new Kings of Italy in the nineteenth century, who made some of these villas their summer homes. We continue to the garden **Villa di Castello** nearby, one of the oldest Medici gardens which retains the Grand Duke's vision with grand avenues. We continue to **Poggio a Caiano**, which lies to the west of Florence, and a group lunch. It is dominated by Lorenzo the Magnificent's **Villa**. Designed by Giuliano da Sangallo in 1485, it was unfinished at Lorenzo's death in 1492. It uses harmonic classical proportion throughout and is decorated with fine ornamental friezes and frescoes. Following our visit, we return to Fiesole and our hotel where the evening will be free.

Day 3: Thursday 9 May – We visit privately **Villa di Maiano**, now owned by the Corsini family, who will be our hosts. It has a long and distinguished history and both the villa and garden offer much to the connoisseur. We continue the short distance to **Settignano** for a private group lunch at what many consider the finest garden in Tuscany - **Villa Gamberaia**. From the arcaded gallery of cypresses to the formality of the parterres, this justly famed garden is the triumph of a seamless journey from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. After our visit to both the garden and villa, we return to the hotel and the evening will be free.

Day 4: Friday 10 May – **Villa Le Balze** sits directly below Fiesole. It was designed by Cecil Pinsent for his American client, Charles Augustus Strong, and was built between 1912 and 13. It is a masterpiece in terms of making use of a narrow shelf of a site, nothing short of miraculous. It is now owned and managed by Georgetown University and they have agreed to our private visit. In the hills above Fiesole we visit **Villa Peyron** at **Fonte Lucente** which could not be more different. This is a nineteenth and early twentieth century environment hewn from the hillside where we shall find a renaissance inspired garden, organised as a series of descending terraces full of witty conceits. After some free time in Fiesole for lunch, not included, we drive the short distance to **Villa La Pietra**. Arthur and Hortense Acton 'Tuscanized' the renaissance villa's English-style garden in 1904, as recalled by their son Harold. The large, theatrical, sloping layout with parterres, fountains and the like, plus the villa's art collection are Harold Acton's twin legacies (offered to, but refused by Oxford University, then happily accepted by New York University), which we shall visit privately. Later in the evening we shall enjoy a final group dinner at our hotel.

Day 5: Saturday 11 May – On our last morning we travel into **Florence** where, close to Santa Maria Novella, we have a private visit to a rare Florentine urban survival, **Giardino Corsini al Prato**. Formality, floral blushes, mannerist statuary and nineteenth century romanticism bring together all of our horticultural themes. We shall also be shown the family palazzo, full of remarkable works of art. After some free time for lunch, not included, we continue to Pisa airport for our evening flight back to London.

PRACTICALITIES

Price £1945 **Without Flights** £1820 **Deposit** £275

Single Supplement £195 Classic Room & £365 Deluxe Room (both Double for Sole Use)

Please note that there is a £250 (total) discount if Villas & Gardens of Florence is taken with Siena & Tuscan Gardens

Hotel 4 nights with breakfast at 4* Hotel Villa Fiesole

Flights British Airways

Outward: **BA604** Depart London Heathrow (Terminal 3) **0835** arrive Pisa **1145**

Return: **BA607** Depart Pisa **1955** arrive London Heathrow (Terminal 3) **2105**

Price includes 2 dinners & 2 lunches with wine, water & coffee, all local transfers, entry fees & gratuities, services of Caroline Holmes and our local tour manager James Hill

Not included Travel to/from Heathrow, 2 dinners & 2 lunches



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