

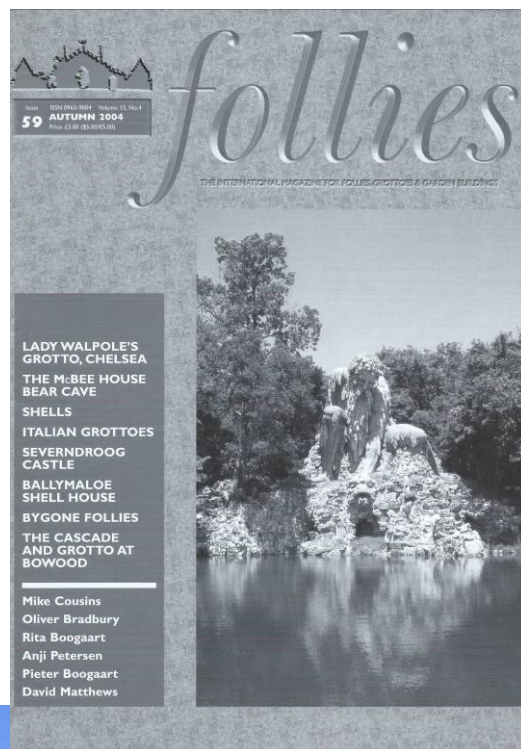
Italian Grottoes

RITA BOOGAART

[This article was published in *FOLLIES* magazine #59;1,12-14 (autumn 2004). With the publication of Journal 16 we arranged to make this article digitally available on the Folly Fellowship website, as promised on page 51. Now we can illustrate my original article with colour and some new pictures, and some snippets of information [in brackets]. At the end I will add an article that I wrote after the publication of *Explorations in Italy* in Journal 16: *The Villa Reale in Marlia*. The information was omitted in the Journal, but its subject fits very well in my earlier article *Italian Grottoes*, as Villa Reale has several grottoes too.]

Right: cover of *follies* magazine 59

Below: the cover picture in colour. The Apennine Grotto, Parco Mediceo - villa Demidoff, Pratolino, Italy, by PRBOOGAART



Italian Grottoes

RITA BOOGAART

As I had inside information about the theme [grottoes] of this issue of the magazine before we went on holiday to Italy last May [2004] I decided to investigate the grottoes in the gardens that we planned to visit. Italy is considered the homeland of the grotto after all (1), and we could at least try and get some good pictures. We could however not anticipate the almost complete prohibition of the use of tripods, particularly in dark grottoes, and in several cases of cameras full stop. Well, in most cases they are presumably too embarrassed by the state of repair to allow the world to see it.



Giardino Barbarigo, Valsanzibio, Veneto

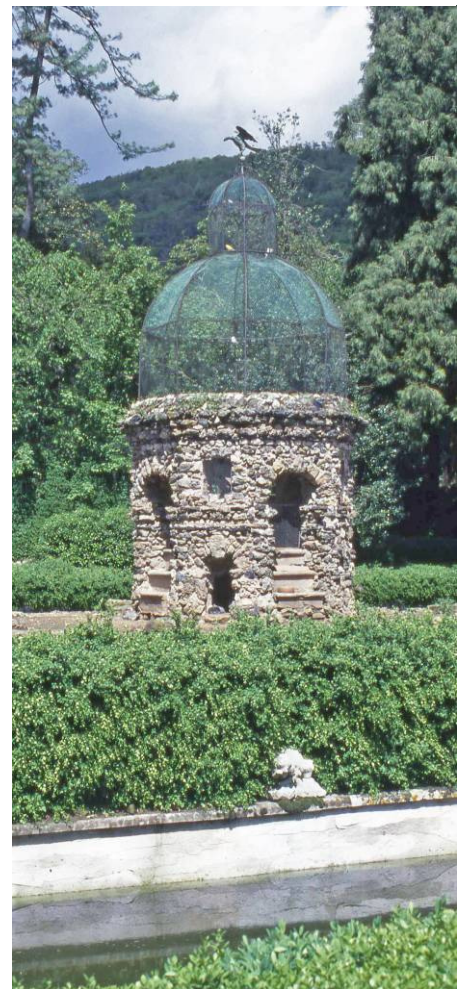
Our experience is not very wide. We started in the north with the Giardino Barbarigo in Valsanzibio, near Padua. It dates from the second half of the 17th century, and the waterworks are recently restored to their former splendor by the present owners, the Pizzoni Ardemani family. From outside the garden one can admire the view through the watergate to a series of three rectangular fishponds, embedded in a gentle slope upwards. The first and third ponds have rocky tops with sculptures, like stage-props. But the middle one, the Fish Pond of the Winds, has three apse-shaped **grottoes** at the top of the



Above: Grottoes at Fish Pond of the Winds
Left: Watergate
Below: sham-ruined tower on Rabbit Island



basin. They are built with rough stones, the sort that one can see in the surrounding Euganean hills, and therefore fit in the landscape. No adornments but statues on top and on the terraces behind them. In the middle arch water streams down over steps. The two outer arches are accommodating nest and fodder for waterfowl. It is claimed that Luigi Bernini, waterwork specialist to the pope, made the design for the arrangements around 1669 (2), and Valsanzibio is still regarded as an important example of a baroque garden [with high topiary hedges, fountains, water-tricks and grottoes. Its **Watergate** is heavily decorated with hunting gear and topped with a statue of Diana, goddess of the hunt, indicating that the building is a hunting pavilion. Would they have hunted for rabbits, raised at Rabbit Island around a **sham-ruined tower** with a wire cupola aviary on top? Is that likely?]



Villa Lante, Bagnaia, Lazio



Above: Information plaque at Bagnaia
Left: Interior of a hunting pavilion, 2014

Villa Lante (3) at Bagnaia, near Viterbo, was [not a villa, but originally only **two small pavilions** as] hunting lodge for the bishop of Viterbo, Cardinal Gambara. He commissioned Vignola, then also working at nearby Caprarola, to design his new residence in 1566, and the garden was completed in 1573. So much money was spent on it that Gambara's allowance was stopped for wasting money on fripperies. And it is a wonderful garden, partly flat [with **parterres around a pond**] and partly climbing up in terraces [along a **water-staircase** with sculpted crayfish, *gambaro*]. In the second world war a lot of damage was done, but in 1953 it was bought by Angelo Canton, who restored it. It is now state property, with state privilege of photography. [Ten years



Right: the water-staircase with crayfish
Below: the parterres around the pond with Fountain of the Moors on island



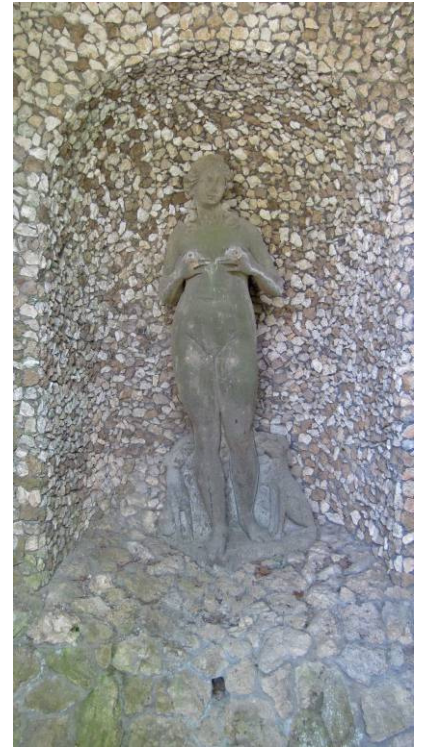
later at the FF excursion nobody stopped us photographing.]

Several **grottoes** are built into the retaining walls. The lower ones were under restoration in 1989, but if it is done it didn't have much effect. We found them mucky and dark, consisting of vaulted rooms with side chapels and an apse, completely cov-



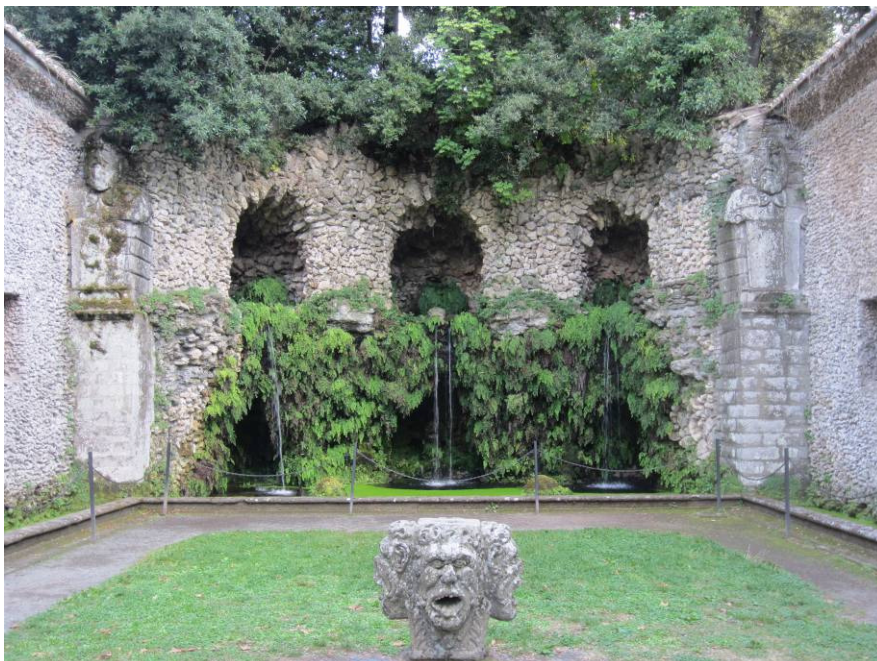
Grottoes in the retaining wall:
details Neptune and Venus, 2014

ered in dusty, brownish little lumps, with a weathered statue at the end. [In 2004 they appeared better.] The **Fountain of the Deluge** at the end of the upper terrace[, next to a shadowy classical **Pavilion of the Muses**] is much more interesting,



although there was no water cascading down the centre of the large grotto wall in 2004. [There was in 2014.] Two rows of three grotto-vaults, built with rougher stone and only adorned with green plants, ferns and a few bits of sculpture, make a nice stage backdrop like a mock ruin.

Left: Pavilion of the Muses, 2004
Left below: Fountain of the Deluge, 2014
Below: Detail crayfish, top of the water-staircase, 2014

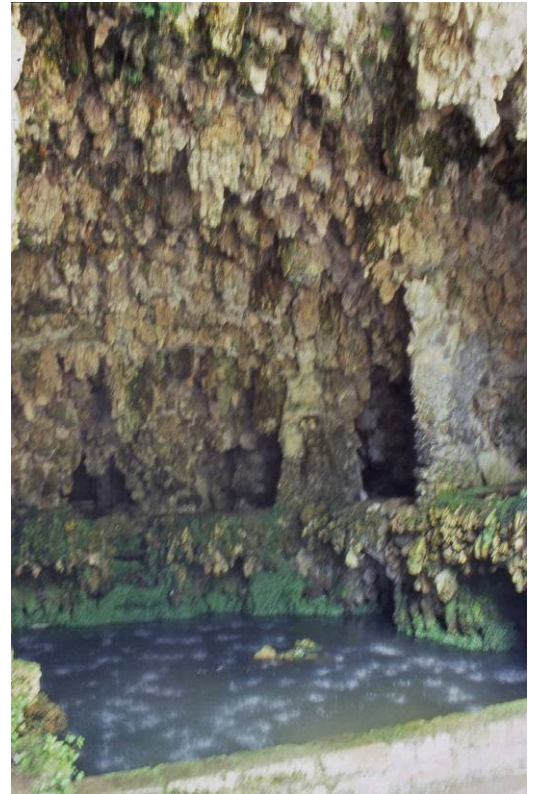


Palazzo Farnese, Caprarola, Lazio

Nearby Palazzo Farnese (4) in Caprarola has a similar grotto wall, **The Fountain of the Rain**, but here it also arches over the pond in front, and everywhere it is hung with stalactites splashing water down. Its design of *ca* 1559 is attributed to

Right: Fountain of the Rain

Below: grottoes in the retaining walls, stairs to Casino



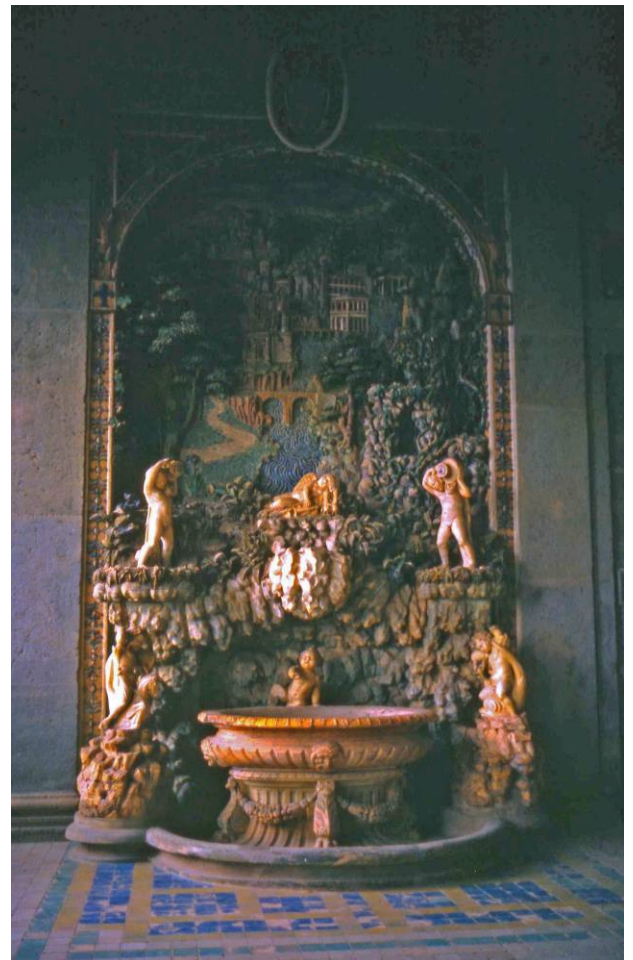
Vignola too. Further **grottoes** are set into the retaining walls along the stairs to the **Casino**. They are of a different sort, added to this part of the garden in 1620 by Rainaldi, together with the rustification of the walls. They are much neater, symmetrical and encrusted with little pieces of coloured stone between stone bands. There is a further grotto built around a vase-fountain in front of the Casino, but that mainly serves as square, rusticated patches of darkness. You can only see the real pride of Caprarola on a guided tour of the splendidly restored mannerist interior of the pentagonal palace – no cameras allowed[, but in the FF



Above: Casino

Right: rustic grotto in Royal Hall. © Neville Hawkes, 1960s

Picture Library we have a slide by Nevill Hawkes, taken without flash in the 1960s when it was still allowed]. This rustic grotto by Vignola is in the Salone Regio (Royal Hall), formerly an open loggia, and dates from 1559-1573. It looks like a giant chimney-piece between two pilasters. The rounded top half shows a topographical view of Rome and the Tiber in painted stucco, the lower half has a deep grotto niche of rough stone around a waterbasin instead of a fire. Five ‘waterbabies’ and a sleeping Cupid enliven the scene.



Villa Medici Castello or Villa Reale, Florence, Toscana

There is some similarity with an other famous one, the **Grotto of the Animals** at the Villa Medici Castello (5) near Florence, designed by Niccolò Tribolo for Cosimo I around 1538, but executed by many [e.g. Vasari] over a long period. There it is a spacious vaulted room with three deep niches, set into the retaining wall of the parterre garden, completely encrusted with porous tufo, mother of pearl, shells and pumice. Each recess has a stone basin, surmounted by a variety of animals emerging from the rock, with a unicorn, symbol of purification of water, at the top in the middle. Unfortunately when we wanted to compare it with the Caprarola design it was blocked off with scaffolds and fences, even on top, in the [wilder] upper garden [, where we saw a bronze half-figure of a shivering man on a mount of rocks in a pond, representing **the Apennines** where the cool water comes from]. ‘Alas, the grotto is closed for urgently needed restoration, and since they have run out of money we have no idea what will happen and when (6).’ No visits, thank you. [In 2017 some said that they are now fully recovered, and can be inspected from outside an iron gate but the inside water-tricks that amused the Medicis and their guests are gone; others reported the grotto is still closed off. So enquire before you go.]



Above: the Apennines in the upper garden, Villa Medici Castello

Below: Grotticina di Madama, Boboli Gardens, Florence

Below left: Grotta Grande, Boboli Gardens, Florence

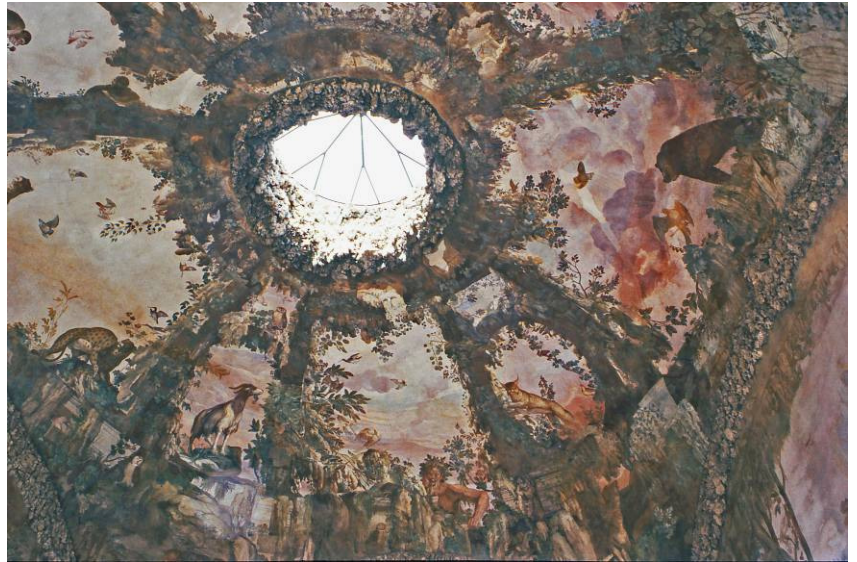
Boboli Gardens, Florence, Toscana

A smaller, one wall version, this time with two putti, three goats and a ram, the astrological sign of Cosimo de' Medici's favour, was made by the same artists for the Boboli Gardens in Florence. This **Grotticina di Madama** (7) was built in a private corner for Cosimo's wife, Eleonora of Toledo, between 1553 and 1555, and was restored in 1990 and 1991. Inside the walls are covered in spongy material and stalactites between stucco cornices; the vault has frescoes. It is the oldest of the four grottoes of the Boboli Gardens.

The second one is the **Grotta Grande**, the most



beautiful one that we saw, and it is really grand. Constructed as a focal point for the old entrance to the



Grotta Grande, Boboli Gardens, Florence
Left: detail facade. Above: vault first room,
below: details first room, taken from outside the railings.

gardens between 1583 and 1593 by Bernardo Buontalenti, incorporating a nursery built by Giorgio Vasari in 1557-1560, it now consists of three vaulted rooms en suite behind a half-open facade with the Medici coat of arms between sculpted deities and rockwork. It was commissioned by Francesco I de' Medici and shows an amazing combination of all sorts of materials and techniques, of works of art –amongst them four unfinished ‘slaves’ by Michelangelo, now embedded in the corners of the first large room– and fresco’s, natural material like coral, shells, and man-made samples of glass, enamel and metals. An amalgamation of art and nature it is phantastic in its effects, a marvel. A pity that you are allowed in only with a ticket for the Pitti Palace, and even then one is evicted within ten minutes from this paradise.

We did not like Bartolomeo Ammanati’s **Moses Grotto** much, in the Ammanati courtyard between two ramps to the gardens, built between 1635 and 1636 for Ferdinando II and Vittoria della



Rovere. It is in fact a classical building with an elliptical pond inside under a painted sky between strips of rockwork, and at the far end in a niche a colossal porphyry sculpture of Moses. Further smaller niches have white marble statues of allegorical figures or a fountain with oak branches from the Della Rovere coat of

arms. In the pictures it looks good enough, but we found it very dark and uninspiring, with the exception of the little swimming putti in the pond.

The fourth grotto is the focal point at the Via Romana gate of the Boboli Gardens, known as the Annalena entrance. After decades of neglect and French domination (1800-1813) the new ruler Ferdinando III undertook a restoration and perfecting plan of his 'Paradise'. The **Annalena Grotto** was built in 1817 by Giuseppe Cacialli and houses a 1616 sculpture of Adam, Eve and the Serpent (looking like a mermaid) to introduce the visitor to the rejuvenated Eden. The facade is not more than a simple, square opening in a wall, divided by two sturdy Doric supports. The semicircular cave has three marble



Above and left: Annalena Grotto, Boboli Gardens, Florence
Bottom: Bacchus on turtle, Boboli Gardens, Florence

spouting masks, now dry, between sponges, and the very flat vault is bright blue wherever it is not covered in many kinds of shells, coral and 'minuscule concretions, simulating the natural stalactites found in grottoes' (8).

[It is unfair to only mention the grottoes, as there is much more to enjoy garden-wise. There are two open-air thea-

tres, many fountains, a baroque balustraded island, Isolotto, in a large pond, and an 18thC coffeehouse/belvedere. Sculptures by the dozens, e.g. in Piazzale di Bacco a drunk dwarf on a turtle representing **Bacchus**, in fact a portrait of Pietro Barbarino -court jester of Cosimo I- a deformed person in the collection of the Medici. And many plants and trees of course. You can easily spend a day there.]



Parco Mediceo - Villa Demidoff, Pratolino, Toscana

As I said above: Francesco I's Grotta Grande was the most impressive one. How would we then have enjoyed his Parco Mediceo in Pratolino (9), famous in his days for the grottoes and watergames, if not Ferdinando III had destroyed most of it [in 1818] to create a romantic English landscape garden there [designed by Joseph Frietsch]! The site is called Villa Demidoff Park nowadays, after the new owners since 1872. Maria Demidoff, the last of the Demidoffs, rediscovered some remnants of the old glory just before WWII and started restorations [e.g. at the **Fountain of Mugone** and the **Grotto of Cupid** with lantern, both of 1577 by Buontalenti]. And now the provincial council of Florence is carefully examining and restoring what they can, buildings as well as vegetation. The visitor finds his path barred by gay red-white plastic banners all over the place, hopefully heralding a new future for the old grottoes in a few



years time. But the famous squatting bearded giant, representing the **Apennines**, erected around 1580 by Giambologna, can be enjoyed already, freed from vegetation, and now one can see that he too was a kind of grotto and part of waterworks. [Inside the 'mountain' are several grotto rooms for parties, now almost empty of their original decorations.]

Top: Fountain of Mugone
Middle: The Apennines at the great lake
Bottom: Grotto of Cupid with lantern.

Palazzo Te, Mantua, Lombardia

Giulio Romano's Palazzo del Te in Mantua (10), built from 1524 to 1535 for Federico II Gonzaga as a summer retreat, was recently cleaned outside and is nearly ready inside. [It is famous for a peculiar Mannerist fresco in the Sala degli Giganti: giants and grotesques wreaking havoc, fury and ruin all around you. The trompe l'oeil works fantastic; it is as if you are in a collapsing room, a sham ruin. The formal gardens are terminated by an arcaded exedra with in the far cor-



Top: garden of Casino della Grotta, Palazzo Te, Mantua
Left: detail interior grotto-bathhouse, Palazzo Te, Mantua

ner] the private **Casino della Grotta**, where Federico could retreat. It is a little house, decorated with 'grotesques', paintings as found by Rafael c.s. in the excavations of Nero's Golden House in Rome. A loggia opens into a Giardino Segreto with a **grotto-bathhouse** opposite spilling rockwork around the doorway. Inside however this octagonal domed and vaulted grotto, a miniature Roman therme building, is in a sad state. One can still see the rocaile of white and black pebbles, of pieces of tufa and numerous shells, and the frescoes with naturalistic birds and animals, but it is crumbling away, and most of the shells have left their imprint already. It is decayed by heating, by fountain and bath water and by nesting love-birds, but maybe not beyond repair. I sneakily made a photograph to plead the case.

1. Naomi Miller, *Heavenly Cave, Reflexions on the Garden Grottos*, New York 1982
2. Brochure of Giardino Barbarigo-Pizzoni Ardemani
Alex Ramsay & Helen Attlee, *Italian Gardens, A Visitor's Guide*, London 1989, pp. 50-52
3. The name Lante comes from the owners of the garden from 1655 to 1932. Ramsay & Attlee, idem, pp. 153-155
4. Ramsay & Attlee, idem, pp. 150-152
5. Ramsay & Attlee, idem, pp. 81-83; John Shearman, *Mannerism*, Harmondsworth 1967, pp. 126-127; Mariachiara Pozzana, *Gardens of Florence and Tuscany, A Complete Guide*, Firenze 2001, pp. 56-61.
6. The pictures of this grotto and details in Michel Saudan & Sylvia Saudan-Skira, *from Folly to Follies*, New York 1987, p. 24-25, and in M. Pozzana, idem, p. 58, do not show decay though.
7. Litta Maria Medri, *The Grottoes in the Boboli Gardens*, Livorno 2002
Litta Medri & Giorgio Galletti, *Boboli Gardens, the official guide*, Livorno 2002
8. Litta Maria Medri, *The Grottoes in the Boboli Gardens*, Livorno 2002, p. 33. Even now this grotto is recently restored the actual material is not named other than 'concretion'.
9. Mariachiara Pozzana, idem, pp. 88-93
10. Gian Maria Erbesato, *Palazzo Te in Mantua*, Alphen aan den Rijn 1989, translation of *Il Palazzo del Te di Mantova*, Novara.

Villa Reale di Marlia

RITA BOOGAART

The **Villa Reale** is at the foot of the Pizzorne hills in Marlia, near Lucca, in Tuscany. The 18-hectare park of this former royal country house in Marlia is well worth a visit and a description, but it wasn't included in *Follies* Journal 16. Did we not visit then? Yes, we did, on 28 August 2014. That is to say: Pieter stayed in the car (heavy showers were imminent) while I hurried from one object to the next with a map and a booklet with descriptions of the water features



here in Marlia, that was transformed into a little Renaissance palace with gardens and fountains around it. This complex was in the hands of the noble merchants and bankers family Buonvisi from 1517 to 1651. Nothing much changed until Lelio and Oliviero Orsetti bought the property in 1651 at the Buonvisi bankruptcy. In 1655 they finished the Clock House, a complex of guesthouse, stables, kitchens and servants quarters, larger than the nearby villa, and connected to it by a subterranean tunnel (of course) and with the Buonvisi six-hour clock incorporated over the double-level loggia from where good vistas are had. The clock section is an **eyecatcher** for visitors approaching between high hedges. Probably before 1664 the house itself was reformed and enlarged again in late-Renaissance style.

and an architecture itinerary in my hand. I took a lot of photos under an ever blackening sky, but didn't manage to get back in the car before the heavy showers soaked me. The map over my head was so wet that I asked for a new one at the exit. I haven't seen map or guidebook since, and without them Pieter obviously didn't recognize any of the pictures I took there. So he didn't include Marlia in our Explorations in Italy article in *Facets of Continental Europe, Follywise*, and I didn't notice until I recently started illustrating our older Italian articles from the magazine for inclusion in the section downloadables on the FF website. That oversight I want to redress with this contribution, relying on the Villa Reale website and my photographs. And then this park deserves inclusion as a postscript to my article *Italian Grottoes* in F59;12-14 in the downloadable version as the main characteristics here are grottoes too.

Originally the Dukes of Tuscany had a fortified building



Top : Villa Reale, south front

Left: Clock of Clock House as eyecatcher

Bottom: Green Theatre

The surrounding gardens were created in the Italian Renaissance-baroque style in the second half of the 17thC. In tune with the spirit of other Luccan gardens it featured a Teatro di Verzura (1652), an open-air **Green Theatre** with topiary 20-foot-high corridors, walls and stage wings, showing three life-size terracotta Commedia dell'Arte statues: Colombina, Pantalone and Balanzone. At the north side of the villa it also had the best **Water Theatre** in the Lucca area, consisting of a semi-circular pond with lion spouts, vases and sculptures, crowned above the retaining back wall with a grotto containing a stepped cascade between tall ilex hedges. A third showpiece of this period is the *Limonaia*, the Lemon Garden, where four large magnolias cut in the shape of Christmas Trees each command a square of grass surrounded by potted citrus plants. On the south side of it a tufa decorated **stone exedra** curves around a fountain. On the north side more lemon pots surround the adjacent rectangular ornamental Fish Pond with a stone balustrade and reclining river gods Arno and Serchio at the end, framing the view to a **nymphaeum** with a statue of Leda and the Swan in a grotto niche, the centre piece of a baroque stone theatre stage. A perfect and popular background for entertaining the high and mighty of the day.

From top to bottom: Water Theatre, exedra
Lemon Garden, Fish Pond with nymphaeum,
Leda nymphaeum



The Villa Orsetti (as it was then called) gained the adjective Rea-le, royal, in 1806, when Napoleon's sister Elisa Bonaparte Baciocchi, Princess of Lucca and Queen of Etruria, bought the beloved place herself. Her entertainments included concerts of violin-devil Paganini, her master of music (and perhaps her lover), in the Green Theatre and the ballroom. She 'modernized' the villa in the neo-classical style and added balconies over the entrance doors.

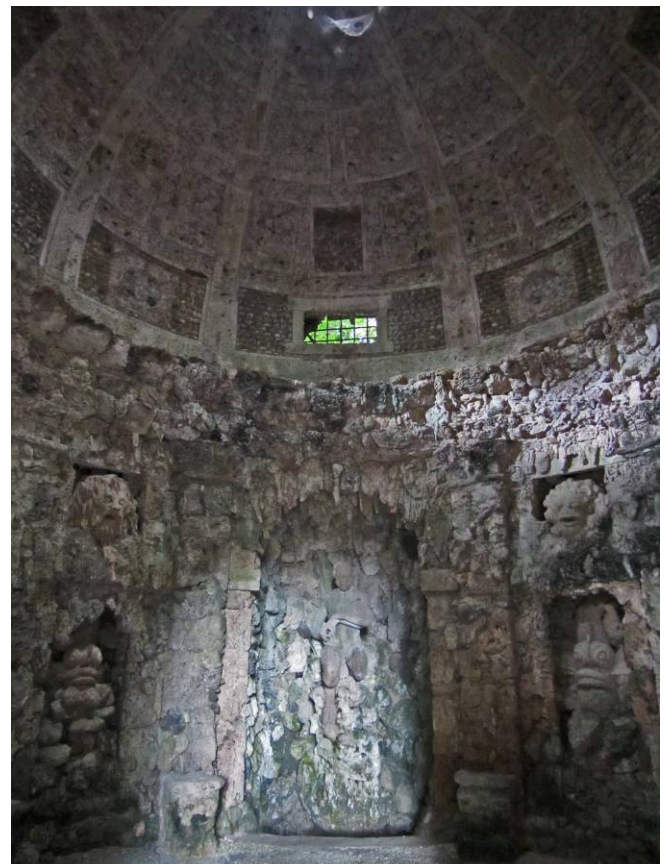
She had twin Empire houses built as lodges at a new entrance gate. And she extended the grounds with the neighbouring Villa del Vescove (Bishop) property. This was built in the 16thC over an existing somewhat irregular structure. In 1811 Elisa had it renovated into a court residence with a camera obscura, a physics laboratory, a library and a study area. This Villa del Vescove still has its 16thC geometrical Italian parterres, rare and exotic plants, some sculptures in niches in its monumental base, and its *pièce de résistance*, the Grotto of Pan or nymphaeum, now incorporated in the Reale park. From



the Bishop's Villa a camellia-bordered path leads to a two-story-high vaulted **loggia**, heavily decorated inside and out with rustication, colourful incrustations and pebbles. This antichambre or atrium opens to a sizeable octagonal domed **grotto** with an oculus in top as skylight. It is such a richly decorated grotto, with the half-wild **god Pan**, symbol of rural life and countryside, residing in the niche of honour, that its design is often attributed to Bernardo Buontalenti, the famous architect of the Grotta Grande in the Boboli gardens in Florence. Built between 1570 and 1580 it is the oldest of its kind in the Lucca area.



From top to bottom:
monumental
base Bishop's
Villa, loggia,
Pan Grotto,
detail Pan



In 1811 plans were also made to turn the former Bishop's grounds into an English landscaped garden with winding paths, viewpoints and many precious new trees and plants, particularly camellias. Indeed today we see a large lawn with tree-clumps as side-scenes all the way from the Villa until the artificial ornamental lake at the other end of the grounds. But this grass expanse was the *manège*, the place to train the horses, since long before that time. And the present-day **lake with a terrace and sculptures** as backdrop was only dug out a hundred years later. There wasn't enough time for transforming the whole garden, as after the fall of Napoleon in 1814 Elisa was evicted and her works abandoned.

The grounds came in the hands of the the Duke of Parma and then of the Grand Duke of Tuscany, the Asburgo Lorena dynasty. Following the formation of a unified Italy in 1861 it was passed onto Vittorio Emanuele di Savoia, the nation's first king, and the second Royal to justify the Villa's name. He later handed it over as a refuge to Prince Carlo of Bourbon, who was disinherited because he dared marry a woman of 'unroyal' origin. Their son, known for his eccentric behaviour, left the place in serious debt around 1918. To cover the debt, the villa was abandoned and put up for sale: a large part of the estate was sold at auction, a large number of trees was cut down and used for firewood.

The whole property was bought in 1924 by Countess Laetitia Pecci and the New York banker Cecil Blumenthal (shortened to Blunt), to stop further dilapidation. They restored the place and the gardens to their former glory, and even added new features to entertain guests. The architect Jacques Gréber was employed in 1928 to build a Spanish garden with Islamic water garden and an **exedra** round a pond, tennis-, boules- and croquet-courts and a state of the art swimming pool for them in Art Deco style. An **octagonal pavilion**, completely surrounded with a pergola of wisteria, arose near the 19thC gates. Many famous guests like Salvador Dali and Alberto Moravia have enjoyed the luxurious ambiance.

Above: the lake with terrace and sculptures
Below: exedra in Spanish garden, Art Deco



In 2015 The Pecci-Blunt family sold the property to a so-far anonymous Swiss couple who, after having restored the villa and clockhouse buildings accurately under the surveillance of the Arts Council, will open it as a dream hotel that aspires to be one of the prime super-luxury hotels in Italy, surrounded by the famous exquisite gardens, now under meticulous restoration. It will, just as in the past, be the scene of cultural events like open-air concerts.

Left: octagonal pavilion with wisteria