

The Veneto Revisited

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Almost half a millennium has passed since Agostino Giusti planted a garden at the foot of a rocky outcrop in the east of Verona, and since then not a guidebook or traveller's journal has omitted to mention these lush city acres in the most fulsome terms. Yet here is his restless descendant Niccolò, pacing the once-gloomy rooms of the recently refurbished family palazzo, and fretting. A posse of scholars whose brains he wishes to pick over lunch follows expectantly, every so often pausing by an open window where the thick scents of cypress and box carry the promise of cooler air.

Niccolò worries away at his garden constantly, picking over past choices and re-evaluating them, edging towards tricky decisions that must clear the hurdle of family approval before humble submission to the state apparatchiks. The only certainty in any of these travails is that he will have to foot the bill. Today, between lamenting a prolonged drought and the imminent departure of a long-serving gardener, he is taxed by the problem of how to exhibit the soon-to-be restored Roman antiquities which have been gathering moss in odd corners of the garden for as long as anyone can remember. Thus the expert lunch guests who are growing hungry.

The sense of responsibility that clearly weighs upon Niccolò's shoulders in his role of guardianship of one of Verona's star attractions is striking. A privilege conferred by inheritance maybe, but one that evidently brings with it an old-fashioned – one might almost say Roman – sense of civic duty. Looking after a garden of this age is a balancing act between satisfying the imaginary demands of posterity and managing the demanding expectations of the present.

Over platters of crusty bread, anchovies and butter, the idea of a conference is mooted. But, Niccolò demurs, is that a good idea? By the second glass of prosecco it has been generally agreed that it is a very good idea indeed, and everyone has promised to write a paper. The subject will not be the funerary steles and epigraphs

themselves, but the person of Agostino Giusti, the Renaissance polymath to whom the family's eminence is owed. Whereas others in sixteenth-century Verona saw Roman remains as convenient quarries for building materials, Agostino Giusti saw ancient artefacts worth preserving. The Giardino Giusti was created out of his need for an appropriate space in which to display his growing collection of stone inscriptions. From these small beginnings as a private museum, and especially out of its association with Verona's Accademia Filarmonica, the garden rapidly developed into an important cultural hub.

Nobody now comes to the Giardino Giusti to admire its Roman epigraphs. Why would they? Nowadays we have museums for that, and in fact Verona is home to one of Europe's oldest public museums, the Museo Lapidario Maffei, which absorbed some of Agostino's collection in the eighteenth century. There, each carefully selected artefact is labelled and explained, enabling us painstakingly to build a mental picture of past epochs. Echoes of the world of our ancestors reach us through the appraisal of objects and images, guided by the written word of curators and scholars that explain to us what we are seeing.

But what did Agostino Giusti want his visitors to see or to experience in his garden? How exactly did he adorn those green spaces in order that they enhance the beauty and interest of his stones? And how was it that a vanished civilisation found its pagan virtues being proclaimed a thousand years after the edict of Constantine in the hush of a well-tended grove? And why then did later visitors fail to notice Agostino's carefully arranged Latin epigraphs at all, raving instead about the 'elegant conceits' to be found in the grotto (Thomas Coryat, 1611); the flower-studded lawns which, for richness of colour, put the very heavens to shame (Francesco Pona, 1620); the prodigious height of the cypress tree (John Evelyn, 1645); the labyrinth's fiendish intricacy (Charles de Brosses, 1740). Even Goethe was more sensitive to the plant forms he found growing there in 1786 than the archaeological evidence of human grandeur.

It's a question that goes to the heart of that activity known as

garden visiting, and one that the Giusti owners pose seriously and persistently. What are today's visitors looking for in a plot of land that has been open to the public (or at least to educated gentlemen) since before Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet*? What emotions are elicited in them, what needs satisfied? To what aspects of our nature does a garden speak, and does that differ according to whether the garden is ancient or modern, restored or modified?

Brother Leopoldo, prior of the Redentore monastery on the Giudecca in Venice, adjusts the brown sleeve of his summer habit and raises his arm in the direction of the olive grove, 'When I was a novice, we used to have our football pitch there,' he chuckles. Surprise at the news that the olive trees – which had seemed like an homage to the Umbrian homeland of St Francis – are actually a relatively recent addition is compounded by confused images of sandaled feet and tonsured pates executing tackles and headers. So this hallowed acre, solemnly consecrated to *ora et labora* and laid out by Palladio himself, served also as a playground for high-spirited Capuchin monks in the late twentieth century. Does this change anything? Is it less of a garden for that?

Even our idea of what constitutes a garden can shift subtly over time or alter dramatically as the result of a fresh experience. On the island of Torcello in the Venetian lagoon, the margins of fragile land emerge and submerge with the ebb and flow of the tide. Wiry sea lavender and fleshy glasswort anchor the clayey silt with a tenacity only matched by those first refugees from the mainland who took refuge here before founding a city on some islets further west at Rivus Altus, the future Rialto. The Casa Museo Andrich is not so much a garden as a glimpse of the very roots of Venice's being, an encounter with her ecology that is further enriched by the works of two artists who made their home here in the last century. It seems an appropriate spot from which to contemplate the imperilled existence of the Queen of the Adriatic: rising sea levels, gigantic cruise ships and heavy-handed flood barriers may not be out of mind, but here they are out of sight.

Perhaps our relationship with gardens may be seen as part of a constant quest for a place in which the spirit is quiet enough to

contemplate yet excited enough to philosophise. In which case wouldn't it be interesting to explore the reasons why this is so? And do so with a lively group of enquiring, garden-minded people, such as fellow readers of this journal?

A HORTUS exploration of the gardens of Venice and the Veneto was led some years ago by David Wheeler and Helena Attlee. Since then, some gardens will have suffered neglect, others will have undergone (one hopes) sensitive restoration or at least careful maintenance. Most will not in any case have changed as much as we and the world around us. A number will be well worth revisiting, but there are others that, as Georgina Masson noted more than fifty years ago, are among those off-the-beaten track treasures in which Italy – a country that is simultaneously the least known and the best known in Europe – abounds.

So a new Venetian journey is now in preparation, one that leads from a rose-covered bower on the Grand Canal to a Venetian neo-Gothic villa and park on an island in Lake Garda, from the rigours of a monastic vegetable plot on the Giudecca to a Doge's farm on the *terrafirma* where English Victorian values ruled the flowerbeds but more unruly passions held sway indoors. Alongside old favourites like Padua's sixteenth-century botanic garden which has been recently and wonderfully enriched by state-of-the-art glasshouses, there are new entries such as Villa Fracanzan Piovene in the Vicenza countryside, an ensemble which retains the baroque propensity to surprise and entertain with panache. The gardens will outlast us: they only ask that we see ourselves reflected in them.

The 2018 HORTUS garden tour of Venice and the Veneto
will run between 22 and 27 April.

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