

The flower of the Italian Renaissance

Villa Lante, Bagnaia, Italy

After 40 years, George Plumptre finally realises his dream and sees for himself Vignola's masterpiece in the Cimini Hills

WHEN on holiday in Italy recently, we visited the Villa Lante garden. For me, this was a pilgrimage; no, stronger than that, it was the consummation of a love affair I had been conducting from a distance for nearly 40 years.

I first read about the Villa Lante in the late 1970s, in one of two books on Italian Renaissance gardens. The first, by Georgina Masson, is large and comprehensive; the second, by Sir George Sitwell, is slim and selective. Both are seminal works, notable for their affection for their subject, which shines out from every page.

A few years later, I studied the Villa Lante closely for various books I was writing. I discovered that its creator, Jacopo Vignola, was a brilliant, but shadowy figure, like so many craftsmen of the Italian Renaissance, and I found out about the intricate combination of design, architecture and engineering Vignola executed for his client, the rich Cardinal Gambara, beginning in 1566.

At the same time, I unearthed hints of why the garden has achieved its particular reputation. This rests not only on its tangible qualities, but on the sense that it is a place with soul, with a character that's matured quietly through nearly 500 years.

It is a creation as iconic as Brunelleschi's dome or Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling,

That maturity has come with an ageing process from which the trappings of modernity are kept mercifully at bay. As you turn up a narrow side street in the small town of Bagnaia, which leads uphill to a small parking area, you have no idea that you are approaching one of the 10 or so most revered gardens in the world, a creation that is as much an iconic masterpiece of the Renaissance as Brunelleschi's dome of the Florence Duomo or Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling.

There are almost no signs. You approach through a gateway to a small courtyard with, to one side, a booth in which a polite, elderly man dispenses tickets. Next door, a small room, with a sign over the door proudly pronouncing 'Bar. Ristorante', contains two drinks-dispensing machines. But then, beyond, the great semi-circular Fontana del Pegaso, with monumental figures and splashing jets, gives a taste of what lies ahead.

The River Gods fountain, with recumbent figures representing the Tiber and the Arno, makes a dramatic centrepiece with the unique water table in front



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Vignola used a sloping site on the edge of the rolling Cimini hills to create a garden that descends through a series of brilliantly arranged terraces and ornamental features. One unique feature of the Villa Lante, which adds inestimably to its charm, is the fact that the garden is not the adjunct to a villa or palazzo. Instead, two elegant matching *casini* are an integral part of the design, positioned on either side of the central vista, overlooking the Quadrato, the broad square parterre with its central Fontana dei Mori that fills the lowest level.

Flowering plants would provide the links through an English garden, but at Villa Lante, Vignola made natural springwater the continuous, animated link from top to bottom. Fed from hillside springs above, it flows without a break and with irrepressible virtuosity from top to bottom, through successive fountains, cascades and rills. Today, the water is as cold and crystal clear as it would have been nearly five centuries ago, when the hydraulic skills of Vignola's companion, Tomasso Ghinucci, first brought it coursing through the garden.

6 You sense the relentless decay of age is, at times, only just kept at bay ;

Although the architectural features of the Villa Lante are peerless, Vignola also appreciated the importance of light and shade and how these play with movement over the details of stonework and water. He knew that his client, Gambara, was a particular lover of Nature, and so the garden's parkland setting and the trees within were of particular significance. Venerable evergreen holm oaks (*Quercus ilex*, a Mediterranean native), cast pools of shade with their great cooling canopies and their presence is integral to the garden's restfulness.

Restful and, at the same time, romantically melancholic: you sense the relentless decay of age is, at times, only just kept at bay. When we visited, the central fountain flanked by monumental figures of river gods was undergoing restoration and was thus inaccessible and covered in scaffolding.

As I contemplated the challenge of fending off the constant natural ageing that a garden faces, I compared it to the situation of the other most exquisite Renaissance masterpiece we sought out, Perugino's small

Above the River Gods, water tumbles down the famous *catena d'acqua* or 'chain of water', which incorporates Cardinal Gambara's heraldic crayfish claws

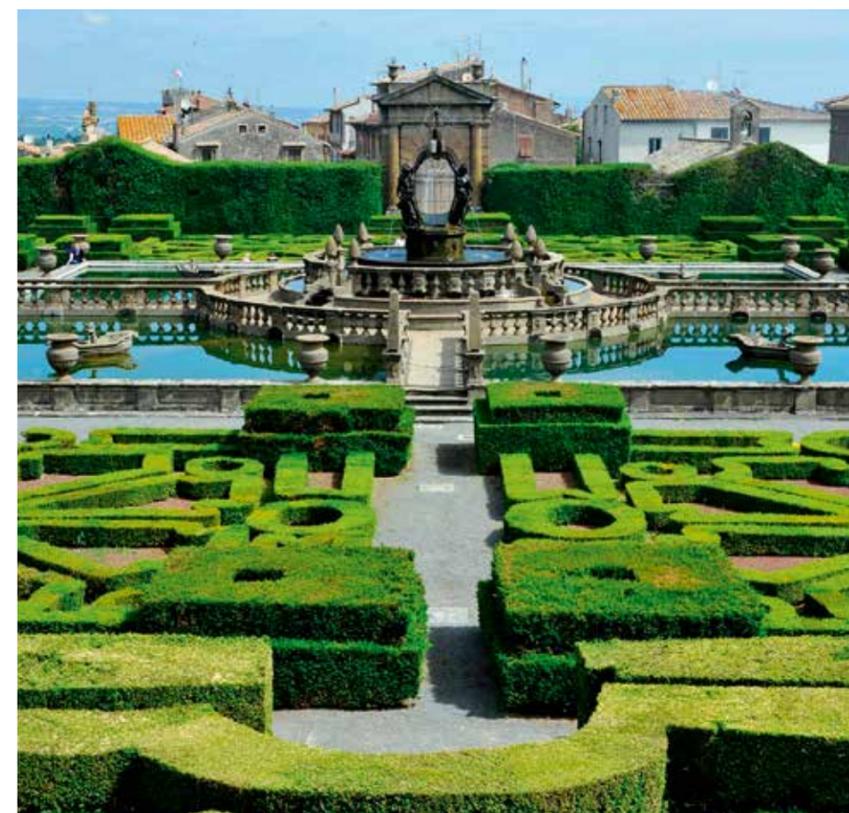
Valerio Mei/Getty

painting *L'Annunciazione*, on display in Perugia's National Gallery of Umbria. Secure in regulated conditions, this tiny gem will survive for centuries; for the Villa Lante, the future is not so secure.

I was delighted to remind myself that my hero Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe, a Modernist with a deep admiration for the Classical tradition, made an erudite comparison between the work of Perugino and Vignola in his seminal book, *The Landscape of Man*: 'The ideals of classical space composition were brought to a climax in painting by Perugino and Raphael, in landscape architecture by Vignola... The search was for the perfection in divine harmony between man and the universe, of which man assumed himself to be the centre. Christ giving the keys to St Peter, painted by Perugino in 1503 for the Sistine Chapel, shows the same principles of composition as the Villa Lante at Bagnaia designed by Vignola in 1566... Both have evolved from an outer landscape, the one by suggestion from the sky, the other from the woods by water intricacies such as the fish rill... From order displayed to order concealed, the Villa Lante was an exercise in geometry—a house divided into two parts, each a square.'

Jellicoe alludes to the broader Renaissance context to which the Villa Lante makes such a profound contribution and confirms this is a garden that is far more than just a sum ➤

Francesco Tommasinelli/AGE Fotostock; Mijl Loupe/UTG/AGE Fotostock



The garden's lowest level is the broad, square Quadrato, an immaculate parterre that centres on a fountain decorated with bronze figures of Moors by Giambologna



A detail of the River God Arno, overgrown with moss, showing the Mannerist strength of the garden's sculptures and ornaments

of its exquisitely arranged parts. The quality of craftsmanship, even at a distance of more than 500 years since its inception, is clear at every turn: boldly carved stonework; sculptures by distinguished artists; and the complex arrangement of successive fountains and water features. Yet this is also the embodiment of Renaissance Humanism, of man's relationship with the surrounding landscape and an illustration of his ability to enhance it.

Today, however, the light hand of human management contributes inestimably to the rewards of a visit. One knows that if the garden were in Britain, there would be endless trappings of tourism fame: a visitor centre, a coach park, a shop, a restaurant and hoards of people. Instead, here in the middle of Italy, you are able to sense the same undisturbed romanticism that has captivated visitors for half a millennium.

As Sitwell wrote in his little classic *On The Making of Gardens*, published in 1909: 'Much there is of mystery in the garden, of subtle magic, of strange, elusive charm which must be felt but cannot wholly be understood.' What a privilege to enjoy this spellbinding place in undisturbed tranquillity and to be able to share its incomparable, if slightly faded, beauty.

The garden of Villa Lante is open regularly through the year

George Plumptre is chief executive of the National Gardens Scheme

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COUNTRY LIFE Italian tour: Gardens of Rome and Lazio, featuring Ninfa and Villa d'Este, May 5–9, 2019

Join host George Plumptre, one of the longest-serving contributors to COUNTRY LIFE, on a tour timed to coincide with the magical weeks of early summer in Italy, when roses bloom and nightingales sing day and night. We will explore some of the most famous Renaissance gardens, including Villa Lante in Bagnaia (*right*) and Villa d'Este, as well as enjoying exclusive visits to lesser-known gardens of the 20th century. We are also fortunate to be invited to lunch at two private villas.

We start the tour in Rome at the Hotel De Russie, a Rocco Forte hotel, with interiors created by his sister, Olga Polizzi. Located between the Spanish Steps and Piazza del Popolo, a tranquil retreat amid a vibrant city, this enduringly glamorous hotel successfully blends modern design with Classical architecture. With its own beautiful secret garden, Hotel De Russie attracts artists, writers, world travellers and garden enthusiasts.

The second hotel is La Posta Vecchia, a 17th-century *palazzo* built on the foundations of a Roman villa overlooking the Mediterranean and later the home of John Paul Getty, who filled it with Italian art treasures. La Posta Vecchia balances the Baroque exuberance of a Fellini film with artful elegance.

The tour price of £4,390 includes return flights from London, all garden entries, most meals, two nights at the Hotel De Russie and two nights at La Posta Vecchia.

For more information or to book, telephone Boxwood Tours on 01341 241717, email mail@boxwoodtours.co.uk or visit www.boxwoodtours.co.uk



One of the upper fountains, which has been deliberately given a grotto-like appearance by rough stonework and cave-like arches