

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



Valerio Mei/Getty

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.

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