

The Pincio in Antiquity

The Villa Medici is situated on Pincio Hill. This hill does not belong to the seven major Roman hills, because it is outside the *pomoerium*, the sacred wall of antique Rome. However it does belong to the perimeter of the Aurelian walls built between 270 and 273 A.D. The Villa stands where the gardens of **Lucius Lucinius Lucullus** were. He was a Roman general and favourite of Sylla. Between 66 and 63 B.C. he built a major villa that covered the entire area between via Salaria Vetus and the current northern path of Pincio. As reported by Plutarch he welcomed Cicero and Pompeius.

Valerius Asiaticus was twice consul and the first man from Narbonnean Gaul to be admitted into the Senate of Rome. During the Claude period he erected a large terrace garden, with a broad and semicircular nymphaeum dominating the current domain of Trinità dei Monti. This chamber was topped by a temple dedicated to Fortune. **Messalina**, Claude's wife, coveted the domain and overwhelmed Valerius Asiaticus with calumnious charges. Under her influence, Claude pushed Valerius Asiaticus to suicide. Several years later, Messalina, who became the ruler of the domain, died under the blows of soldiers sent by her own husband.

The villa of Lucullus remained imperial property until the time of Trajan, who apparently preferred the gardens of Sallust, on the eastern part of Pincio. During the third century A.D. the domain was occupied by the patrician family of the Achilii, who gave it away to the Pincii during the fourth century. Interestingly the current name of the hill comes from this very family, whose history is still little known.

Emperor Aurelius built a wall around Rome during the third century to protect it from Barbarian invasions. It still surrounds the Villa. Nevertheless the wall fell under the troops of Alaric that invaded Rome in 410 A.D through the Salarian gate, located on Pincio. Then Emperor Honorius (395-423 A.D.) built his palace in the gardens. **Belisarius** kept his camp there when he defended Rome against the Ostrogoth Vitigès in 537 A.D. At the fall of the Roman Empire, the place was abandoned because of its suburban location.

The Renaissance Palace

We only have little information about the history of the Pincio hill between the 6th and 16th century. When **Cardinal Ricci of Montepulciano** purchased it in 1564 it was a tiny building called **Casina Crescenzi**, bearing the name of its former owner, and some antique ruins such as the Temple of Fortune. Cardinal Ricci had a palace built by Florentine architect **Nanni di Baccio Bigio**, at the current location of the Villa Medici. When he died in 1574, the construction had not finished yet.

Ferdinando de' Medici (1549-1609), cardinal at the age of 13, collector and sponsor, purchased it in 1576 and asked the **Florentine architect Ammannati** to build a palace worth the prestige of the Medici family.

Devoted to Antiquity, like many of his contemporaries, Ferdinando conceived his Villa representing a museum. He added a gallery where he presented his collection of antique masterpieces. He inserted in the facade a series of antique bas-reliefs. Even the garden was designed in the same spirit of staging, like the botanic gardens of Pisa and Florence designed by his father several years before. Numerous rare species were gathered there, amongst antique statues. Further south, ruins of the **Temple of Fortune** were overlaid by a belvedere from where one's sight could embrace the major part of the city and surrounding countryside.

Far from sight a small pavilion was built ordered by Ferdinando de' Medici inside one of the old towers of the Aurelius wall. It had a sight on the Roman countryside and was composed of a main room and a smaller one with a narrow balcony. The recent restoration of those rooms have highlighted a beautiful decoration from the workshop of Jacopo Zucchi, painted in 1576-1577. It represented a grapevine populated by a multitude of birds. The lobby was decorated by Zucchi, student of Vasari who painted grotesques and views from the Villa at different times, as well as allegories and scenes from Esopo's fables. In 1587 Cardinal Ferdinando de' Medici was called to Florence to replace Francois the First on the throne of Tuscany. He left the decoration of the Villa partly unfinished. The most precious statues and the comprehensive set of the collections were moved to Florence. The Lorraines, heirs of the Great Duchy of Tuscany sold the Villa in 1803.

The Villa Medici from Balthus to today

In 1961 **the painter Balthus** was appointed director of the Villa Medici, the French Academy at Rome. He launched a vast campaign of restoration in the spirit of Renaissance. Casts of statues were put in the gardens, like the group of the Niobides. Frescoes from cardinal Ricci's period were restored after having been revealed following many previous washings. Finally, the creation of exhibition halls expressed the will to cultural openness of the Villa formulated by Culture minister André Malraux.

Archaeological diggings led several times by the French School at Rome generated major discoveries about the antique period. Therefore, it has been possible to comprehensively explore the ruins of Roman emperor Honorius' palace (early Vth century) buried beneath the piazzale (square) in front of the loggia.

The Loggia

The facade of the Villa opens on the gardens that inspired numerous masterpieces such as engravings from Pinaresi, imaginary views by Claude Lorrain, as well as Norblin and Duprè's painting representing the *Party organized by Chateaubriand for the Archduchess Helen of Russia* (1829) or the photographs by the Alinari brothers. The beautiful columns of cipolin and Egyptian granite frame the rich polychrome inlay of marble placed in front of the fountain of Mercury. It is a copy of a sculpture by Gaimbologna currently at the museum of Bargello in Florence. Two lions evoke both Florence, Leo X and Ferdinando de' Medici, who was born under the sign of Leo. The spheres under the legs of the lions on the banister refer to the arms of the Medici family.

The Grand Salon

The Grand Salon was designed during the cardinal de' Medici time to be a place of celebrations and receptions. Its windows open on a unique panorama on the Eternal City. From the 19th century to Balthus it housed the library of the Academy. Balthus wished to restore the Renaissance-like genuine spirit of the Lounge. He moved the library and cleaned the paintings to restore the essential green colour of the Lounge. This colour is now called "A la Balthus" because it is a heterogenic tint that thrills visitors. The Great Lounge was later decorated with tapestries from the Gobelins workshop brought to Rome in 1726. They previously decorated the Mancini palace, the former directorate of the French Academy of Rome during the presidency of the painter Nicolas Vleughels (1725-1737). Those Indian-style tapestries represent hunting scenes and animal fights.

The Ferdinando de' Medici Gallery

The Gallery is adjacent to the Lounge suite. It was conceived to show collections of antiques owned by Ferdinando de' Medici. A great number of travellers came from all over Europe to admire his collections. Between 1587 and the end of the 18th century, after his departure, the collections were transferred to Florence. During the 19th century, once the Villa had become the headquarters of the French Academy in Rome, its artists showed their pieces of art in the Gallery of moulding, reproducing antiques from Roman times. Thereafter the Gallery was been divided in three parts, the library and two reception halls, under the Balthus administration.

The Bosco studio

The studio is located under the Bosco terrace. It was represented by Diego Velasquez during the 17th century in a famous painting now in the collection of the Prado museum of Madrid. The Bosco studio was the location of the ephemeral Museum of the Villa Medici, between 1933 and World War II. Later it became Balthus' workshop in the 1960s and 1970s. It is nowadays a well-known exhibition location for contemporary artists.

The Cardinal's bedroom

When he bought the Ricci Palace Cardinal Ferdinand de' Medici asked Jacopo Zucchi to decorate his apartments above a loggia he just enlarged. The apartments are composed of three rooms which open to the piazzale and the finely decorated gardens. The first room is the Chamber of the Elements, the second one is called the Chamber of the Muses, and the third one is the Chamber of Jupiter's' loves. Cosimo III, who considered those decorations too licentious, had them destroyed by fire during his journey to Rome in 1700. The Cardinal Ferdinando de' Medici slept in the Chamber of the Muses. On the typical Florentine ceiling are painted women carrying their symbols. They are surrounded by square and hexagonal paintings. Those women are the muses of the neo-platonic tradition ruling the movement of each planet. They are all surrounded by a frieze presenting the history of Hercules and Minerva, prominent gods inspiring the horoscope of Ferdinando de' Medici. His father Cosimo I is told to have seen in his birth's horoscope signs of royal destiny. As Ferdinando was the fifth son of Cosimo I his father decided to hide the document predicting the death of his four first sons. Indeed three of them died very young. In Rome, Ferdinando, who knew the document, decided to make it self-fulfilling by showing it through the ceiling of his suite. Undoubtedly he sought the Saint See. In 1587 when his elder brother Francesco I died, he replaced him at the head of the Great Duchy of Tuscany. A very providential death that Ferdinand might have taken part in planning.

A Florentine Villa in Rome, by Cécile Beuzelin

From the *vigna* to the villa

Pincio Hill did not lose the prestige it had gained in the Antiquity, during the Renaissance. It was a peaceful area covered with gardens. The "Eighth Hill" of Rome offered a breathtaking view of the city. Indeed it was still flushed with antique buildings at the beginning of the 16th century. Nero's tomb, the temples of Fortune and Hope and Jupiter's nymphaeum among others attracted enlightened collectors who wished to discover the ancients' contemplative way of life, the otium described by Horace and Pliny. It is for instance the case with Marcello Crescenzi, owner of what seemed to be the original building of the current villa. He bought the site circa 1543 and asked the Florentine architect Nanni di Baccio Bigio to build a casino with a small tower, corresponding nowadays to a section of the northern aisle of the villa.

The Villa of Cardinal Ricci's and its architects: Nanni di Baccio Bigio and Giacomo della Porta

Cardinal Giovanni Ricci da Montepulciano bought the Vigna Crescenzi on May 30, 1564. At the time he was one of the greatest builders in Rome. He had built the prefecture of the pontifical House (1550), a villa in Frascati (1551) and had enlarged and had finished the building of a palace via Giulia, currently the palace Ricci-Sachetti (1552-1557). This palace was decorated with frescoes by the Florentine artist Francesco Salviati. For those architectural projects he called Nanni di Baccio Bigio, a rival of Michelangelo and a famous villa builder. Nanni learnt his profession mainly on the site of San Pietro, under the orders of Antonio da Sangallo, from whom he learnt his architectural touch. He fancied masonry walls with reinforced angles, heavy cornices, loggias with columns and Doric and Tuscan orders. From 1564 Nanni started to work on the Villa Ricci. He followed the initial structure of the Casino Crescenzi, such as the northern wall. He entirely modified the lower levels and built a staircase. On the city side, he lowered the level of the ground, creating a place that connected the building with Trinità dei Monti. In 1567 an expansion to the south revealed numerous antique masterpieces: the path to the Aqua Vergine, a vaulted cistern instated for domestic use, but also two stairs that transformed the villa's facade to make it look more like the Farnese palace. From the beginning the villa seemed to be conceived to present an austere and medieval facade on the street while showing an open facade on the gardens, thanks to the loggia. When Nanni died in 1568 it seemed that the architect Giacomo della Porta continued the work, finishing the loggia, which explains the choice of an ionic order, reinterpreted with a small *mascherone*, very much inspired by those of Michelangelo.

Cardinal Ferdinando de' Medici and the art of resorting between Florence and Rome

In 1563 Ferdinando de' Medici, son of Cosimo I de' Medici and Eleanor of Toledo, was appointed cardinal by Pope Pio IV and became Lord of the Church of Santa Maria in Dominica in Rome two years later. It had been a former charge of his cousin Giovanni, Pope Leo X. Ferdinand then settled in the Florence palace, at the Field of Mars, but encountered the same issues as his cousin had at the time. Leo X indeed wanted to construct a monumental palace that would have an opening on the Navonna place by gathering several properties of the family. The project being abandoned, the pope started the construction of the Villa Madama. This new plan was to be interrupted by the death of his architect, Raphael, in 1520, then by his own death one year later. Ferdinando bought the Villa Medici from the heirs of Cardinal Ricci on January 9, 1576. It was probably because he had faced several failures on trying to buy other properties in Rome. But this choice was not randomly made. Ricci was born in Montepulciano, Tuscany, and made an alliance with Cosimo I de' Medici during the Sienna war. He also initiated the appointment of Ferdinando as cardinal. He soon became his friend and protector in Rome, while teaching him art antique research. Ferdinand became a connoisseur and frequented a lot of artists and collectors such as the sculptor Benvenuto Cellini, the artist and antique collector Gherardo Spiri. He also knew Bartolomeo Ammannati, whom he appointed as his personal architect. Starting in autumn 1577, he himself negotiated the purchase of the collection of antiques Della Valle-Capranica to present it in his Roman villa on the Pincio hill. He reserved an area to show the bas-reliefs and built, on the southern side, the gallery to present the statues. The bas-reliefs were not added to the facade before 1584, because of complicated negotiations with the Capranica family.

The Florentine tradition of the Villa

The Florentine style of the Villa was a strong feature of Ferdinando's childhood. He saw his father restoring the Villa di Castello. The link between the Medici family and suburban villas is deeply rooted in the family's history. The Medici made their fortune with land depending from the villas of

Trebbio and Caffagiolo, in the Mugello area close to Florence. Because of their isolated locations those villas had a strong defensive aspect. They are often designed with a frame of heavy fortifications with few and tiny openings. They also include a main tower to watch remote areas and potential threats. The Villa di Careggi in Florence was also in Ferdinando's mind. It was indeed the headquarters of the Neoplatonic Academy created by Cosimo the Ancient and Marsilio Ficino, and then continued under Lorenzo the Magnificent. As for the Villa Petraia in Florence, offered to him by his father Cosimo I in 1566, Ferdinand had it decorated by the engineer David Fortini. He was the son-in-law of the famous engineer and sculptor from Florence Niccolò Tribolo, whom he worked with to design the gardens of the neighbouring villa in Castello. In 1570 Ferdinand himself supervised the works of the gardens and imported lots of sculptures to Rome from the land of Petraia. His passion for Medici Florentine villas was also expressed through his order to the Flemish painter Giusto Utens to decorate his apartments in the villa of Arminimo. There were the famous symbols present of all properties of the Medici in Florence. Therefore it is the Villa Medici that is much closer to Medici Florentine Villas than suburban Roman ones. For instance, the fortified and heavy aspect of the villa of Petraia is also present on the street facade of the Villa Medici. The garden facade is presented in the same spirit of sobriety through the ornamental decoration only animated by the movements of bas-reliefs and antique statues. Those Florentine features are mainly the result of deliberate choices to use local labour to stamp in Rome the presence of the Medici.

The Cardinal's project: architecture and the decor

Starting with the purchase of the Villa Ricci, Ferdinand called Bartolomeo Ammanati to Rome in 1576, the long-time protégé of the Medici family. His intervention on the construction led by Nanni and Della Porta consisted in creating a ground-floor entrance to connect the villa with the city and the urban landscape. To do so, the architect pierced a monumental gate of Doric order opening on a large bay with a fountain. Still at the ground floor he created a vestibule, a t-formed staircase, enlarged the one on the northern side, and built its symmetric on the southern side.

The final project was created by the painter Jacopo Zucchi in the stanzio dell'Aurora. It also provided a terrace system in front of the villa leading to a real place with a fountain but that part was not realized. On the garden side, Ammanati entirely transformed the core of the edifice. He increased the height of the loggia and transformed the entablature by opening a central bay with a fully circling arch creating a pattern surrounding the two bays. Above the loggia he built a new floor with three large rooms previously presented: the Chamber of the Elements, the Chamber of the Muses and the Chamber of Jupiter's Loves. On the top floor he designed a series of rooms opening on the city through tiny openings and added two other rooms connected to the roof by a corridor. It allowed circulation between the two sides of the villa and embraced the sight of the city. For the internal decoration, the Cardinal once again called upon another Florentine artist, the painter Jacopo Zucchi, and his team. The Cardinal's room was started to be decorated in 1584-1585, with a complex cosmologic iconography. In the southern apartments the iconography became more openly political and referred to the dynasty and territory of the Medici. They are also composed of three rooms. First is the Chamber of the Corporations where the main Medici mottos were presented. Secondly stands the Cosimo I room with the territories conquered by him, and the third one, is the Chamber of the Ancient Florentine Domain, with an alternation of soldiers holding arms of the four districts of Florence and its suburban area.

The gardens and the *Studiolo*

When Cardinal Ferdinando de' Medici bought the Villa, the framework of the gardens had already been designed. Nanni di Baccio Bigio completed it for Cardinal Ricci, with two parts. The northern part was devoted to sixteen squares while the southern one to the Bosco. To finish this work,

Ferdinand called upon David Fortini from Florence in order to raise an artificial hill on the Bosco, following the shape of an Etruscan tumulus. This reference had been prominent during the receptions for the election of Pope Leo X Medici in Rome in 1513. Several decors referred to the Etruscan origins of the family and the concord between Lazio and Tuscany: The meetings of Janus and Saturn, Horatius Cocclès and the bridge, and Mucius Scaevola in front of the Etruscan king Lars Porsenna. Those iconographic themes are also present in the villa Lante al Gianicolo, at the Siena Baldassare Turini, datary of Leon X. Moreover the installation of that tumulus on a Roman temple is another way to signify the power of Tuscans on Rome. Ferdinando added to the gardens a great number of other references to Florentine art. We see a clear reference to the Petraia in the organisation of the squares, especially in the cover of the aisles by pergolas now vanished. Ferdinand planted rare species and created a menagerie, as his father and brother did at the Pitti palace. Thus the cardinal built a small pavilion on the Aurelius wall, allowing him to go in and out of the villa through stairs leading out of the city. The decor painted by Zucchi and his workshop showed in the main room a decor of pergola that represents vegetal and animal species, precisely detailed in the style of a herbarium. This decor calls to mind the one in Cosimo I's office in the lordship palace of Florence. This pavilion of Ferdinando is composed of another room, the Chamber of Dawn. At the centre of the vault, there is a painting of an allegory of Dawn surrounded by winds presented to symbolise the four seasons, under the walls of the vault. Fewer than three of them are mounted medallions of views of the villa at different steps of its construction, and the cardinal's comprehensive plan. The whole is framed by a decorum of grotesques mixing imaginary architectures, monsters and the arms of Cardinal Medici. The Villa Medici is the brightest sign of the Medici family's presence in Rome. Its decor and gardens make it an exceptional symbol of Florentine art *savoir-faire*, as encouraged by Ferdinando de' Medici at the 15th century. The construction of the villa was also deeply linked to the cardinal's political ambitions, as he sought, like his cousins, papal election and the restoration of the Medici's golden age in Rome.

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