



History Relived

An Italian doctor recreates the
splendor of a Medici villa.



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Photography by Massimo Listri



During the Renaissance and Baroque periods in Italy, popes, kings and grand dukes spent large sums of money to create magnificent, yet ephemeral, decorations to celebrate milestone events such as births, deaths and marriages. Large plaster statues, archways, columns and paintings transformed cityscapes to impressive effect, only to be dismantled soon after.

The Villa Lappoggi, a Medici villa outside Florence, is a more permanent result of such short-term decorative planning. When Cardinal Francesco Maria de' Medici acquired the building at the end of the 17th century, he called upon architect Antonio Ferri to expand and decorate this superbly situated building. Drawing up plans for both the structure and gardens, Ferri presented the cardinal with an estimate of approximately 80,000 scudi. But the cardinal, viewing the project as a leisure-time retreat and nothing more, capped the budget at 30,000 scudi, forcing Ferri to guarantee his "superficial" work for a mere 18 years. Fortunately for the villa's present owner, the redecoration and restructuring of the building was more substantial than perceived, and today at least parts of the grand structure still recall the heyday of Medici sumptuousness. (Unfortunately, nothing remains of the splendid garden, captured in Zocchi's 1744 print.)

The villa's current splendor is also a credit to its present owner, Dr. Angelo Sordi, who has been lovingly bringing his corner of the building back to life. Sordi first heard about the villa in 1971 when one of his patients mentioned that her husband, a real estate agent, was about to put part of a Medici villa on the market. Instantly intrigued, Sordi drove through the olive groves and vineyards to visit the villa that afternoon. "I had no intention of buying a country home, much less such a grand dwelling," he confesses. "I actually was more interested in contemporary architecture and had begun to put together a collection of 20th-century furniture." Yet by the following morning Sordi had bought the ground floor of Villa di Lappoggi, and thus changed the course of his life. (The rest of the villa is divided into other apartments as well.) For the next three decades, his pursuits of finding suitable objects to fill his villa have been vital, fascinating and challenging experiences—both intellectually and emotionally.

"When I acquired the Villa, it was in a state of total abandon," he says. "Although the portion that I began to restore, Cardinal de' Medici's summer apartments, was the most important, it had been sadly neglected for decades." Lack of electricity and plumbing left the rooms gloomy and in disrepair. However, the powerful history springing from the place,



The entrance hall in Sordani's villa houses an 18th-century Florentine architectural model, 17th-century wall frescoes, two 17th-century sculptures of apostles on the bookshelf and a 17th-century Florentine book stand. In a corner of the portrait room, a statue of St. John the Baptist (facing), attributed to Pietro Bernini, and a Roman Baroque desk.



A view from the main gallery into the adjoining room is dominated by a Flemish tapestry in the background, and a stone statue attributed to Giovanni Caccini. An 18th-century Florentine architectural model (facing, left). The ballroom (facing, right) is lavishly decorated with a Florentine tapestry, Tuscan Luigi XIV console and 17th-century terra-cotta sculpture.



the beauty and surprising character of the volumes of the great halls spoke to Sordi, who felt an urgent need to restore the villa's soul as well as its foundations. "The Medicis' home had the power, even in its sorry state, to stir in me that fine intoxication that lifts one out of everyday life."

The villa has had many owners over the years. The property passed from the Medicis' hands to the Gheradesca family until 1875, when it was bought by sculptor Giovanni Dupré. It was afterwards acquired by a winemaker who used it as a warehouse, painting over most of the frescoes. "While the restructuring of the villa itself is a slow and ongoing process, I immediately began work to bring the frescoes, covered by whitewash, back to light," Sordi says.

These hidden frescoes were commissioned by the cardinal from some of Florence's most important decorative painters. Most were executed circa 1703 by Andrea Landini, Giovanni Cinqui, Pier Dandini and Alessandro Gherardini. The grand architectural backgrounds in the Grand Salone, known as *inquadratura*, were carried out by Rinaldo Botti. Many of the frescoes, such as the battle scenes by Dandini, still are framed by ornate, gilded stucco work. The quality and pageantry of the decorations inspired Sordi to fill the rooms with equally brilliant objects.

"I knew that I couldn't recreate the rooms in an historically accurate way," Sordi explains. The original furnishings commissioned by the cardinal had long since vanished. A frescoed Annunciation, attributed to Alessandro Gherardini, in the bedroom indicates where an ornate bed would have been





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In the bedroom, a Flemish tapestry hangs on the back wall, while frescoes by Pier Dandini decorate the perimeter. On the right is a 17th-century painting by San Giovanni Battista depicting St. John the Baptist in the desert. A corner view of the "Room of the Seasons" (facing) features a painting of David and Goliath by Domenico Passignano, a series of 17th-century medallions by Giuseppe Brocetti and terra-cotta bust by Plamontini.



positioned. Yet the richly carved and gilded furnishings that documents attest to are no more. "I decided that while I couldn't possibly turn back time, I could at least revive the spirit of these rooms by carefully selecting furniture, sculptures and paintings that recalled the rarefied atmosphere of the Medici court.

"I began collecting 17th- and 18th-century works soon after I bought Lappoggi," he continues. "At that time, the early '70s, works from the 16th century were totally out of my price range, yet [pieces from] the later centuries, especially Baroque art, were still somewhat affordable." Frequenting local auctions, as well as those in Milan and Rome, he began to fill the great halls. "Although sculpture was particularly difficult to find, I felt myself drawn to this medium," Sordi says. And the rooms are in fact animated by a wide array of 17th-, 18th- and 19th-century marbles, bronzes, and plaster casts and reliefs.

The setting that Sordi has created is formal and far removed from everyday life—yet that is exactly the effect he wanted. "The interruption of the extraordinary into the daily context of life is extremely rare, but welcome and uplifting," he explains. "Often this feeling of transformation is reached through words and literature, music and song. In my case, I attempted to create something intoxicating

Detail of the entrance hall with a marble bust of Cosimo III de' Medici (above left and below). A view of the main salon (above), with frescoes by Rinaldo Botti and two 19th-century majolica sculptures. A family portrait by Flemish painter Van der Tempel and a 19th-century bust of St. Anthony (facing).

through the location of splendid works of art in this magnificent and stirring setting."

The *enfilade* of rooms, including the great hall, formal reception rooms and smaller studies, are stage-like in their dramatic effect. And Sordi, the director of the presentation, is rarely content to let his treasures remain still for long. A 17th-century tapestry, 19th-century plaster cast or small terra-cotta bozetto can inspire him to rearrange the rooms completely, adding yet another rich layer to the already shimmering ensemble.

"Over the years I have slowed down my collecting, and as the years pass the rooms I have created, which once seemed so surprising in their otherness, have become familiar, a part of my daily life," he says. "Still, it never seems like a mere collection to me. Here, I believe, I have recreated a sense of beauty lost, of history re-lived." □



