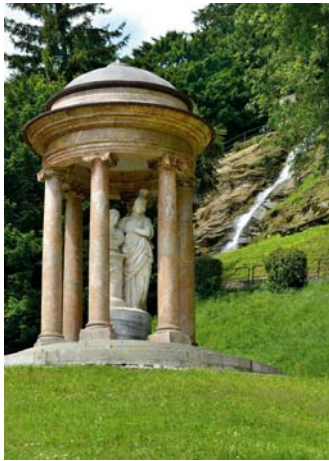




THE GARDENS OF VILLA D'ESTE A short history



Villa d'Este, a name that conjures up centuries of gracious living in the panoramic surroundings of beautiful Lake Como. Once a favourite holiday place for the ancient Romans, today it is known not only as one of the top hotels in the world but its beautiful gardens are drawing interest from all over.

In 1568 a Villa was built by Architect Pellegrino Pellegrini for the Cardinal Tolomeo Gallio. It was considered one of the finest examples of architecture and landscaping at the time. Its fame reached far and wide and in 1615 the villa, named Garrovo after the mountain stream that flows into the lake, was visited by the Sultan of Morocco with the sole purpose of seeing for himself the reported splendour.

It was renamed Villa d'Este when Caroline of Brunswick, Princess of Wales and future Queen of England, purchased the property in 1815 and added typically English, picturesque touches to the beauty of the Gardens.

More than 100 years ago Edith Wharton, in her book "Italian Villas and their gardens" wrote: "Though Queen Caroline (owner of Villa d'Este from 1815 to 1820) anglicised part of the grounds, the main lines of the Renaissance garden still exist!" In the Villa d'Este gardens, visitors now enjoy a blend of different styles, the Italian and the Picturesque, the Baroque and the Romantic.



Examples of Italian garden features are the elaborate parterres and the perspective avenue which ascends from the Nymphaeum to the sculpture of Hercules and Lica.

Marked by a double chain of stone basins where water runs and flanked with tall evergreens, the "Viale dell'Ercole" is one of Villa d'Este gardens' most ancient features.

The Nymphaeum is also called "the Mosaic" since it is decorated with myriads of polychrome pebbles. In 1985 an additional two bass-reliefs were added to the original eight by Sculptor Francesco Somaini, with the themes of "Love" and "Solitude".

Romantic Picturesque elements can be found, for example, in the rocky hill which dominates the main building. Through narrow steps, bridges and passages, surrounded by seemingly wild vegetation, visitors can reach the Temple of Telemachus and the small fortresses - mock fortifications - commissioned in 1808 by one of the past owners of the villa to celebrate her husband's achievements with Napoleon's army in Spain.

The old plane trees (*Platanus occidentalis*) growing between the main building and the Queen's pavilion are undoubtedly the botanical landmark of Villa d'Este. Over the centuries, Queens, Empresses, Cardinals, Aristocrats and Heads of State have contemplated the beauty of Lake Como sat in the refreshing shade offered by these trees.

The inebriating perfume marks the hotel opening in Spring and the closing of the hotel in Autumn. There is jasmine growing on the columns of the terrace porch, two magnificent oleafragrans trees which blossom twice a year.

Apart from the topiary hedges and the bushes of bamboo, azaleas, camellias, oleanders, rhododendrons, hydrangeas, laurocerasus, lauronobilis, phitosporum, there is a variety of rose bushes which adorn the railing of the lake terrace. The trees range from chestnut, magnolia, wisteria, olive, palm, cypress, pine, ilex, privet, medlar and many others.

Daffodils and pansies grow in the flower beds in Spring and they are replaced in Summer by begonias and impatiens.



The tour ends by walking up the water staircase adorned by cypresses and magnolias until you reach the Nymphaeum which contains a dramatic statue of the Hercules maddened with pain, hurling his companion Lica into the water.

Further improvements (including the mysterious construction called Labyrinth) were made from 1815 onwards when the villa was the property of Caroline of Brunswick: Villa Cima, Villa Malakoff, Villa dell'Ercole. In 1846 the trompe l'oeil building Reine d'Angleterre, was named so in honour of Caroline of Brunswick.

Villa d'Este which was the residence of the Russian Empress Maria Feodorovna in 1868, was transformed, together with the Queen's Pavilion, into a hotel in 1873. Later a lake terrace was added.

Tennis courts were built in the park and in 1966 a Sporting Club, which included a pool floating on the lake, and a Restaurant, The Grill, were inaugurated. In 1973 an indoor pool was added and in 1999 the Beauty Center.

The Chef's Garden located on the panoramic slope leading to the fortresses was created in 2004, in response to the Chef's need for fresh vegetables, berries and a variety of herbs used to enhance the flavour of his recipes.

Villa d'Este is a Golden Donor of the FAI, the Italian equivalent of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and it is a member of the Italian association Grandi Giardini Italiani, which gathers the most prestigious and historic properties of our Country.

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