

A GUIDE TO THE GARDEN OF VILLA DA SCHIO COSTOZZA DI LONGARE (VICENZA)

The Garden of Villa da Schio, originally planned by Francesco Trento, has been embellished and beloved (just as the Villa and the “Grotta” standing above) by Giovanni and Alvise da Schio from the beginning of the XIXth to the end of the XXth century, a sure sign of Faith and Love, while Man’s Folly and the Tragedy of War seemed to aim at nothing but leveling and destroying all evidence of the Past.

For information concerning bookings for lodging accommodation and / or requests for the use of the Garden for various open-air activities such as concerts, theatricals etc. please contact :

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The Garden of Villa Trento da Schio at Costozza

The visit to this Garden offers three interesting aspects so closely connected as to be almost inseparable; viz., historical, architectural, and botanical.

So that you should enjoy your visit the more, we suggest the following itinerary: walk up the several flights of steps, reading the description of the statues as you go, until you reach the alley of lime trees at the top.

From that level the architecture of the whole Garden can be appreciated. We advise a short rest to admire the view before going through the Loggia, then descending the Dwarf’s staircase, as far as the circular plot in front of the Villa, walking through the wood to come out, once more, by the two Lions at the entrance.

The Statues and the Architectural Lay-out

The very fine statues on the pillars of the gate represent two Warriors placed on perpetual guard at the entrance. The right hand one, with the Ferramosca flies on his shield, represents Valeria Ferramosca; his opposite on the left, with the Dragon on his shield, represents Valeria’s spouse, Giuseppe Trento.

After passing the Warriors on guard at the gate, you will come to two fierce Lions, sitting opposite each other but turning to face all intruders: a Symbol of Power dear to the ancient Venetian Republic.

The next level brings the visitor to two charming smaller statues, said to represent, on the left, the Merchant origin of the Trento Family's flourishing prosperity, and on the right, their consequently munificent hospitality offered by the Page.

Above this second short flight of steps there is a wide space, often requested for concerts, theatricals and other various open-air activities.

Across this free space the largest flight of steps, named after Diana and Atteone, is reached. The two protagonists, standing on either side of the steps are transfixed in their surprise at this unexpected encounter. Diana, on the right, rises naked from her bath, her amazement not yet turned to anger. Atteone on the left, his quiver by his side, stares in admiration, quite unaware of the cruel fate threatening him (Diana is about to change him into a deer).

Four Nymphs surround Diana and Atteone on either side; one of them plays the cymbal to the delight of the Goddess and her maids. Jove, Diana's father, stands on the left at the far end of the wall, with his eagle at his feet.

At the top of the steps the path passes between two lawns, surrounded by box hedges with a yew tree in the center. The path leads to the first fountain, erroneously named Eve's Fountain. The basin is not very large, but, standing above a few steps, flanked by two watchdogs, the scenery is most effective. A niche, encrusted with stones, evokes a reef sheltering a beautiful Goddess of the Sea from whose breasts spout two jets of clear water. She most likely represents Amphitrite, Neptune's spouse, and mother of Triton and of countless Sea-Nymphs. The poets of antiquity referred to the deep sea as "Amphitrite's breast".

Along the top of the wall, on the right comes Ceres (Goddess of the Harvest) carrying a bunch of wheat sprigs; then comes a boy with a cornucopia, followed by a nymph and finally a large masculine figure wearing a crown of laurel leaves and carrying a cornucopia represents Honor. On the other side of the fountain stands Virtue, an elegant lady richly attired. She is followed by a warrior in Roman guise, a nymph carrying wreaths of flowers and, at the far end of the wall, an unidentified ancient of days with a beard.

Having mounted the steps running either side of Amphitrite we have attained the principal monument of the da Schio Garden: Neptune's Fountain.

There are two lawns, gracefully outlined in stone, each one with a beautifully shaped flower bed in the center, in one of which stands Zephyr, his cheeks puffed out by wind and in the other his wife Flora.

Neptune's Fountain, skillfully shaped in typically 18th century style is the pivot upon which depends the perspective design of the Garden. Neptune, from the top of a reef, brandishes his trident aloft, while a dolphin, entwining its tail about the God's leg, spouts water from its nostrils. Two aviaries enliven the wall on each side of the Fountain. Neptune himself stands at the mouth of a deep cave showing traces of frescoes. This cave with the graceful stone archway at the mouth is the focal point (and now all that remains) of a far older and larger Garden, planned by Francesco Trento in the 16th century.

The importance of this spot arose certainly from the stream which, until quite recently, sprang from the back of the cave to become, forever afterwards, the main theme of the Garden we admire today. Along the top of the wall are four allegorical and mythological statues. Beginning to the right, a king carries the emblems of regality and poetry; next to him comes Hebe, the cup bearer of Olympus; on the far left are Apollo, with his lyre, and a nymph with a wreath of flowers.

Now is the time to climb the small flight of stairs under the creeper, at the far end of the wall to come out onto the alley of lime trees leading into the Loggia.

Half way along this alley from the Belvedere above Neptune's Fountain, the perspective details of the 18th century garden show as if pinned to a drawing board.

It becomes apparent that the central axis of the Garden, that is to say the path running between the box hedges and down the several flights of steps all the way to the gate, is not orthogonal vis-à-vis the center of the Fountain. If it were, the gate would be several meters farther to the right, and consequently the right side of the Garden much narrower than the left, therefore all symmetry would be impossible. To get over the difficulty, Trento's designer decided to slant the axis by means of the clever juxtaposition of acute and obtuse angles, thus creating the illusion of a straight line. As an example of this, we point out the pillars each side of Amphitrites fountain: the edge of the right hand pillar is an acute angle, whereas the left side is an obtuse angle but approaching from below the two pillars appear to be symmetrical.

From this viewpoint you can see the whole Garden and part of the Village of Costozza. On the far right, on the hillside, the entrance to the ancient stone quarries is visible. Observing the face of the rock it is immediately obvious that the stone has been artificially cut, that these are not natural caves but man-made quarries. A number of troglodyte dwellings have recently been restored.

Villa da Schio stands on the left-hand side of the Loggia. The building is closely attached to the hillside in order to make good use of the isothermal currents, cool in summer and warm in winter issuing from the cellars and storerooms below.

This villa was not built according to a single plan: it was begun by the Trento Family in the 16th century as a guest house supplementary to the principle Villa Trento (now Carli) and enlarged bit by bit during the following centuries.

The Loggia, the ceiling and the walls decked with the creeper *Ficus Repens*, stand at the end of the alley of lime trees and oleander bushes. This creeper dates back to the days of the Trento Family. The beautiful dwarf's staircase leads down to a courtyard in which grow palm-trees, agave and cicche, all of which seek the warmth of this sheltered spot favored also by the temperate currents coming from the store-room below the Loggia.

At the foot of this staircase you come to a circular plot in front of the Villa, with a young magnolia tree in the center, and across the drive, you find the entrance of the footpath leading through the wood to the front gate of the garden.

A BRIEF HISTORICAL SUMMARY

The Garden was begun in the XVI Th century and was part of far larger grounds which comprised the many Villas owned by the Trento Family in Costozza.

Francesco Trento intended creating a Garden on several levels, according to the slope of the hillside, but his project was not completed until much later. Of this early design, apart from the various levels, the only surviving element is the stone archway, and the cave behind it, at the back of Neptune's Fountain. The Garden, as it stands today, is a typical example of a formal Italian Garden of the 18 Th century such as Giuseppe Trento and Valeria Ferramosca, who were married at the beginning of that century, conceived it.

The success of the project is due to several favorable circumstances. Costozza lies in a wide amphitheater of ancient limestone quarries, ideal for architects and sculptors.

The Romans exploited these quarries with slave labor. The name derives from the Latin Custodia (= Custody). They left us the immense quarries known as Covoli, from the Latin Cubiculum. Andrea Palladio used the stone of Costozza for his splendid Villas and finally Orazio Marinali (1643-1720) for his statues.

Thanks to the patronage of the Garzadori Family, whose land bordered on the Trento Garden, Orazio Marinali set up his workshop in the smallest of the Villas in the Veneto known ever afterwards as Marinali's cave (La Grotta dei Marinali).

Here the sculptor found an ideal site and the stone necessary for the creation of his statues (in fact, there is a stone quarry beneath Villa Garzadori) with which to people all the Gardens of the Veneto with Gods and Goddesses, Ladies and Cavaliers, Nymphs and Gnomes and Dwarfs. The statues of the Villa Trento da Schio were therefore created on the spot by Marinali and his apprentices.

Count Ottavio Trento, the last of his lineage, died at the age of 83, in 1812. His property in Costozza was divided, according to the terms of his famous Will, into three lots between his cousins Valmarana, Sesso and da Schio. The principal Villa, built by Pizzocaro, was inherited by the Valmarana Family and sold shortly afterwards to Prince d'Arenberg. It now belongs to Carli.

The two Villas inherited by Ludovico da Schio were cut off from the Valmarana Villa by a purposely-erected boundary wall, plainly visible to this day. When Ludovico da Schio, followed shortly afterwards by his son Giovanni, came into the property, fashion turned away from the rational, geometrical, dry cut out-lines of the formal 18th century pattern in favor of the new romanticism inspired by the English informal gardens. Fashion also demanded the cultivation of lemons, orchids and innumerable plants, impossible to grow in the open during the winter; hence the erection of enormous hothouses which smothered the whole Garden from top to bottom.

Finally, in 1926 Giovanni da Schio's great grand son, Alvise, inherited the property.

Since the four years he spent at the University in Florence where he obtained his degree in Agriculture, (on the cultivation of mushrooms in his extensive stone quarries), Alvise da Schio's main object in life has always been the embellishment and restoration of his property in Costozza. With unerring instinct he set about clearing the prospective Garden of all the 19Th century superstructures. Neptune's Fountain was freed of the cumbersome walls which had completely obliterated the design of the basin; the two aviaries, side by side, were also freed of great walls which hid them behind a monotonous straight line. The design of the 18Th century footpath, outlined in box hedges, was copied from an original map; the statues, dotted haphazard about the Garden, were placed in logical sequence along the top of the walls. The kitchen-garden was removed from the middle of the prospective Garden and replaced by a tennis-court that is now a space left free in front of Diana's stair-case for theatricals or other such open-air activities. Everything possible was done to weld the opposite tendencies of the 18Th and 19Th centuries into a harmonious whole.

Nowadays the cost of upkeep of a Garden built on the five different levels and exposed to atmospheric pollution, that is so damaging to the soft stone of Costozza, has increased tenfold: nevertheless every effort is made to preserve the simplicity and integrity of the original layout. For some unknown reason, in the last few years, the spring which from time immemorial poured from the cave behind Neptune's Fountain, has changed its course and become a mere trickle. This can be due to the relentless shifting of the earth's surface or rather to the endless violent explosions caused by the mining of the open stone quarry which has left such a blatant scar on the hillside in the place of the hill Elicona which, with the Parnaso on one side and Ipocrene on the other, formed a graceful background to the village of Costozza. These three hills were well known and often referred to by the poets of the 16Th century.

THE PLANTS

The Garden of Villa Trento da Schio is not properly speaking a botanical Garden, nevertheless, nature enthusiasts will be pleased to find a number of plants indigenous to Northern Italy and several others which originate from lands of a somewhat milder climate.

In fact, the temperate currents, warm in winter and cool in summer, coming from the caves mitigate the severest winters and summers.

On the ceiling of the Loggia and on the wall behind and to the side of Neptune's Fountain, the creeper, *Ficus Repens*, spreads its dark foliage; this is a plant a couple of centuries old going back in all likelihood to the days of Giuseppe Trento. The leaves, very small and closely packed in the far corner, away from the direct sunlight, grow larger and hang loosely as the branches reach the strong light coming from the window and figs appear on the tips.

Going down the Dwarf's staircase, all the delightful details of these six beautiful statues can be appreciated, enhanced by the vigorous tufts of capers, pushing their way through the chinks in the stone and, according to the time of year, roses, oleanders and *olea fragrans*, giving off whiffs of delicious scent.

At the foot of this flight of stairs are tall palm trees (*cameros*), cactus plants (*agave*), clematis, camellia, begonia, lilies and irises and a large *cicca* in the center of a round flowerbed. The profusion of plants in this sheltered corner is also due to the temperate influence of the warm or cool currents, as the case may be, coming from the Gardener's storeroom below the loggia.

At the foot of a second flight of stairs, passing the ancient tamarisk on the right that produces a mass of pink flowers in spring, the visitor comes to a circular plot with a young magnolia in the center and a graceful Nereid sitting in a large stone shell.

To the left, across the drive leading to the former stables where lodging accommodation has been arranged for tourists (for information phone 0039 3404854568 or fax-phone 0444 953195) stands a very tall magnolia; by its side grows a rare specimen of box tree (*Buxus Sempervirens*). At the beginning of the footpath leading through the wood, stands an imposing plane tree, followed by yew-trees, chestnut-trees, paulonie and calycantus. Beneath the trees grows a soft carpet of evergreen convolvia grass. Aged yew-trees grow near the Lions on guard near the entrance.

Having come full circle back to the Piazza we can but hope the visit to the Garden has been a pleasurable occasion of some interest