VILLAS AND GARDENS
A selection of travel literature, published between 1885 and 1914, in the Harold Acton Library

from Edith Wharton: *Italian Villas and their Gardens*, 1907

Library and Cultural Centre
Lungarno Guicciardini 9
Firenze 50125
Tel: +39 055 2677 8270 Fax: +39 055 2677 8252

www.britishinstitute.it
Registered charity no: 290647
This guide to a selection of books from our collection was put together by Michele Amedei, intern from the Università degli Studi di Firenze. It is one of a series of three: Tuscany, Tuscany and Beyond, Villas and Gardens.

ANONYMOUS

Julia Mary Cartwright

Vernon Lee

Dorothy Nevile Lees

Linda Villari

Edith Wharton

Maxfield Parrish

In a Tuscan Garden

Italian Gardens of the Renaissance

Genius Loci: Notes on Places

A Tuscan Villa

A Tuscan Villa

Italian Villas & their Gardens

A biography
Anonymous, *In a Tuscan Garden*, London & New York (John Lane, The Bodley Head), 1902 [914.55 GRA]

Published anonymously, the author has since been identified as Georgina S. Grahame. In this book the author introduces the English – the lover of Italian gardens – to the history, traditions and origins of Tuscan gardens. This book might have been useful to English people who wanted to acquire a garden in Tuscany as it explains how a garden that respected Tuscan traditions could be created. The author explains the history of Italian gardens (chapter III: *Italian Gardens, Old and Modern*), the habits of *Tuscan Servants* (chapter IV), comments upon the *Treatment of Animals in Italy* (chapter V), and describes the weather in different seasons (chapter X, XI and XII: *Autumn in Tuscany, A Tuscan Winter, Spring in Tuscany*). In each chapter she explains *Tuscan Garden* in great detail. For example in Chapter XII (*Spring in Tuscany*), she gives information about Tuscan fruits: ‘All the prunings of last autumn seem to have been successful! The great show of this week [april 7 1902] is the Prunus Pissardi at the bottom of the garden’: ‘Prunus Pissardi’, explains the author in a note, ‘is now being extensively grown in Tuscany for the sake of its fruits, which is delicious, – a particularly well-flavoured and very juicy plum’; ‘it is a mass of pale pinky blossom, with just a suspicion of the dark brown leaves through its lower branches; the flowers above these rise into the clear air in a kind of misty effect, like a crest of a wave, and give one the effect of Japan and things Japonesy. The effect of the prunus is heightened by the pale yellow-green of a white Banksia rose, which has completely covered an old olive trees beside it. By the time this last is in flower the prunus blossom will be over, and the Banksia will be thrown into relief by its lovely brown foliage’ (p. 371). This book is provided with eight photographs, perhaps taken by the author of that Tuscan garden she refers to at the start of the book (p. 5).
Julia Mary Cartwright, *Italian Gardens of the Renaissance: and Other Studies*, New York (Charles Scribner’s Sons) 1914 [712.45 CAR]

In *Italian Gardens of the Renaissance: and Other Studies* the English writer Julia Cartwright (1851-1924) studies several historic Italian gardens. Unlike other books that devote entire pages to detailed descriptions of existing Italian gardens, in this book the author describes some of the gardens of the past (especially of the Renaissance), some of which have ‘unfortunately perished’ (p. vii). Julia Cartwright recounts the history of each villa and its garden from an historical and aesthetic point of view, and traces the garden’s history in relation to humanist scholars and artists. As she writes at the start of the book, ‘to-day most of the gardens described in these pages have unfortunately perished, and only live in the writings of Renaissance humanists, in the prose of Boccaccio and Bembo, in the verse of Poliziano and Ariosto’ (pp. vii-viii). Among the most interesting chapters are ‘The Gardens of Florentine Humanists’, ‘The Gardens of Este and Gonzaga Princes’, ‘The Gardens of Papal Rome’, and ‘The Garden of Venice’. Some chapters are devoted to important historical figures such as Bianca Sforza and Cardinal Bembo. The whole book is illustrated with a number of interesting photographs of villas and gardens described in the text (those that still exists), and a series of reproductions of ancient masterpieces. The last chapter is dedicated to Giovanni Costa (‘Giovanni Costa – His Life and Art’), the Italian painter who founded with a group of British artists, the Etruscan School in the winter of 1883 and 1884.

Vernon Lee, *Genius Loci: Notes on Places*, London (Grant Richards) 1899 [820.9 LEE]

Vernon Lee was the pseudonym of the British writer Violet Paget (1856-1935). Violet Paget was born at Château St Leonard in France (Boulogne) and she spent most of her life on the continent, particularly in Italy where, from 1889 to her death in 1935, she lived at the Villa Palmerino just outside Florence. Vernon Lee was known and appreciated in Italy but especially in England. The “Genius Loci”, whose origins are in romantic ideas and especially
the work of Heinrich Heine in his book *Gods in Exile* (1854), is ‘an encounter with mysterious forces that stun the visitors with their presence having condensed the memory of a fateful event’ (Attilio Brilli). Vernon Lee divides the book into several chapters, all dedicated to the moments when the *genius loci*, the spirit of the place, was presented to her, including several chapters on France and Italy. Vernon Lee dedicated other books to the theory of *genius loci*, including *Limbo* (1897), *The Enchanted Woods* (1905), *The Spirit of Rome* (1906), *The Tower of Mirrors* (1914) and *The Golden Keys* (1925).

*The Vernon Lee Collection in the Archive of the British Institute of Florence consists of books from Vernon Lee’s own library, many of which she annotated.*

**Dorothy Nevile Lees, A Tuscan Villa, in Tuscan Feasts and Tuscan Friends, London (Chatto and Windus) 1907, pp. 1-15**

[C 914.55 LEE]

*A Tuscan Villa* is the first chapter of the book dedicated by Dorothy Nevile Lees (1880-1966) to the territory and people of Tuscany. The chapter is inspired by the types of Tuscan villa that can usually be found in the Tuscan countryside. Each typical Tuscan villa has a characteristic garden; they have ‘groves of cypress; thickets of laureustinus’, writes Dorothy, ‘myrtle, and ilex, where the nightingales sing through the still nights of summer; mossy fountains and old white statues of fauns and nymphs; they have hedges of monthly roses on which the flowers grow so thickly that hardly a leaf is seen, and masses of oleander, azalea, and camellia in every shade from white to crimson. Magnolias, too, they have – the pale, leafless pink ones which the early springs brings, and ivory blossoms which in June fill the air with heavy fragrance from their high, glossy-leafed trees. Pomegranates’, continues Dorothy, ‘abound, with their fire-red flowers; and Judas trees and Polonias, laburnums, lilacs, pergolas of roses and vines and wisteria, bitter-orange trees which scent all the air with their perfume in early summer, and in autumn are hung with golden fruit; and lemons bordering, in their earthen pots, the gravel walks’ (pp. 9-10). ‘How the old masters loved gardens! How exquisite are the pleasaunces
[sic] in the pictures of Angelico and Benozzo Gozzoli and Botticelli and Filippo Lippi’, explains Dorothy Nevile Lees (p. 10). In the last part of the chapter, Dorothy examines the Tuscan garden in different seasons. ‘Spring and autumn’, she writes, ‘are in Italy the flower seasons; in July and August the heat is too oppressive; but with September the pink roses blossom for the second time, their bright faces pushing over the walls of every road until late into November; verbenas, geraniums, dahlias, carnations, and cream and crimson roses, fill the gardens, and so like summer does it seem that it is a surprise, almost a shock, when the autumn rains set in and winter is upon us all at once’ (pp. 11-12).

from Dorothy Nevile Lees *Tuscan Feasts and Tuscan Friends* 1907
Linda Villari, *A Tuscan Villa* in *On Tuscan Hills and Venetian Waters*, London (T. Fisher Unwin), 1885, pp. 5-26 [914.5 VIL]

In the first chapter of her book dedicated to the Tuscan hills and to Venice, Linda Villari (1836-1905), English writer and wife the Italian historian and politician Pasquale Villari, writes about a Tuscan villa. This villa in question is villa Gamberraia at Settignano, on the hills outside Florence. After a rapid description of the villa, she concentrates on its garden. Villa Gamberraia is in a beautiful position: ‘No position could have been better chosen, no outlay spared in planning its groves and gardens. It clings midway on the olive-clad slopes rising from the basin of the Arno to the pine-fringed ridge that sweeps round from Monte Ceceri to Compiobbi; and its ilex woods and cypresses interrupt the soft monotony of the grey-green foliage above and below its terraced walls’ (p. 6). ‘In the middle of the main garden’, she recounts, ‘where vines and vegetables, fruits-trees and Egyptian wheat are bordered with pink and red roses, there is a fountain where Cupid on a dolphin “sprinkleth water” on the goldfish below, and can on occasion shoot jets of spray almost as high as the eaves of the house. Across the grass, and directly opposite the eastern door, is a narrow enclosure of the true rococo style. It has miniature flower-beds and paths; a fine oval fountain of granite, with graceful handles, set in a circular carved basin, decorates the alcove at its end. Stones deities and troubadours are set in niches round its walls and draped with climbing weeds, while two dainty flights of steps on either side communicate with the ilex wood and the upper garden. Great bushes of lavender guard these steps with their fragrant spikes, and roses lean down from the trellised arbours that are fit entries to the treasury of flowers above’ (pp. 17-18). The chapter is decorated with illustrations by Blanche Strahan Lemon: ‘A Tuscan Villa’ (p. 7), ‘The Val d’Arno From the Terrace’ (p. 11), ‘The Villa Terrace’ (p. 19).


As Edith Wharton (1862-1937) writes on the first page, this book is dedicated to the English writer Vernon Lee: ‘To Vernon Lee who,
better than anyone else, has understood and interpreted the garden-magic of Italy’. This book is an interesting guide for those travellers who want to follow an Italian itinerary dedicated to Italian villas and their gardens: ‘The garden’, suggests Edith to the reader, ‘must be studied in relation to the house, and both in relation to the landscape’ (p. 6). The main chapters of the book are: ‘Florentine Villas’, ‘Sienese Villas’, ‘Roman Villas’, ‘Villas near Rome’ (which includes ‘Caprarola and Lante’, ‘Villa d’Este’ and ‘Frascati’), ‘Genoese Villas’, ‘Lombard Villas’ and ‘Villas of Venetia’. For each villa and garden Edith Wharton traces the history and, at the end of the book, includes biographies of the architects and gardeners referred to in the text. The general characteristic of the Italian garden is, argues Edith, ‘the converging lines of its long ilex-walks, the alternation of sunny open spaces with cool woodland shade, the proportion between terrace and bowling-green, or between the height of a wall’ (p. 8). Others characteristics include: ‘Intricacy of detail, complicated groupings of terraces, fountains, labyrinths and porticoes’ (p. 11). The whole volume has magnificent illustrations by the American artist Maxfield Parrish (1870-1966). He portrays the most romantic corners of villas and gardens with soft tones; often tending to pastel colours.

Maxfield Parrish
Maxfield Parrish (1870-1966) was an American painter and illustrator who worked between the end of nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. He was born in Philadelphia and lived his life at his New Hampshire home and studio (The Oaks). He had numerous commissions and worked for popular magazines in the 1910s and 1920s. Parrish’s subjects are often imaginative and fantastic, linked to the neoclassical style, and he often used soft pastel colours. In 1907 Parrish illustrated Italian Villas and Their Gardens by Edith Wharton (1862-1937). In this book Parrish illustrated each of the villas and gardens described in the text. These illustrations were the result of Parrish’s travels in Italy, where he documented his visits with both a camera and his
sketchbooks. Parrish’s illustrations exalt the solemnity and spiritual mystery belonging to the villas and gardens. Sometimes Parrish portrays a poetic group of cypresses reflected in a lake, and sometimes he finds his artistic inspiration inside a wood: ‘Certain [spiritual] effects’, writes Edith Wharton to the preface of this book, ‘those which depend on architectural grandeur as well as those due to colouring and age, are no doubt unattainable; but there is, none the less, much to be learned from the old Italian gardens, and the first lesson is that, if they are to be a real inspiration, they must be copied, not in the letter but in the spirit’ [E. Wharton, *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*, New York [The Century Co.], 1907, p. 12]