# MEDICI VILLAS AND GARDENS IN TUSCANY

## Jewels of the Renaissance PART I

BY JIM SANO



**VILLA LA PRETAIA**

The Medici villas are a remarkable collection of architectural and horticultural masterpieces across the Tuscan countryside. The House of Medici, known for its association with the Italian Renaissance, originated from the rural Mugello region near Florence and rose to prominence in the 15th century. Initially acquiring properties for agricultural purposes, their influence grew significantly with the establishment of the Medici Bank by Giovanni di Bicci de Medici in 1397. His son, Cosimo il Vecchio, further solidified their power, becoming the de facto ruler of Florence by the mid-15th century.

The villas, built between the 15th and 17th centuries by the influential Medici family, showcased their power and wealth, offered leisure, and served as centers of agricultural activity. They featured courtyards, balconies, and gardens, uniquely blending art, nature, and power. These elegant summer homes, owned by the Medici family until the early 18th century, are prime examples of Florentine Renaissance architecture. As the Medici family became prominent in Florence, their villas evolved from simple farmhouses into sophisticated residences. They became symbols of their wealth and influence, showcasing the family's patronage of the arts and sciences.

The Medici villas pioneered a new concept of country living, blending architecture harmoniously with the surrounding landscape. They incorporated elements of classical architecture, innovative gardens, and advanced agricultural techniques. These villas became centers of intellectual and artistic activity, hosting renowned thinkers, artists, and scholars. They played a crucial role in shaping the Renaissance ideals of humanism and the appreciation of nature.

In recognition of their exceptional cultural and historical significance, the Medici villas were inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2013. This prestigious designation highlights their enduring impact on European architecture, landscape design, and the Renaissance. The UNESCO site designation includes twelve Medici villas and two gardens.

The first Medici villas were Villa del Trebbio and Villa di Cafaggiolo, fortified houses built in the 14th century in the Mugello region, the Medici family's original home. In the 15th century, Cosimo de' Medici had Michelozzo design villas at Careggi and Fiesole, which included courtyards, balconies, and gardens. Florence eventually became surrounded by Medici villas, with more in distant parts of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany. By the end of the 16th century, there were at least 16 major estates and another 11 of secondary importance, along with many farms and hunting lodges throughout the region. In 2013, twelve Medici villas across the Tuscan landscape, Boboli Gardens, and the Pratolino Gardens were designated UNESCO World Heritage Sites. They showcase the Medici family's extensive architectural and cultural influence on European culture through their patronage.

Each significant member of the Medici family owned an estate, with the duke moving from house to house. The villa became a small version of the Medici court when the Medici were in residence. For hunting, the duke



could visit the Villa del Trebbio, Villa di Cafaggiolo, or Villa di Pratolino, stay at the Villa dell'Ambrogiana in the spring, and move to the Villa di Artimino to spend the summer in its cooler elevated position. The Medici Villas and Gardens included in the World Heritage site are Villa di Careggi, Villa di Castello, Villa della Petraia, Giardino di Boboli (Boboli Gardens), Villa del Poggio Imperiale in Florence, Villa di Cafaggiolo in Barberino di Mugello, Villa de Il Trebbio in San Piero a Sieve, Villa Medici/ Belcanto in Fiesole, Villa di Cerreto Guidi, Giardino di Pratolino in Vaglia, Villa di Poggio a Caiano, Villa di Artimino, Palazzo di Seravezza, and Villa La Magia in Quarrata. The Medici family also owned 11 other minor villas throughout Tuscany: Palazzo Medici Riccardi, Palazzo Vecchio, Palazzo Pitti, Casino di San Marco in Florence, and Villa Medici in Rome.

The family's first significant palace, Palazzo Medici, was commissioned by Cosimo around 1444. Designed by Michelozzo di Bartolomeo, it featured a characteristic stone facade and a colonnaded courtyard, reflecting the family's growing power and wealth. Despite its humble beginnings, the Medici family leveraged its financial success to become one of Europe's wealthiest.

Cosimo il Vecchio's patronage of the arts was exemplary. Artists like Benozzo Gozzoli adorned Palazzo Medici with masterpieces, such as the frescoes in the Magi Chapel, celebrating the Medici family's prestige. Cosimo's death in 1464 marked a transition, but his legacy endured through his son, Piero il Gottoso, and his grandsons, particularly Lorenzo il Magnifico.

Under Lorenzo's rule, Palazzo Medici flourished as a cultural hub. It hosted luminaries of the Renaissance, such as Michelangelo and Botticelli, whose works adorned its halls. Lorenzo's death in 1492 led to a period of decline for the Medici, culminating in their expulsion from Florence in 1494 under the influence of Girolamo Savonarola's anti-Medici regime.

Despite this setback, the Medici returned to power in 1512, reclaiming Palazzo Medici. Over time, however, the family shifted their primary residence to Palazzo Vecchio and later Palazzo Pitti, marking a change in Florence's political and cultural landscape. Palazzo Medici evolved, becoming Palazzo Medici Riccardi after it was sold to the Riccardi family in 1659, who renovated it in a Baroque style.

After Gian Gastone de' Medici died in 1737, Francis, Duke of Lorraine, acquired the Grand Duchy of Tuscany and the Medici's assets, including their villas. The villas were neglected for several years until Leopold I inherited the duchy in 1765 and decided to sell many of them. Tuscany was eventually absorbed into the Kingdom of Italy in 1860, leading to the sale of most Medici villas. Some are now museums, while others serve as institutions or private event venues.

The story of the Medici family and their palaces reflects not only their rise to power and cultural patronage but also the evolving dynamics of Renaissance Florence. Their legacy as patrons of the arts and influential political figures continues to resonate through the centuries, leaving an indelible mark on Italian history and the Renaissance era.

**Villa La Petraia** is one of the most beautiful Medici villas. It is located in Castello's hamlet just outside Florence. The villa was originally an ancient fortress of early medieval origin. It offers breathtaking views over its expansive Italian garden and the Renaissance city of Florence from its elevated position. The villa features a splendid Italian garden and richly decorated interior, showcasing stunning examples of Mannerist architecture. The Brunelleschi family acquired the villa and sold it to Palla Strozzi in 1422. In the 16th century, Villa La Petraia became the property of the Salutati family and was later sold to Cosimo I de' Medici in 1544. Cosimo gifted the villa to his son, Cardinal Ferdinando, in 1568. Extensive excavation work between 1588 and 1598 transformed the site's "stony" character (hence the name Petraia, meaning "full of stones") into a dramatic sequence of terraces dominated by the massive main building. Cardinal Ferdinando, who became Grand Duke in 1587, transformed the villa into a princely residence, focusing on the central tower and creating three terraces in the surrounding park. The first terrace had dwarf fruit trees; the second, flower beds; and the third, elliptical areas with general and citrus trees. The ballroom was decorated with frescoes by Cosimo Gaddi and Volterrano, depicting the exploits of the Medici family.

Despite changes in the 18th and 19th centuries, the garden retains the original 16th-century geometric layout designed by Ferdinando I de Medici, as documented in Giusto Utens' painting series "Villa in a Lunette" (1599/1602). A new permanent gallery at Villa La Petraia opened in 2014 to display Giusto Utens's 14 surviving paintings of Medici villas.

In 1609, ownership of Petraia passed to Don Lorenzo de' Medici, who continued to enhance the property. In 1622, the tower was reinforced, and a cycle of frescoes by Baldassarre Franceschini (Volterrano) was added in the central courtyard, celebrating the Medici family and the knights of Santo Stefano.

The villa remained in the Medici family's possession until their extinction. It then passed to the Grand Dukes of Habsburg-Lorraine. Villa della Petraia has always served as a residence, hosting notable figures from the Medici family (such as Don Lorenzo and Cosimo III), the Lorraines (Leopold II), and the Savoys, Italy's royal family (Vittorio Emanuele II and his wife, Rosa Vercelliana). In 1860, the estate became the property of the House of Savoy and became one of Victor Emmanuel II's favorite residences. The Petraia villa was transferred to the Italian state in 1919 and is now a museum. It is a testament to the architectural and artistic patronage of the Medici and other influential families in Florence, preserving its historical and cultural significance for visitors to explore.



**The Villa di Castello**, also known as Villa Reale, is a historic complex featuring an elegant villa and renowned Italian gardens near Florence. It was a favored retreat of Cosimo I de' Medici, the Grand Duke of Tuscany, in the 16th century. Acquired by Giovanni and Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici in 1477, the villa played a significant role in Medici history, with Humanist philosopher Marsilio Ficino educating Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco there and Botticelli creating The Birth of Venus and Allegory of Spring for the villa. The villa's architecture evolved from a 12th-century defensive tower, undergoing Renaissance renovations under Cosimo I and Ferdinand I, with contributions from architects like Niccolò Pericoli (Tribolo), Giorgio Vasari, and Bernardo Buontalenti.

The garden, designed by Tribolo in 1538, is a prototype of the 16th-century Italian garden and influenced the Boboli Gardens. It includes terraces adorned with classical sculptures, an advanced hydraulic system, the famous Fountain of Hercules and Antaeus, the Cave of the Animals, and a unique collection of citrus plants that are over 300 years old. The garden also includes a medicinal herb garden with rare species, and was later, in the 19th century, transformed in parts into an English-style park. Additionally, two secret gardens near the Limonaie are for wintering citrus plants.

After being acquired by the Lorraine family, the villa's garden was redesigned, and several interior rooms were refurbished. It was later taken over by the Savoy family, who donated it to the Opera dei Combattenti after World War I. In 1924, it became state property. Since 1974, the villa has been the home of the Accademia della Crusca and, since 2001, the CNR-Opera Nazionale del Vocabolario. The garden was transformed into a National Museum in 1984, showcasing its historical significance. Castello remains a cultural institution open to the public, highlighting its unique heritage and significance in Italian history.

**The Medici Villa of Poggio Imperiale** in Florence, originally a medieval castle owned by the Baroncelli, Pandolfini, and Salviati families, is located on the hill of Arcetri. In 1565 Cosimo I de' Medici confiscated it from the Salviati family for his daughter Isabella.

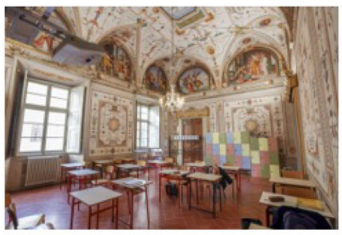
Grand Duchess Maria Maddalena of Austria purchased it in 1622, transforming it into a luxurious suburban residence with renovations by architect Giulio Parigi, including a central cloister and gardens. Renamed "Poggio Imperiale" in 1624, the villa hosted figures such as Mozart and Queen Maria José, and played a role in significant events, including Grand Duke Peter Leopold's abolition of torture and the death penalty.

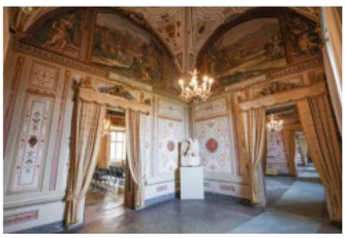
In 1681, Grand Duchess Vittoria della Rovere hired



Villa di Castello







architects Diacinto Maria Marmi and Ferdinando Tacca to enhance the grandeur of the villa. In the 17th and 18th centuries, architects such as Giovan Battista Foggini and Niccolò Gasparo Maria Paoletti expanded and beautified the villa with stuccos, frescoes, and picturesque gardens. Subsequent owners, including Maria Luigia di Borbone and Elisa Baciocchi (Napoleon's sister), transformed the villa into a Neo-Classical estate. In the 1700s, the Lorraine family further expanded the villa, and Grand Duke Leopold chose it as his permanent residence for its beauty and strategic location. Leopold selected architect Niccolò Gaspero to make significant modifications, transforming the villa's layout into a large rectangular structure with symmetrical courtyards. Notably, Mozart held his only concert in Florence in 1770.

In 1864, just before Florence became Italy's capital, the Villa Medici Poggio Imperiale was ceded to the Female Boarding School of the Santissima Annunziata, which still occupies it today. The villa underwent restoration between 1972 and 1975, balancing ancient structures with modern school needs. This historic girls' school opens some of its frescoed rooms, Italian garden, and other areas to the public, preserving its Renaissance legacy and cultural heritage.

**The Villa Medici Careggi**, located north of Florence, was one of the first Medici villas. Initially, it functioned as a farm to support the family. On June 17, 1417, Lorenzo di Giovanni di Bicci de Medici purchased it from the Lippi family for 800 gold florins.

In 1457, Cosimo the Elder commissioned Michelozzo to make significant expansions and enhancements to the villa. These improvements included integrating numerous farms surrounding the primary residence.



The property's substantial size extended to the borders of the Trebbio and Cafaggiolo villas in Mugello. Michelozzo also renovated the villa by adding trapezoid courts and loggias. Following Cosimo the Elder's death in 1464, his grandson, "Lorenzo the Magnificent," assumed leadership of the Medici family.

Lorenzo the Magnificent favored this residence, which became a center for cultural and artistic activities. It notably housed the headquarters of the Platonic Academy. Part of the garden served as a meeting place for the Platonic Academy, which Marsilio Ficino, the owner of a farm on the property, founded. The villa was a gathering place for intellectuals, philosophers, and artists. Notable residents included Donatello, a friend of Cosimo the Elder, and Poliziano. Regular guests included Leon Battista Alberti, Michelozzo, Pico della Mirandola, and Michelangelo. In the sixteenth century, Cosimo I had it decorated by artists such as Pontormo and Bronzino. In the seventeenth century, Cardinal Carlo de' Medici undertook a restyling. The garden, surrounded by a wall and overlooked by loggias, featured a mix of local and exotic plant species. Architects Giulio and Alfonso Parigi, who also worked in the Boboli Gardens, restored the garden.

In 1492, Lorenzo the Magnificent died. The death marked the Medici family's decline as Florence fell under the control of the Sforzas, and their opponents burned and sacked the house. Alessandro de' Medici regained power and called in Pontormo and Bronzino to restore the mansion, but it gradually lost its importance. The works of Verrocchio, the Putto with the Dolphin, and the Resurrection in terracotta were moved from the Villa Careggi into the Palazzo Vecchio.

In the 16th century, the Medici family regained power in Florence, and Villa Medicea di Careggi again became a center of opulence and intellectual activity. The gardens were redesigned and expanded, and the villa's interior was adorned with exquisite frescoes and furnishings.

In the 17th century, the Medici family's influence began to decline, and Villa Medicea di Careggi fell into disrepair. In the 18th century, the villa was sold to



private owners, and much of its original grandeur was lost. The villa continued to deteriorate over the years until it was purchased by the wealthy English geologist Francis Sloane in 1848. He transformed the garden into a romantic park with exotic trees and various citrus fruits. After Sloane's death, the property changed hands multiple times before being acquired. In 1936, the house passed to the Hospital of Florence's Administration.

Finally, in 2004, the Region of Tuscany acquired Careggi. It converted it into the headquarters of the European Landscape Centre, recognizing its historical significance and positioning it as a modern hub for landscape preservation and appreciation.

**The Villa of Cerreto Guidi** is one of the most beautiful and best-preserved Medici villas in the heart of Tuscany, a few kilometers from Florence. This noble residence, built between 1564 and 1567, is a true Renaissance masterpiece, combining architectural elements of great elegance with an intimate atmosphere. Commissioned by Cosimo I de' Medici, the villa was designed by some of the most important architects of the time, including Bernardo Buontalenti, Alfonso Parigi il Vecchio, and Davide Fortini. Its construction was part of a broader project to enhance the territory, aimed at transforming Cerreto Guidi into a hunting residence, territorial garrison, and strategic control point. The villa is situated on a hilltop near the Fucecchio Marsh, a once-abundant wetland rich in wild game.

The villa has a simple and elegant exterior, featuring a pietra serena portal and regular windows. The Italian Garden has geometric flowerbeds and fountains, perfect for a peaceful stroll. The villa has evolved into a significant cultural and historical site, reflecting Medici power through its architecture. The villa is now an imposing two-story structure with a large pavilion roof and a façade. The rear facade features a portico with rounded arches on unadorned pillars. The most notable feature of the villa's architecture is the "scalera," a unique flight of brick zigzag stairs leading to the entrance. The stairs create a striking contrast with the villa's facade and serve a practical function as access to the stables below and as a natural support for the villa's elevation. These symmetrical grand stairway access ramps, known as "Medici bridges," are attributed to Bernardo Buontalenti, a prominent architect and designer favored by the Medici family. He played a pivotal role in the villa's architectural design and was an important architect of the Mannerist period. The villa's interior floor plan centers around a central hall, with stairs leading to the upper floor. The villa retains many original decorations, including stuccos, frescoes, and terracotta floors. Notable areas include the Great Hall with its coffered ceiling and the Chapel, which features frescoes by Bernardino Poccetti.

The villa gained fame due to the tragic death of Isabella de' Medici, who died there in July 1576. Contrary to the legend that her jealous husband, Paolo Giordano I Orsini, murdered her, recent studies suggest she died from severe renal obstruction. The villa, which later belonged to various members of the Medici family, was transformed into a more residential space under Cardinal Leopoldo de' Medici in 1671.

After the Medici family line became extinct in 1738, the villa passed to the Lorraine family and later to private individuals. During World War II, the villa served as a military garrison and suffered looting. After changing hands several times, the villa was purchased by engineer Galliano Boldrini, a native of Cerreto Guidi, who donated it to the Italian State in 1969 to be used as a National Museum. It is notable for being one of the few Medici villas permanently open to the public since 1978, offering guided tours of the villa and its adjacent gardens and hosting cultural events and exhibitions.

In 2002, it became home to the Historical Museum of Hunting and the Territory. The museum narrates the story of hunting and the enduring relationship between humanity and nature. It features a collection of 17th to 19th century hunting and shooting equipment. The first floor showcases portraits of the Medici family, weapons, tapestries, and furniture.

THIS ARTICLE WILL CONTNUE IN OUR NEXT ISSUE