

Artists at the Gamberaia

The Villa Gamberaia has been the *meta* of artists since at least the middle of the eighteenth century, when Giuseppe Zocchi included three different views of the property in his celebrated collection of etchings, *Vedute delle ville della Toscana* (1744), designed for the growing market of the Grand Tour. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, an increasing number of “garden-seekers” were arriving from all parts of Europe and North America to view the gardens and record their impressions in photographs, free-hand or measured drawings and descriptive essays. The Italian poet and playwright Gabriele D’Annunzio made sketches of the landscape while jotting down notes on the gardens in his journals of 1896 and 1898. It was a place, he wrote, that evoked a “mysterious communion of art and nature”. Professional artists illustrated the first major travel books on Italian gardens: Nelly Erichsen, with pen drawings for Janet Ross’s *Florentine Villas* (1901), and Maxfield Parrish, with watercolors for Edith Wharton’s *Italian Villas* (1904). It is reported that Léon Bakst, costume and set designer for the Russian Ballet, also made watercolors during a visit to the villa in the early part of the century, perhaps with the intention of using them one day as models for his stages sets. About 1911, the English landscape designer Cecil Pinsent sketched the long grass *allée* of the Gamberaia as a model for the one he was planning at Villa I Tatti for Bernard and Mary Berenson, and a couple of years later Henry Vincent Hubbard, the first graduate of Harvard’s School of Landscape Architecture, together with a group of young colleagues, produced a set of beautifully rendered pen drawings of the *parterre*, *gabinetto rustico* and *nymphaeum*.

The Gamberaia itself was home to two artists in the first decades of the twentieth century: the Romanian Princess Jeanne Ghyka, who purchased the property in 1896, and her American companion Florence Blood. Both of them had studied art in Paris, and they must have been attracted to Settignano not only by the treasures of the nearby Florentine galleries and an international community of artists and *letterati*, but by the mysterious qualities of the garden and its inspiring setting, ‘suspended’, as it were, above the Arno valley. During the more than two decades that they lived at the Gamberaia and enhanced the gardens—“adding beauty”, as Evelyn March Phillipps remarked, “even to the most beautiful creations of yesterday”—each of them found time

for their own painting and sculpture. Florence Blood, a friend of Mary and Bernard Berenson, painted so well, it was said, that a contemporary collector of Cézanne actually mistook one of her copies of the master for an original!

Stories of the aloof, almost invisible Princess Ghyka contributed to the sense of mystery surrounding the villa. Bernard Berenson likened her to the exotic and 'eternal' Ayesha (Wisdom's Daughter) in Rider Haggard's *She* (1887). The young Iris Origo, visiting the Gamberaia with her mother, Lady Sybil Cutting, about 1911, imagined seeing a veiled figure at an upper window, and repeated a story she had heard that the princess emerged from the house only at dawn to bathe in the pools, or for nocturnal walks along the garden avenue. Perhaps, indeed, it was not just a lively imagination. Years later, Giovanni Haussmann, whose father had managed the princess's estates in Belorussia and the Ukraine, and who found refuge at the Gamberaia after the Russian Revolution, described her early morning "apparitions", dressed in a long white robe with a veil covering her head: a fairy-queen in her enchanted gardens.

Today, in the twenty-first century, the Gamberaia continues to inspire thoughtful and creative works of art. The watercolors of Federico Pirani, to which this exhibit and catalogue are dedicated, also testify to the wide range of meanings that the gardens elicit. They not only preserve and enrich our own memories but open up new vistas, reveal new hues and, above all, evoke its subtle, changing moods, capturing moments of that elusive and enigmatic atmosphere that makes the Gamberaia a unique place among the gardens of the world.

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