

Villa Lante

Bagnaia, Italy

Photographs by Alan Ward 1994, 2001, 2006

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

Villa Lante was designed and built almost five hundred years ago and remains an inspiring landscape, comprised of a series of terraces with water flowing through basins, channels, and runnels, accentuated by sculpture amidst arrays of jets and sprays. The design is a choreographed set of experiences, beginning with a path through a woodland, followed by gardens along a central organizing axis that is flanked by a pair of villa buildings, a composition that is a semblance of the natural world. The symbolic expressions in the landscape, such as the flow of water from springs to the sea, make the Villa Lante landscape invested with meanings derived from nature. The newfound realism of the Renaissance is also evident in the design, which is organized by linear perspective to unify the garden spaces, and in fountains which incorporate life-like figurative sculpture.

The sloping site, rising approximately twenty meters from the southern edge of Bagnaia, was originally a hunting preserve, transformed into a villa landscape for Cardinal Gianfrancesco Gambara from 1568 to 1579. The design is attributed to Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola; others may have assisted in the design and engineering of the complex water system. Written accounts from seventeenth centuries describe how the villa landscape was meant to be experienced, by proceeding from Bagnaia south through a planted woodland, or *bosco*, on the west side of the site, following the existing topography and arriving at a higher elevation, and then descending through a series of four precisely-shaped

garden terraces north toward the town. This woodland was a park landscape, with paths amidst groves of trees, and originally included fountains and other garden elements (4). Based on early engravings, the contemporary park does not retain the character of the original design; it is missing fountains and sculptural pieces within overgrown planting. This park was the beginning of a metaphorical landscape composition that introduces the visitor to what was considered the expression of a natural setting, that was complimentary to the more geometrically ordered garden spaces along the central axis. Sometimes referred to as a separate section of the landscape with naturalistic overtones, the park should be considered an integral part of the overall composition, an essential component of the initial scheme, although now modified.

After following paths along the sloping terrain through the woodland, the visitor arrives at the uppermost terrace, where linear perspective is applied to symmetrically organize the descending terraces along a south to north central axis (6). Two small buildings, called the Houses of the Muses, are on each side of the axis on the upper terrace (6,9). What is most surprising, however, is the villa itself, which is also divided into two separate and matching *palazzine* on each side of the axis on a lower terrace (19,20). This is unlike most Renaissance villas, where the villa is the dominant central structure on the site, such as the nearby Villa Caprarola, which is illustrated in one of the frescoes in

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Palazzina Gambara at Villa Lante (26). As a result, the designed landscape on the central axis with its elaborate system of water between these twin buildings, takes center stage in the composition at Villa Lante.

At the upper terrace, water appears to fall from the hillside in spouts above a grotto into a small basin (7). This is the beginning of a symbolic expression of the flow of water in nature, originating in hillside springs, running through tributaries and rivers on the intermediate terraces (10-12), and on to the placid sea at the widened lower terrace (27). The water for this landscape sequence originates from a reservoir at a higher elevation on the property, supplied by an aqueduct brought to the site in 1549. Mythical and allegorical illusions elaborate on the significance of water, beginning at the upper terrace with the Fountain of the Deluge, derived from biblical stories, which flows to the Fountain of Dolphins, representing the destruction from the deluge (9). The Water Chain follows along the central axis (10,11), flowing into The Fountain of Giants, representing the Tiber and Arno Rivers (17,18). The Fountain of the Moors is centered in the four quadrants of the lower terrace, framed with parterres (30). In addition to these series of water features, there are smaller-scale channels, runnels, and jets along the paths and stairs .

The planting along this metaphorical journey through the landscape is adjusted and becomes increasingly more refined along the route. Shade trees and citrus plantations characterize the woodland, which has

become a more naturalized landscape over time (4). Shrubs and herbaceous planting in their natural form frame the uppermost terrace, while trailing plants spill over the edges of the grotto (7). Evergreen hedges on the next two lower terraces are progressively more structured, culminating in tightly clipped boxwood parterres on the lower terrace (10,11, 28-30).

Villa Lante is one of the most studied and researched of the many Italian gardens, and is frequently described as an example of the interaction between Renaissance ideas about nature and art. For example, in “The Villa Lante at Bagnaia: An Allegory of Art and Nature,” Claudia Lazzaro-Bruno interprets the design: “In the lowest level of the garden nature is completely subordinated to art.” This is a misinterpretation because landscape architecture, as its own distinctive form of art, does not subordinate nature; it abstracts from nature and natural processes, to make a semblance of nature, not a resemblance, but a semblance, or artistic expression of nature. There can be varying degrees of abstraction; there may be little verisimilitude, but the artistic expression is still derived from nature and dominates the conceptual scheme for the design of the landscape at Villa Lante. The commanding idea of a path through a natural woodland to the series of terraces that abound with symbolic references to the natural world and the flow of water, is the artistic vision that has guided the creative process in the design of this masterpiece of landscape architecture.

List of Photographs

1. Entrance gate to Villa Lante from Bagnaia, 1994
2. Path south toward Pegasus Fountain in park, 1994
3. Pegasus Fountain, 1994
4. Woodland park on west side, 1994
5. Garden of columns in the woodland park
6. Houses of the Muses, eastern building, 2006
7. Grotto of the Deluge, 2006
8. View east to the Fountain of the Dolphins, 2006
9. Fountain of the Dolphins, 2006
10. View north of water chain, 2006
11. View south of water chain, 2006
12. Overview of water table, 2006
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15. View of the Fountain of the River Gods, 2006
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17. View north of water table, Fountain of the River Gods, 2006
18. Fountain of the River Gods, 2006
19. View north on axis to lower terrace, 2006
20. View north from water table terrace to lower terrace, 2006
21. Path on east side toward *Pallazzina Montalto*, 2006
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23. View south of the Grotto of Venus, 1994
24. *Pallazzina Gambara*, 2006
25. *Pallazzina Montalto*, 2006
26. Fresco of Villa Caprarola in *Pallazzina Gambara*, 1994
27. Overview of lower terrace, 1994
28. Parterres on the lower terrace, 1994
29. Clipped hedges in the lower terrace, 1994
30. Fountain of the Moors and *Pallazzina Gambara*, 2001





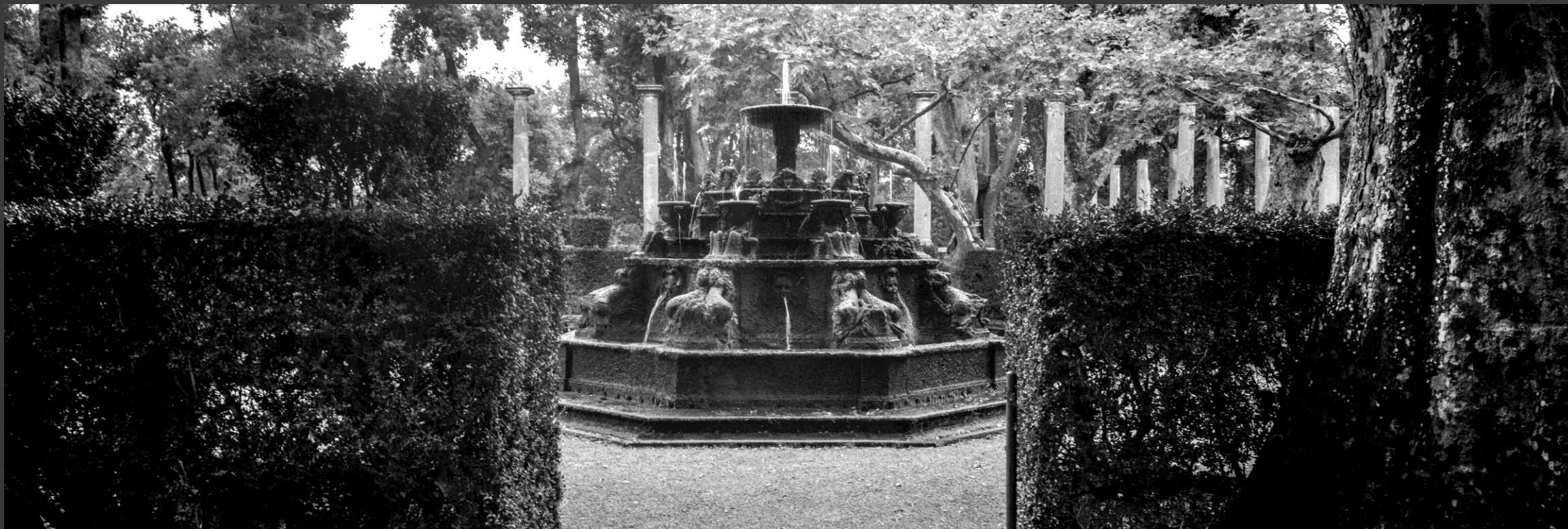


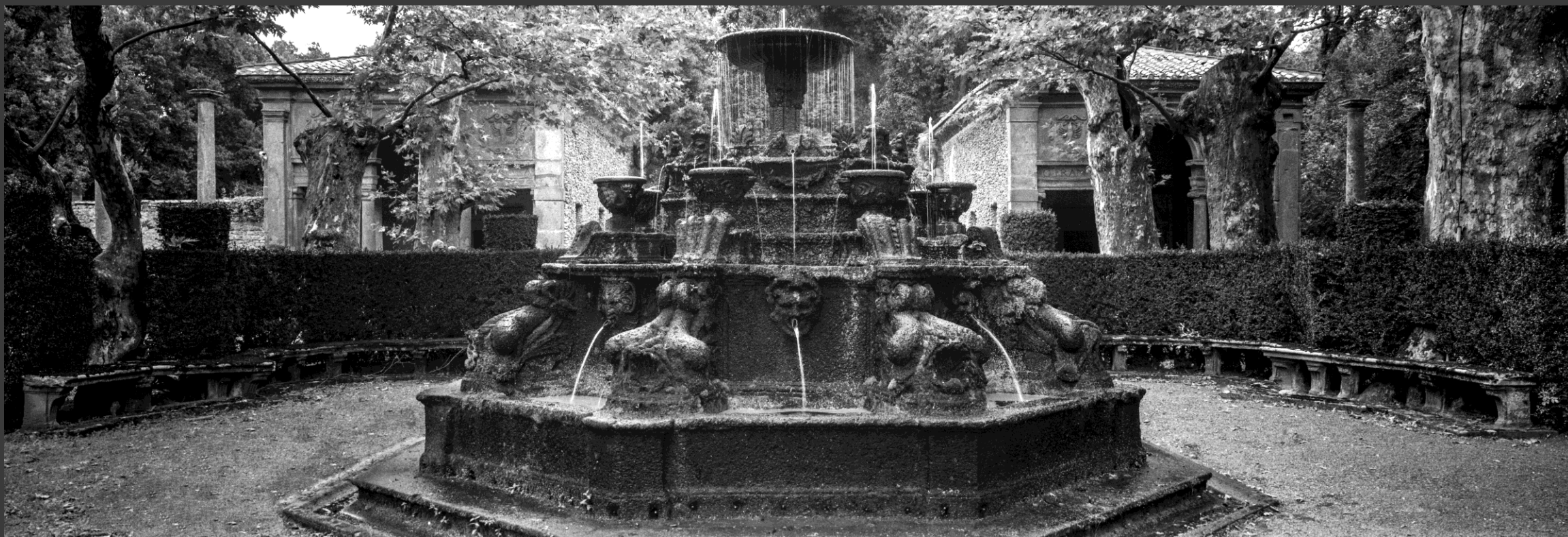




































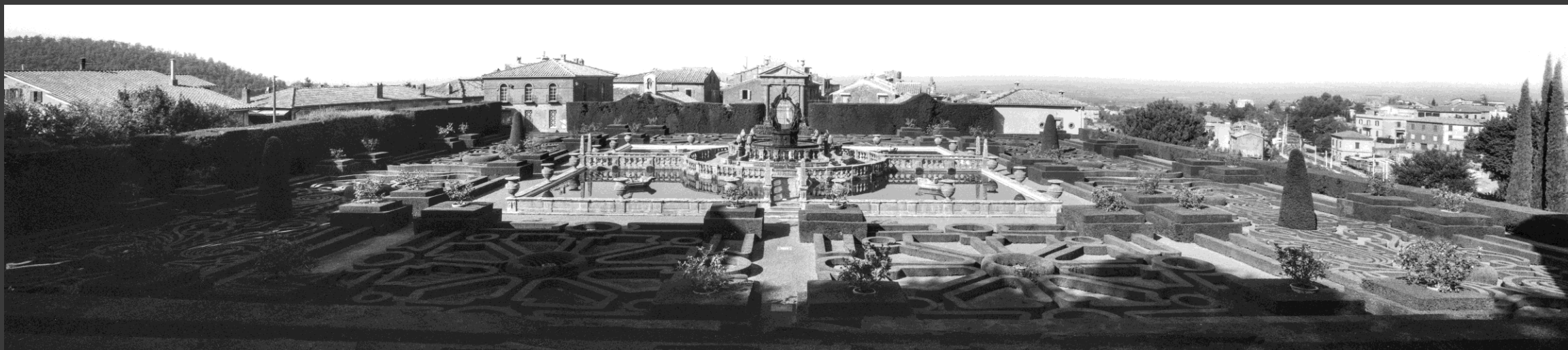


















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