Villa Medici in Fiesole

Fiesole, Italy

Photographs by Alan Ward 1994, 2026

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

The Medici Villa in Fiesole was built almost six hundred years ago on a site with exceptional views to Florence, the city dominated by the Medici family for nearly three centuries. The inclination to build a place in the countryside is described in Roman literature from the classical era, on sites ranging in size from a *villa rustica*, a small farm, to expansive country places for the Roman elite.[1] With Florence at the center of the Italian Renaissance, the powerful Medici family engaged renowned Florentine designers to make their own versions of these rural retreats, with the example in Fiesole, one of the earliest. The original Latin meaning of the term *villa* meant “farm,” so the idea of making a villa encompasses more than a residence. Villas include both buildings and grounds, a unified composition to make a dwelling within an agricultural setting.[2]

The villa at Fiesole was designed by Michelozzo and built between 1451 and 1457 for Giovanni, Cosimo il Vechio’s son. It is well documented in most interpretations that this early Medici villa in Fiesole departs from previous designs by having so few defensive elements, such as castellated parapets or towers. The fundamental concept for the site remains intact with four south-facing terraces built into the hillside near the highest elevation in Fiesole, however, the design treatment of the gardens on these terraces, as well as the location of the principal entry, have been modified and adjusted over the years. It is a constructed landscape, that required significant earth moving and retaining walls to make the terraces built into the steep slopes (2). The residence is a simple rectangular volume on the primary terrace, that is also the entry level to the villa through a loggia on the east side (8,9).

The original entry was through a pedestrian gate on the west side of the villa from a small lane along the north side of the property (1), with the gardens on the east side more secluded and private. This was reversed in the late eighteenth century to take advantage of a new street on the east side of the site to build a new entry and curving carriage drive (4). After passing through a gate from this new street, the path along the hillside offers filtered views through cypress trees to the terraced villa (2). The path and drive arrive at a pavilion connected to a second gate, that frames a view over a garden to the east façade of the house (5,6). This garden steps up with a terrace on the north side, planted with vines (7,12). It was not the original vision, but this route offers a dramatic experience of approaching the site with glimpses of the terraced composition, as well as views over silver-gray olive trees on the south-facing slopes. These groves of olive plantations were once much more extensive

1. Literary descriptions of villas are in *De re rustica* by Columella, *De agricultura* by Cato, and in *Letters* by Pliny the Younger from “The Idea and Invention of the Villa,” by Geoffrey Taylor, 2004
2. *The Roman Villa: Definitions and Variations* by Ursula Rothe, 2018

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

on the hillsides of Fiesole, so it was originally experienced as a rural retreat set in a predominantly agricultural landscape (3), while still positioned for views to the Duomo and towers of Florence (17,33).

The primary terrace is both a perceived and actual plinth for the residence; it is supported by a ten-meter-high battered retaining wall, that merges with the south façade of the house (2,17). The lower level of the residence opens to the next lower terrace (26-28); a sloped walk leads to additional garden levels. The landscapes on these terraces were extensively modified in 1915 by architect Geoffrey Scott and landscape architect Cecil Pincent, who were working for the English owner at the time. These additions in the early twentieth century included the pergola on a mid-level terrace (20-24) and the reworking of a garden on the southwest corner of the site (33). In addition, the orangery was added to the primary terrace (11,12), however, the fundamental character of the design of a terraced landscape was not altered. [3]

The sheer scale of the retaining walls was an obstacle to change. By remaining intact, the overall framework of the landscape architectural composition survives, to be studied and analyzed for achieving the appropriate scale and proportion between buildings, walls and site.

It is an underlying human characteristic to exist or reside in a landscape; the utter simplicity and scale of terraces and buildings emerging from the steeply sloping site makes a habitable environment that resonates, because it expresses a sense of stability and permanence, a place of dwelling created by design. When experienced, the design brings forth this fundamental relationship to the site and our intrinsic relationship to the land. Viewed abstractly, it is a composition of harmonious horizontal and vertical lines to make a villa, that is a fixture in the landscape, built on the oblique and dynamic lines of a hillside.

The set of photographs shows the refinements and adjustments to the design treatment of the terraces, which have accumulated over time. Landscape designs composed of dynamic, living elements evolve and change form, a comparison of views from fall 1994 and spring 2026; illustrates these changes, as well as the seasonal differences in the garden planting and the arrangement of potted plants on terraces. However, the principal aim with these images was to depict the basic structure of the plan, which remains from the fifteenth century, of a hillside villa built on terraces. The Villa Medici in Fiesole is an early example of this character-defining feature of Italian Gardens, and one of the best surviving examples.

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3. *Villa Medici a Fiesole: Leon Battista Alberti and the Prototype of a Renaissance Villa* by Donata Mazzini and Simone Martini, 2004

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Notes

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