

Italian Lake District

Tales of Enchantment

by Fran Baccari

SET IN THE FOOTHILLS OF THE ALPS, the northern Italian Lake District features spectacular, jagged mountain peaks; glacier-formed, deep-clefted valleys; and cold meandering mountain lakes. Small fishing villages and towns, Neoclassical villas, lavish Renaissance palaces, ancient Roman ruins, and spectacular gardens create a kaleidoscope of colorful, visual sensations. The HPS trip to the Lake District was a ‘Tale of Enchantment’—a fairy-tale journey that explored magical gardens, art, and architecture and was woven with stories steeped in the rich, colorful history of the region.



The entrance to Villa Carlotta

We began on the shores of Lake Como, in the exquisitely landscaped gardens of **Villa Carlotta**.



Repentant Magdalene, a sculpture by Canova at Villa Carlotta

A meandering pathway weaves through a lush botanical cornucopia covering nearly 20 acres with over 500 species. Although not in bloom, the sheer number, size, and variety of the mass plantings of azaleas form a gently rolling wave tumbling down the hillside toward the lake. A long garden trail leads to the back entrance of the villa, along which are two clusters of 100-year-old single variety *Rhododendron arboreum*, 25 species of bamboo, a natural ravine, and a linden- and plane tree-topped fern valley extending through a hillside.



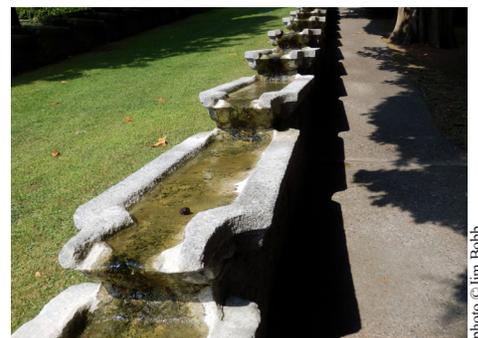
A hand-trimmed holly oak at Villa Balbianello

We traveled by private boat to **Villa Balbianello**, built on a steeply sloped peninsula in 1784 by Cardinal Angelo Durina. The deconsecrated Franciscan monastery features a simple design with terraced gardens, manicured lawns and graveled pathways lined with pollarded plane trees and soaring cypress and oak. The mushroom-shaped holly oak (*Quercus ilex*) with its dense boughs trimmed by hand was a marvel. Today, the villa is a monument and museum to Guido Monzino, department store mogul and adventurer who, upon his death in 1988, deeded the property to the

Italian National Trust, Fondo Ambiente Italiano. Movie enthusiasts should note that Villa Balbianello is the location for James Bond’s 2006 *Casino Royale* private hospital scene and the scene of Anakin and Amidala’s marriage in *Star Wars: Episode II—Attack of the Clones*.



Tiered slab waterfalls at Villa d’Este



Detail of waterfall

Villa d’Este, a Renaissance villa and its 25-acre landscape, has been altered by the estate’s many owners. Manicured lawns cover the hillside and are interrupted by a waterfall of tiered granite slabs bordered by a granite double staircase. The fountainhead of the waterfall is at the feet of Canova’s sculpture of Hercules and Lichas. A gravel path leads to a fake fortress which provides perspective with stunning aerial views of the landscape

and a clear view of the 500-year-old plane tree (*Platanus orientalis*), the English garden, the chef's garden, Lake Como, and the facade of the villa. The resort was popularized since 1873, graced by the likes of Alfred Hitchcock, Mark Twain, Greta Garbo, and Elizabeth Taylor.

Our visit to **Villa Melzi** provided a peaceful ambience along an allée with magnificently pruned plane trees hugging the lake. The boughs are pruned to create picture frames featuring the lake, the town, and Villa Carlotta on the opposite bank. The pruning handiwork is evident throughout the property elevating the beauty of the variegated dogwood, rhododendrons, and azaleas as they flow over the gently sloping terrain.



Training young minds at Fondazione Minoprio School

Our road trip from Lake Como to Lake Garda gave us an opportunity to visit **Fondazione Minoprio School and Park** and to speak with staff and students at the horticultural boarding school. Learning landscape maintenance, horticulture, and conservation to become the future artisans of the gardens, the high school students have a four-year course of study. An invigorating conversation with the laboratory entomologist, virologist, and plant pathologist about their research helped us realize the



Inside a greenhouse at the school

universality of the demons that plague gardeners.



One of many pathways and trails at Il Vittoriale Degli Italiani

Il Vittoriale Degli Italiani (The Shrine of the Italian Victories), was both a golden palace and cage for adventurer-poet Gabriele d'Annunzio, an obsessive collector of art antiquities, amulets, and war memorabilia. The villa maintains this feel with a labyrinth of dark, low-ceilinged, cluttered rooms. The landscape, with its circuitous pathways traversing the hillside, is eccentric, disorganized, overcrowded, but less somber. From his mausoleum, the royal battleship cruiser Puglia is forever in dry dock between the Valley of Wise water and the Valley of Crazy water which feed the Pond of the Dances. Growing on a stone wall at the lowest elevation, a caper plant with bud, flower, and fruit symbolizes order, hope, and the continuity of life.



Gabriele d'Annunzio would fire canon salutes from the warship Puglia, anchored halfway up the hill.



Rain and mosaic path in the Heller Garden
Hardy Plant Society/Mid-Atlantic Group



Monkey puzzle cones at Heller Garden

Chaos was the theme of the day and continued with a rainy afternoon walk to the **Heller Garden**. Set on two acres of hillside with pathways of colorful mosaic tiles, plants are packed into the landscape, interspersed with whimsical art. The beautifully sculpted drainage furrows were put to good use as runnels of rain ran down the hill and over the pathways and our feet.



Whimsical artwork at Heller Garden



Hidden art and plant treasures can be discovered everywhere at Heller Garden.

A perfect place to calm the senses and offer a brief reprieve was our hotel, the 1884 **Grand Hotel Gardone**. Starting at an umbrella-shaped magnolia, footed in a rainbow of red, pink, and white impatiens, the stone promenade lies between the sparkling Lake Garda and a series of small flowered niches. Between majestic windows, tall, thin lilac bougainvilleas climb ochre stucco walls, before spilling into mounds of lavender and



photo ©Jim Bobb

The view from a Grand Hotel Gardone balcony white impatiens. On the white posts of the railing, fragrant, white alyssum lollipop globes are perched in pots, hidden by cascading violet petunias flowing toward the water's edge.



photo ©Jim Bobb

The Villa at Isola Del Garda

Romantic **Isola Del Garda** is an island with a Venetian neo-Gothic-style marble and reinforced concrete villa, and the ancestral home of our guide, Alberta Cavazza. Italian and English garden themes mirror the past inhabitant's preferences. Olive and fruit trees abound, and the numerous boxwoods require over three weeks of extensive pruning to create the crisp outlined gardens and De Ferrari family emblem on the lower front terrace. Stepping off the private boat, a fellow traveler felt the morning crispness as the earth and plants released their wonderful scents after the rain. Talk of family history, bygone Franciscan



photo ©Fran Baccari

The De Ferrari family emblem hedge at Isola Del Garda

monks, and Dante and other poets could be heard whispered in softly muted words. Tiny rain droplets, captured on the bald cypress trees, shimmered silver in the sunshine, and the mild breeze created gracefully moving shadows at our feet, as we meandered through the forested area, which provides a privacy barrier for the villa.



photo ©Jim Bobb

Waterlilies at Villa Taranto

In the westernmost Lake Maggiore region, on 40 acres of land transformation, the 1875 **Villa Taranto** is the expression of love by Scotsman Neil McEacharn. The garden overwhelms us with beauty and smells, rare plants, meticulous formal gardens, and a maze of dahlias over six feet high, planted in a serpentine to hide visitors as they coo at the myriad colors and shapes. Spectacular specimens include Amazonian *Victoria cruziana*, the largest water lily measuring two meters in diameter. Two towering, deciduous conifer *Metasequoia glyptostroboides*, thought extinct and 'rediscovered' in China in 1941, were gifts given by the Borromeo family to McEacharn in 1949. A huge *Emmenopterys henryi*, which first bloomed when it was 24 years old, is a possible goal for those who marvel at the unusual adaptations of nature.



photo ©Jim Bobb

Sculptures at the Sacred Mount of Orta depict the eventual approval of the aims of Francis by Pope Innocent III.

The **Sacred Mount of Orta**, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is a pilgrimage destination for the faithful. A spiral, tree-lined, sloping pathway leads to the 20 chapels with life-size, terra cotta figures and colorful frescos depicting the life of St. Francis of Assisi. This is a place of quiet, solitude, and reverence.



photo ©Jim Bobb

A tasty spread for tasting at Frantoio Manestrini olive oil farm



photo ©Jim Bobb

At Bellavista, Sue Slim calculates how many bottles of sparkling wine she can fit in her wine cellar.

A trip to Italy would not be complete without food experiences. During a brief visit to the **Frantoio Manestrini** olive oil farm, staff lectured while we tasted. Located on top of a knoll overlooking fields of parallel grape vines, **Bellavista** winery was our site for tour and tasting of quality sparkling wine. Gelato may not have been the highlight during the medieval period for the townspeople of **Orta San Giulio**, but two members of our group eagerly consumed 12 different varieties in the 45 minute visitation to the town. *Mmmm.*

Villa Cicogna Mozzoni, the ancestral home of our guide Iacopo Mozzoni, provides challenges and opportunities for preservation and restoration with the dichotomous feelings of love-loathe, amid the ever present financial concerns. Built as a hunting lodge and expanded in 1530,



photo © Fran Baccari

Two pools adorn the gardens of Villa Cicogna Mozzoni.

the villa, with its Lombard Renaissance architecture, grand staircase, and fruit-frescoed courtyard and loggia, is balanced by the beauty of the formal late 16th-century Florentine- and Roman-styled gardens, which are still maintained as originally designed. Like two paintings side by side, meticulously manicured boxwood frame a central circular fountain in a lawn with flashes of ruby begonias. Framed again by a high hedge of bay laurel, two rectangular balustrade pools, a stone grotto, and the open courtyard, the garden paintings send a siren call and beckon one to view, smell, and taste the fruit of centuries of loving care. Behind the villa, a 16th-century water staircase, double bordered by cypress trees, cascades to a drain where, by gravity, the water is shunted as the irrigation system for the gardens. Centuries have diminished the impact, yet, with imagination, the touches of faded elegance sing to the heart and soul of any visitor with a love of art, manifested in nature and architecture and echoed in the voice of our host.

In 1501, the Borromeo family became owners of **Isola Madre** and later purchased **Isola Bella**. Generations of Borromeos and their architects and landscape designers have left their imprint on the villas and gardens of both islands. This is a family with the financial ability to maintain the grandeur of the past. The Isola Bella palace expansion, begun in 1659, created domed, barrel, or miter-vaulted, ornately stuccoed ceilings with clerestory windows illuminating the interior with sunlight. Beautifully crafted Murano crystal chandeliers compliment the ambiance in different themed rooms.

The visit continued from the palace into the garden at the Atrium of Diana where the beautiful stone huntress regally stands in her fern-covered niche—a profusion of crimson begonias, potted in terra-cotta, surrounding the pool at her feet. A stone balustrade draws the eye upward, and the two curved stone staircases beckon one to continue ever upward. Passing through the ornate iron gate and standing under the boughs of the majestic 197-year-old *Cinnamomum camphora*, we stop and stare at the man-made, monumental Teatro Massimo (Maximum Theater), which terminates the field of vision on the southern garden axis.



photo © Jim Bobb

Teatro Massimo at Isola Bella

Shaped like a bell curve, the amphitheatre pays homage to the surrounding, life-giving waters with the center section composed of three large exedras, separated by pilasters into nine niches containing allegorical figures representing Lake Maggiore, the Rivers Ticino and Torce, and seashells. Bisecting the two boxwood-edged lawns often visited by white peacocks, the central promenade leads to the theatre. Veering either left or right, we can climb two flights of stone steps leading to a terrace at the highest point on the island. Here, the 360° view is awe inspiring. Rugged-peaked mountains, rippling water dotted with small boats ushering people to and from other islands, and towns provide the backdrop. The protected southern side of the island provides a warm microclimate for the Garden of Love. In the formal Italianate Renaissance theme, four symmetrical boxwood-edged flower beds enclose a central circular nymph-adorned basin located at tier five, its north side protected by Teatro Massimo. To the east, leveled closest to the water's edge, is the linear

Bitter Oranges Allée of beautifully globed citrus trees with its central avenue. Looking over the side of the high terrace, tiered, espaliered walls of the hanging gardens with their feet in narrow flower beds blossom in a potpourri of color that can be enjoyed from above and when sauntering down to the exit.

Villa Borromeo on Isola Madre was built 1518–1585 as a summerhouse. Fruit and nut trees and grapevines have been cultivated since the middle 16th century. Lovely botanic gardens of azaleas, rhododendrons, and camellias are visited by colorful peacocks. The most striking feature is a majestic Kashmir cypress (*Cupressus cashmeriana*) planted from seed in 1862. Toppled by a tornado in 2006, the tree was truly resurrected by Italian ingenuity with cranes, harnesses, and guy-wires and stands today as a testament to man and his love of nature.



photo © Fran Baccari

The majestic Kashmir cypress, adored by all of Italy, resurrected after a tornado.

Believing that “living means making our lives a memorable experience,” it is with appreciation that we celebrate the people, gardens, art, architecture, and history of the Italian Lake District.

Our special thanks to Brightwater Holiday tour guide Kate Williamson, whose knowledge, professionalism, passion, and enthusiasm enhanced our experience enormously.



Fran Baccari and her husband Al are retirees from the Department of Biology at Montgomery County Community College (MCCC). They adore all things Italian, having organized many trips to Italy for the MCCC students. Al produces many fine wines and his own pasta from only the finest flour. Fran spends her days reading and basking in her beautifully coiffed garden—sipping wine and eating Al's pasta.