

FAI's New Treasure

Villa dei Vescovi, a True Delight!

The most important pre-Palladian villa in Veneto, the bishops' summer home, is now open to the public.

By Guido Beltramini

When speaking of the history of books, we refer to what was produced during the early decades of the printing press era as *incunabula*. These volumes retain all the fragility and primitive fascination of something that was born but is not yet fully developed. The Villa dei Vescovi in Luvigliano is the *incunabulo* of the long history of the villas of Veneto. It is a unique building and marks the beginning of a new architectural era that would reach, in the coming centuries, the English countryside and the plantations of Virginia.

Of this book, there exists, in fact, a “manuscript” which is known as the “house on the hills of Arquà”, near Padua, where Francesco Petrarca went to live during the 1370s to take refuge from the chaos and miasma of city life. For the Medieval man, the countryside was the dark forest where Dante had lost his way, an uncivilized and dangerous place. Petrarch elevated it, instead, to a place of intellectual productivity, and experienced the land as had his predecessors Cicero and Virgil, thus changing the overall perception of the countryside. Almost a century later, Poliziano and his friends would emulate Petrarch by setting up residence in the peaceful Tuscan countryside where their lord, Lorenzo the Magnificent, would build the first humanist villa in Poggio a Caiano. Conceptually there already existed the desire to live in the countryside, but the idea had not yet been given form: today, we know it as a villa, but the Medici residence at Poggio a Caiano resembled more of a city palace that had been transferred to the countryside.

We now return to the Veneto where in 1535, not far from Arquà, Gianmaria Falconetto and Alvise Cornaro invented a new style of building for the Bishop of Padua, Francesco Pisani. Falconetto was a brilliant, roughneck architect with bright red hair who was as swift with his pen as he was with his knife (according to Vasari). Palladio would later inherit his studies of ancient Roman theaters. Cornaro was a penniless Venetian noble with a great passion for architecture and theater, so great, in fact, that he had a theater built in his courtyard in Padua. The

two men worked together with great synergy, and when Cornaro was enlisted to restructure the Bishop of Padua's country home, he and Falconetto worked side by side on the project. The bishop's property stood atop the remains of a small medieval castle. The location is critical because of town's name, Luvigliano. The name is derived from *Livianum*, which is the name of the site where it is believed that Livy, the famous historian of Paduan birth, planned to build his country villa. The site also resembles the place where Pliny the Younger's legendary Villa Laurentina was located, poised atop a small knoll and surrounded by an amphitheater of hills. Cornaro and Falconetto made use of the rectangular structure from the pre-existing medieval building, and turned into a solid basement level for the villa's service areas. Over this ground floor they built a single *piano nobile* which contained an absolute novelty: three out of the building's four sides were open thanks to a series of uninterrupted arches. The villa thus became a genuine observation point, from which viewers could take in the landscape as if it were a living painting. The arches were framed by Doric-style columns that supported a delicate frieze composed of *triglyphs* and *metopes*, which were inspired by ancient temples. In the center of the villa lay a small square courtyard that functioned as an *impluvium* (to drain off rain water). Thus a new type of country home was born in the Veneto, inspired by ancient Roman villas, and which marked a dramatic departure from traditional farms or fortified residences.

Perhaps I've simplified things, but in truth it's taken quite a bit of work to get to the bottom of this story. The villa, as we see it today, is the result of a series of transformations which were not easy to identify. It was necessary to work like a philologist who examines a text and must determine where publishers have added their comments or removed certain portions. In order to rediscover the original "edition" of Villa dei Vescovi, much time had to be spent in the archives, and the restoration spearheaded by FAI afforded an invaluable opportunity to interrogate the building itself through architectural surveying, rock analysis, and other architectural investigations performed for the first time on the structure. Needless to say, the story was not without its drama. Looking at the south side of the building, which was the villa's original entrance, one notices that two large windows have been obscured by internal walls. It seems odd that Falconetto and Cornaro would commit such an error, and in fact, the true story was uncovered in the archives of Mantova. In 1542, when the villa was nearly finished, Bishop Pisani had an argument with Cornaro and banished him from the building site. His replacement would be Giulio Romano, a celebrity architect who was working for the Gonzaga family in Mantova at the time. Giulio implemented some changes in the layout of the villa's interior spaces, and enclosed one of the

three lateral arcades, as evidenced by rock analysis. Moreover, he applied a layer to the basement level that simulated large stone blocks. But the story doesn't stop there, because fifteen years later, the new bishop decided that he did not like to enter the villa from the south, so he had a *cour d'honneur* built with a grand staircase on the villa's western flank. Ten years later, his successor had Vincenzo Scamozzi build a majestic entrance to the villa's eastern side as well. But the villa had a critical flaw: for a dreamer like Cornaro, the *impluvium* was certainly an important tribute to the *domus* of ancient Rome, however it proved a disastrous use of space in daily life at the villa and was eliminated in the 18th century.

The culture of the villa was born in Luvigliano, not only in terms of its architecture, but also as a result of the beautiful frescos painted by Lambert Sustris. In the subsequent decades, Palladio would further develop the "incunabula" of Villa dei Vescovi by integrating the *barchesse* (long arcaded wing), threshing floor, and dovecots into the main buildings of his villas. In this way, Palladio was able to create the commercial villa for early entrepreneurial aristocrats of Northeastern Italy who sold their silk throughout Europe. But to conceive his most famous villa, La Rotonda in Vicenza, Palladio would return in spirit to the Euganean Hills, where he would be inspired by the primitive modernity of the dwelling that lies on the site of Livy's former villa.

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