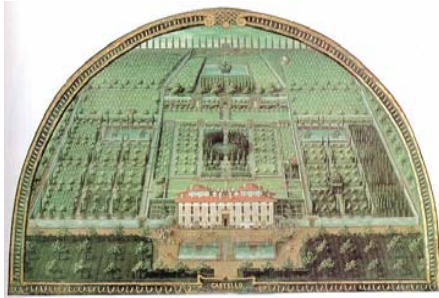


## Water Tricks - the delights of an Italian Renaissance Garden

*By Keri-Anne Lawton (SCA - Mistress Manyra, OP) As far as winters go, most of Avacal cannot complain about the mild weather we've had. Still, now that we are closer to the end of the season, us gardeners cannot help but start counting the days till spring. Hence, when a email came across the Myrgan wood list describing this wonderful little feature of Italian gardens, I couldn't help but find out more. Enjoy.*

Imagine yourself meandering down the garden path when from nowhere a stream of water shoots you in the face evoking peels of laughter from your companions. You've just experienced the giochi d'acqua (water game) a popular garden feature during the Italian Renaissance.



Medici Villa at Castello

We first hear of the water game or trick in *De Re Aedificatoria* (On the Art of Building, c.1450) by the architect, Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472). The treatise formalized the idea that a garden should include elaborate fountains, sculpture, labyrinths, grottos and terraces; becoming a place of harmony between nature and art. It was a complete turn around from the practical and pastoral gardens of the middle ages and represented a livelier, more extroverted appreciation of life. The water trick was just one way this attitude was expressed.

“Scherzi acqua” or surprise showers could be found in the most ingenious areas of the landscape; Pathways could be flooded at any time (often called *inganni da peidi* or trick aimed at the feet), walking under an archway could suddenly bring on a tempest, a bridge rail could give way landing the sightseer in a pool and statuary found in grottos frequently targeted people contemplating the art. The Grotto of the Animals at Medici villa at Castello, for example, contains numerous jets of water hidden in its floor. The gates of this grotto would suddenly shut, trapping visitors inside, then the hidden jets would be turned on.(1)

Labyrinths were also popular places for unknown water features taking advantage of the unexpected turns of the maze and the visitor’s inability to escape. The now famous Fountain of Florence was once surrounded by a labyrinth of evergreens and “marble benches where those who sat to admire the work of art were greeted with hidden water jets shoot up all around them.” (2) Other locations include tree houses such as the one at Pratolino, which was large enough to serve a meal in and water jets and pipes were veiled with ivy to surprise the diner. (3)

Why were such jokes and tricks popular with villa owners and guests? Well, at the basic level, they provided a cooling effect from heat of the Tuscan sun. Looking deeper, we see what the garden began to represent – the new focus on leisure, art and environment. Water and the controlling there of was at the heart of this attitude and the water trick was the perfect example of combining human ingenuity and nature to provoke play and laughter. Inventors took great joy in devising new hydraulics and pumps to make the water replicate the joy of an incoming tide or the fear and awe in the sound of canon fire.

The gardens at Villa Lante at Bagnaia include more than 400 surprises among its many water features. There were designed mostly by a hydraulics specialist from Sienna, Thomaso Chiruchi, whose work still inspires today. Each terrace of the Villa Lante grows more wild and savage.(4) Water tricks serve to emphasis the feel of unpredictable danger.

At first what seems to be a frivolous design of some trickster, the water game is actually symbolic of the many ideals embraced in the Italian Renaissance, proving that indeed “Man defines himself by his garden”.



Water running down the stairs at Villa Lante

1. Lazzaro, Claudia. (1990). *The Italian Renaissance Garden*. New Haven and London: Yale University. pp.66 &186.

2. Lazzaro, ibid pp.176

2. Lazzaro, ibid pp.56

3., *THE ENCHANTED GARDENS OF THE RENAISSANCE* Line, Jacques-Edouard's student Ecole des Beaux Arts, Lausanne. [http://www.bergerfoundation.ch/Jardin/bagnaia-intro\\_english.html](http://www.bergerfoundation.ch/Jardin/bagnaia-intro_english.html)

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