

MEDICI VILLA AT CAREGGI



In 1325 Giovanni Villani described Careggi as “*un bello paese di villate meglio accasato e giardinato, rispetto ad altre terre*”. Therefore, as early as the fourteenth century the area between Careggi and Rifredi had many prestigious villas which certainly must have included that of Tommaso Lippi. In 1417, the Medici family began purchasing lands and houses on the hills of Monterivechi, which is where the Lippi lands were located. And, the Medici were not alone, the most powerful and prestigious families of fifteenth century Florence such as the Tornabuonis, Bencis, Davanzatis and Ardinghellis, built lavish villas in the area as demonstrations of their social status and prestige.

Even for Giovanni di Bicci (father of Cosimo the Elder) the acquisition of the Lippi’s villa marked the first step in the development of the political power of the family that would soon rise to the apex of prestige and power.

The Medicis were constantly on the move from one country residence to the other seeking a better climate and tranquility.

The purchase Giovanni di Bicci made on 7 June 1417, consisted of a palazzo with a courtyard, loggia, well, cellar, chapel, stables, towers, vegetable garden and two houses. The palazzo must have been in good condition at the time of the purchase because it was only upon the owner’s death (1429) that his two heirs, Cosimo and Lorenzo had to do any work on it.. From surviving documents we learn that

substantial sums were earmarked for the work and therefore we can presume that it was a large-scale project. The architect Michelozzo was appointed to the task.

The first to mention Michelozzo's work on the villa at Careggi was Giorgio Vasari who, after describing the Villa del Trebbio, wrote: "*E similmente, lontano da Firenze due miglia, fece il palazzo della villa di Careggi, dove Michelozzo condusse l'acqua per la fonte che al presente si vede*". A comparison of the building plans show that the structure of the villa, even after the remodeling, was identical to the original when it was owned by Lippi.

As we enter the Villa we first see the **Cortile** and loggia which is certainly the fulcrum of Michelozzo's design. We are immediately struck by the unusual, trapezoidal shape of the courtyard which is congruent with the path of the road (in fact, at the time the work was being done, the main road was tangential to the entrance).

The two lateral wings of the west façade are also attributed to Michelozzo. They are lower than the central structure and project towards the garden. On the ground floor there are two loggias with three arches supported by composite style capitals and columns which are similar to those in the internal courtyard.

Lorenzo the Magnificent was born at the Careggi villa in 1448, and after the death of Cosimo the Elder (1464) he became the head of the family. Careggi was his favorite residence and he transformed it into a center of culture and the arts by establishing the Neoplatonic Academy.

Proceeding with our visit, we go up to the first floor via a broad staircase that takes us into a large room with a fireplace. On the walls there are two nineteenth century paintings depicting scenes of life at the villa (Lorenzo the Magnificent with a group of academy members honoring Plato, and Cosimo the Elder receiving dignitaries and men of the church in his library). From this room we go to the small **Loggia** of the west wing. The attribution of this loggia is still the subject of debate since, in architectural terms it is dissimilar to the rest of the building and this has led to the hypothesis that it was constructed later, during the last years of Lorenzo's life. Following the death of Lorenzo the Magnificent, the fall of Savonarola and the banishment of the Medicis from Florence, most of their lands and buildings were confiscated. Although this was not the fate of the Villa at Careggi, it changed hands through inheritance several times. Finally it was inherited by the Duke Alessandro in 1534 and was remodeled again.

When the Grand Duke Cosimo I became the proprietor, the villa lost its former splendor: he preferred the Villa del Trebbio to such an extent that in 1569 he gave the entire Careggi estate to his son Pietro.

The Grand Duke Ferdinando died in 1609 and the villa went to Prince Carlo who, after being made a cardinal in 1615, undertook an enormous project to remodel the villa and the gardens.

The fresco decorations in the **Studiolo** in the south-east corner of the first floor and the lunettes in the **Room of the Frescoes** date from this period.

In the Room of the Frescoes, the lunettes are decorated with the cardinal's coat of arms, imaginary *vedute* and landscapes, two views of the villa Medici in Rome (owned by the cardinal) and scenes based on Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*. It was the cardinal who commissioned the **Grotticina** or little grotto.

The **Gardens**, have undergone several radical changes over the years, including one in the nineteenth century. The gardens of the Villa at Careggi were already important in the day of Lorenzo the Magnificent and therefore were designed in accordance with ideals that can be traced to antiquity. Unfortunately, not a trace remains of the original layout because the gardens, like the villa, had been redesigned several times. The first changes date back to Cardinal Carlo who had a path with colored cobblestones and two statues of dwarfs – which are still visible – built on the south side. One of the greatest architects of the day, Giulio Parigi, the same Parigi who with his son redesigned the Boboli gardens, was commissioned to do the work.

With the advent of the Lorraines the villa fell into such a state of decline that Pietro Leopoldo sold the entire estate to Vincenzo Orsi (1780). The next owners were the Holland family. The fresco in the **Garden Room** portraying the famous scene in which the physician to Lorenzo the Magnificent was thrown into the well – and killed – for not having properly cared for the great patron of the arts (George F. Watts 1845) dates from this period.

The legend of Lorenzo gained strength and influence among the English and hence the next owner was Francis Joseph Sloane. Under his guidance the villa and the gardens were significantly modified. Many rare plants were added and an Italian garden was created. The **Limonaia**, or citrus house, dates from the same period and still houses many citrus plants.

After Sloane's death, the next owner was Count Augusto Boutourlin and then, in 1901 the Segrè family. In 1936 the last owner, Rosina Cirillo Fornaciari, sold the entire estate to the Arcispedale di S. Maria Nuova.

*Today, the villa belongs to the Tuscan Regional Government and hosts, inter alias, the **European Network of Local and Regional Authorities for the implementation of the European Landscape Convention (ENELC)**. This organisation has set up its permanent headquarters at Careggi in March 2007.*

Following a decision by the Tuscan Government, this represents the first step towards the promotion of international activities entirely dedicated to landscape issues and concerning the implementation of the above-mentioned Convention at Villa Careggi.