

The Medicean villa 'Ambrogiana': A building rediscovered through its inventories¹

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The topic of this paper is the use of inventories in relation to the Ambrogiana, a Medicean country residence that stands on the left bank of the river Arno in Montelupo Fiorentino, near Florence (Italy). Why has this particular building been chosen amongst numerous more famous and celebrated Medicean villas? The answer is to be found in its current state of decay and abandonment probably due to both its windy and wet location, as well as the fact that it has been inappropriately used since the 19th century.

A new found interest in the Ambrogiana started about two years ago with a project funded by Regione Toscana and directed by Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa, called 'ArTeSalVa', 'Saved-Art'. The objective of 'ArTeSalVa' (an ongoing project) is to study large historical Tuscan buildings facing deterioration or under-use. The research aims primarily at reconstructing the history of neglect and degradation of such buildings. It also analyzes (partly through computer generated graphics) their structural and functional changes, from their origins to the present. These studies will help determine their appropriate restoration and re-use.

The Ambrogiana Villa stands as a perfect example of neglected cultural heritage, which needs to be studied and rediscovered. Therefore, the analysis of its inventories, which we will explain in this workshop, is significant to the scope of our project.

The history of the villa is one of both rise and decline². It was acquired by Ferdinand Ist of Medici (1548-1609) in 1574, when it was only a manor house with two towers. After a few years, particularly from 1587 to 1590, it was changed into a real court residence, with four towers, one at each corner of the building. The first architects involved in its enlargement and restoration were Giovanni Antonio Dosio (1533 – after 1609), documented in 1574, and subsequently Raffaello Pagni (active 1588-1597), pupil and collaborator of Bernardo Buontalenti (1536-1608), documented as master builder in 1588.

¹ This paper has been read at the international workshop "Inventories and courtly spaces", held in January 13-14, 2012 at Lisbon and Sintra (Portugal) and organized by PALATIUM, a ESF research networking program.

² The main contributions used in the text are: M. Fossi, *Note documentarie sul gruppo di Ercole e Anteo dell'Ammannati e sulla villa Ambrogiana*, in *Architettura e politica da Cosimo I a Ferdinando I*, Firenze 1976, pp. 463-479; C.V. Vatovec, *L'Ambrogiana. Una villa dai Medici ai Lorena*, Firenze 1984; A. Alderighi, *L'Ambrogiana: una villa atipica. Contributi documentari di epoca lorenese*, in "Miscellanea storica della Valdelsa", 107, 2001, pp. 113-133; M. Visonà, *La Via Crucis del Convento di San Pietro d'Alcántara presso la Villa l'Ambrogiana a Montelupo Fiorentino*, in *Kunst des Barock in der Toskana: Studien zur Kunst unter den letzten Medici*, München 1976, pp. 57-69.

The Buontalenti imprint was maintained over the following years due to the involvement in the project of engineer Gherardo Mechini (active ca. 1580 – ca. 1620).

Although the Ambrogiana Villa was a residence dedicated primarily to hunting, Ferdinand Ist used it mostly as a pleasant retreat where he received his guests (ambassadors, courtiers, travelers...), offering them hospitality during their travels by river from Florence to Livorno. Important events were also organized there, one example being the wedding of Eleonora Orsini and Federico Sforza, duke of Segni, in 1592³.

After the rule of Ferdinand the Ist, the villa began to show various signs of deterioration due to its lack of use. Under the government of Grand Duke Cosimo the 3rd of Medici, the villa however regained its splendor. The Grand Duke loved this country residence and decided to enrich it with many works of art. He was a great Flemish and Dutch art enthusiast, a passion which grew after his grand tour of Europe between 1667 and 1669. In the Ambrogiana, he mostly collected paintings representing animals, hunting scenes, and still lifes. Aside from his patronage of the arts, Cosimo the 3rd focused on the construction and improvement of the church and convent of St. Peter of Alcantara. This complex was built near the villa from 1678 to 1681 and is connected to the Ambrogiana by a long corridor.

In 1737, the Duchy of Tuscany passed from the Medici family to the Lorena family. Therefore, the villa was left in the hands of royal officials that, at the request of the new ruling family, were appointed to draw up inventories of all the royal villas in order to appraise their worth and conservation status.

Under Ferdinand the 3rd a new season begins for the villa (only interrupted during the Napoleonic period, between 1799 and 1814, when there was a failed attempt to sell the entire building). Ferdinand the 3rd did in fact have the Ambrogiana restored, the first floor painted, and the external annexes expanded with the construction of new stables⁴. The last duke of Lorena, Leopold the 2nd, did not, however, take care of the villa as much as his father. Thus, from 1824, the Ambrogiana underwent a rapid decline. A railway was built in its vicinity and starting from 1850 the uninhabited structure became a penitentiary⁵ and mental asylum. From this moment onwards the Ambrogiana has known only neglect and improper use: the penitentiary was expanded to the corridor connecting the villa to the church; in the villa some rooms were closed or used as storage, others were structurally changed to serve as offices for the insane asylum, as they do to this day. During this period all the works of art within the villa were gradually removed.

Now, let us explore the ways in which inventories were written, used and can now be a helpful tool for the art historian to recreate the history of a building. Who made inventories and who for?

³ Archivio di Stato di Firenze (ASF), *Manoscritti* 130, c. 315r.

⁴ First the construction of new stables was entrusted to the architect Giuseppe del Rosso (1760-1831) then to the architect Pasquale Poccianti (1774-1858).

⁵ The first project was entrusted to Giuseppe Cappellini (1812-1876), replaced at design from Francesco Mazzei (1806-1869), who created the prison in the building of detached stables. See: *Giuseppe Cappellini architetto 1812 - 1876, catalogo della mostra*, a cura di G. Micheletti, Livorno 1998.

Both Medici and Lorena court officials used inventories for the administration of the families' properties. Like all Medici villas, the Ambrogiana was periodically subjected to inspections by the so-called 'Guardaroba's, officials responsible for the administration, productivity and maintenance of the villa, as well as the compilation of its inventories⁶. The word 'guardaroba' also referred to a storage area where things such as tools, furnishings, textiles, metals, works of art, etc. were kept and which the court official had to administer and safeguard.

We are aware of more than 20 inventories related to the Ambrogiana from the 16th to the 19th century⁷. These inventories generally describe the entire estate of the villa or may sometimes describe just specific objects. They can be divided into three different types: topographic inventories, 'a capi' inventories and alphabetical inventories, depending on how they are structured and organized. A topographic inventory is a description of objects ordered by location. An 'a capi' inventory is composed of lists of objects organized under different categories and often followed by an index of names.

The majority of the topographic inventories of the villa start their description from the same specific point of the building and follow the same route, describing the entire building room by room. They start on the first floor with the description of rooms on the right and left of the courtyard, then pass on to the courtyard itself and then move to the huge salon and its adjacent rooms. They go up to the mezzanines and then to the second floor, the towers and the attics. The tour continues back towards the ground floor and basement, with the description of guardarobas, kitchens and wine cellars. This route is used in most inventories because it allowed a smooth passage of information about assets and transfers of property between a Guardaroba and his successor. It also allowed for an easy comparison of the before and after.

Thus, not only do the topographic inventories confirm the information already acquired through the comparison of other tools such as plans and drawings of the villa (tools often found in the same archival source), but allow for a detailed reconstruction of the old distribution of the spaces within the villa. At the moment, for security reasons, not all of the villa's rooms are made accessible to the public and it is therefore extremely useful to have information about their original use. Every room had in fact its own title, which sometimes changed from an inventory to the other. So, thanks to the description of the first inventory from the 16th century we know that the main entrance to the villa was called 'loggia' and that it overlooked the courtyard from a 'scalera', a staircase⁸. In the next inventories of the 17th and 18th century the word 'loggia' is replaced with 'salone a terreno' (salon on the ground floor), without any reference to a loggia. This could merely be considered a change of terminology, or, more significantly, may record a transitional stage during the construction of the

⁶ M.G. Vaccari, *La guardaroba medicea dell'Archivio di Stato di Firenze*, Firenze 1997; Alderighi, *L'Ambrogiana: una villa atipica*, cit., p. 118.

⁷ The Ambrogiana inventories is preserved in the Archivio di Stato di Firenze (archival fonds: 'Guardaroba Medicea', 'Scrittoio delle Regie fabbriche' and 'Imperiale e Reale Corte').

⁸ The first Ambrogiana inventory is dated 1588. Cfr. ASF, *Guardaroba Medicea* 1463, c. 7v (1588).

building, from a completely open loggia to a partially closed gallery, as it is today. The rooms' names are a fundamental aid to understand the function of the spaces. We can for example discover that on the second floor of the building there was a "salotto ove si faceva le commedie", a salon dedicated to the performance of comedies⁹ (until 1683). This indicates that the villa was not only a place for short stays, but also for the recreation and more prolonged stays of the court. Rooms specially equipped for the court jesters with names such as 'room of the dwarfs' show that parties and entertainment were organized there. Among the most interesting spaces mentioned in the Ambrogiana inventories are the main halls of each floor, each characterized by their own decor. The hall on the first floor (where the 'loggia' was located) is recorded in the 16th and 17th century as a 'hall of Picche (spears)' or 'salon of the Trucco'. Trucco was a very popular game during the 17th century similar to billiards. The hall on the second floor is often cited as a 'hall of horns'. Different animal horns and spears were some of the decorations there, as befits a villa in a hunting reserve. The second floor was mainly reserved for the apartments and rooms of rulers. For example, one room is described as the 'camerino della duchessa', 'the Grand Duchess's dressing room': it is situated at the beginning of the corridor that connected the villa to the convent of Alcantara. This 'dressing room' must have been a small, isolated and 'secret' space, where the duchess could retire and be alone; it was decorated in a sumptuous way compared to the other rooms of the building: gilded leather hangings with a frieze depicting seven life size heads hung around the dressing room¹⁰.

At first, the inventories reported only one chapel, the one on the first floor, whereas from 1623 a second chapel, on the second floor was recorded. This last one was the Duchess's personal chapel, it was decorated with an altarpiece depicting *Madonna and Child with St. John, St. Joseph and St. Elizabeth*, attributed in the same inventories to Francesco Salviati (1510-1563) (the attribution is still not confirmed by other sources)¹¹.

The space used as 'guardaroba' extended to the rooms of the upper floors of the towers and to a big part of the ground floor. The corridor connecting the villa and the convent of St. Peter of Alcantara was also included in the description of the building as it was used by the sovereign to reach the church unseen, and was therefore considered a part of his property. On the other hand, the grotto made by Giovanni Battista del Tadda (? - 1617), (which included fountains, bas-reliefs, sea sponges and seashells) was never mentioned or described in the inventories, even though its creation started in 1588. This was probably because the grotto was considered as part of the garden rather than the villa. In addition to information concerning the distribution of space within the building, the Ambrogiana inventories give us a lot of information about its furnishings and, in particular, the works of art on display in the halls. Compared to other Medici villas, the Ambrogiana never had a large cycle of frescoes. The only frescoes in the villa are those reported in an 1832 inventory, painted by Niccolò

⁹ ASF, *Guardaroba Medicea* 883bis, c. 49v (1683).

¹⁰ ASF, *Guardaroba Medicea*, 883bis, c. 50r (1683).

¹¹ In the inventory of 1832 the masterpiece is no longer mentioned. Cfr. ASF, *Imperiale e Reale corte*, 4916, p. 18 (1832).

Conestabile around 1792¹². The most valuable furnishings in the villa in the 16th century were the cycles of tapestries of biblical or mythological stories and very few sculptures¹³. The rest of the ornaments consisted of only a few paintings and many items related specifically to hunting. In the hall on the first floor wooden and painted deer heads were on display; in the yard hung more than 20 heads of wolves and deer. Nine more carved and painted deer heads were placed in the room of the Grand Prince in 1604¹⁴. Starting from the second half of the 17th century, the villa was enriched with paintings of nature, still lifes, country landscapes, hunts and religious themes. In an inventory 'a capi' of 1640 there is a total of 77 paintings in the building, 6 drawings and 2 prints¹⁵. A rather small number compared to the one recorded in the following centuries. In the topographical inventory of 1683 works of art increased and the room by room description reports them as distributed in a balanced and nearly symmetrical way, that could be defined as 'museological'¹⁶.

Due to Cosimo the 3rd's religious fervor, in the late 17th and early 18th century religious themes became more prominent among the scenes depicted in the rooms of the villa and especially along the corridor connecting the villa to the convent of S. Peter of Alcantara. In 1732, the corridor was transformed into something close to an art gallery: there were 120 paintings made by the court painter Giovanni Cinqui (1667-1743) depicting the *Life of Jesus*, all in black and gold frames, titled after their corresponding passage of the Gospel¹⁷.

Religious themes are only one aspect of the Medici's collecting activity in the 18th century. Most of the artworks in the villa were still lifes, hunting scenes and country landscapes, satisfying Cosimo the 3rd's penchant for natural science and zoology. The 1732 and 1758 inventories give a detailed description of these artworks and have helped to attribute many nature-themed paintings to court artist Bartolomeo Bimbi (1648-1730)¹⁸. Some examples of his artworks specifically created for the Ambrogiana, such as the *White Parrot*, the *Pheasant: three views*, the *Squirrel and the mouse*, decorated the walls of the second floor hall. They are worth noting for their scientific, exotic and curious features. Two different paintings portray 'monstrous' two-headed animals (one of a calf and one of a lamb)

¹² Cfr. Alderighi, *L'Ambrogiana: una villa atipica*, cit., p. 121.

¹³ A bas-relief in marble, a terra-cotta bust of Christ, two bronzes and a silver inkstand worked reliefs are the only sculptures mentioned in the inventories of 16th century.

¹⁴ ASF, *Guardaroba Medicea* 1463, cc. 5r, 29v, 35v (1604).

¹⁵ ASF, *Guardaroba Medicea* 562 (1640).

¹⁶ ASF, *Guardaroba Medicea* 883bis (1683).

¹⁷ Giovanni Cinqui (1667-1743) painted this cycle in 1717. Cfr. R. Spinelli, *Giovanni Cinqui (1667-1743)*, in *La vita di Cristo di Giovanni Cinqui alla Certosa di Firenze*, a cura di G. Arcidiacono e G. Viti, Firenze 1994, pp. 9-32.

¹⁸ ASF, *Guardaroba Medicea* 1392 (1732); ASF, *Guardaroba Medicea*, Appendice 92 (1758).

which were actually born in the Medici farms and painted to record the event¹⁹. Equally striking for their naturalistic interest are the still lifes recorded in the 18th century inventories²⁰.

Many artworks have already been traced back to the villa, while the search for others, although not yet conclusive, will greatly benefit from the detailed descriptions found in the inventories.

The inventories of the first half of the 18th century recorded works of art formerly found in other Medici villas such as Jacopo da Empoli (1554-1640)'s *Drunkenness of Noah*, or Justo Sustermans (1597-1681)'s *Two old countrywomen*²¹. All these artworks are scattered over different locations instead of being in their original one. The practice of moving artworks from one property to another was not unusual at the time of the Medicis and the Lorenas. Objects were moved in and out country houses depending on the sovereigns's needs. The Ambrogiana suffered property losses more than other houses, particularly in the 19th century²². Many artworks have been transferred to the storage rooms of Palazzo Pitti, others have been distributed to other villas, and their partial identification has been made possible largely thanks to the use of inventory descriptions²³. A use that may help in the future to increase our knowledge of this villa.

¹⁹ M. Mosco, *Natura viva in casa Medici. Dipinti di animali dai Depositi di Palazzo Pitti*, Firenze 1986, Firenze 1985, pp. 36-37, 42-43, 50-51; Bartolomeo Bimbi. *Un pittore di piante e animali alla corte dei Medici*, a cura di S. Meloni Trkulja, L. Tongiorgi Tomasi, Firenze 1998.

²⁰ See: I. Della Monica, *Il granducato di Cosimo III (1670-1723)*, in *Il giardino del granduca. Natura morta nelle collezioni medicee*, a cura di M. Chiarini, Torino 1997, pp. 216-237.

²¹ ASF, *Guardaroba Medicea*, Appendice 92, cc. 90, 103 (1758).

²² S. Meloni Trkulja, *Vicende di Bartolomeo Bimbi e delle sue opere in Bartolomeo Bimbi, un pittore di piante e animali...*, cit., pp. 11-15; S. Meloni Trkulja, *Il centoventesimo quadro: il 'Giudizio Universale'*, in *La vita di Cristo di Giovanni Cinqui alla Certosa di Firenze*, cit., pp. 33-34.

²³ Cfr. *Il giardino del Granduca. Natura morta nelle collezioni medicee*, cit., infra.