Religion and Humanism in the Italian Renaissance: Church and Political Gardens

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During the Renaissance period in Italy a growth of an idea called Humanism began. This was a time period when man focused on his own enlightenment and less on religious strength. These ideals are shown physically in the representation of Italian gardens. When comparing religious gardens with gardens owned by higher political powers, we can compare the shift in man’s own advancements. In this paper I will show how gardens in Renaissance Italy differ with the focus being on man or God, and how that influenced the culture.

Gardens are forms of art in constant evolution and are the artistic combination of nature and design. Italian Renaissance gardens are a variation of the museum that has to be experienced with all the senses. There are also gardens attached to a palazzo, or villa that have the very essence of the Renaissance. This was a time when the God-fearing medieval men became fully aware of their own capabilities as individuals. This led to a revival of man becoming the center of the political world as represented through his or her garden. As Italy reaches the peak of the Renaissance, a growth of humanism is integrated into the gardens widening the gap farther from the religious influences of the church.

A Background on Humanism

There is a term called the *uomo universale* (universal man), which became the standard upon which all men were compared. Alberti and Vasari were two of the original Italian humanists. Vasari himself was a second generation Florentine humanist, while Alberti is considered as one of the founding influential figures. Humanists encompassed all of the traits for an educated man including writing, painting, playing music, architectural design, garden designing, and sculpting. Humanism is the revival of art and literature by the influence of classical antiquity.\(^1\) This was a time when men removed themselves from the church and focused on power and wealth. They believed it would be their own intellectual gain, political strategy, and cultural wisdom that would lead to a fruitful life.\(^2\) The subsequent relationship between gardens and design became centered on man and not God. There was a hierarchal system that began with God, followed by humans, and finally ended with nature.\(^3\) Each of these elements intermingled and depended upon each other.

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other. While both versions of gardens between churches and villas are beautifully designed, they have different intentions, functions and meanings behind them. When researching each type of historical garden, it is important to realize where they came from, the political leaders in control at the time, how that influenced the design, as well as the religious symbolism within churches and palazzi.

Difference of Power
Some of the main elements to consider are the three areas of importance for creating gardens, which fulfilled practical as well as religious needs. First, the main intention of a garden is to simply satisfy those of human’s everyday necessities. This is shown in the need for production of plants, animals, food, and medicine. In regards to fulfilling religious needs, the addition of gardens inside of churches is created. These gardens are called cloisters. Cloisters of any denomination, whether it is Franciscan or Dominican, meet these requirements on the most basic level. The sole purpose of a religious dwelling is to not be focused upon oneself, but rather on God. Thus, in their humility, they only survive on what is necessary. Franciscan order churches mainly survived on donations, whereas monastic orders like the Benedictines were primarily self-sufficient by virtue of the sales of their manufactures products. They live for themselves and their humanistic mindsets. These gardens were used for events and spectacles. Wealth and power greatly influence the design of the garden. Comparing the necessity of a garden attached to a powerful villa with the humility of a cloister shows the difference in religion verses extravagance. This overpowering by the villa over the church is the physical manifestation of humanism rising over religion.  

An example can be made with the focus at San Marco’s cloister on idolizing God and the humanizing focus in The Boboli Gardens of idolizing man. Canonized for their art and architecture, Florence’s churches have been studied and documented for years. San Marco, located in Florence, Italy is a famous Dominican order church. It was rebuilt between 1437-43 under Cosimo the Elder’s financial donations. This beautiful church and monastery house some of the most influential art pieces of the Renaissance era such as Fra Angelico’s ‘Annunciation’ fresco. There is a set of elements used to define a mendicant order church. All monasteries would have a place of worship, a scala capitolare (meeting

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room), a *hospitale* (hospital), a refectory to eat in, and a cloister. This particular cloister is dedicated to St. Anotninus. It has the typical intersection creating four equal squares of grass that intersect at the *axis mezzo* (middle axis). At this *axis mezzo* there is a large, single tree. This is not typical as usually it is a well for water in the center of cloisters. The tree stands alone inside of the church and references Genesis in the Bible through the ‘tree of life’ in the Garden of Eden and therefore symbolizes God’s provision, immortality, and protection. Churches are humble in their intent and typically are the safe haven for the community while paying respect to God. Cloisters inside of churches were designed for religious reasons as they have many symbolic references. Italian gardens were enclosed by walls, and were typically used to grow vegetables, fruits and medicinal herbs, or, in the case of monastery gardens, for meditation and prayer.

Gardens inside or attached to *palazzi* are quite different in just about every aspect from a cloister. They are not created to be simple or even functional in every case. These gardens are designed to display social status and be envied by all. The larger and more extravagant the garden, the more wealth and power the owner has. The Italian Renaissance garden emerged in the late fifteenth century at villas and palazzi in Rome and Florence. They were inspired by classical ideals of order and beauty, and intended for the pleasure of the view of the garden and the landscape beyond. Gardens were meant to use all of the senses a person has as this completes the experience. Large gardens were used for thinking and for the pleasure of the sights, sounds and smells of the garden itself. They are not created to be simple or even functional in every case. According to Alberti there are a total of fifteen elements necessary to create the perfect humanist garden. The elements are as follows: a *loggia* (open walkway on the perimeter of the building), the *pergola* (arbor), lawns, a bowling alley, *limonaia* for growing citrus fruit, a *parterre* (low hedges designed in a geometrical order), a *grotto* (a system of bushes and nets used to trap birds for eating), a water system, a *bosco* (wooded area), a *giardino segreto* (secret garden), a *belvedere* (provides views of the surrounding landscape), symmetry, statuary artworks, an amphitheater, and symbolic references that relate to the owner of the villa or palazzo.

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5 Dafne Mazzanti, Class Lecture. Gardens of Love: Green Paradises in Italy from Renaissance to Contemporary. Florence University of the Arts, Florence, Italy (7 October 2013).
6 Ibid.
The most famous Medici garden in Florence is the Boboli Garden at Palazzo Pitti. Created in the 1500’s by masters such as Vasari, Ammannati, and Tribolo, everything about this garden is shocking from the sheer size, the fanciful grotto, and the exotic citrus. It all began with Cosimo the First in the Medici family. The Medici family was a powerful line of patrons of the arts who commissioned many important pieces ranging from public to private works, but typically only for the wealthy or politically significant audience. Cosimo appointed two architects to begin the first phase of the garden. Ammannati was a follower of Michelangelo and Tribolo (who is considered one of the first true landscape architects). In 1500 they designed the area called the amphitheater, which was innovative as it brought together the Villa and the garden seamlessly and was the original beginning of the garden. The amphitheater is where many grand parties were held as well as luxurious spectacles.8

After Tribolo’s death, Vasari carries out the garden after Ammannati’s design. The second phase of construction began around the 1630s. This was in the Baroque period. A third phase of construction took place at the Boboli garden. This is the Romantic era. After the Medici, Napoleon gave Palazzo Pitti to his sister in the late 1600s. The Romantic period was a time when there was less order and structure to the design of the garden. The pathways were much more free flowing and followed the natural curvature of the land. Gardens are just as historically preserving as the millions of art museums around the world, but they are a much more rare beauty. Knowing who created the pieces and when adds so much more meaning to the garden. From the beginning to the end it tells a story of history between its new owners, period style differences, and purposes for each section.

There is one area that has remained untouched. It is the most fantastical area of the entire garden. Many areas are about beauty or wealth, but there is one area that is all about seduction and enticing the viewer: the Grotto. Buontalenti created it somewhere between the 1540’s to the 1570’s. Grottos are not a typical feature of gardens from this time period.9 While gardens are supposed to be about fantasy and romance, the grotto is quite the opposite. They are alluring to the viewer, exotic even. They represent the lust and darkness within a person. Usually they represent the underworld and are meant to be shocking. This was used as a significant marker.

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Figure 1: Personal photo taken from the top of the amphitheater section looking down on Pitti Palace.

Figure 4: Personal photo of the grotto at Boboli Garden. When first created it was originally underground, through the years as the earth has settled it has become more surface level and is no longer hidden.
to parade wealth and importance when entertaining guests.\textsuperscript{10}

Is Man More Important than Religion?
The humanistic virtues of palazzi with the \textit{uomo universale} greatly differ from those of the religious man. As stated above, churches were used for worship and devotion to God. Their beliefs and intentions were to remove any trace of self-importance and place all emphasis on God. Inside of the churches, there are many physical examples of this ranging from frescos, to altarpieces, to crucifixes throughout the premises. Yet, it is in the cloister that we find the most religious symbolism and virtue, and the cloister of Santa Croce is an ideal representation of the type.

Santa Croce is a Franciscan order church that was begun in the 1290s, and it is design reflects the most humble and simplest values of the order. Upon entering the church, the viewer is greeted with simple layouts to scale of the modern Renaissance man as to not be too overwhelming. Vitruvius was one of the leading art historians and architects of this time. His philosophy of art was based on geometry. This idea of his was a mathematical reasoning was around the proportions of a Renaissance man, which was incorporated into the design of Santa Croce. The measurements of his buildings were all ratios of the typical man at that time.\textsuperscript{11} The cloister in Santa Croce is one of the most minimal versions of a garden. It was created by Brunelleschi in the early 1400’s and completed in 1453 by Rossellino.

There are also many sections to this particular cloister that have heavy symbolism as well. The gardens are square with sections intersecting in the middle to create four smaller squares within the larger one. The intersecting axis creates a symbol of the cross, as well as representing the four cardinal points. At the point where these two lines intersect in the center is a fountain. At Santa Croce the fountain can have many functions as well as meanings. Cloisters have a mathematical perfection to their design and placement. This is because geometry is the reflection of cosmic order and therefore divine order.\textsuperscript{12} This was the source of water for the monastic church, and fulfilled all of their necessities. Water is the life to a garden, as Christ is the life of the religious community. Surrounding the garden is usually a type of loggia, or a covered walkway that is

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\textbf{Figure 5: Personal photo of cloister at Santa Croce. Shown is the axis mezzo with the well of water in the center surrounded by the loggia or hospitale.}
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\textsuperscript{10} Dafne Mazzanti. Class Lecture. Renaissance Architecture. Florence University of the Arts, Florence, Italy. 9 September 2013.

\textsuperscript{11} Dafne Mazzanti, Class Lecture. Renaissance Architecture. Florence University of the Arts, Florence, Italy. 9 September 2013.

\textsuperscript{12} Lazzaro, p. 10.
open to the garden. This does not have any dual meaning so much as it was a necessary function for the church. The community uses this area as a place to walk, reflect, and meditate. It also was used to house people and give them a place to sleep or nurse them back to health. Gardens or cloisters inside of churches were very simplistic in their design, as they were usually more for function or religious symbolism.

The new Renaissance man's focus on himself led to a new idea of man becoming the essence of life and replacing the notion that God was life. Villa di Castello was built for Cosimo the First and the Medici family and, according to Vasari, was the most rich, magnificent, ornamental garden in Europe. There are many areas of the garden that connect the family into the architectural and horticultural design. Tribolo who was the designer behind many gardens in Florence revived it as a project in 1540.

The garden was a political statement proclaiming Cosimo the First would be the leader of Florence into a new Golden age after many years of war and suffering. This is repeated many times symbolically throughout the garden representing Cosimo in statues as strong animals such as horses and lions.

In the center of the garden, there is a statue titled Florenza created by Giambologna. This was a figure of a woman combing her hair with water running down. This statue created to represent how the Medici family was the life of Florence as water is the life of a garden. As Christ is represented as the fountain of life in a church, the Medici have glorified themselves with a humanistic mindset to have the same status as Christ.

Order vs. Nature
While both gardens are beautiful in their own way, there are a few things that connect them. One of which is how a garden functions as a safe haven. Even inside of the grandest gardens there are usually one or two secret gardens that a privileged number of people are granted access to. Gardens are a place to think and meditate. They are an area of healing and peace. Another way that these gardens can be linked together is through the fact that they are built to commemorate or honor someone. In cloisters, gardens represent how man has become God's gardener, and keeps his creations thriving. In villas gardens represent the family they are commissioned by.

Figure 2: Lunette painted by Giusto Utens in 1599 of Villa di Castello

14 Dafne Mazzanti. Class Lecture. Gardens of Love: Green Paradises in Italy from Renaissance to Contemporary. Florence University of the Arts, Florence, Italy. 7 October 2013.
Every detail of the garden reflects back to the owners through either crests or symbolism.

An area of overlap between the religious cloister and the new age humanistic villa garden is the respect for gardens as a living art form. They are art shaped by nature, but they are inspired by classical culture. There is a push and pull with having an order and beauty with symbolic geometry as well as political representation. At the same time, nature cannot be contained within walls. It is a wild, unknown, and often times an uncontrollable element. This idea is reflected in the gardens of palazzi. Humanists are making a statement that they, like nature, are a life force that cannot be contained or controlled by society.

That which delights us in things that are either beautiful or finely adorned, must proceed either from the contrivance and invention of the mind, or the hand of the artificer or from what derived immediately from nature herself

- Alberti

It is the way that each of these ideals between religion and humanism design their gardens that separates the intention and purpose. Cloisters use their mathematical perfection to tame and control nature. Just as there is order in the church, there is order in the cloister. This differs from the brooding power and dominance in palazzo gardens. Comparing Dominican and Franciscan order cloisters with the large Medici palazzo gardens gives a broad idea of the shift from the importance of God to importance of man. What humanism truly comes down to is how a person values and achieves virtue. Before, man was only seen as holy or sacred had blessed them. Now, the *uomo universale* is stating that virtue can be achieved by personal action.

The enthusiasm of Renaissance humanists for classical learning greatly influenced the development of gardening in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Their respect for classical methods encouraged techniques for new observations and meanings. This new age thinking led to the strength of men and reliance on themselves. To commemorate God in a cloister was the traditional aim that brought peace and enlightenment to man, but this idea shifted during the Italian Renaissance. Through wealth, status, and political power, the humanistic ideals glorified the advances in culture by man. Renaissance gardens are a tangible embodiment of the separation that religion had during the humanist enlightenment.

**Bibliography**


15 Lazzaro, p. 18.
16 Alberti, p. 115.


