

Ada V. Segre. *The Gardens at San Lorenzo in Piacenza, 1656-1665*. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2006. 107 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-88402-302-9.

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The Italian Baroque Garden

The first pleasure of this book is that as it is released from the slipcover, it is revealed to be two volumes. The first volume is the study, transcription, and translation of the accompanying volume. The second volume is a faithfully reproduced facsimile of the actual manuscript, making visible ink bleeds from facing pages, stylus lines, and that over the course of more than a decade and with at least two different writers, the manuscript reads in both directions.

It is this manuscript from seventeenth-century Italy that beckoned the author, Ada Segre, to this particular piece of research. Because of her devotion to meticulously annotating all aspects of the manuscript, through the use of a wide array of archival material, including family letters, church documents, and local land register maps, it took the author a decade to complete the volume. From the ownership of the gardens, to the reasoning behind their layout, Segre takes the reader on a story of a garden and by extension, gardens in seventeenth-century north-central Italy.

The main part of the book is divided into three chapters. The introduction acts as a first chapter, and perhaps should have been designated that way. It serves to set the context of both the manuscript and the work of researching it. The seventeenth-century gardener's notebook is described and set within the framework of similar writings of the time. A section on the owner and location of the garden takes in not only the actual site in the city

of Piacenza, but also the cartographic records of the garden and the political history of the city pertaining to it. The author concludes that this notebook refers to gardens designed for Margherita de' Medici Farnese, the wife and then widow of Duke Odoardo Farnese, and mother of Duke Ranuccio II.

Chapter 2 reveals the actual garden designs. Three layouts are found in the source material, designated by Segre as the "Early Garden," the "Nine Star Garden," and the "Star-Centered Garden." The notebook is the work of two gardeners, a document by amateurs, and in a real sense a work-in-progress. These designs were being worked out as they were being worked on. That situation adds to the complexity and difficulty of reconstructing these particular gardens. Their precise location on the site is also unknown, making it challenging to contextualize the actual planting beds and clarify their relationship with surrounding buildings. This chapter also discusses the theoretical basis of baroque garden design found in various contemporary publications, which favored a grid with overlaid diagonals. A fair amount of space is devoted to dimensions of both the sketches and then the actual garden. Unfortunately, this discussion becomes confusing, as it is sometime unclear whether the author is referring to the sketch or the actual garden. At one point a dimension in the sketch is described as being six centimeters and then later in the same paragraph it is described as possibly a *braccio* in absolute dimensions (more or less a half a meter). I found I had to work my

way slowly through the explanation (p. 31) to avoid getting lost.

The final chapter presents the reconstructed planting design of the beds. Segre sets her discussion of the use of exotic and expensive bulbs and the way they were handled in the garden within the history of the bulb in Europe, particularly the tulip bulb. These small, exquisite, and precisely planned gardens were meant to showcase the individual bulbs, whose mere presence demonstrated the power and wealth of the owner. This part is supplemented with illustrations of each individual garden, using color and coded symbols to visually reconstruct the planting design.

The book concludes with substantial appendices that provide both transcription and translation of the original manuscript and detailed planting lists of the plants used in the designs. Lists of Italian and Dutch publications on bulbs are also offered. An extensive bibliography rounds out the presentation.

Two minor issues interrupt what is otherwise an enjoyable and educational read. One is the font used for the main text. A loop is added to a “t” when it follows a

“c” or “s,” which cluttered the text so much that a friend who looked at the book commented on it. The second, larger problem is one of visual representation. Segre explains her difficult search for an appropriate way to visually represent the reconstruction of the beds. One of the most problematic issues was how to envision their scale. Dimensioning the inserted diagrammatic reconstructions may have been one way to do it. The few photos, in the text of similar seventeenth-century gardens, were helpful when it came to really understanding what these gardens might have looked like.

Beyond the sheer delight of the content for a garden enthusiast, the book is a pleasure to read simply for the dense layering of information and detail. Aside from the discussion of dimensions, the text reads smoothly and generous footnotes add further details. Because Segre does an excellent job of researching not only the gardens but also their physical, social, economic, and political context, the reader is engaged immediately in a fresh understanding of life in the seventeenth century. What might appear to be an insignificant manuscript comes to life in Segre’s hands, providing new understanding for historians, landscape architects, and gardeners.

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