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Metaphors of Villa d’Este: travel impressions and descriptions around 1900 (Edith Wharton and Marie Luise Gothein)

At around 1900 garden history took its first steps to develop into a science.¹ At the same time, travelling developed into mass tourism. The American author Edith Wharton (1862–1937) wrote as early as 1905: “One of the rarest and most delicate pleasures of the continental tourist is to circumvent the compiler of his guide-book.”² The Italian Renaissance was in the focus of garden historian’s interest, as the land “where lemontrees bloom” was the place of longing for educated travelers. For Edith Wharton and the German cultural historian Marie Luise Gothein (1863–1931), historical Italian gardens were the touchstone of their garden historiographies.³ This essay aims to compare their respective approaches to their fields of study by focusing on one particular famous garden: the Villa d’Este in Tivoli near Rome. The comparison offers an insight into different methods of garden historiography at a time when it first took shape.

As the two authors dealt with an object that they had visited on their research tour, the question arises how the experiencing of the actual garden affected their texts. In the case of Gothein there is the rare and happy coincidence that a letter from her visit to the Villa d’Este survives, which describes her firsthand experience and differs very much from her handling of the subject in her book. The two texts will be compared in this article. Wharton also wrote letters from Italy, although none – to my knowledge – deals with her visit to the Villa d’Este in particular.⁴

1 Mirka Beneš, *Italian and French Gardens: A Century of Historical Study (1900–2000)*, in: Mirka Beneš, Dianne Harris (eds.), *Villas and gardens in early modern Italy and France*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, pp. 1–15, p. 3.

2 Edith Wharton, *Italian Backgrounds*, Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York, 1905, p. 85.

3 Edith Wharton, *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*, Century, New York, 1904, Marie Luise Gothein, *Geschichte der Gartenkunst* [Bd. 1: Von Ägypten bis zur Renaissance in Italien, Spanien und Portugal, Bd. 2: Von der Renaissance in Frankreich bis zur Gegenwart], Diederichs, Jena, 1914. Gothein slightly revised the book in 1926, in 1928 an English translation appeared: Marie Luise Gothein, *A History of Garden Art*, Joseph Malaby Dent, London, Toronto, 1928. This was reprinted by Hacker Art Books, New York in 1966, 1972 and 1979. The latest English re-print dates from 2014 by Cambridge University Press. Both books are easily accessed online: Wharton, *Italian Villas* at <https://archive.org/details/italianvillasan01parrgoog>; Gothein, *A History of Garden Art* at <http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/gothein1928bd2/0008>; the German publication is online at <http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/gothein1928ga>; all three accessed September 19th, 2016.

4 Edith Wharton’s life and work as one of the most important American authors and Pulitzer Prize winner is well researched. The German cultural historian Marie Luise Gothein is mainly known by her *History of Garden Art*, a first overview about her life and work give Maria Effinger and Karin Seeber (eds.), *‘Es ist schon eine wunderbare Zeit, die ich jetzt lebe’: die Heidelberger Gelehrte Marie Luise Gothein (1863–1931)* (Katalog zur Ausstellung der Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg vom 29. April bis 31. August 2014), Winter, Heidelberg 2014.

This essay – in the strict sense of the word – will analyze a very narrow excerpt of complex texts and will thus exclude the broader context of the writers' *œuvres*. It singles out the Villa d'Este as example because its garden was famous since its first construction works from the 1550s onwards and was often described by well-educated travelers. Its long history of reception can serve as a background for Wharton's and Gothein's accounts. Not before David R. Coffin's groundbreaking study of 1960 did the iconological meaning of the villa and gardens become an object of study for garden and art historians of increasing importance.⁵ Since its publication it is accepted, for example, that the middle axis of the garden leading up the palace was meant as a metaphor for Hercules' life and choice between vice and virtue, thus mirroring the wisdom of choice of the original owner, Ippolito II. d'Este (1509–1572). The vertical axis, on the other hand, was built to display the topographical motive of Tivoli and its connection to Rome by channeling water of the river Anio from the "Fountain of Tivoli" through the "100-Fountains-Alley" over to the "Rometta"-fountain, which displayed Rome on a small scale.⁶ Their interconnection has led scholars to see a display of cultural superiority – also emphasized in the motive of the seat of the muses (the "Pegasus-fountain") – that Ippolito II. wanted to show towards his opponent, the Pope in Rome.⁷ In this he was supported by his architect Pirro Ligorio (1512/13–1583), who is also famous for his antiquarian research work about ancient Rome.

Today, the whole complex is weaved in an iconological, metaphorical and religious web of interpretations,⁸ which all rely on the assumption that the learned Renaissance visitor, the ideal guest of Ippolito II. d'Este, understood these concepts.⁹ Wharton and Gothein worked well before these iconological methods, and

5 David R. Coffin, *The Villa D'Este at Tivoli*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1960.

6 Denis Ribouillault, *Toward an Archaeology of the Gaze: The Perception and Function of Garden Views in Italian Renaissance Villas*, in: M. Beneš and M. G. Lee (eds.), *Clio in the Italian Garden: Twenty-First-Century Studies in Historical Methods and Theoretical Perspectives* (Dumbarton Oaks Colloquium on the History of Landscape Architecture 32), Harvard University Press, Washington D.C., 2011, pp. 203–232., pp. 213ff.

7 Anna Schreurs, "Hercules verachtet die einstigen Gärten der Hesperiden im Vergleich mit Tibur". Die Villa d'Este in Tivoli und die "memoria dell'antico", in: Wolfram Martini (ed.), *Architektur und Erinnerung*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 2000, pp. 107–128.

8 Simone Kaiser, *Villa Academica – fabrica della vita. Eine topologische Untersuchung des frühneuzeitlichen Gartenraumbildes am Beispiel der Villa d'Este in Tivoli*, PhD-thesis, Johann-Wolfgang-Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt a. M., unpublished, Frankfurt a. M., 2012, relates the spatial organization of the villa to Ligorio's ideal of representing knowledge. She gives a complete overview of the current state of research in chapter "II.3 Zwischenfazit und Forschungsstand zur Villa d'Este". I would like to thank Simone Kaiser for making her work accessible to me.

9 The denying of this assumption is vital for the approach of John Dixon Hunt, *The afterlife of gardens*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2004, p. 205, which serves as background for this analysis: „So we must give some credence and support to the argument that over the *longue durée* of its existence a great design can stimulate a whole cluster of meanings that were not intended or envisaged for the original designs. This will disturb the historians, but those who profess to understand and revere landscape architecture should welcome the opportunities that allow a rich residue of meanings to accrue beyond the moment and the intention of a site's designs.“

the original statuary was lost and ruined at the time of their visits. Thus, their perception has to be seen against the background of the contemporary state of the garden, historical methodology and available sources.

Movement as landscape metaphor

The sociologist Michel Conan takes Coffin's work as the starting point to develop his theory of the garden as "landscape metaphor", where visitors become part of this through their movement and choice of path in the garden. Conan bases his concept on the iconology of the life of Hercules as displayed in the garden of Villa d'Este through its statues and fountains. By following the apparent way up the main axis and being forced to decide which way to choose at the "100-Fountains-Alley" in the middle of the garden, the visitor imitates Hercules' path and finally finds himself misled to voluptas in reaching the "Fountain of Tivoli" with its presiding Sybil. Conan concludes: "Thus a landscape metaphor comes into existence when motion through a landscape invites an interpretation by its visitors that *displaces* the meaning of their own motion in favor of a *new* meaning."¹⁰

As both Wharton and Gothein moved through the garden as travelers, the question arises what kind of meaning they created. In other words: What happened to visitors, who – although learned – did not perceive the garden as hermetic challenge? Even when the iconological reading is not obvious, the recipient still "contributes to the development of [...] the cultural community to which the individual belongs".¹¹ This article looks at founding mothers of garden history in their cultures, as recipients of garden art and as travelers through one particular garden and landscape. It analyzes how they created their individual meaning and construed it for further scientific exploration.

Reception and afterlife of a garden

The original construction of villa and garden dates from the time between 1560 and 1572, from Ippolito II. d'Estes fixed appointment as governor of Tivoli until his death. The original design by the antiquarian and architect Ligorio is preserved in an engraving by Etienne Dupérac (fig. 1). In 1571 Dupérac, a friend of Ligorio, made a large drawing of the design with an accompanying description for the emperor Maximilian II., which is lost. His less detailed engraving from 1573 sur-

10 Michel Conan, Landscape Metaphors and Metamorphosis of Time, in: Michel Conan (ed.), *Landscape Design and the Experience of Motion* (Dumbarton Oaks Colloquium on the History of Landscape Architecture, 24), Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington D. C., 2003, pp. 287–317, p. 308.

11 Ibid.

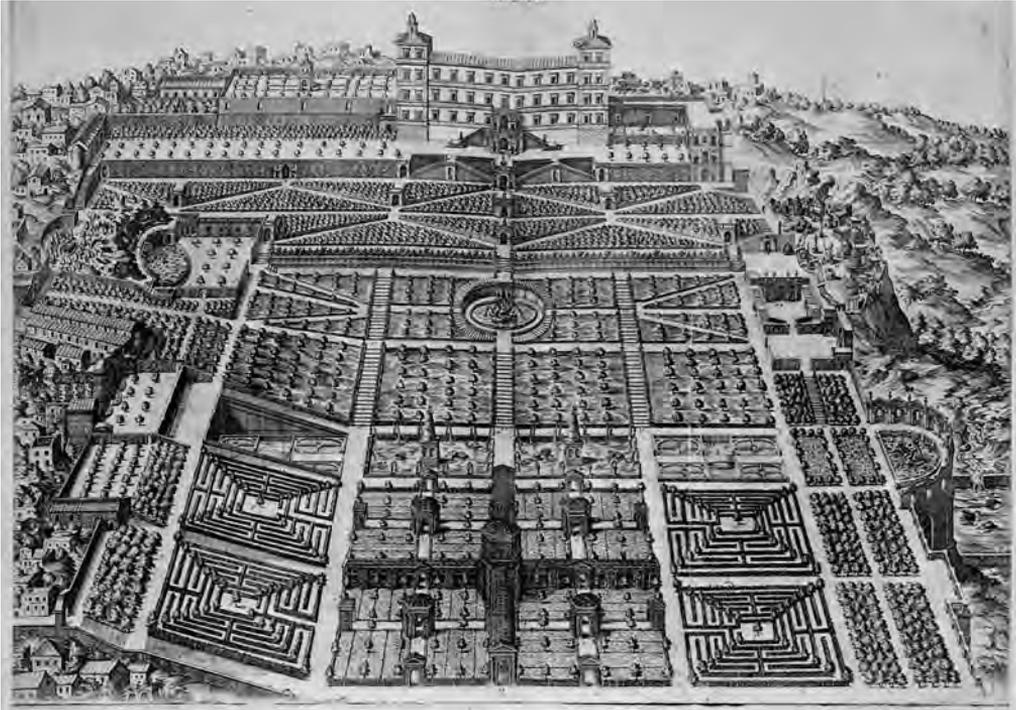


Fig. 1 Etienne Dupérac's plan of the garden of the Villa d'Este (Marie-Luise Gothein, *Geschichte der Gartenkunst*, Diederichs, Jena 1914, fig. 183)

vived and became one of the most important sources to approach the garden.¹² Early descriptions rely on the plan rather than the actual site and thus the “disegno” became more real than the garden. Contemporaries even described garden features that were only existent on the plan as if they had been realized. Sensual perceptions of the actual visit were attached to the structure-giving plan.¹³ Uberto Foglieta, for example, who described garden and villa in 1569 writes: “[...] the very first sight captures soul and eyes and separates the mind from the senses. As I had gathered myself and let my eyes wander over single parts, I started to examine them more carefully”.¹⁴ He goes on to describe the paths through the garden along the main axes and the signature waterworks in a structured way; he starts his description at the entrance in the lower levelled garden, thus “ascending” during his description up the mountain garden to the palace. This approach of sensual appreciation followed by a structured analysis is a way of perception chosen by Gothein in 1905, as will be seen later.

¹² Kaiser, *Villa Academica* (see fn. 8), p. 137.

¹³ Ibid., p. 140. An overview over early descriptions like that of Uberto Foglieta (1569), Giovanni Zappi (1576), Nicolas Audebert (1576/77), Michel Montaigne (1580/81) and others gives Carl Lamb, *Die Villa d'Este in Tivoli*, Prestel-Verlag, Munich, 1966, p. 12f.

¹⁴ Translation by author from the German translation: Lamb, *Die Villa d'Este* (see fn. 13), p. 104.



Fig. 2 *Villa d'Este, Tivoli* by Maxfield Parrish (Edith Wharton, *Italian Villas and their Gardens*, Century, New York, 1904, p. 126)

The villa had a changeful afterlife. Francesco I. d'Este (1624–1658) changed the appearance of the lower garden by planting the circle of cypresses in 1640, which became one of its signature features (fig. 2 and 3).¹⁵ During the 18th century many of the antique statues, most of them originally placed in the nearby Villa Hadriana, were sold. In 1800 the possession fell to the Habsburg family. In 1850 Gustav Adolf von Hohenlohe (1823–1896) tried to revive the idea of the seat of the muses and partly restored the villa in the contemporary fashion. W. P. Tuckerman, who wrote one of the earliest modern historiographies about Italian gardens, described in 1884 the easy access for every tourist to the villa owing to the “liberality of the actual possessor”.¹⁶ Generally speaking: The last decades of the 19th and the first decade of the 20th century – when Wharton

and Gothein saw the place – were a time of neglect.¹⁷ Nonetheless it remained in the center of tourist's interest as Baedeker in 1903 describes the train ride to Tivoli with a hint to the view “straight to Tivoli with the cypresses of the Villa d'Este [...] one of the most beautiful Renaissance creations of her kind. [...] The entrance is at the Piazza S. Francesco (50c).”¹⁸

Edith Wharton visited Villa d'Este in the early spring of 1903, Marie Luise Gothein came there in May 1905. The original fountains were ruined, the course of the water was diverted, the planting was wild and overgrown. Indeed: In Wharton's and Gothein's time the gigantic cypresses of the Villa d'Este and its melancholic atmosphere were the touristic attractions



Fig. 3 Contemporary photograph of Villa d'Este from Gothein's book (fig. 190)

15 Alessandra Centroni, *Villa D'Este a Tivoli: Quattro secoli di storia e restauri*, Gangemi Editore, Rome, 2008, p. 168. For the time between the original possessor's death in 1572 and the death of the last owner in 1896 see pp. 47–74.

16 W[ilhelm] P[etrus] Tuckermann, *Die Gartenkunst der italienischen Renaissance-Zeit*, Paul Parey, Berlin, 1884. David R. Coffin, 'The Study of the History of the Italian Garden until the First Dumbarton Oaks Colloquium', in: Michel Conan (ed.), *Perspectives on Garden Histories* (Dumbarton Oaks Colloquium on the History of Landscape Architecture 11), Dumbarton Oaks, Washington D. C., 1999, pp. 27–35, p. 27 calls the book: “The first significant study of Italian gardens in their own right [...]”

17 As late as 1922 the villa came into the possession of the Italian State and discussions about the “right” restoration started. See Centroni, *Villa d'Este* (see fn. 15), p. 83ff.

18 Karl Baedeker, *Italien von den Alpen bis Neapel. Kurzes Reisehandbuch*, Baedeker, Leipzig, 1903⁵, p. 311/12.

of the site. The cypresses are mentioned in every contemporary traveller's and art historian's account and even seen as an essential artistic feature. Tuckermann, for example, to whom Wharton refers to in her book, writes of the "architectural motives" of the cypresses, intended in its outlines by Pirro Ligorio himself – although they were planted around 80 years after his design.¹⁹

The entrance to the complex is still at the level of the palace, on top of the hill. To grasp the mythological meaning of the ascent up the palace by following Hercules's path of vice and virtue, one must enter at the lower garden level at the northern side of the site, which was and is still not possible. Thus Wharton first entered the palace and, after striding through a flight of rooms, stepped out into the garden. This route is also described in Wharton's book, while Gothein starts her described tour in the garden. Before their descriptions will be placed in the center of the analysis, the context of their travels and books will be presented shortly.

Educated travelers and their books

Edith Wharton developed from a traveler into an expat. Born in New York City to upper class parents, she was used to journeying in Europe from an early age. Her time abroad summed up to eight years during the first 21 years of her life.²⁰ Even after her marriage she yearly went to Italy as she recalled in her autobiography.²¹ When her marriage broke down, she decided to turn the ratio around by settling in Paris and visiting the States.

Her book about "Italian Villas and their gardens" was published in 1904, she used her journey to Italy in 1903 for her research. Wharton was commissioned by "Century" magazine to write about the topic and in the early months of the year she visited villas and gardens in and around Rome.²² In her autobiography she wrote about her aim to "make known the simpler and less familiar type of villa."²³ But she also dealt with the "most famous country-seats"²⁴ – partly owing to the fact that her editors did not want to publish details about lesser known estates.²⁵ Two letters are preserved from those weeks, which lamentably do not hold any first impressions of the gardens. Wharton described on March, 8th, 1903 a drive

19 Tuckermann, *Gartenkunst* (see fn. 16), p. 98.

20 Mary Suzanne Schriber, Edith Wharton and Travel Writing as Self-Discovery, in: *American Literature*, 59 (May, 1987), 2, pp. 257–267, p. 257.

21 Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, Constable, London, 1962⁴, p. 91.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 129.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 134.

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Ibid.*, p. 138.

with an automobile – her first experience of the sort²⁶ – from Rome to the Farnese Villa of Caprarola:

“I think it is the most beautiful excursion I ever made in Italy. Have you ever done it? The view on the ridge between Ronciglione & Caprarola, looking down on one side of the Lago di Vico, & on the other on the wide plain with Soracte springing up from it in ‘Magnificent isolation,’ was like one of ‘Turner’s Italian visions, which are so much nearer the reality than the work of the modern realists.’²⁷

The comparison with Turner’s paintings shows how her – ostensibly emotional – experience was filtered through education. And this is the case with all her travel experiences, as Robert Burden convincingly argues: They are all pre-estimated by literature – or indeed art.²⁸

From Florence, where the Whartons, wife and husband, turned to after their stay in Rome, Edith wrote to her editor on March, 18th, about her

“careful study of old plans & the inspection of the greatest number possible of gardens, in order to write with some sort of system & comprehensiveness on a subject which, hitherto, has been treated in English only in the most amateurish fashion. Both here & in Rome people have taken such interest in my work that I have had wonderful opportunities for seeing all that I wanted [...].²⁹

Because of her heightened expenses she requested her editor to increase the pre-negotiated sum of 1500 to 2000 dollars, which he supposedly agreed to. After her return to America, Wharton wrote the articles and in 1904 they were published as “Italian Villas and their Gardens”.

Wharton is mostly known for her novels, though garden historiography cherishes her book on Italian Villas and gardens as an early achievement to bring the topic to a broader audience.³⁰ Coffin analyzes the “geographical and chronological structure to her research” as new in the field and comments on her sourcing “the deeper harmony of design” in the Italian villa and its garden.³¹ He criticizes her “descriptions of the individual sites [as] charming, but limited in their consideration of any possible meaning [...].” – which is a somewhat unfair criticism as the

26 Ibid, p. 136f.

27 R.W.B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis (eds.), *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York, 1988, p. 78.

28 Robert Burden, *Travel, Modernism and Modernity*, Ashgate, Farnham, 2015, p. 200 gives another example: “[her] impressions of landscape continue to be filtered through literature: ‘in fact, no better description than Homer’s could be given of the countryside about Corfu.’“

29 Lewis, *The Letters* (see fn. 27), p. 83. Expat and author Vernon Lee, alias Violet Page, was Wharton’s door-opener to gain admission to the private gardens. Wharton accordingly dedicated her book to her. See Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (see fn. 21), p. 133f.

30 Coffin, *The Study of the History* (see fn. 16). p. 29.

31 Ibid.

introduction of iconology was a matter of the 1920s and 30s, by – for example – Coffin's teacher Erwin Panofsky. Mirka Beneš calls Wharton's book the most famous of several guide books, which emerged because of the growing interest of travelers, thus differentiating it from architect's and landscape architect's professional interest in the topic, who, in their books, included site surveys and compendia – like W. P. Tuckermann, Charles Platt, J.C. Shepherd and G.A. Jellicoe and H. Inigo Triggs.³²

This, also, does not do Wharton justice, who says in her autobiography that she wanted to include plans, but the editor thought the “public ‘did not care for plans’”.³³ Wharton even wanted to annul her contract because her “serious work on Italian villa and garden architecture” and the accompanying illustrations by Maxfield Parrish, which she called “fairy-tale pictures”, would not complement each other (fig. 3).³⁴ This was, however, denied.³⁵ The English architect Triggs, nonetheless, distinguishes in the preface of his 1906 book about Italian gardens Wharton's work from other contemporary texts that deal with the subject from a “more pictorial point of view” as containing “much valuable criticism”.³⁶

Beneš names art historian's approaches from the last third of the 19th century as official starting point of Italian garden history, in particular Heinrich Wölfflin, Walter Friedländer and – as “maybe the most notable work to come out of this early phase” – Marie Luise Gothein's book.³⁷ Gothein, for her part, mentions Trigg's “Formal Gardens of England and Scotland” from 1902 “as supplying a

32 Beneš, *Italian and French Gardens* (see fn. 1) p. 3. John Dixon Hunt, “The Quality of ‘Garden-Magic’”, in: Edith Wharton, *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*, Mount Press, Rizzoli, New York, 2008, introduction, gives a well-balanced analysis of Wharton's work in his foreword to the 2008 re-print of the book, in which he decidedly states that it “is not a travel book”.

33 Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (see fn. 21), p. 139. There might also be the aspect stressed that Wharton, who had no formal education, was – as a woman – not thought to be competent to deal with architectural plans. The editor obviously wanted to reduce her work to a female-fitting associative text. The same happened to Gothein, when she was in search of an editor. One of them suggested that she should strip the text of its footnotes and scholarly approach, which left her furious. Effinger and Seeber, “*Es ist schon eine wunderbare Zeit*” (see fn. 4), p. 30.

34 Wharton and Parrish travelled independently from each other and only met once to discuss the project. See Anna Mazanti, *Pen and pencil in Italy: Edith Wharton e Maxfield Parrish, sentimental travellers*, in: *Artista: critica dell'arte in Toscana* (1995), pp. 138–163 and 172–173, p. 138.

35 Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (see fn. 21), p. 138.

36 H. Inigo Triggs, *The Art of Garden Design in Italy*, Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1906, p. 2. Wharton's first autobiographer R.W.B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton. A Biography*, Constable, London, 1975, p. 121, judges: „‘Italian Villas and Their Gardens’ is a remarkable achievement. It draws on learning taken from books in four languages dating back to the seventeenth century, and includes brief biographical sketches of some sixty historically notable garden architects. About four-score villa gardens are examined, often with accompanying sketches. [...] Packed with a combination of first-hand experience and history, infused with a somber charm of style and a stateliness of movement, the book remains unique in this country.”

37 Beneš, *Italian and French Gardens* (see fn. 1) p. 3.

wonderful wealth of material to look at”.³⁸ Thus the historiographic interdependence refutes easy categorizations as brought forward in today’s research.³⁹

Marie Luise Gothein’s book “Die Geschichte der Gartenkunst” is a world-history of gardens, commencing with ancient Egypt and ending at the end of the 19th century. In her thesis the Italian Renaissance and Baroque garden plays a crucial role as being the summit of the western development since antiquity. Gothein worked on the two volumes over the course of ten years, they were published in 1914 and translated into English in 1928. In 1966, 1972 und 1979 Hacker Art Books, New York, produced reprints. As the wife of a professor at Bonn and later Heidelberg University, she had access to a thorough humanistic education.⁴⁰ Her approach to garden history is decidedly academic. In 1903, when Wharton was busy visiting Italian gardens, Gothein had only just started her book project by studying gothic architecture in England and was discovering the gothic revival and the landscape garden. In 1905, she set off for a six-week research trip to Italy to study in libraries and archives and to visit gardens. During the preparatory years of the book she also travelled to France, the Netherlands, Austria, and Greece.

Gothein’s letters to her husband are preserved at Heidelberg University Library. Especially interesting are those which describe her visits to existing gardens, that are later dealt with in her book. This is for example the case with Villa d’Este, the letter dates May 17th 1905. She wrote: “I have already spent 2 wonderful morning hours in the Villa d’Este – in deepest solitude [...] I strolled around, how was everything so familiar, I could have find my way blindfolded.” On the evening she returned and continued:

“[...] As I have seen the Villa in the morning and the lush afternoon light and can only say that it is the most magnificent of all that I have seen so far, surely, much is ruined and the grottoes bereft of their statues, but the beauty of the whole is there in its splendor and this it owes to two things: the wonderful architectural plan and the untamable power of the water, which is so massive that it flows in new canals since the old ones are broken. I have wandered about with the old plan in my hand

38 Gothein, *A History of Garden Art* (see fn. 3), p. IX.

39 Another scholarly approach to Wharton’s book offers Anatole Tchikine, *The Expulsion of the Senses. The Idea of the ‘Italian Garden’ and the Politics of Sensory Experience*, in: D. Fairchild Ruggles (ed.), *Sound and Scent in the Garden* (Dumbarton Oaks Colloquium on the History of Landscape Architecture 38), Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, D.C., 2017, pp. 217–253. It is the only analysis which places Wharton’s book in the contemporary discussion of garden styles, thus taking it seriously as a part of a discourse rather than evaluating its scientific weight. Tchikine gives Wharton’s approach the responsibility for the dominance of “the expulsion of the senses” in the modern reception of Italian gardens.

40 For an introduction into Gothein’s education and work on the book see: Karin Seeber, “Den Welträtseln näher kommen“ – Leben und Werk Marie Luise Gothein, in: Effinger and Seeber, *“Es ist schon eine wunderbare Zeit“* (see fn. 4), pp. 9–25. Eberhard Gothein (1853–1923) devoted substantial time of his career to supporting his talented wife.

[...] and I think that nothing which was added by later times was of good consequence, but with one exception: the cypresses."⁴¹

This passage makes clear that Gothein and Wharton share the same approach to cultural sites: that of a perception filtered by previous study. As Burden says of Wharton: she was often disappointed by what she actually saw due to the expectations which were aroused by her reading, can also be said of Gothein, who often utters the same complaint in her letters: that of disappointment of studied sites.⁴² In the case of the Villa d'Este, however, Gothein's expectations are met. Her reception of the garden follows long-established traditions. The plan, which in a previous letter she mentions to have found by accident in the archive in Rome, must be Dupérac's of 1573. As in the above quoted description by Foglieta, Gothein's letter shows the dominance of the structured approach – in Gothein's case with the plan – over the first sensual impressions. She emphasized her intimate knowledge of the old plan. With its structure in her mind and the paper in her hands, it was possible for her to savor the present beauty, which differed widely from the 16th century "disegno".

Wharton's description: a descend

The American author starts her passage about Villa d'Este by stressing the importance of the house: "These gardens have excited so much admiration that little thought has been given to the house, though it is sufficiently interesting to merit attention."⁴³ Wharton refers in her introductory remarks to art historical authorities like W. P. Tuckermann, Cornelius Gurlitt, and Jakob Burckhardt, who, indeed, had not dealt with the entity of house and garden. Hence, Wharton's approach is groundbreaking as she tries to perceive the complex as "Gesamtkunstwerk", thus reviving Renaissance concepts.⁴⁴ In referring to Gurlitt and Burckhardt, she reacts to the discourse of style of her age, showing the learned preparation of her representation. She follows Burckhardt in his classification, but not in his opinion that the palace is "gross und unbedeutend" (big and mediocre).⁴⁵ Wharton, in contrast, pays special attention to the house. She is also not with Burckhardt when he calls the garden „[D]as reichste, durch Naturvorzüge ewig unerreichbare Beispiel eines

41 Marie Luise Gothein, *Letter to Eberhard Gothein, "Tivoli d. 17. [1905]"*, unpublished, University Library Heidelberg, Heid. Hs. 3487, 204, translated by author.

42 Burden, *Travel, Modernism and Modernity* (see fn. 28), p. 200; Effinger and Seeber, "Es ist schon eine wunderbare Zeit" (see fn. 4), p. 91f.

43 Wharton, *Italian Villas* (see fn. 3), p. 140.

44 Ibid, p. 147.

45 Jacob Burckhardt, *Die Baukunst der Renaissance in Italien* (Nach der Erstausgabe der "Geschichte der Renaissance in Italien"), ed. by Maurizio Ghelardi (Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Band 5), Beck, München/Schwabe, Basel, 2000, p. 187.

Prachtgartens [...]“ (the richest, due to natural advantages eternally un-achieved example of a grand garden).⁴⁶ Instead, she explains:

“The plan is worthy of all praise, but the details are too complicated, and the ornament is either trivial or cumbrous. So inferior is the architecture to that of the Lante gardens and Caprarola that Burckhardt was probably right in attributing much of it to the seventeenth century. Here for the first time one feels the heavy touch of the baroque.”⁴⁷

The passage on the Villa and its garden is four and a half pages long; it consists of a short historic account, praise for the house (uncommon in contemporary criticism), a description of how Wharton moved through the house and into the gardens, as well as an estimation of Ligorio’s artistry. Wharton ends her description with a negative overall placings of the site. The text is accompanied by a painting by Maxfield Parrish, a naked boy sitting at the edge of a fish pool (fig. 4).⁴⁸

Wharton’s description of the house and garden merits special attention.⁴⁹ Through her choice of words, she evokes movement and thus revives the actual visit in her report which begins with her descend from “the village square” into the garden. The motion, evoked by the repetition of the word “descend” starts in front of the entrance through a “frescoed corridor” into the palace. The reader follows the author through her “laying-out” of the inside structure, which she creates by mentioning views and the lie of the rooms, for example: “On this side, looking over the gardens, is a long enfilade of rooms, gaily frescoed by the Zuccheri and their school: and behind the rooms runs a vaulted corridor built against the side of the hill [...]”. The author speaks of aquatic decorations (“coloured pebbles”), niches and fountains, thus rightly supposing that “the whole length of the corridor must once have rippled

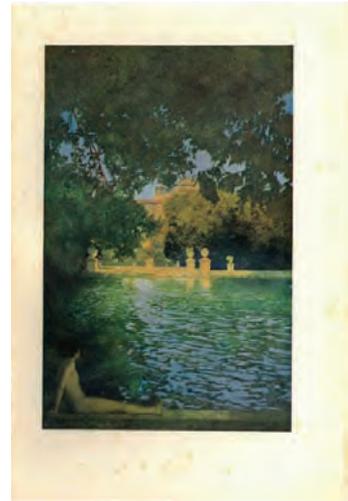


Fig. 4 Edith Wharton, *Italian villas and their Gardens*, Century, New York, 1904, p. 141)

46 Jacob Burckhardt, *Der Cicerone. Eine Anleitung zum Genuss der Kunstwerke Italiens, Architektur und Sculptur*, ed. by Bernd Roeck et.al. (Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Band 2), Beck, München/Schwabe, Basel, 2001, p. 322.

47 Wharton, *Italian Villas* (see fn. 3), p. 147.

48 Another picture of Villa d’Este accompanies the beginning of chapter „IV Villas near Rome“. It shows the ascent up the house from the viewpoint of the circle of cypresses (fig. 2).

49 See Hunt, ‘Garden Magic’: “[...] Wharton’s descriptions remain one of the book’s strengths. She is exceptionally good at narrating the transitions that the garden visitor experiences in moving through sites [...] (see fn. 32).”

with running water”.⁵⁰ The “loggia overlooking the Campagna” grants a pause at the interface between house and garden, between culture and nature. The emphasized view from the villa to the “Campagna” and the “Roman landscape” underlines the strong bonds between the site and the eternal city, thus reverberating the original main axis of the country seat.⁵¹

The tone of the sober and structured description displayed when dealing with the building’s architecture and its ordering views along the main landscape axis changes when the author steps out on the “upper terrace”, from where

“one looks down on the towering cypresses and ilexes of the lower gardens. The grounds are not large, but the impression produced is full of a tragic grandeur. The villa towers above so high and bare, the descent from terrace to terrace is so long and steep, there are such depths of mystery in the infinite green distances and in the cypress-shaded pools of the lower garden, that one has a sense of awe rather than of pleasure in descending from one level to another of darkly rustling green.”⁵²

This descent coincides with a loss of orientation. The text mentions the water of the river Anio as giving “the Este gardens their peculiar character”. From this passage onwards, it seems to be carried away by the chaotic movements of the different water forms:

“a thousand rills gush downward, terrace by terrace, channelling the stone rails of the balusters, leaping from step to step, dripping into mossy conchs, flashing in spray from the horns of sea-gods [...] or forcing themselves in irrepressible overflow down the ivy-matted banks.”

The text enumerates “sparkling rill[s]”, “water-pouring nymph[s]”, and “gushing urn[s]; the solemn depths of green reverberate with the tumult of innumerable streams.”⁵³ The description loses its structuring quality when it comes to the garden and its water features. The descent becomes a decline. Here, the separation of “the mind from the senses” as Foglieta experienced it in 1569, is something that Wharton’s modern text mirrors with regard to the appearance of the garden around 1900: the mind-blowing sensual stimulation of the garden’s water features triumphs over the rational recording of the building’s architecture. Her mentioning of the “plan, worthy of all praise” suggests that she, too, looked at the outline of the whole work, but it did not grant her a structured approach to the garden.

50 Wharton, *Italian Villas* (see fn. 3), p. 143.

51 The axis Rome – Tivoli has to be understood as main axis of the landscape, the Hercules-axis as the main axis of the garden.

52 Ibid, p. 143f.

53 Ibid, p. 144.

The descent from cultural order into natural decline shows how the reversing of the approach, succeeded by Wharton, led to a feeling of disorientation. If the learned Renaissance visitor experienced his ascent as a diversion, because the straight path upwards was blocked and he had to choose his way at the “100-Fountains-Alley”, then Wharton experienced this disorientation in a reverse way. For the Renaissance visitor, who reflected his choice afterwards, the allegory of Hercules’ path (the cardinal’s) appeared clear to him and revealed itself in the fountains and – most obviously – in the depiction of Hercules’ invitation to the feast of the Gods at the ceiling of the Salone inside the palace.⁵⁴ Wharton, who started her way at the palace, at the top of the allegory with its axis to Rome, perceives its structuring quality, but becomes disorientated when entering the garden. Her reverse movement through the complex turns into a choice between virtue and vice, in her case between orderly architecture and vicious nature, thus creating a landscape metaphor in its own right. It is the waterways, although dysfunctional, which allow Wharton to grasp this original meaning of their composition: She can still perceive that they were tamed and neat in the surrounding of the cultural entity, the house, and wild and untamable, once they get out of the house.

Wharton dislikes the gardens because of the stark difference between the orderly water canals in the house and the irrepressible overflow outside does not meet her ideal of entity between house and garden, which she stresses in her introduction: “the garden must be studied in relation to the house, and both in relation to the landscape.”⁵⁵ The composition of these elements should be laid out, according to the author, in a three-zoned design: formal elements near the house, clipped evergreens as “transition between the straight lines of masonry and the untrimmed growth of the woodland”, which leads to the effect that: “each step away from architecture [is] a nearer approach to nature.”⁵⁶ At the Villa d’Este Wharton misses the transitional zone; the proliferating plants and exuberant waters overwhelm the structured architectural effect that she acquired in the house, thus disuniting the house-garden-landscape complex that Wharton propagates in her introduction. Her entrance into the intertwined ways of the garden produced feelings of disorientation without the revelation of the mythological way upwards to clarity.

Wharton had experienced the layout of the garden according to the plan as “too complicated” in its detail. As the architectural lines of the garden are lost to her understanding, she does not get an idea of a movement along the fountains and garden architecture as valuable and because of the lack of iconological questions, elements like the “Rometta” (“toy model of an ancient city”) and foun-

54 Ribouillault, *Toward an Archaeology of the Gaze* (see fn. 6), p. 11.

55 Wharton, *Italian Villas* (see fn. 3), p. 6.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

tains like the “water-organ” of the “grotto of Arethusa” seem to her “puerile” or “tawdry”.⁵⁷ Her conclusion is thus: “the cypress-groves of the Villa d'Este are too solemn, and the Roman landscape is too august, to suffer the nearness of the trivial.”⁵⁸

Wharton's verdict about Villa d'Este is negative, but her description of her movement is a subtle re-experiencing of the original effect, which the ascent up the palace was meant to have on visitors.

Gothein's description: an Ekphrasis

Wharton reprocesses her impressions of the actual, derelict garden and estimates its value as such. That is why her accounts are read as historic guide books. It is a different case with Gothein's approach, who tries to create an ideal image of the original garden by putting a critical distance between her travel experience and her description. She explains this process thus in her preface: “what you actually see with your eyes has to be ‘restored’, like a corrupt text, into its original context [...]”.⁵⁹ The above mentioned letter of her visit proves that approach: she notices the current state of the garden with its broken fountains and cypress-infested downs, but as she clings to the Dupérac plan, she tries to work out the original layout and gives the “architectural plan” superiority over her impressions.

The passage about Villa d'Este in the English translation of her book comprises almost nine pages, five of them fully covered by historical engravings and a contemporary photography; three smaller photos are inserted in the text. The description starts on the left-hand page, the right-hand sided page displays Dupérac's plan as an emphasis of its importance. Gothein's aim is to strip the contemporary impression of its features. The cypresses, that were interpreted as accentuating the architecture and, indeed, one of the main tourist's attraction, were an addition of later times, she writes: “The first picture clearly shows how thoroughly we must get rid of the fantastic impression, if we want to know how things were at the beginning, which is made nowadays by the dense overgrown gardens [...]”.⁶⁰

Gothein's description starts with her estimation of the garden, which is, in comparison to Wharton's full of praise: “This place must always stand out as the finest specimen of Italian gardening in the period of Baroque. [...] House and garden are the work of a single mind, and woven together into one complex whole.” Although Gothein shares Wharton's and, indeed, the contemporary ideal of the unity of house and garden, her application of it on the Villa d'Este is com-

57 Ibid, p. 147.

58 Ibid, p. 148.

59 Gothein, *A History of Garden Art* (see fn. 3), p. X.

60 Ibid, p. 257f.

pletely different. Gothein also starts her account with the house, which serves her to introduce the owner of the villa: “Cardinal Ippolito d’Este [...] was fascinated by the lovely view that opened from the top of the hill towards the Sabine Mountains [...]”⁶¹ This, however, is the only mentioning of the house, although she, too, had to enter the site through the house. Her description focuses on the garden, the connection between house and garden, which Wharton highlights, is not further referred to.

Gothein’s text shows movement, too, evoked by verbs of motion, but not that of a person walking through the complex, but that of the eyes, following the main lines on a plan. The movement jumps from the specified features: first the mountain garden is

“ascending to the house by five steep terraces. The terraces were joined to one another by diagonal paths and side steps. The middle-line, starting from the central gate of the house, is indicated in simpler form by a repetition of the scheme of the great gate [...]”⁶²

First, there is a movement up to the house, then the motive of the gates leads the reader again down to the level ground. When it comes to the description of water, running through the garden, the same effect can be detected: the text works its way up from the level axis of the fishponds and then to the terrace above. Liveliness is evoked by verbs of motion that describe the water. As such, the passage becomes a peculiar mixture between the description of the Dupérac plan and first-hand impressions. For example: Gothein introduces – according to plan – four basins, although only three had ever been executed.

“[...] the water rises at the east side and ends in an imposing water organ from which a great cascade pours into a cistern below, its roaring sound contrasting with the gentle ripple [...]. A second crossway line begins with the third terrace and the easter water-works. Gigantic blocks of tufa, with a Pegasus on the top, receive the rush of the water.”⁶³

Gothein goes on by describing the “Fountain of Tivoli”, which she calls “theatre of the waters”, from where she follows the “main walk”, the “100-Fountains-Alley”, to the “Rometta”, “Roma Triumphans” as she calls it. The passage then switches over to the level garden, which, as Gothein defines: “depended more on the manner of its planting”,⁶⁴ therefore has to be especially perceived with the historic layout in hand.

61 Ibid, p. 254.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid, p. 254 and 257.

64 Ibid, p. 257.

In Gothein's text, the actual impression of the garden is strongly filtered through the historical document. This gives it more value for garden historiography. In her description of the original "disegno", Gothein follows the traditional perception of the garden as, indeed, the plan was at times considered more real than the actual garden. However, as she inserts verbs of movement into this description she hints to the actualization of the plan, creating an animated picture of the three-dimensional art work. It may best be described as an Ekphrasis in the antique sense of the word: a description of something that does not necessarily need to exist, but is put before the very eyes of the listener.⁶⁵ In Gothein's case: the described garden does not and had never existed, it is only a mental creation, enlivened by the reproduction of sensual experiences like the water-movement.⁶⁶ This argument gets explicit when Gothein writes: "If we would understand the garden aright, we must imagine it peopled with a host of statues [...]."⁶⁷ Imagination takes over the role of the first-hand experience.

In contrast to Wharton's text, Gothein's has eradicated all signs of a travel document. Her first-hand impressions are only just perceivable in the ekphratic character of her description. She deals, however, with many gardens in the same way, which she never set eyes upon. There she solely depends on sources and plans and it is only logical that sometimes her description, based on historical material, differs from the actualization.⁶⁸ In the case of Villa d'Este she could check the mental image that she had created with the help of sources by her garden visit. The result is the creation of a mental space, where the outlines are marked by movement between central features, enriched by sensations that evoke the plan to live. The movement creates not a landscape metaphor as the writer does not describe an individual tour through the garden as is the case with Wharton's text. Gothein creates a cultural metaphor, where the mental image becomes more real than the actual site. In this she revives the Renaissance concept of the predominance of the "disegno" above the execution. Gothein moves in cultural traditions.

65 See Ruth Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice*, Ashgate, Burlington, 2009, p. 27: "The ancient discussions of ekphrasis define it as a type of speech that creates immaterial images in the mind. The speaker of a successful ekphrasis is therefore a metaphorical painter, the result of his words is a metaphorical painting." Hunt, 'Garden Magic', calls Wharton's "complex and subtle verbal pictures" ekphrasis, which is only acceptable in the broad definition he adds: "the term has become synonymous with writing about the visual." (see fn. 32).

66 In the German text the impression of an animated picture even gets stronger with Gothein's choice of the active form, that has been changed to passive in the English version, for the description of the main lines: the steep garden ascents, paths bring connections into existence, the river Anio embraces the hill etc.

67 Gothein, *A History of Garden Art* (see fn. 3), p. 258 and 260.

68 See Henrike von Werder, "Die schematisch wirkenden Stiche beleben" – die französische Gartenreise, in: Effinger and Seeber, *"Es ist schon eine wunderbare Zeit"* (see fn. 4), pp. 94–96.

Interpretations of a garden

Wharton's landscape metaphor, that describes the experience of motion through the garden as disorientating and the perception of the house as clearly structured has to be seen as an accidental coincidence between the originally intended programmatic ascend and the untended state of the garden when she saw it. Nonetheless her motion through the garden creates a similarity with the original intention of the site, which leads to the suspicion that the idea of this seeped into the mind of visitors of the pre-iconological age through its very topography and layout. Wharton's text therefore has to be understood as a landscape metaphor in the sense that it bears similarities with the programmatic metaphor that was first intended and re-constructed by Coffin.

Gothein's text in contrast to this strips the visiting experience from all individual sensation, thus it does not describe the actualization of the garden, but its design, which becomes more real than the garden itself. The similarity lies in the fact that this perception was common especially for the Villa d'Este and intended by the 16th century creators of the plan themselves. Her description with its ekphratic elements seem to create a time traveller's machine to the original garden, but is rather a mental journey to an image of the garden.

By analyzing early historiographical texts about gardens, scholarship can learn much about the power of design concepts and their reception through the ages. As such they can also put a critical distance between modern state-of-the-art interpretations and the garden as existing entity. Wharton's and Gothein's texts reveal their dependence on traditional modes of receptions of the Villa d'Este; but they are also interpretations of the piece of art in their own right.