

## GARDEN AS AN EYE. THE GARDEN OF THE VENETIAN PALACE SORANZO-CAPPELLO

Erika ZLATKOV

SI-1000 Ljubljana, Ulica bratov Učakar 44

e-mail: erika.zlatkov@gmail.com

### ABSTRACT

*This paper concerns the garden of the Venetian palace Soranzo-Cappello and is situated in a wider iconological and symbolic-theoretical framework. The garden is a continuous meeting of opposites, which succeed in coming to life as a harmonious whole; it is a symbolic space on account of its specific emplacement between nature and cultural landscape, and it is a space of symbols, since it has its own inner speech. The garden's appearance is subjected to climatic, temporal and terrestrial influences, and also to the will of man, who shapes it. The purpose of this study is to lead ourselves to thinking of a garden as a work of art, for man's power of expression is not only real, material; it is also spiritual, immaterial. The Venetian garden represents the interweaving of both. It is a work of art in open space, to which is also given a useful value. It is an emblematic figure, a mental and formal space which differs from the surroundings – both reflective and thoughtful.*

**Key words:** garden, genesis, art, myths, visual message, Venice, palace Soranzo-Cappello

## IL GIARDINO COME UN OCCHIO. IL GIARDINO DEL PALAZZO SORANZO-CAPPELLO A VENEZIA

### SINTESI

*L'articolo tratta del giardino del palazzo Soranzo-Cappello a Venezia e viene posto in una cornice iconologica e simbolico-teorica più ampia. Il giardino rappresenta un ininterrotto incontro fra opposti che prendono vita in un unico armonioso complesso; è uno spazio simbolico per mezzo del suo posizionamento specifico fra la natura e il paesaggio culturale. È uno spazio fatto di simboli che esprimono il suo dialogo interiore personale. L'aspetto del giardino è soggetto alle influenze del clima, del tempo e della terra, come anche dalla volontà dell'uomo che gli dà forma. Lo scopo del presente studio è quello di farci vedere il giardino come una forma d'arte, in quanto il potere di espressione dell'uomo non è soltanto reale e materiale, ma è anche spirituale, immateriale. Il giardino di Venezia rappresenta l'unione delle due visioni. È un'opera d'arte all'aperto che mantiene anche una sua utilità. Si tratta di una figura emblematica, uno spazio mentale e formale che si scosta dagli elementi riflessivi e meditativi che la circondano.*

**Parole chiave:** giardino, genesi, arte, miti, messaggio visivo, Venezia, Palazzo Soranzo-Cappello

## INTRODUCTION

An endless space, caught between sea, earth and sky, into which man has introduced the elements of recognition of his reason, might be the definition of the Venetian garden, yet at the same time a dilemma as to whether this is true.

The Venetian garden attracts me, for I wish to know why the garden is represented as the *primordial image of paradise*, yet at the same time also as restricted space for everyday use? Art is transfixed between these two extremes – between the harmony of the eternity of the spiritual and the transience of the material.

The gardens in Venice have originated through different periods and have developed just as Venice itself has originated and developed. The Venetian garden, therefore, is not just a space, not merely an appendage to the possibly important, original character of the home; the garden is a (stage-) presentation, an interplay of light and shade, of spirituality and materiality interweaving the roles of past and present.

Architects, artists, and thinkers have created the image of the Venetian gardens. I shall take a stroll through time, and through one single Venetian *giardino* I will attempt to reach the *primordial image of paradise* in its spiritual and material component.

## GARDEN AS THE PRIMORDIAL IMAGE OF PARADISE

Whenever I look back at the Venetian garden into which I entered, I have the feeling that I am being accompanied by the immaterial image of a garden – the image of non-transience. The narrow, bounded space is, in fact, the meeting-place of the materiality of the present (grass, flowers, etc.) and the immateriality of the past (style of arrangement, history of the garden, etc.) in a symbiosis which cannot be separated. Can one perhaps, in the arrangement of the Venetian garden, apprehend the message from the past, directed towards the future?

The garden, however, is the space of the word, the first space of man's living and yearning. It is the primordial image of paradise, which in diverse mythologies, religions and legends is somewhat unclearly presented.

Even in the Bible we find testimony that the garden is a bounded space, and as such a space of bounds: "And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of

knowledge of good and evil." (*Genesis* 2, 9). Thus, in God's garden there is a meeting of the concepts of the Beautiful and the Good – terms with which numerous philosophers concerned themselves, seeking for the balance between them. Perhaps from this was born the myth of Arcadia,<sup>1</sup> the pastoral country landscape with cliffs, grottoes and ruins, marked by pain and the memory of lost plenitude.

If the Garden of Eden is an allegory for the Golden Age, good fortune, abundance, the place where the Beautiful is also the Good, what then was its image?

The question now arises of whether paradise was a bounded or an unbounded space. Considering the biblical course of history,<sup>2</sup> one may conclude that it is the former, i.e. an elite space, intended for the chosen few; separated, and different from all by which it is enclosed. As such, during the Middle Ages, it developed into the metaphor of *hortus conclusus* (derived from Solomon's *Song of Songs* 4, 12), which symbolises innocence, purity, untouchedness and untouchability, the immaculateness of feminine nature.

The symbol of Mary, who immaculately conceived and bore fruit. In a certain sense, Mary is also the personification of the Garden of Eden, with the tree of eternal life which can also be identified with Jesus Christ, yet also with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for the favour of having been chosen as the Mother of God is bound up with the pain surrounding his sacrifice and death on the cross.

Hence, all the more appropriate would seem the designation of the garden introduced by Massimo Venturi Ferriolo – the womb of life (*il grembo della vita*) (Venturi Ferriolo, 2000): the origin of humankind is placed in the Garden of Eden. The new possibility of eternal life for humankind was dependent upon Mary. By undertaking the role of Redeeming Mother she became the personification of the closed garden (and vice versa) (Mavrič, 2005, 93–94).

Nevertheless, whether the garden is enclosed in the sense of being a closed space, or whether it is perhaps the outer manifestation of the human mind and spirit, which is bounded by recognition, reason – what does man effectively know, understand? Only whatever awareness has enabled him to understand in the bounded moment of human life, or until the moment of birth of dilemma. Thus, I am limited in recognition, yet not creativity, but my creativity is bounded by the limitlessness of other people's reason. This is most probably

1 Arcadia, which according to Polybius is described as a "poor, barren, rocky land, which lacks all life charms and which barely yields food for a new scrawny goats", was only later enchanced into an idealised image by Virgil, who depicted it as "a land of luxuriant growth, eternal spring and inexhaustible idleness for loving dalliance". In his *Eclagues* there first appeared in Arcadia the grave, and with it death. Thus Virgil combined in it two contradictions: the place and space of blessedness, together with man's transitoriness, pain and tragicality (Mavrič, 2005, 92–93).

2 But not only biblical: the ancient Greeks also speak of the Golden Age, which man by his doings has squandered away (Mavrič, 2005, 94).

why the idea of the enclosed garden has also been realised in ornamental gardens from the Renaissance on, i.e. in the form of hidden or secret gardens (*i giardini segreti*): these were parts of the garden enclosed by a high barrier or living border, right beside the palaces or villas, usually full of flowers, also possibly with a fountain (*fons vitae*) in the centre, intended mainly for the proprietor and his special guests. These are spaces of intimacy, of sensitive and sensory delight, an inward turning world, unlike the other garden layouts which embody different cosmic principles<sup>3</sup> and strive towards general outward display (Mavrič, 2005, 94). Indeed, yet are we speaking of materiality or of spirituality? Is the tree a material tree, or is it the symbol of the ramification of information which it derives from nature and which it rejects as forbidden fruit, for it is not understood?

Why virtue and why sin? It is virtue to plant and to gather fruits, it is virtue to learn and to put one's knowledge to good use. Sin is not to plant, not to learn. But is not the garden in its essence teaching about life and about the development of thought (immateriality) and the application of thought (materiality)? I may conjecture that the garden was, in its original conception, a materialization of the spirit, an outward manifestation of the intensiveness of the individual's reflecting, which in the shaping of the garden has synthesized all that up till this moment he had rationally mastered (geometry, art, history, etc.) and into it had also interwoven that which he had not rationally mastered (myths, religion, cults, etc.).

Why do we seed plants and introduce animals into the gardens, then crop them or kill them? The garden is a warning to us that all in the material world is transient. One tree gives way to another, the animals graze on the grass, man consumes the meat, man is killed by conflict with man. And the whole cycle is renewed, repeats itself, at a higher level of reason and recognition.

In all the above-mentioned examples, the garden is linked with the element of Divine, the Holy, most probably because it was also chosen by rulers as their status symbol.

Homer, in the *Odyssey*, describes the garden of King Alcinoos in all its luxuriance. From the description it is evident that the emphasis was mainly on the luxuriant fertility and the accompanying abundance. It seems to be a place of eternal spring or eternal summer, in which there never is a lack of fruits and flowers: of the Good and the Beautiful. There are also two sources of water: one intended for the king, the other for his subjects. It is, therefore, the king who gives them water, and with it life (Mavrič, 2005, 97). At this point, one may approximate the king to a God, on account of his power and authority.

"Many more instances could be found of the presence of the garden in diverse myths, legends and religions. From what has thus far been mentioned, we may conclude only that the garden is a sacred space, created by the chosen ones in order to satisfy their insatiable yearning for paradise lost, and thus to become compatible with God. Gardens, therefore, were frequently created by commission from rulers or influential individuals, who expressed their importance in such a way – through the speech of nature tamed. They are the mirror of the society by which the garden was designed. It is, perhaps, more difficult to compare the non-European with the European gardens – for, in the latter, the development is outwardly more visible – yet all are marked by religion, philosophy and/or the political system of the time and space in which they originated" (Mavrič, 2005, 98). Consequently, the image or appearance of the garden has an intense influence on human sensibilities.

The garden is an expression of the mental and spiritual state of the owner, the commissioner of the creation, and a reflection of his inner equilibrium. Why four rivers, why is Christ's cross divided into four composite parts, why is the brain divided into four spheres, and why the four elements: fire, water, earth, air? The garden may indeed be a bounded space, and as such also a space of limitations, yet at the same time it is also a boundlessly open space, within space and time. In the garden, all takes place – from presentations of the works of gifted artists, to crucial negotiations between rulers of the past and the present.

The proprietor, artist, creator or metaphysician must therefore elevate himself above the earthly and the rational, and from a certain mental distance study the earthly – present or future and draw out the lines – whether mental or geometrical – from the bounded into the limitless space and time, and so create – a garden.

#### BETWEEN ETERNITY AND TRANSIENCE

The opposite to nature is art. Yet both meet in the garden. In this instance, man appears to be equal to God, for by shaping nature he rules over life and death, and hence *creates the world in his own image*. Man it is who sets down the laws – and so the form – although in so doing he must to some extent take into consideration those who have their own nature. Thus the garden is an intermediate space between nature and culture, between nature and art. This intermediate role is frequently evident from the foundation: in the geometrically based gardens, the structure of the garden is a continuation of the composition of the building and its architectural articulation. No less imposed, yet also not apparent, are

<sup>3</sup> In this instance, the cosmic principle represents the ideational image of the world of its creator. Its message is intended primarily for the public, since usually it magnifies the role of the owner, who is frequently also the conceptual author of the garden's layout (Mavrič, 2005, 94).



**Fig. 1: The flowers in the garden of the Palazzo Soranzo-Cappello (photo: E. Zlatkov).**

**Sl. 1: Cvetje v vrtu palače Soranzo-Cappello (foto: E. Zlatkov).**

the laws governing landscape designed gardens, which appear to be natural, although they are actually composed of numerous artificial hills and lakes, artfully devised paths and streams, etc.

The garden is, effectively, a bounded space, for it cannot be otherwise. Man's knowledge is bounded, yet reason is not bounded, hence in the garden there is constantly something changing. Life cycles of living beings, restoration, renovation of the garden... And the garden becomes, indeed is, a gallery in which are displayed the artistic works of man – of the creator and of nature. Then we come full circle, for mind and material together create a new state – whether it be the ruin of the garden or its restoration, as is the birth and as is the death of man – and the rebirth.

Art is born and resides in the garden. *Il giardino* (the garden) is of masculine gender, yet the garden gives birth. In the garden there occurs something unrestrained, the erotic unbridled, and fertilization. Fertilization, burgeoning, birth-giving is an endless cycle which only the male hand can halt by destroying his very self – *il giardino*.

All the already mentioned, and numerous unmentioned views confirm in us the recognition that the garden is the (continuous) meeting of opposites: here polarities almost imperceptibly flow into each other. So we may say that the basic motive power of the garden is the relation between extremes, which is dominated by the desire for harmony – and hence for all of the great values: the Beautiful, the Good, and the True. One may,

indeed, be alone in the garden, but one is never lonely. In the garden, communication is established between man and nature, between man and society, between man and God, yet also between man as a social being and as a human being. Since the garden is a bordered space (this is the precondition for it to have the right to be so called), it is a place where man can create the world in his own image, and may also choose his own role within it. The garden is the expression of his power, intelligence, open-mindedness, influential power and knowledge, yet at the same time it is the space of the illusion which reveals man's inconsolability, emptiness and inability to realise himself in the outer world (Mavrič, 2005, 103–104). Or, perhaps, reverse. It is a space where man discloses his intimate self, his inner strength. It is a space where man realises his mission by placing within it works of art which are intended for his own appreciation, or that of other visitors to the garden.

## VENICE

In the further text, according to my own selection, I shall cite certain important archival data which illustrate the significance of Venice as a place set in a specific, characteristic space, and through the times which marked it by the advancement of thought and enrichment of the city, not only with works of art but also with the gardens which gave Venice a new dimension of expression. The text in the following chapters is, therefore, an abstract of the documentary data on the development and significance of Venetian gardens, by which I intend to demonstrate – or to establish – the originality of thought and creativity of Venice, which was and still remains the very concept of art and originality of expression.

Among the most important texts relating to Venetian gardens is a document compiled in the first part of the year 1500 by Francesco Sansovino, in which he describes in close detail the public green spaces and the gardens which were cultivated within the monasteries; he also precisely describes the botanical gardens which were characteristic of this period, and the origin of gardens around private houses (Cunico, 1999).<sup>4</sup>

Also in the centuries to follow, the Venetians constantly showed especial care for arranged spaces, a care which particularly in the 18<sup>th</sup> century attained a somewhat higher level in the arrangement of gardens. In these times, the Venetians adopted certain new forms – or a new philosophy – of spatial arrangement. They partly abandoned the arrangement of space which was based on consistent respect for geometrical laws – *allées* –

<sup>4</sup> The text is, essentially, a continuation of the research study on this theme, conducted in the early 1500s by Jacopo de' Barbari, who particularly stressed the importance of the gardens which had to be arranged for the outer areas (marginal parts) of the city.



**Fig. 2: Jacopo de'Barbari: View of Venice, detail (Hunt, 1999, 47).**

**Sl. 2: Jacopo de'Barbari: Veduta Benetk, detajl (Hunt, 1999, 47).**

which was primarily derived from the French manner of spatial arrangement, and instead they took a freer approach. In the arrangement of Venetian gardens, a particular impression was left by Frederic Eden, who at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century laid out gardens according to new principles of spatial arrangement, in which he combined elements characteristic of gardens of the Near East, and also features of the Venetian tradition, or tradition of the Veneto (Cunico, 1999). This gave to the gardens in Venice new, dynamic contents.

The garden was established as handicraft, which had primarily the purpose of increasing the aesthetic content of the landscape; being arranged with living material, the garden as such was sensitive to the changes occasioned by poor tending or by a disrupted balance between harmony and dimensions (Cunico, 1999).

At first sight, Venice does not appear to be disposed either towards gardens or towards the landscape historian. The ecology of the lagoon – salt water and air, its hostility towards plant roots thrust deep into the earth, its threat towards some of the basic needs and assumptions of gardening (e.g. there can't be any earthworms there), the powerful succession of high and low tides, which can flood and destroy the tending of gardens – is above all intolerant towards the creation, preservation and maintenance of gardens. Yet it was this very challenge to setting up gardens in such an environment that lay at the heart of Venetian garden making; it was one of the characters in Henry James' novel *The Aspern Papers* who claimed: "The idea of a garden right in the middle of the

sea!", although it was actually the challenge, the audacity, *sprezzatura* of the accomplishment that has always been part of the idea of Venetian gardens, right from the times of Cassiodorus onwards (Hunt, 2000a, 22).

Although the evidence on the gardens in the Lagoon of Venice, already from the 6<sup>th</sup> century onwards, is incomplete and usually linked to the establishment of religious associations, the gardens are first accorded an important role in the city when they are given importance by Jacopo de' Barbari in his woodcut map or "portrait" of the city, produced around the year 1500. The question arises as to why the gardens were given such prominence. That question becomes even more necessary when we accept the fact that (as other historians of Venice have explained) the woodcut is the image, emblem or visual representation of the idea of the city (Hunt, 1999, 48).

The Venetian garden, for which de' Barbari provides an early typological image of the city, clearly confirms its cultural structure. The sequence of spaces represents the temporal process through which Venice was established both in practice and in its own mythology: at first, the uncertain settlement on the embankments which rose out of the lagoon, then the drainage of suitable land above the water and protection against erosion, and the use of this land for cultivation purposes. Once these needs for survival had been fulfilled, there arose the need for embellishment of the city, which gave stimulus to the arrangement of gardens and paved courtyards (Hunt, 1999, 53).

Above all, Venice, which right from the beginning had been a mercantile city-state at the margins of the western political world, remained utterly indifferent to feudal relations on the mainland. The shape of the city evolved directly from the shape of its space, which is not a mirror of the water's surface – for that is presented in a direct view – but rather an intricate and invisible system of the underwater. The city's organism, with islands built upon a serried ground-plan, is rationally positioned at the confluence of the Grand Canal (Canale Grande) and the Giudecca Canal, close to their joint outlet to the open sea. This was a conscious choice of site, for it tamed nature so that space for the city could be gained; the shifting contours of the canals were fortified and the territory created was suitably enclosed (Benevolo, 2004, 46).

"This splendid organism, which had been established and mainly incorporated between the 9<sup>th</sup> century – when the seat of the doges was transferred from Malamocco to the Rialto – and the 11<sup>th</sup> century, when the city began to be divided between *confine* and *contrade*, achieved its final monumental solution in the following century. The church of San Marco was renovated between the years 1060 and 1094, following the monumental model of the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople. The Doge's Citadel was altered around 1175, so that the square before the church was opened out in the shape of the letter L, with palace loggias looking onto it; in 1177, in this setting, the meeting took place between Frederic I and Pope Alexander III. Venice was by then already ranked equal to Constantinople, and when that city was taken by the crusaders in 1204, they deliberately presented themselves as inheritors of the capital of the Orient. As a result of this direct relation – which placed the city on the far side of the stylistic divide between East and West, and thus together with Ravenna separating it from the rest of Italy – on account of the unusual intercrossing there emerged the most exclusive characteristics of the city: primarily the system of plane-surface walls, firmly set in the foundations and linked by facades, full lacunae and polyphors. This system had already been used in Constantinople, although in quite different proportions with regard to the outer spaces; in Venice, however, it was composed of uninterrupted walls around a series of canals. The facades began to take on successive Romanic, Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque forms, yet without alteration to their original role, i.e. the axis towards the exterior opened out wide the deep-set transit spaces" (Benevolo, 2004, 47–48).

On account of its safe position, political firmness and effective defence, Venice never had to set up ramparts and fortify individual buildings, all of which made it possible for precise attention to be given to completion of the public and private spaces. Strict levelling of height, which was determined by the surface of the water, with slight fluctuations to the rhythm of the tides, dictated the entire disposition of the city with its dual network of water and land ways. From this groundplan, which at the horizontal level is firmly regulated by the water, there rise the sharp dividing lines of the church bell-towers, which already from far away reveal where the main centres of life are, and where the others (Benevolo, 2004, 48–49).

An equally premeditated and daring tension supported the political and physical construction of the city on the lagoon, quite different to all others, "constructed on the impossible", which was the object of mythical wonderment throughout the western world. This is the only European city-state which in the 16<sup>th</sup> century competed with states and was, right up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a great world power. The city, with a delay and with dramatic fluctuations, took over world classicism, and in exchange gave the world a new visual culture, which was shaped by artists of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and during the next two centuries spread throughout the world (Benevolo, 2004, 48–49).

The aspiration towards understanding and mastering the world of visual forms had been given a scientific and final answer with the earlier mentioned linear perspective, which introduced a precise accordance between artistic depiction – in painting or in sculpture – and the three-dimensional shape of objects depicted. Perspective selected images of the world according to the hierarchy of importance – first the proportional relations, then measures and physical characteristics, texture and colour, and from this hierarchy proceed the rules for projecting all kinds of works, from architecture to urban landscapes.

Among the Italian cities, the only one that can be compared to Rome is Venice – city of eternal present – with its specific insular character, and in that respect it does not bear the comparison. In Venice, the most celebrated Florentine artists were received, although the ruling class resisted the diffusion of the Tuscan influence and proudly adhered to its traditional models (Benevolo, 2004, 119).

This resistance was first overcome by the painters.<sup>5</sup> The large-format canvases of Gentile Bellini and Car-

5 "After the year 1440, when Antonio Vivarini, Giovanni d'Alemagna and Andrea Mantegna were working together in Chiesa degli Eremitani in Padova, there began an increasingly frequent exchange of experiences, which included Mantova, Ferrara and – through Piero della Francesca – also the international environment of Urbino. The year of 1475 saw the arrival of Antonello da Messina, who introduced to the south the Flemish technique of painting. The meeting between him and Giovanni Bellini was decisive for the birth of the Venetian school of painting. Carpaccio began painting there in 1488, followed by Giorgione, Lotto, Titian in the final years of the century. The technical innovations – canvas, oil colours – and painting *senza par disegno* – led to a shift in the traditional balance of visual culture and accorded to painting an exclusive dominance which was not based on 'drawing'." (Benevolo, 2004, 120)



**Fig. 3: The Palazzo Soranzo-Cappello in 1709 (Favaro, 2005, 9).**  
**Sl. 3: Palača Soranzo-Cappello leta 1709 (Favaro, 2005, 9).**

paccio faithfully depict every fine detail of Venice at the height of its flourishing.<sup>6</sup> Two hundred printing presses, established after the year 1469 – among them, in 1490, the highly refined press of Aldo Manuzi – together with the engravers' workshops continued and spread this masterwork (Benevolo, 2004, 120). It was right here that Jacopo de' Barbari printed his famed panoramic view of the city.

The first two masters of arranging gardens into an open scene were Giuseppe Jappelli (1783–1852) and Francesco Bagnara (1784–1866), both of whom added to the Venetian gardens the elements of vegetation and introduced artefacts, thus creating the image of a cultural space (Cunico et al., 1996, 11–14).

On account of this, the garden is essentially a kind of labyrinth, it is a path strewn with expectations and surprises: in the interior of the garden, shady groves – at first sight unbounded – intermingle with greening lawns. The sensations are most diverse: the senses of shade, coolness and moistness are intertwined with the feelings aroused by birdsong, light-rays and the luxuriance of colours, all of which is accompanied by the glimmering surface of the water which runs between the hillocks or cools the shore. The paths meander somewhat uncertainly, revealing at each step perhaps a surprise. Here are generated feelings of belief in unbounded liberty, yet at the same time of the boundedness which is accompanied only by thought, which arouses the deepest feelings

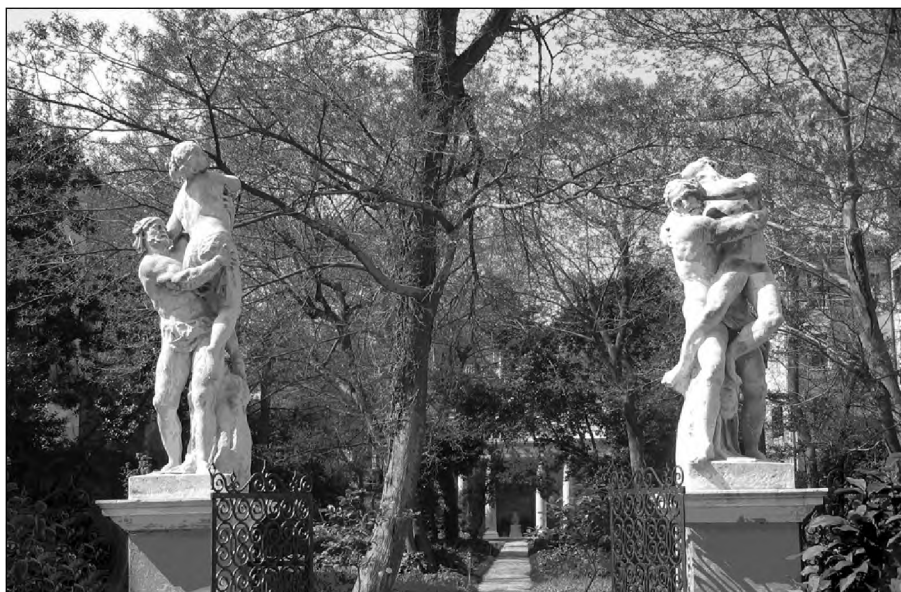
that stir the soul (Cunico et al., 1996, 11–14). Man might perhaps just wish to be transformed into a plant in order to live within the garden, in eternity.

#### THE GARDEN OF THE PALAZZO SORANZO-CAPPELLO

The Palazzo Soranzo-Cappello is situated in the residential quarter of Santa Croce in such a way that, with its façade facing towards the waterway Rio Marin – and together with the neighbouring palazzo – it creates a special architectural reality which gives its own distinguishing mark to the whole neighbourhood. Adjoining the building there is also a courtyard and a large garden which extends behind the palazzo. The palazzo, together with the complex of neighbouring buildings, is situated on the ancient island-settlement of San Simeon Piccolo, which lies between the waterways of Canal Grande, Rio Marin, Rio di S. Zuanne and a filled-in canal, along which now runs the Calle delle Chioverete. On the island are remains of settlements dating back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, on which the gothic style may be recognised.

The palazzo was constructed around the year 1500, as is confirmed by certain records and by the ground-plan of Jacopo de' Barbari. In this area there may also be seen a larger building, behind which extends a sizeable green surface.

<sup>6</sup> The physical landscape is an image that can be read, then the painted landscape is the image of an image. It seems to be no more than common sense to suggest that landscape painters want to give viewers aesthetic pleasure rather than to communicate a message (Burke, 2001, 42).



**Fig. 4: The garden of the Palazzo Soranzo-Cappello (photo: E. Zlatkov).  
Sl. 4: Vrt palače Soranzo-Cappello (foto: E. Zlatkov).**

The first historically documented information about the palazzo derives from the year 1379. Preserved in the church of San Simeone Profeta, which is situated in the area of Rio Marin, is an archive document which mentions the existence of a plot of land with a building, the property of the family D'Armer, who had moved there in the year 812 from the region of Cadora. The data from 1514 reconfirm proprietorial rights over the building by the householder Alvise D'Armer: from the description it emerges that the property consisted of several buildings, from which it may be conjectured that individual parts of the building served for renting out; it may also be supposed that the original building comprised a ground floor, first floor, and attic with a balcony.

A document dated August 1589 confirms that the householder Alvise Bragadin had submitted an application to the competent authorities at the Magistrato dei Giudici del Piovego for permission to reconstruct the building with its appurtenances. During later periods, this reconstruction was followed by numerous other renovations of parts or of the whole complex of buildings.

The palazzo became the property of the householder whose name it still bears today, Lorenzo Soranzo, in 1612, after being sold at an auction held following the death of the owner Giacomo Bragadin. From the documents on ownership of the palazzo, it may be concluded that the garden was added to the palazzo only at the time of Lorenzo Soranzo's ownership, for in earlier records no mention can be found of the garden. In the archival documents dating from 1712 the first mention of the garden appears (Casa Propria con Giardino e Corte). However, a graphic representation by Vicenzo

Cronelli, dating from 1709, does show a view of the Palazzo Soranzo and the Rio Marin with a garden. This displays the courtyard before the palace, in which statues of Roman emperors are placed in niches. A specific feature of the garden itself, however, is the central walking path, alongside which statues are placed on pedestals, and the broad, rectangular shaped "parterre", embellished with highly refined figures. The garden is separated from the courtyard by a low wall, on top of which is a skilfully designed wrought-iron fence (Favaro, 2005, 15–16).

In 1788, following the death of the last member of the Soranzo family, Giacomo, who died without descendants, the ownership of the palazzo with garden passed into the possession of Antonio Cappello, ambassador of the Venetian Republic at the court of the French King Louis XVI. Cappello arranged the garden, which extended behind the palazzo.

The Palazzo Soranzo-Cappello went through its ups and downs, rises and falls, just like the garden. For many years, it was neglected, abandoned, and the garden untended. It was not until 1989 that the Italian state repurchased the disintegrating palazzo from the last owner, contessa Carolina di Trento, and commissioned the renovation of the building and the garden (Favaro, 2005, 20).

There is relatively little historical documentary material on the palazzo and the garden, and even this does not add any more specific information to the details which can today be gleaned by studying the testimony of the records, hidden in the walls and in other elements of the garden. To a certain extent, they supplement the information gained from notes in D'Annunzio's diary





**Fig. 5: The pergola in the garden of the Palazzo (photo: E. Zlatkov).**

**Sl. 5: Pergola v vrtu palače (foto: E. Zlatkov).**

and details contained in the work of Henry James, though these are more elements of feelings, sensations, rather than concrete facts.

The state of the garden of the Palazzo Soranzo-Cappello before its restoration was described by Giuseppe Rallo as follows: "Among the vegetation, every trace of a path, a pattern, every opening which once opened out the view to somewhere, has been obliterated by time, and all that remains to be seen of the ancient garden has been left to dereliction, as is so characteristic of gardens for which nobody any longer cares. There ruled a natural disorder, and the only indicators came from some of the built parts of the garden: from the protective walls of recent or more distant periods, doors immured, the remains of two pedestals at the end of the garden, extension works, openings in the walls which spoke of the arrangement of the garden and of the emplacement of support structure for the pergola." (Rallo, 2005, 109)

The ideal of a garden set in the sea, disintegrating, almost completely abandoned with its overgrowth of weeds and disorder, with its wonderful Venetian haughtiness, seemed almost to be living in this space, ready waiting to rekindle the feelings of Henry James: "... as I approached the far end of the garden, I became aware that the youngest of my mistresses of the house was seated beneath the pergola... in the darkness, the trees and shrubs took on all possible bizarre shapes, and one could hear all kinds of unnatural sounds..."

One might also claim that, in this dereliction, in the undefined gradation in the gradual ruin of the things which create this environment, there lies a certain vale, of beauty, of the remnants of feelings – doubtless only imaginary and literary – which yet acquire extensive confirmation in the state of a place which had to be

confronted during the restoration of the garden (Rallo, 2005, 109).

#### GARDEN AS AN EYE

Man's power of expression is not only material, it is also spiritual, immaterial. A compromise between the material and the spiritual is perhaps not possible, because material reality is conditioned by reason, while spiritual reality is not limited by reason, and so it seeks contacts with infinitude, non-transience, eternity, with God. Philosophy is therefore the eternal seeking of connections between the reason and the idea of the thought which is beyond the reasonable. The result of the quest for truth lies in works of art which express precisely that which reason is unable to express as a material truth in a determined space and time. Visual art, therefore, represents a felicitous way of seeking for eternal truths, their discovery and presentation in the material form of paintings, statues, and also gardens, palaces, mathematics, astronomy and other sciences in a given time and space.

Hence both art and science, particularly in the temporal period of the Middle Ages and likewise of the Renaissance, have been closely linked with the society of those times, and in this way also with the Church, which held primacy over thought – and therefore spiritual life, spirituality. It is not surprising, therefore, that the first step forward in the direction of a different conception of space – which achieved its zenith in Renaissance art and in post-Renaissance science – was made with the change within framework of *metaphysics* and not (as perhaps might be naively expected) that of *physics* (Ženko, 2000, 38).



**Fig. 6: Two statues of the Roman emperors (photo: E. Zlatkov).  
Sl. 6: Kipa rimskih imperatojev (foto: E. Zlatkov).**

Therefore, truth cannot always be presented in material form, and so symbols are needed, the metaphysical speech of space and, placed in space, the components of man's life through time. What else is the garden, then, but the symbolic message of past generations of creators, who introduced into a geometrically shaped space messages, answers to dilemmas, and the dilemmas themselves. This is why there are placed in gardens the statues of emperors – of real people – and statues of powerful, spiritual belonging to eternity, of non-transient love, of purity: images of Christ of Venus. The arrangement and content of the garden is, consequently, also a direct connection between physics and metaphysics, between materiality and spirituality, which is otherwise subjected to the logic of man's development or ruin, yet the garden itself and its content is non-transient through time.

Today the garden of the Palazzo Soranzo-Cappello presents a message equally visual to the one at the time of its origin, though of course to a different person and at a different level of mind. Nonetheless, the basic dilemmas still remain unclarified. Why, in the garden of the Palazzo Soranzo-Cappello, are there placed – for instance – eleven statues of Roman emperors? Is this homage to individuals or a cult of personality? Is garden a cult space? Is garden a work of art?

I think that the arrangement of the garden, actually

the garden itself, is comparable to a work of art for the simple reason that nobody gives what the creator gives, and what he gives is something new, still not yet fully narrated. Painting, for example, produces a picture, but it has to be created in a way which is artistic, if the painting is to be art. On what does this depend? I believe that painting or, in this case, the arrangement of a garden is an intentional act.

Thought leads the eye and the act, when it generates and shapes the image – information – which up till this moment nobody has in the same manner, in the same content and the same combination of geometric images, unpeeled from eternity, given to the eye a recognizable form, and to the mind a useful value. This is why the garden also has the content of art – a work of art in open space, to which is also given a useful value. I might add that the garden also contains the ideational image of the world of its creator. The message which is conveyed by the arrangement of the garden is, however, intended mainly for the public, since usually the garden magnifies the role of its owner, who is frequently also the conceptual author of its layout.

Thus the garden becomes an adventure, and the visitors play the role of main actors of the public which attends the cultural events in this space.

The garden is the eye through which we see into the past, the present and the future.

## VRT KOT OKO. VRT BENEŠKE PALAČE SORANZO-CAPPELLO

Erika ZLATKOV

SI-1000 Ljubljana, Bratov Učakar 44

e-mail: erika.zlatkov@gmail.com

### POVZETEK

Vrtovi v Benetkah so nastajali, kot so nastajale Benetke, njihov geostrateški položaj, njihova prevzeta in izvirna kultura, odnos do materialnosti in do duhovnosti. Beneški vrt torej ni le prostor, ni le pritiklina domu, morda pomembni, izvirni osebnosti; vrt je predstava, igra svetlobe in senc, igra duha in materialnosti, kjer se prepletajo vloge preteklosti in sedanjosti.

Vrt je prapodoba raja, ki je v različnih mitologijah, religijah in legendah precej nejasno predstavljena.

Vendar – ali je raj omejen ali neomejen prostor? Glede na biblijski potek zgodovine lahko zaključimo, da velja prvo: torej, to je omejen, elitni prostor, namenjen izbrancem; ločen, drugačen od vsega, kar ga obdaja. Kot tak se je v srednjem veku razvil v metaforo hortus conclusus, ki simbolizira nedolžnost, čistost, nedotaknjenost in nedotakljivost; neomadeževano ženskost. Simbol Marije, ki je brezmadežno spočela in obrodila sad; maternica življenja: začetek človeštva je postavljen v rajski vrt.

Vrt je res lahko omejen prostor in kot tak tudi prostor omejitev, a je hkrati brezmejno odprt v prostoru in času, hkrati pa nas vrt opozarja, da je vse v materialnem svetu minljivo, kakor tudi, da je vrt morda zunanja manifestacija človeškega duha, ki ga omejuje spoznanje, razum.

Človeško vedenje je omejeno, ni pa omejen razum, in zato se v vrtu neprestano nekaj spreminja. Ciklusi življenja živih bitij, restavriranje, obnova vrta. In vrt postaja – je galerija, kjer so razstavljena umetniška dela človeka – ustvarjalca in narave. Krog se tako sklene, kajti duh in materija ustvarita novo stanje; bodisi propad vrta ali njegovo restavracijo, kot je rojstvo in kot je smrt človeka.

Moč izražanja človeka ni samo stvarna, materialna, je tudi duhovna, nematerialna. Kompromis med materialnim in duhovnim ni mogoč, ker je materialna realnost pogojena z razumom, duhovnost pa z razumom ni omejena, zato išče stike z neskončnostjo, neminljivostjo, večnostjo, z Bogom. Filozofija je zato le večno iskanje povezave med razumom in idejo misli, ki je izven razumnega. Rezultat iskanja resnice so tudi umetnine, ki izražajo ravno to, kar razum ni sposoben izraziti kot materialno resnico v določenem prostoru in času.

Vizualna umetnost predstavlja torej posrečen način iskanja večnih resnic, njihovo odkrivanje in podajanje le-teh v materialni obliki slik, kipov, pa tudi vrtov, palač, matematike, astronomije in drugih znanosti v določenem času in prostoru.

Resnice torej ni mogoče vedno prikazati v materialni obliki, zato so potrebni simboli, metafizična govorica prostora in v prostor umeščene sestavine življenja človeka skozi čas.

Kaj je torej vrt drugega kot simbolno sporočilo preteklih rodov ustvarjalcev, ki so v nek geometrijsko oblikovan prostor vnesli sporočila, odgovore na dileme, dileme same. Zato so v vrtove umeščeni kipi imperatorjev – realnih oseb in kipi močne, duhovne pripadnosti večnosti, neminljive ljubezni, čistosti: podobe Kristusa, Venere. Ureditev, vsebina vrta je zato tudi neposreden stik med fiziko in metafiziko, med materialnostjo in duhovnostjo, ki je sicer podvržena logiki človeškega razvoja ali propada, a je vrt sam in njegova vsebina neminljiv skozi čas.

Vrt palače Soranzo-Cappello podaja danes enako vizualno sporočilo kot v času svojega nastanka, seveda drugačnemu človeku in na drugačni stopnji razuma.

**Ključne besede:** vrt, geneza, umetnost, miti, vizualno sporočilo, Benetke, palača Soranzo-Cappello

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