

*Lorem Ipsum*

# SACRO BOSCO

LEE VAN LAER



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# Sacro Bosco



Pier Francesco Orsini's Parco dei Mostri in Bomarzo, Italy

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## *Chapter 1*

# THE PARCO DEI MOSTRI

An extraordinary garden of the underworld, conceived of by Pier Francesco Orisini, beginning in 1547.





# Introduction



## THE ENTRYWAY

The visitor is treated to a vision of the untouched landscape, where *in situ* rock outcrops and boulders graphically illustrate the raw materials from which Orsini crafted his vision.

A pervasive and timeless air of mystery suffuses the Parco dei Mostri, Pier Francesco Orsini's arcane masterpiece of Mannerist garden landscapes. The sculptures seem to emerge from the earth itself as creatures of the underworld—carved, in some cases, from the bedrock itself.

Leave aside for a moment the sheer originality of the sculpture: the idea of carving monumental statuary directly from the landscape was already a departure from high Renaissance ideals. The concept connects the statuary to an elemental bedrock, entirely appropriate to the Gods, nymphs, sprites and Satyrs of classical tradition. It represents a turning away from the structured idealism of perfect gardens such as the Villa Lante (in the immediate vicinity) back towards what may seem to be an earth-bound, perhaps even underworldly, aesthetic.

But Orsini was up to more than just a clinical exercise in sculpture and gardening innovations. Following his capture as a prisoner of war in the 1550s, on his return to his ancestral lands,



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Orsini entered into a deep state of spiritual questioning—one that caused him to challenge the standard underpinnings of life as it was known, then and now. The death of his wife intensified that state; and the garden he left stands as eloquent testament.

The original plan (and surely there was a plan, considering the great expense it took to create it) of the garden is lost; and with it, in greater measure, the precise ideas Orsini intended to express in his creation. But surely, the garden was far from casual; and enough remains for us to intuit some of his questions, observations, and meanings—although any would-be interpreter of the Parco dei Mostri has to exercise creative impulses nearly equal to those that which birthed the garden in the first place. We cannot for certain know what his intentions were; so we must invent them anew. And Orsini himself demanded this; the garden is a challenge to interpretation, not a lecture on principles, and his welcoming angels, the sphinxes, state the case.

On the way through this garden of earthly delights, we'll participate in a journey that crosses innumerable lines of demarcation, and discover an epic that spans multiple traditions.

While the classical references are perhaps evident enough, the surrealistic nature of the Parco dei Mostri touches on territory that defies such facile classification. Attempts to inter-

pret it according to standard modes of thought and tradition are doomed to failure—as Orsini himself knew, and even intended.

The Garden of Earthly Delights, Bosch's acknowledged masterpiece, was created between 1490 and 1510, and, due both to its extraordinary nature and the extent to which its iconography and style were imitated, had to be well known in art circles by Orsini's time (he lived from 1523 to 1585.) The work on the park was begun in 1547. Populating a landscape with fantastic creatures was Bosch's specialty; Orsini took it one step further into the literal, creating an actual landscape populated with the denizens of heaven and hell.

Orsini employed [Pirro Ligorio](#), the master architect and sculptor who designed the waterworks at the [Villa d'Este](#), one of the most famous Renaissance gardens in the area of Rome. He also had a hand in the work at [Villa Lante](#).

Ligorio, an accomplished architect, antiquarian, and one of the world's earliest experts on seismology, was challenged to create an entirely different kind of garden here; and he certainly did so.



Because he worked directly with local outcrops of stone in situ, it was impossible to lay this park out according to traditional Renaissance principles of garden design, which prize organization, adherence to precise mathematical relationships and combinations, and elaborate symmetry. But then again, Orsini's intention was to lay out a map of the human unconscious, which displays no such order. Instead of tapping in to the highly ordered world of the Renaissance, of atomistic materialism and literalism, Orsini's creation is a primordial return to dream worlds and the realm of the collective unconscious.

The parallels between this garden and the work of Carl Jung cannot be denied; the Garden anticipates Jung's ideas about man's psyche presenting us with a collected imagery that touches nerves deep inside the human soul, in places that many dare not look in.

Although it's fairly certain Goya would not have seen this garden, we can also draw parallels between the imagery here and Goya's later paintings, which likewise enter territory where reason takes a backseat and cryptic giants stalk the landscape. It's peculiar that Orsini's vision, which predates Goya by several hundred years, has achieved nowhere near the same fame, even though it often veers into the same darkly imaginative realms. One can easily imagine that Orsini, having seen war, questioned everything man believes

about his rationality; and Goya was certainly cut from the same piece of cloth.

*Movie 1.1 An impression of Villa Lante*



*A stroll through one of the most traditional gardens contemporaneous to Sacro Bosco. Pirro Ligorio was also involved as a consultant on this garden.*



## *Chapter 2*

# SPHINXES, AND THE CONTEMPLATORS

A challenge to visitors to attend, discriminate, and  
discern an intention





## SECTION 2



### THE CASTLE GATES

*Entering the garden, we meet two sphinxes, who perform their traditional role by asking us riddles.*

# The sphinxes

Orsini declared the entrance to his garden with a pair of sphinxes, the classical riddlers of ancient times.

One is inscribed, "He who does not visit this place with raised eyebrows and pursed lips will fail to admire the seven wonders of the world." The other says, "Be very attentive, and tell me if these marvels have come about by mistake, or have been realized according to a form of art."











# The contemplators



## CONTEMPLATION

*The numerous busts at the entrance to the garden seem to be an invitation to contemplation. Most feature multiple faces, reminiscent of the figures at Bayon in Angkor Wat, Cambodia.*

There are a number of important elements in the garden leading up to the figure of Time, or the swallower. A man and a woman, representing the ursprüngliche, or elemental, man and woman, flank the path to the swallower; and in their immediate vicinity we meet a statue of Janus, the two-faced god of beginnings, transitions, and passageways.













Here we meet, as well, a statue of a god with faces oriented to all four points of the compass. This particular piece of statuary bears a distinct resemblance to the faces at [Bayon in Angkor Wat](#); and we'll see a number of other intriguing pieces that echo this relationship. Remember, traditionally, Brahma has four faces; and given some of the other symbolism and imagery in the garden, one has to wonder whether all the allusions to "world travelers" in the inscriptions are a veiled reference to the influences from asian cultures which appear here in the iconography.

Angkor, one of the world's pre-eminent temple complexes, not only shares peculiar similarities in some religious iconography; the two culture's monuments have a strong consonance of appearance in terms of weathering, texture, and even the patterns of lichens on the stone. Any visitor familiar with the landscapes of ancient Cambodian temples will recognize the affinities immediately.

Man and woman, placed in the landscape, simply serve to sound the introductory notes, reminding us that all mythol-



ogy is, in essence, a reflection of the human character; not the character of the colorful gods, who are used for illustrative purposes. The two-faced god suggests not only beginnings and transitions, but the environment of duality mankind forever dwells within; and the four faced god indicates a need for vision, attention, and vigilance—the ability to see in all directions at once.

Most of these pieces of statuary intentionally recall Etruscan styles, rendering a direct homage to the earliest known inhabitants of this ancient landscape. Orsini held the Etruscans in high regard, and included a number of references to them in the garden, but I believe their presence here is specifically intended to convey an impression of timelessness.

The overall impression here is one of contemplation, meditation; and perhaps Orsini's intention was to have them serve as a silent preparation for the unusual and challenging wonders of his garden.





# The Swallower: Time

Here, just after the cluster of contemplative figureheads, we encounter the first absolutely extraordinary piece of statuary in the garden. Meant—it is assumed — to represent Proteus, it's a monstrous head, set back against a sylvan hill, opens a gaping

TIME, WHICH DEVOURS ALL THINGS

*Underneath the apparent solidity of the earth and man's accomplishments lies the irresistible power of time, to which all things succumb.*

*Emerging from the hillside, this swallower from the underworld rushes forward to inhale all of creation.*





maw to swallow everything in its path. It's very reminiscent of the gaping maw in the primary fish of Breughel's "Big fish eat little fish;" and if we are willing to accept the analogy, certainly, we are the little fish.

Once we intimate this relationship, the frills at the temples of the head and the whiskers that sweep back from the mouth reinforce the idea of an anthropomorphized fish.

Proteus is believed to have oracular qualities. He is capable of assuming many forms, indicating the constant nature of change. He also represents flexibility, versatility and adaptability —something that will be demanded of the viewer as they walked through the garden. In alchemy, as well as Jungian psychology, he also represents the unconscious. No more apt figure could be chosen to introduce us to the wonders of the garden.





Perched jauntily on the head of this piscine monstrosity, balanced as though this malevolent swallower of all were the very foundation of the world itself, is a globe.

The artist has included spiral elements at the base of the earth, suggesting the rotation of the planet. The reference seems to tell us that the world turns; time passes; and the swallower of all things is time itself, giving us a clue to the



identity of the huge head beneath the globe.

On the globe sits a castle — ostensibly the Orsini castle, suggesting that the Orsini's somehow dominate the world, but the scale of the statuary indicates that this interpretation is badly mistaken. What we have is a tiny castle, sitting on an only slightly larger earth, which is completely supported by

the huge, dominant swallower. It puts the works of man in perspective: the largest, most stable and impressive structure human being can imagine, a castle, is dwarfed by the figure of time, ending up as nothing more than a decorative tassel on his cap.

Man, Orsini is arguing, is at the mercy of forces far greater than himself, forces he is unaware of, perched as he is at what



he thinks is a lofty position at the top of the dung heap. But the forces of the underworld, the collective unconscious, and time itself, are the unseen darkness that swallows everything we are and dominates the actions that we take. There is far more, he argues, than meets the eye to life; and a high vantage point is not a guarantee that one is seeing everything that must be seen. The biggest things are hidden to us; and



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this mystery, which lies underneath our very feet themselves is what the rest of the garden will lead us to investigate.

To the left of the swallow, a stream. This carefully engineered water feature, which streams through a naturalistic cleft in the rock—completely unlike the controlled and managed water features at Villa d’Este or Villa Lante, where even the “primordial” sources of water are carefully groomed and managed—manages to create a spontaneous impression.







## THE CONQUERING HERO

*The first megalithic figure in the garden presents us with an image of virtue triumphing over evil.*

# Hercules

The next piece of statuary we come across is the aptly cthonic Hercules slaying a giant. This piece of statuary is absolutely stunning and completely unexpected, even given the scale and unusual nature of Proteus. If the viewer had any doubt whatsoever as to the extraordinary nature of this garden, it is dispelled when one comes across this particular vignette.

It's difficult to convey the scale of this mind-blowing sculpture without a point of reference. The following pictures will give readers a general idea of how large and very impressive this statue is.















As you can see, the scale is positively staggering. It conveys an overwhelming impression of force and mastery. Even the placement in the landscape is masterful, unexpected; it lies partly concealed behind and below a wall, so that coming across it is a truly breathtaking experience. It's at this moment that I understood this was truly a garden of wonders.

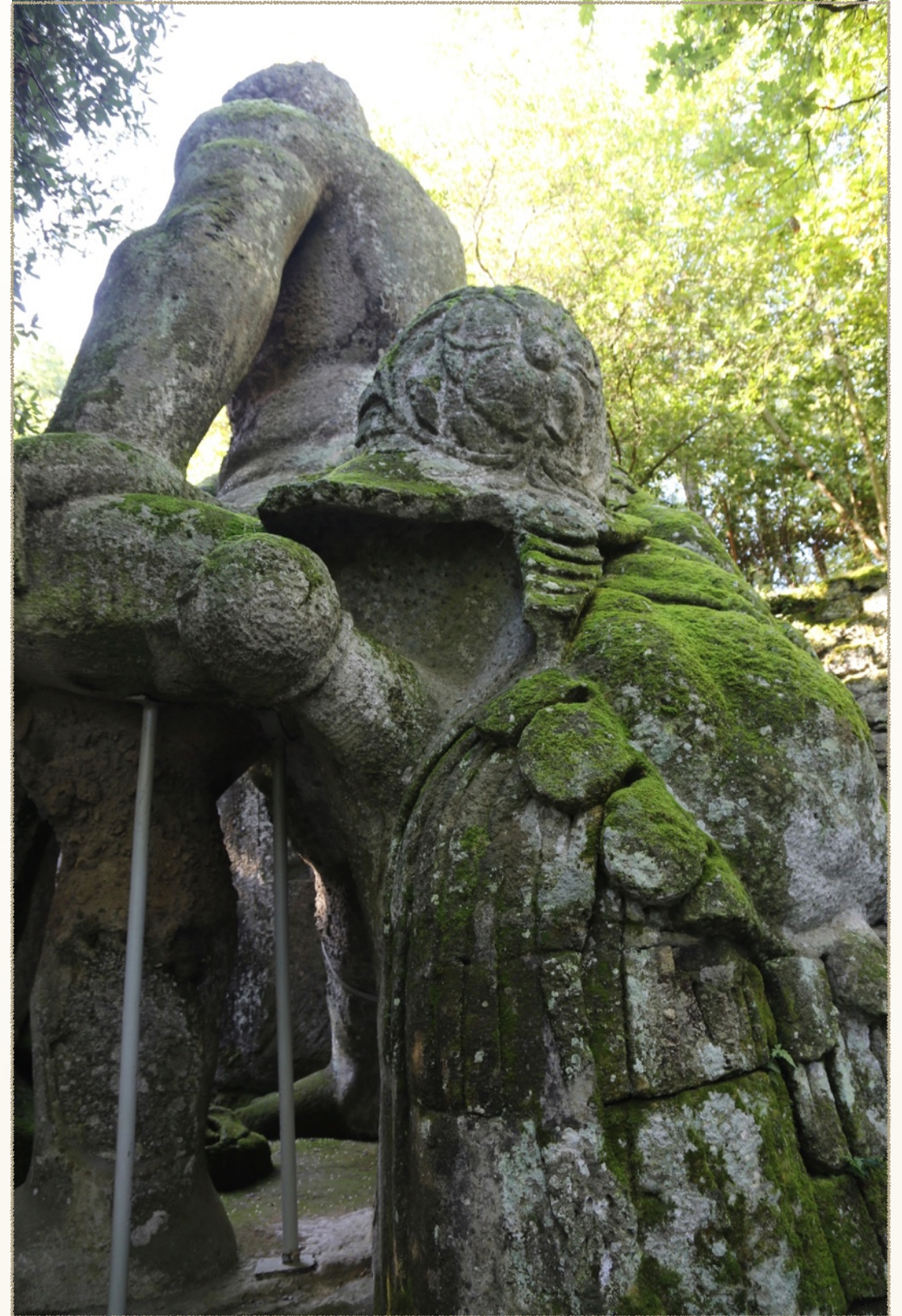
The image is reminiscent to me of the Hindu incarnation of Vishnu Narasimha, depicted slaying [Hiranyakashipu](#) at Banteay Srei.

Serving as an image of the conquering hero mastering evil, it has a hidden message which can perhaps be best understood by looking at the back side of the sculpture.





Hercules's sword, shield and helmet are parked at the rear of the action: eschewing the tools of the warrior, he chooses to master his opponent using his bare hands alone. The implication is that the hero uses the force of his physical body and his will alone to conquer. He needs no help from props or artifices; his own inner strength is what prevails. This interpretation is consistent with medieval and later traditions, which assign Hercules the moral imperative of battling monsters which represent amoral forces. Here; the monster is distinctly human; and the inference is that Hercules is battling the inner monsters of mankind—corrupted creatures of the soul—not amoral external forces.





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rectly above the subterranean plaza containing the statue of Hercules, we encounter a ruined temple, fallen on its side. The guidebook indicates that the monument is in very bad repair, but i doubt this is the case. the fallen nature of the temple—it has collapsed and is lying on its side—implies that the condition is a function of the position. Here Orsini gives us not stock ennoblement, but an iconclastic vision of the classics: they are fallen over, cast off, worthless. Instead of elevating the classical ideal of perfection, as symbolized by gloriously symmetrical temple structures, Orsini's vision has thrown it over. A new vision must be pursued; this is, at the very least, rebellion. Once again, as at the beginning, our conventional ideas are comprehensively challenged. The world is falling down; whatever will replace it?





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The back side of the fallen temple, with its cryptic architectural details.





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Immediately past the fallen temple, in a position which allows the seater viewer to stare, very counterintuitively, at the back of Hercules's head, is a bench that seems oddly reminiscent of the stone benches the Etruscans placed their dead on. The similarities cannot have been lost on Orsini, who would have been familiar, above all, with the standard architectural features of Etruscan tombs. Is the implication here that rest is only meant for the dead?





*Chapter 3*

# PEGASUS

The triumph of hope and idealism





## SECTION 6

# Victory

The next heroic piece of statuary is a giant sacred tortoise, surmounted by a victory figure on the earth. Surely the piece reminds us powerfully of primitive myths that the earth rests on the back of a great turtle; and it equally brings to mind the famous image of Vishnu presiding of the churning of the waters to create the milk of immortality, another famous image from the walls of Angkor Wat.



### THE JAWS OF DEFEAT

*The jaws of defeat lurk perpetually at the feet of victory.  
But here, they do not triumph.*

*A patina of great age and rich moss lends an even greater  
subterranean air to the state of affairs.*







Vishnu's avatar Kurma, in the churning of the waters of the sea of milk to create the elixir of immortality.





A detail showing Kurma.



This monument of victory atop the turtle, and the world itself, suggests moral triumph- perhaps the triumph of Love. Its position on the tortoise suggests the victory is hard won and only achieved through patience and long effort.







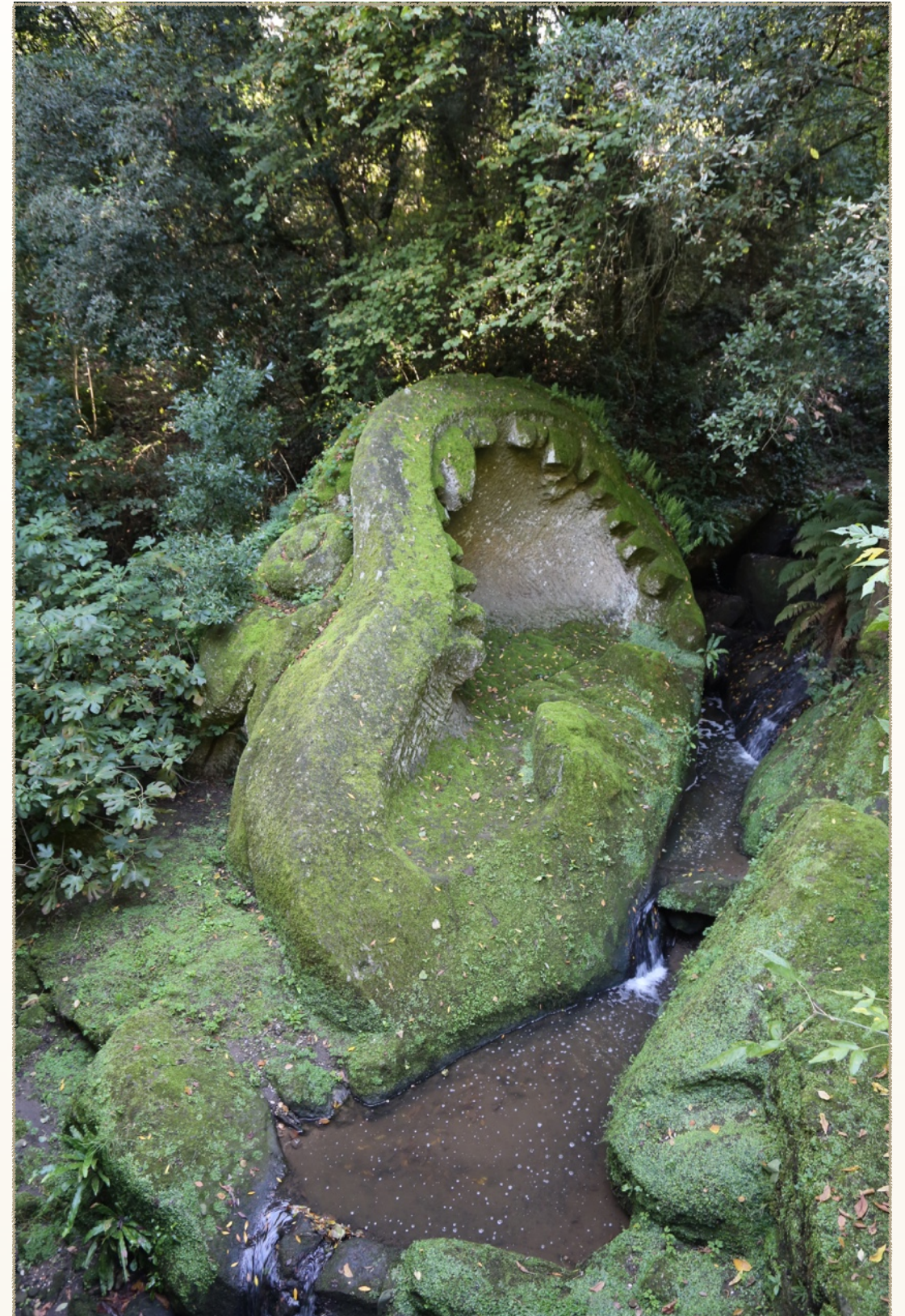






Lurking ominously to the left of the tortoise, a creature of the underworld—kin to our initial friend the swallower—rears up in an attempt to consume the pair.

Mysterious steps lead downwards into a hidden crypt, evoking traditional Etruscan burials. The presence of the underworld, and the unknown, along with the implied threat of missteps and even death, is constant.





Even stairways here may lead up from the ground... to nowhere.





But despite the ominous warnings, the overwhelming impression here is one of triumph.





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In an extraordinary image of hope, Pegasus takes flight from atop a fountain representing the waters of both life, and the underworld—escape into an unbound world of air.



The statue is aligned to take best advantage of the sunrise.



## *Chapter 4*

# THE NYMPHAEUM

A realm of the sexual and sensual. In this area, the entry is warded by two subtly masculine symbols, but femininity dominates.





## The Sensual Realm

Leaving the plaza, we're confronted with yet another peculiar reference reminiscent of eastern art: a millstone, but a millstone with overtly phallic overtones that reminds us of the Lingam so common in Hindu art. The millstone/phallus probably serves



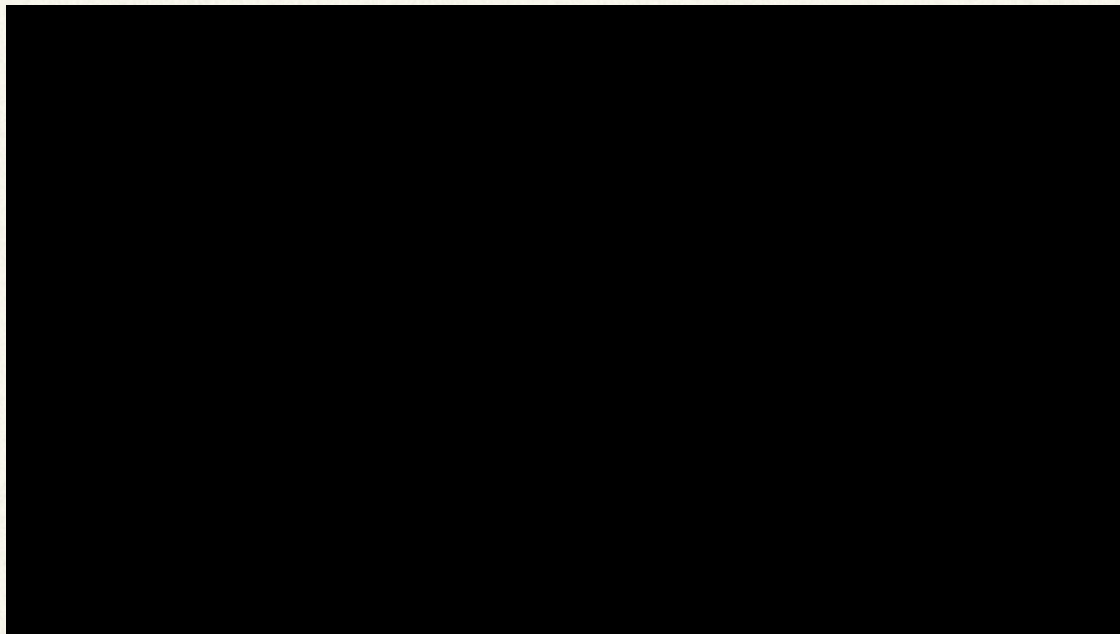
*In much the same way that Herms were used in Roman times, phallic totems mark the entrance to the Nymphaeum.*





multiple symbolic purposes. One is to indicate that time grinds all of life's efforts into an exceedingly fine flour; the other is to point to the generative powers of destruction and transformation, as symbolized by the grinding power of the stones and the grist they process.

*Movie 4.1 Area around the Pegasus fountain*



*This short video begins with the Lingam and the tree, but walks you back through the fountain area.*



Flanking the phallus, on the other side of the path, is a tree that rises from a recessed hole in the earth. The tree completes a pair of generative phallic indices, this one more exuberantly indicating growth and fecundity.



Directly following the phallic guardians, we come across the Nyphaeum and baths, an area once again featuring references to water, but dedicated to femininity and the celebration of womanhood.

The area is flanked by a handsome pair of lions, sadly deteriorated.



Take note that the lions have balls under their paws, a typical way of rendering lions not only in Renaissance statuary, but also in Chinese statuary. Unlike Asian lions, these are prone, not sitting up.





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This leads into an extensive area of benches, surrounding an oversized shallow pool, shaped like a bathing tub. It carries subtle inferences of a ritual of cleansing or purification before entering the Nymphaeum.





This leads to what appears to be a huge bathing pool, although it's a bit too shallow for the purpose.





The pool sports two dolphins; it's a fair guess that they used to spout water.





The adjacent Nymphaeum, seen in its entirety. To the left, a vignette of the three graces; to the right, the muses (?) seasons, and the hours. Most of this statuary is so deteriorated that it's difficult to be clear on the meaning without some help.





The figures to the left definitely appear to represent the three graces. Flanking niches have lost their statuary; we can only guess what may have been there.

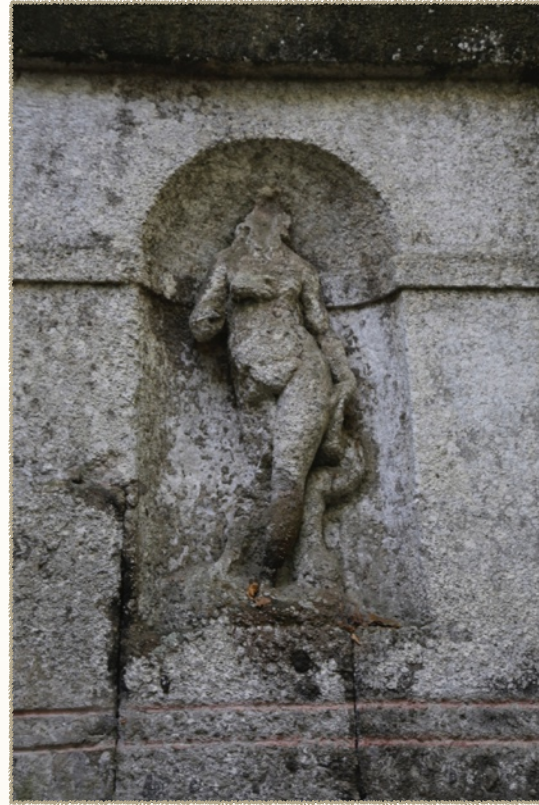




A close-up of the area to the right. Sadly deteriorated, it's certain that this grotto was at one time an exquisite environment.







Four of the five nymphs in the right area. The fifth one is destroyed and the niche is empty.







The fine statue of [Venus](#)—serene and distinctly Etruscan in nature—which follows the nymphaeum gives us a hint of the quality the original nymphs must have displayed. Standing not on a seashell, but on a dragon, she presents as with an offering—perhaps a bouquet of roses, her signature flower—whose exact nature is lost to history. Orsini labeled this Venus a "virile" Venus, implying an aggressive fecundity. [Jupiter](#) watches over her; The overwhelming message is one of the sheer power of love and sexuality in the earthly realm. However, given Orsini's interest in the Etruscans and the distinctly water-based themes surrounding both this area and the whole of the garden itself, we can surmise that his Venus represents Venus Cloacina, Venus the purifier, a hybridization of the Etruscan water goddess [Cloacina](#).



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Jupiter (Venus is located directly to the right.)







The dragon pedestal. Take note this is a distinctly piscine dragon.





The theater, directly to the right of Venus. Statuary from its six niches, if there ever was any (see below) is long gone. A typical feature of Roman gardens, but in this case, one with a more specific—rather than general—allegorical purpose in mind. We gather the impression that this stage is set for—and presided over— by love (Venus) but that it's now empty- a fitting and quite perfect juxtaposition following the death of Orsini's wife. The niches for statuary may have been left intentionally empty in order to emphasize the isolation implied by the unoccupied stage.





Underscoring this impression, the theater is flanked by two obelisks with a touching inscription that highlights his spiritual anguish.



“Only to relieve his soul”



Vicino Orsini in 1152



A brief video of this area

*Movie 4.2 The nymphaeum*



*A brief video of the area.*



## *Chapter 5*

# HOUSE AND GARDEN

Orsini's avant-garde landscape violates basic principles in unexpected but appropriate ways to accentuate the impression of his disruption and grief.





# The House



## WE ALL FALL DOWN

*Tilting a house on its side turns out to have an unexpected psychological impact on visitors.*

Moving on, we come to another daring feature which defies precedent in comparable gardens of its time. The leaning house, implying a subversion and disruption of stability, the immanent collapse of everything predictable and reliable, looms over the transition to the next level of the garden; and one must pass through this disturbingly altered landscape in order to go forward. It's as though Orsini wanted to reproduce a physical sensation analogous to the death of his wife: a radical reformation of the landscape.

The reformation is not only visual, that is, intellectual; moving through the house we physically experience vertigo and disorientation, meant to mimic the emotive force of bereavement, thus creating an emotional state of transformation that brings us, for a moment, into active relationship with a taste of Orsini's state of grief and questioning.



Interestingly, this is the only place in the entire garden where Christian symbolism appears. The unambiguous Presence of Christ — with what appears to be Mary praying to her — is puzzling on a number of levels.



First of all, overt Christian imagery seems to be a typical of classical gardens of the type preferred during this period. Secondly, Orsini reputedly had little interest in organized religion, flouting the traditions of his day. Third, the images hardly in keeping with the dominant themes and directions from the rest of the park, which are exclusively Pagan.

Under the circumstances, the viewer is forced to draw the conclusion that Orsini was not irreligious or agnostic; but rather that his religion took on a different, more inner and sophisticated, vision than that of his contemporaries.

This very specific reference in a garden so carefully thought out in every other way cannot be an accident, and his refusal to conform to the conventions of the day speaks against the idea that Orsini was making any concessions when he included this in his garden.

The image shows up to the left of the tilted house, clearly linked to the grief, disorientation, and destruction implied by the tilted structure.

Here we encounter a man of thoughtful prayer and introspection; marching to the beat of his own drummer, yet still reverent.





The inscription on the house reads, "Animus quiescendo fit prudentior ergo"—

"By virtue of stillness, spirit becomes wiser."

We are called here, to a moment where we stop. A moment where the house tilts; a moment where we are out of our element, and our expectations are confounded. The theater is empty, with no love to fill it; the house is empty, and its floors are not level. We must stop, because we do not know this world. It has none of the things we're familiar with in it.

Yet in stopping, our soul sees itself, and we grow.

Can Orsini truly have been alluding to such esoteric secrets? Certainly, he gave us an esoteric garden; and he was a troubled man who had done a great deal of thinking about what life means, that much is evident. Even more evident is the fact that he was unique, and willing to express himself in ways that defy convention. All of these elements suggests that he was a man who expend a great deal of time pondering his life, and who made decisions that belonged to him and himself alone. So all of the qualifications for an original thinker, an inner philosopher, are definitely on the table; and here, if you will, is a call to silence — a call where, confronted with the impossible, we stop, and we contemplate.









As one climbs the narrow stairs next to the house—implying an entire rite of passage in itself— one apparently emerges into a world of much greater, even classical, order; but this, too, is fundamentally deceiving. The stately urns lead us straight into the underworld again... this time, into an even more confusing and perhaps troubled territory.



These vases originally carried inscriptions; but all of them are lost to time. While the loss erodes the original meaning of the piece, it adds to the air of mystery that surrounds Orsini's intentions.



## SECTION 9

# Ceres



### CERES

*A masterpiece by Ligorio exemplifies the perfections of proportion and beauty expected in any classical garden.*

We encounter the nurturing goddess [Ceres](#), elegant, stately, and reputedly considered one of Ligorio's most successful pieces, due to its perfect proportions. Preserving the same Etruscan flavor that permeates all of the statuary in the garden — an influence much more prominent here than in other gardens of its time — she bears a bowl of fruit on her head, recapitulating the symbolism of the earthly globe seen earlier in the garden. Here, the earth is abundant; not something to be conquered, but, rather held up, lovingly. Ceres' torso is literally crawling with infants, implying a tremendous fecundity; yet her expression is pensive and objective.



As with most of the work in the garden, the scale here is impressive; and in keeping with the underworldly overtones of the rest of the garden, disturbing elements enter.





The figures surrounding Ceres are not the florid cherubim one usually sees in period sculpture; instead, they are fairies, elemental sprites, and they don't seem completely benign.







They're holding a third figure upside down, and, given the point of reference offered by Hercules with his upside down and vanquished victim, one suspects that it can't be accidental — and that the gesture, seemingly playful at first glance, may be more sinister. Certainly, it brings up echoes of the hanged man of the Tarot; a curious bit of esoterica that may subtly imply that we see the world upside down.





Cthonic undertones continue to well up from the depths of the unconscious mind, even here; note the figures and faces at the bottom right side, who seem to be emerging from the earth itself.

Moving deeper in the garden, and (temporarily) up the hill away from the main body of sculpture, we come across a crypt or tomb. The presence here is unclear. It seems perhaps atypical of Etruscan tombs, yet may well have been one; so whether or not it appears in the garden by accident or design is a question, interesting in itself in light of the question asked of the viewer at the entrance to the garden. In any event, it certainly serves as a chilling reminder of our mortality.

At the same time, the tomb is empty; is this perhaps a reference to resurrection or immortality? With the whole garden serving as a referential point for a life beyond the life of the body—a life within the conscious and unconscious principles that drive both myth and reality—the tomb seems to assume a rightness, and one is left with a sense that it belongs here, a notation that must be included if questions on this scale are to be confronted.









## *Chapter 6*

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lee van Laer was born in Yonkers, New York, in 1955, and spent a good deal of his childhood in Hamburg, Germany. He has spent the majority of his adult life in the Gurdjieff work, and is an active member of the New York Gurdjieff Foundation.

Lee is an import professional by trade, and has traveled extensively worldwide, particularly in the Far East. He holds a degree in fine art from St. Lawrence University, and is a fine artist, musician, photographer, poet, and writer.

At the time of publication, he is a Senior Editor for Parabola magazine ( [www.Parabola.org](http://www.Parabola.org) ).

His principal web site is at [www.nefersweetie.com](http://www.nefersweetie.com). His blog is at [www.zenyogagurdjieff.blogspot.com](http://www.zenyogagurdjieff.blogspot.com).





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