

AMMANNATI AND THE VILLA MEDICI IN ROME: AN UNKNOWN LETTER

by Edmund P. Pillsbury

On January 9, 1576, Cardinal Ferdinando de' Medici acquired from the heirs of Giovanni Ricci a villa on the Pincian Hill in Rome. Occupying a prominent site in the city, with a view of St. Peter's on one side and of the Roman Campagna to the rear, the Ricci casino possessed a double set of apartments, on two floors, flanking a loggia and two-storey high *gran salone*.¹ From the north end of the long, rectangular structure rose a tower containing the principal staircase. With its decorated rooms, its furnishings, and its fountains, the villa built by Cardinal Ricci was ready for immediate occupancy. Its new owner, however, had other plans. Less than a month after signing the purchase agreement Ferdinando called Bartolomeo Ammannati (1511-1592) from Florence to advise him on the development of the property. Soon thereafter began an extensive renovation and expansion of the villa. This witnessed, among other things, the remodelling of the garden side of the structure with a new loggia and *appartamento nobile* above it, the construction of a matching tower — with a second spiral staircase — on the south end of the casino, and the addition of a long gallery wing to the south side of the building to house the cardinal's sculpture collection. In 1927, Ferdinand Boyer, in an important study of the villa, concluded that the architect responsible for the changes was Ammannati himself.² And, although documentary and other evidence which has come to light since then (and will be discussed below) tends to confirm this view, there persists a tradition to ascribe many of the later changes at the villa to others, especially Annibale Lippi, son of Nanni di Baccio Bigio, the architect of the original Ricci construction.³ The purpose of the present note is to make known a letter written during the early years of the Medici ownership of the villa. This document — a transcription of which appears in the Appendix, p. 306 — clarifies the villa's authorship and, in the absence of construction records, provides a means of identifying the first projects that were undertaken by Ferdinando.

The letter is dated October 18, 1577, slightly less than two years after the villa's acquisition;

¹ For a re-construction of the original appearance of the villa and a discussion of its authorship and character, see: *F. Boyer*, La construction de la Villa Médicis, in: *Revue de l'Art Ancien et Moderne*, 51, 1927, pp. 3-14, 109-120 (in the following cited as: *Boyer*); *G. M. Andres*, Cardinal Giovanni Ricci: The Builder from Montepulciano, in: *Atti del V Convegno Internazionale del Centro di Studi Umanistici, Montepulciano*, 8-13 agosto 1968, Florence, 1970, pp. 283-312 (pp. 308-310); and *idem*, The Villa Medici in Rome, Doctoral Dissertation, Princeton University (available through University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Mich.; in the following cited as: *Andres, Diss.*), I, pp. 118-182. When the villa was restored in the early 1960's, frescoes dating from the Ricci ownership were discovered in the north apartments; these are published by *E. Schlumberger*, Les fresques retrouvées de la villa Médicis: L'enquête commence, in: *Connaissance des Arts*, no. 121, March 1962, pp. 62-69.

² *Boyer*, pp. 109-120. In the best, and most complete, modern account of the villa *Glenn Andres* (*Diss.*, pp. 435-452 and *passim*, and *idem*, The Villa Medici in Rome: The Projects of 1576, in: *Flor. Mitt.*, 19, 1975, above [in the following cited as: *Andres, Mitt.*]) has taken up *Boyer's* thesis and ascribed to Ammannati an important share of the work undertaken by Ferdinando. He has attributed to the Florentine architect the *portone* and frontispiece on the west facade, the new staircase leading from the street level to the two spiral staircases, the entire garden facade with its loggia, new south tower, and *appartamento nobile* — with the possible exception of the flat attic, panelling of the sculpture reliefs and windows, and Michelangelesque capitals of the loggia —, and probably the first designs for the gallery wing and terrace grotto. Among recent scholars to discuss the villa *L. Salerno* (*Piazza di Spagna, Cava dei Tirreni and Naples*, 1967, p. 46) has also argued for Ammannati's authorship of the Medicean conversion.

³ The attribution of the villa to Lippi goes back to *Pietro Ferrerio's* *Palazzi di Roma*, published in 1655. Modern writers who have subscribed to this view, either wholly or in part — in spite of the documentary evidence brought to light by *Boyer* — include: *L. Callari*, *Le ville di Roma*, Rome, 1934, pp. 82-86; *G. Bocchino*, Annibale Lippi fu l'autore di Villa Medici?, in: *Osservatore Romano*, no. 40, Feb. 18, 1943, p. 3; *R. Villedieu*, *Villa Medici*, transl. *M. Bautier de Mongeot*, Rome, 1953, p. 177; and *M. Fossi*, Bartolomeo Ammannati architetto, Florence, 1968, pp. 191-192.

its author, *maestro* Arduino Marsili, served as the superintendent — *ministro* or *soprastante* — of the works at the villa.⁴ Preserved among Ferdinando de' Medici's correspondence in the Archivio Mediceo in the Florentine State Archives, the letter reports to the cardinal's secretary, Pietro Usimbardi, in Florence on the progress of construction at the villa and requests certain materials be ordered for the work there. Marsili begins by saying that the last vaults on the tower, *la toretta*, were done and that within eight days work would begin on the installation of the balustrade. The reference here would appear to be to the new tower constructed on the south end of the building: this tower contains a vaulted spiral staircase matching that of the tower rising from the north apartments and is topped by a balustraded terrace.⁵ Marsili goes on to say that work on the balustrade would continue as long as there were no problems. According to the superintendent, *messer Bart^o Ammannatj* had been unavailable for consultation, and the workers anticipated difficulties in erecting the loggia on the garden facade. Ammannati wanted the loggia built with a barrel vault, *a botte*, but apparently this put too much weight on the supporting wall and columns, and those on the site felt that the vault should be made *a schifo* — literally, in the shape of the hull of a boat (i.e. pointed).⁶ If Ammannati failed to come to Rome, Marsili continued, not only this question but also others that might arise in the more straightforward areas of building the arch in the center of the loggia and lighting the *sala* — presumably the *gran salone* immediately behind the loggia — would be resolved on the spot. Marsili then told Usimbardi that he would have to write to Genoa for tiles for the floors in the villa. The letter ends with the statement that the stones of the loggia were being carved and that the installation of the bases and capitals would begin before Ferdinando returned to Rome.

The information contained in this letter seems to confirm the opinion of Boyer and others that Ammannati was responsible for the initial conception of the changes carried out at the villa under Ferdinando. It specifically links the architect with the design of the south tower and loggia and suggests that he had formulated a plan for the entire renovation of the building, including the construction of a new *appartamento nobile* above the loggia. In his article Boyer noted that the seventeenth-century art historian, Bellori, had attributed the villa to Ammannati in a personal copy of Baglione's *Vite* of 1642 and that Ammannati had come to Rome soon after its purchase by Ferdinando and had made a full report on the villa to Grand Duke Francesco upon his return to Florence in July of the same year.⁷ Boyer also drew attention to two views of the villa painted in the vestibule of a small retreat on the outlying walls of the garden, suggesting that these contained Ammannati's first ideas for the development of the building and its gardens.⁸ To this evidence Pirri, in 1943, added a letter of April 21, 1576 which stated

⁴ Entries of 1576 and 1578 in the Guardaroba Medicea, published by *Andres* (Mitt. pp. 284, note 23), mention Marsili as *ministro della fabbrica del Giardino della Trinità* and as *soprastante alla fabbrica del Giardino della Trinità di S.S. Ill.mo*. Marsili's name also appears in reference to a request for funds by a Maestro Batista, *capomaestro* of the *fabbrica*, in Ammannati's letter of July 15, 1576 about the villa (*Andres*, Mitt., Appendix, p. 301).

⁵ The inventory of the villa drawn up 1598 also uses the word *torrette* to describe the structures housing the two spiral staircases (*Andres*, Diss., II, p. 309, note 798). The balustrade mentioned in the letter may have included not only the section on the terrace of the south tower, but also the double railing running across the attic and the matching one on the old north tower, although the attic balustrade fails to appear in the fresco purportedly recording Ammannati's first scheme for the facade (for which see *Boyer*, p. 115, repr.).

⁶ The „Vocabulario degli Accademici della Crusca“, Venice, 1686, p. 814, records a similar usage of the word *schifo*: „volta di stanza fatta a guisa di schifo a rovescio“.

⁷ *Boyer*, pp. 112-115; *Andres*, Mitt., pp. 283-284.

⁸ *Boyer*, pp. 112-115. These frescoes are by Jacopo Zucchi, the chief painter in Ferdinando's *famiglia* of artists in Rome, and were probably done in 1576-77: Zucchi was consigned on August 23, 1576 two pounds of blue pigments *per dipignere al Giardino* (ASF, Guardaroba Medicea, vol. 97, c. 115 des.). *Andres* has made a careful study of the views in relation to Ammannati's plans for the villa and has identified a third view in the series as being of the villa and its property as they were under Camillo

that Ammannati was in Rome for the purposes of developing the villa, ...*per fabricare la vigna del Sr. Cardinale Monte pulciano*.⁹ And in 1968 Fossi published a notice recording Ammannati's payment of 6 *scudi* to a Batista Fiameri *scultore* for assistance in revising certain drawings for the palace of Cardinal Medici.¹⁰ More recently, Glenn Andres identified among the drawings by Ammannati in the Uffizi, bound with those for the architect's so-called *Città Ideale*, two for the Villa Medici: one is a plan for the upper floor of the villa with the new *appartamento nobile*, showing a corridor along the center of the building connecting the north and south wings; the other is a study for the loggia of the grotto in the garden below the *bosco*.¹¹

The new letter suggests that while Ammannati may have provided the initial ideas for the remodelling of the villa, he had little to do with the actual execution. In fact, after Ammannati left Rome in the summer of 1576, there is no record of him returning to the eternal city until 1585, by which time practically all the major work at the villa was done. It is therefore possible that someone was called in to supervise the work, especially after the purchase of the large Capranica-Della Valle Collection of antique marbles, negotiations for which began as early as October of 1577.¹² Andres has convincingly demonstrated that the decision to incorporate many of the statues and reliefs on the garden facade would have required someone in Rome able to measure the individual pieces and make the necessary adjustments in the position of the windows and other elements of the facade and that this may have involved a Roman architect.¹³ This suggestion helps to explain some of the stylistic discrepancies on the garden facade — the Roman character of the panelling, for example — and attempts by scholars to see in the villa the work of a non-Tuscan architect, i.e. Lippi.

In the early stages of construction there was more interest in following Ammannati's designs. As Marsili's letter reveals, Ammannati may have been absent from Rome but his instructions were detailed enough to allow work to be carried out. And although the builders thought they would have to alter Ammannati's designs for the loggia, they eventually constructed it according to his desire, that is with a simple barrel vault instead of a *schifo*.¹⁴ It is possible that Ammannati, at least during the early years, revised his drawings when problems arose. Yet this task probably became more difficult, and impractical, as Ferdinando's plans for the villa changed and developed and Ammannati lost touch with the project.

Crescenzi, the owner of the villa before Cardinal Ricci bought it in 1565 (*Andres*, Diss., I, pp. 55-67, 241-328 and *passim*). For a study of the iconography of the decorations and the character of the garden retreat see *E. Darragon*, *Le studiolo du Cardinal Ferdinand à la Villa Médicis*, in: *Revue de l'Art*, no. 19, 1973, pp. 62-77.

⁹ *P. Pirri*, *L'architetto Bartolomeo Ammannati e i gesuiti*, in: *Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu*, 12, 1943, p. 40.

¹⁰ *M. Fossi*, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

¹¹ Uff. 3448 A and 3449 A, reproduced in: Bartolomeo Ammannati, *La Città*. Appunti per un trattato, ed. *M. Fossi*, Rome, 1970, pp. 210-213. For the relation of the drawings to the villa, see *Andres*, Diss., I, pp. 438-440, and *Andres*, Mitt., pp. 293-294.

¹² One of the significant discoveries made by *Andres* during his work on the villa was a group of letters, nine in all, written between October 20, 1577 and early 1578, concerning negotiations between Ferdinando and Capranica over the sculpture. These letters indicate that although the formal sale agreement and the movement of the sculptures to the villa took place as late as 1584, it would have been possible to design the facade in its finished form as early as 1578 (*Andres*, Diss., I, pp. 252-253; *Andres*, Mitt., p. 300, note 64).

¹³ *Andres*, Diss., I, p. 451; *Andres*, Mitt., p. 300).

¹⁴ The barrel vaulting of the completed loggia can be seen in the cross-section of the building published by *V. Ballard*, *Villa Médicis à Rome*, Paris, 1847, pl. 15. It is possible that part of the solution to the problem of excessive weight on the wall and columns, supporting the loggia, was found by removing the corridor connecting the north and south apartments. Although present in Ammannati's drawing for the *appartamento nobile* in the Uffizi (3448 A), this feature was eliminated in the final structure. For a discussion of the relationship of the loggia on the garden facade to those in other places in the villa, and their function and meaning, see the article by *C. Mignot*, *Les loggias de la Villa Médicis à Rome*, in: *Revue de l'Art*, no. 19, 1973, pp. 50-61.

The new letter is of interest in one final respect. There are no construction records for the villa — only scattered notices for the consignment of materials to the site from the journals and inventories of the Guardaroba Medicea —, and these latter, although helpful, fail to provide a full account of the sequence of events.¹⁵ In this regard the letter not only establishes a *terminus ante quem* for the completion of the south tower but also indicates when work on the garden facade was beginning. This information places our knowledge of the villa on a more factual basis and gives us an insight into the procedure that was followed in executing Ammannati's plans for the remodelling of the villa.

¹⁵ *Andres* has made effective use of these in his discussion of certain aspects of the villa's construction (e.g. *Andres*, Diss., I, p. 249), and a thorough examination of the account books of the Guardaroba Medicea — especially volumes 97, 99, and 108 — would seem to be a necessary first-step in fully documenting the activities of Ferdinando's *fabbrica* at the villa and elsewhere in Rome.

APPENDIX

Florence, Archivio di Stato, Archivio Mediceo, Filza 5101, cc. 750r and 757v :

Letter of Arduino Marsili in Rome to Pietro Usimbardi in Florence on October 18, 1577.

[c. 757 v] Al Molto Rev.^{do} sig.^r mio oss.^{mo} Il sig.^e Pietro Usimbardi sec.^{rio} dell'Ill.^{mo} et R.^{mo} sig. Car.^{le} de' Medici / Fiorenza

[c. 750 r] Molto Rev.^{do} sig.^e mio oss.^{mo}

Non ho scritto prima a V.S. per non mi essere occorso. Hora m'è parso darle nuova della muraglia acciò V.S. ne possa dare nuova a Sua S.^{tia} Ill.^{ma}. La toretta habiamo fornito l'ultime volte et fra otto giorni cominceremo a mettere su li balaustri et l'anderemo fornendo non ci essendo altro impedimento, non venendo messer Bart^o Ammannatj il quale lasciò che la loggia si facessi a botte. Però per dare manco peso alla muraglia verso Roma et alle colonne ancora di molti g[i]udicherebbono che la si facessi a schifo, secondo quella della sala, et il dare li lumi sarà facile et ancora dell'arco che va sopra le colone, che non vendendo messer Bart.^o tutto si potrà risolvere costà.

Bisognierà fare scrivere a Genova per 30 migliara di quadretti per mattonare le stanze et si potranno fare venire hora per le barche che portono il vino dove cinque migliara, et dove sei, che si spenderà mancho. Le pietre della loggia si lavorano et cominceremo a mettere le base et li capitegli innanzi che Sua S.^{tia} Ill.^{ma} venga. In questo mezzo V.S. vegga se la vuole le provegga cosa alcuna innanzi alla venuta sua. La mi commandi, et con questo fine le bacio le mani. Di Roma il dì 18 di ottobre 1577.

Di V.S. Molto Rev.^{da}
 Servitore Affezionatissimo
 Arduino Marsili

RIASSUNTO

Il presente articolo pubblica una lettera, conservata nell'Archivio di Stato di Firenze, che fa luce sulla paternità della Villa Medici di Roma e, in mancanza di documenti sulla costruzione, fornisce un mezzo per identificare i primi progetti iniziati dal Cardinale Ferdinando de' Medici. Scritta dal maestro Arduino Marsili, soprintendente alla fabbrica della villa e datata 18 Ottobre 1577, poco meno di due anni dopo l'acquisto della proprietà dalla famiglia Ricci, la lettera informa il segretario del Cardinale, Pietro Usimbardi, che la *torretta* — identificabile con la nuova torre innalzata al lato sud della costruzione — era quasi terminata e che la volta a botte proposta dall'Ammannati per la loggia, della quale si stava iniziando i lavori, doveva essere forse modificata per alleggerire il peso eccessivo gravante sui muri di sostegno e sulle colonne. L'informazione contenuta in questa lettera prova che il responsabile delle più importanti modifiche apportate alla villa fu l'Ammannati e non Annibale Lippi o qualche altro architetto, e che l'esecuzione del progetto era molto avanzata già nel 1577.