



Fritz Barth
Die Villa Lante in Bagnaia

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The Villa Lante in Bagnaia near Viterbo is outstanding among 16th-century Italian gardens. It is not particularly large, but it is the undisputed highlight of this epoch, the heyday of Italian horticulture, not just because it is outstandingly well maintained, but also because of its unique formal qualities and its extremely complex iconographic programme.

The present monograph attempts to establish what triggers the intense sense of beauty with which visitors to the gardens are confronted. It is immediately clear that it is essential to analyse the form of the garden – here the extremely precise treatment of central perspective as a device is of considerable interest – but close attention has also to be paid to the significance of the individual elements and the connections between them. This examination brings an elaborate accumulation of various sign systems to light, which seem to have the astonishing characteristic of not being entirely reconcilable, indeed they appear to build in contradictions as a basic constant. From this develops a panorama of the late 16th century, presenting the tangled pathways of perception of the gardens in all their complex relations, from the various late Renaissance garden types, via philosophy, the response to antiquity, perception of nature, perspective, harmony, literature, theatre and religion, and on to models of time and the forms it takes. Against this background the garden of the Villa Lante, which belonged to the scholarly cardinal and inquisitor Francesco Gambara, proves to be a difficult – and perhaps not entirely successful – balancing act between Renaissance traditions and the thrust of the Counter-Reformation, but showing at the same time, as a kind of »apotheosis of the artwork«, a surprising affinity with the present day.

Fritz Barth studied architecture at Stuttgart University. He runs an architectural practice in Fellbach and has been concerned with architectural theory and history for many years, especially with the way in which architecture becomes tied up with art and literature.

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