



## Italian Gardens By Georgina Masson

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**New Edition**

I have a copy of the original; book by Georgina Masson (actual name Marion Johnson) which was invaluable in my research into Renaissance and Edwardian gardens\*: it was in this that I discovered that the now non-existent house at Foot's Cray, set in a garden designed by Thomas Mawson, was copy of the Rotunda in Vicenza. (It was also her guide book to Rome that accompanied me when I visited that city)

This book is a completely revised new edition of the 1961 text with its original photographs, kept until now in the archives of the American Academy in Rome, "including many images never before published". So ran the press release. I therefore got out both books to compare.

The most obvious difference between the two books is caused by the development of printing and publishing since 1961. Modern techniques allow the pictures to be alongside the text, whereas in the original book they are grouped together as plates in sections. The reprint is on glossy paper and has colour photographs whereas in the 1961 original there is no colour. The paper of the 1961 book, however, is thick, and of a much more interesting character - you can *feel* the pages as well as read them or look at them. This together with its binding gives it the feel of a much older book. (It is also one-inch wider!) . There are a few drawings, e.g. a plan of a an Ancient Roman villa, and parterres. but has few plans of the gardens themselves. The publishers won the argument with Masson that to understand the garden properly there should be plans - as indeed there were in many of the books on Italian Gardens of the early 20th century: *The Art of Italian Garden Design* by Inigo Triggs is outstanding in this respect. The reprint gives a section of plans at the end - so, like the original, you have to keep your finger in the reading place while you turn to the plans. If the photographs could all be inserted in the text why not the plans? Or is it that the plans are editorial additions to the book while the extra photographs added are all by the author? Hmm.

The introduction by Margherita Azzi Visentini ( Professor of History of Architecture and History of Gardens and Landscape at the Politecnico of Milan and Professor at the Center for landscape

Studies at Dumbarton Oaks, Washington D.C) is a useful summary of the books written about Italian Gardens up to the time of Masson's book. However, there were points in it that made me smile (ruefully). She writes that, in the 1960s, Masson's book was thought not scientific enough (it has no footnotes) for the academic establishment of the time - despite the fact that Masson wrote about and photographed details that had not previously been reported. (Masson was also one of the first to join Ancient Roman gardens to the Renaissance gardens) But she herself cannot resist pointing out that Masson, one the speakers at a conference organised by David Coffin in 1971, was "the only one who *did not have an academic title. Nevertheless* she had already gained international acclaim as a scholar for all intents and purposes" (my italics). Does this betray a little academic snobbishness?..., Despite that Ms Visentini rallies and welcomes the edition of the book as "it will allow everyone to appreciate the extraordinary insights that other scholars would go on to develop." Good.

Georgina Masson did indeed have extraordinary insights - and a more readable style than that of the introduction. For example - the opening phrase: "It was no mere chance that a crystal spring chattering in the shade of an oak tree..." immediately brings the reader into a garden. And so it goes on. In a book as magical as this, I could quote endlessly. There are historical paragraphs to give the context of the garden " the Duchy of Lucca, which was the only Tuscan State to preserve its autonomy right up to the Unification of Italy, had a garden tradition at least as old as (that) of the capital"; "The sources from which Bramante drew his inspiration (for the Cortile di Belvedere) were, of course, classical ruins"

She combines historical knowledge of the gardens with her own observations "the garden of Viganello provides definite evidence of the type of parterre laid out in Italian gardens at the beginning of the seventeenth century....But it should be noted that for all their extent and complicated design, they are still purely geometrical and show no signs of the curls and arabesques .... which became popular in Italy later in the seventeenth century"

Her photographs show an eye that is artistic, but very telling in the angle she chooses for the image - to show the designs as if they were plans, or a detail which is so telling of its period.

I am so glad to have this book - thank you Garden Art Press - and hope that many people will read it. But I still think I will go back to the 1961 version simply for the feel of it...

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\* see Bella's own book ['Gardens of Divine Imitation'](#) on this website and for sale