

Natural artificio – artificiosa natura: Grottoes of the Early Modern Age in Italy

The Photo Library of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz is presenting in its online exhibition significant examples of Genoese and Florentine grottoes and in this way providing ongoing virtual access to these fragile constructions.

As part of the revival of antiquity, a new building type in the form of artificially created grottoes was developed in Italy around 1500. The fashion for grottoes would rapidly spread throughout Europe and become a salient aspect of villa culture.

Inspired by archaeological finds and the transmission of the texts of ancient authors, important artistic centres for this revived genre of garden architecture especially came to be formed in Rome, Florence and Genoa. The grottoes erected there were intended to resemble natural caverns, but were decorated with a wealth of artificial materials, including stuccoes, paintings, mosaics, statues, fountains and automata.

The choice of decorative materials played a pre-eminent role in the creation of grottoes, in which nature was imitated by using a combination of natural phenomena and especially ornamental materials and forms. The aim was not only to emulate, but to surpass the natural creations of a cavern in the rock with new compositions and an extraordinary profusion of forms. In this dialectical relation between “naturale artificio” and “artificiosa natura”, between the artificially and naturally created form, the ancient *topos* of the conflict between art and nature was also revived. By recreating in this way the richness of nature – in a similar way as in *Wunderkammer* or cabinets of curiosities – grottoes gave the observer an insight into the creative power of the bowels of the earth.

In addition, grottoes, with their precious, often exotic decorative materials and rich décor of statuary, came to represent status symbols, in which the revival of the world of antiquity and the growing interest in the natural sciences were combined.

Comprising 75 photographs in all, the online exhibition can only offer a selection of the extensive material covering Genoese and Florentine grottoes. The photos were taken during two photographic campaigns conducted by the Photo Library, the first in Florence in 2005, and the second in Genoa in 2006. The exhibition focuses on the essential aspects, such as the materials used, and the myths represented, and also provides comprehensive photographic coverage of a few particular grottoes.

The Genoese grottoes presented in the exhibition (all created between 1540 and 1650) are often distinguished by their extraordinarily rich polychromy in the form of enamelled majolica pebbles and large masses of corals. They include the *Fonte Doria* erected by the Genoese architect Galeazzo Alessi in 1538/49. As the earliest known Renaissance grotto



it was, with its octagonal inner chamber and lavish decorative system, to become a prototype of its kind.

The photographic campaign conducted in 2005, one of the first digital campaigns ever conducted by the Kunsthistorisches Institut, focused, instead, on a later Florentine grotto: the one in the garden of the Villa Bandini to the south of Florence. Erected in 1746, it was commissioned by the marchese Antonio Niccolini and decorated by the Florentine sculptor Giuseppe Giovannozzi. The restoration of this grotto, completed in 2000, not only contributed to its conservation, but also recovered its original polychromy.

Due to their use of the most various natural and artificial materials – shells, corals, crystals, limestone incrustations, faience fragments and painted terracotta –, built-in technical features and jeux d'eau, and due to the fact that they are in part open to the elements, grottoes are extraordinarily fragile constructions. The rapid deterioration to which they are prone makes their photographic documentation all the more valuable: through photographic campaigns, these vulnerable works of art are preserved – at least in visual form. At the same time digital photography enables us to study in detail the richness and beauty of the often bizarre materials used in their decoration.

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Head of the Photo Library: Costanza Caraffa

Concept: Stephanie Hanke

Coordination: Almut Goldhahn

Opened on 22 February 2010, the online exhibition can be accessed on the website

<http://expo.khi.fi.it>

The next online exhibition will be opened on 15 June 2010 and dedicated to the Palazzo Grifoni Budini Gattei – the new seat of the Photo Library of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz since January 2010.

Further info:

Astrid Müller

Public Relations & Communications

Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut

Via Giuseppe Giusti 44, 50121 Firenze

Tel.: +39 055 24911-1, Fax: +39 055 244394

khi-presse@khi.fi.it

www.khi.fi.it/

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Photographic Material

Galeazzo Alessi, Fonte Doria in Genoa (1548/49), dome, detail with sea-horses of Neptune;
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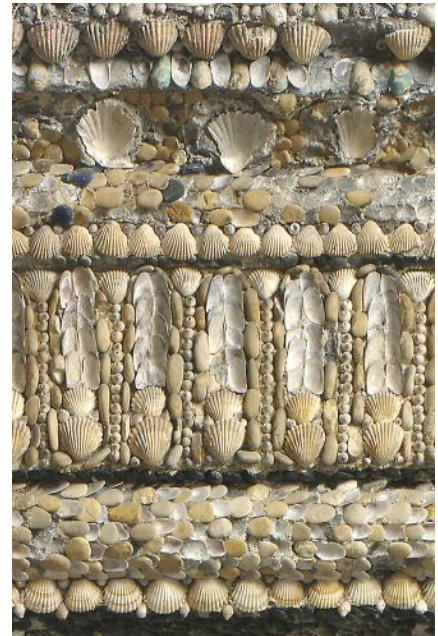
Giuseppe Giovannozzi, Grotto of the Villa Bandini in Florence (1746), south wall, satyr with dragon;
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Giuseppe Giovannozzi, Grotto of the Villa Bandini in Florence (1746), interior, detail of a dragon;
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Galeazzo Alessi, Fonte Doria in Genoa (1548/49), interior, detail of shell-encrusted beam;
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Genoa, Grotta Pallavicino (early 1560s), main chamber;
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Genoa, Grotta Pallavicino (early 1560s), façade of the portico;
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