



*The garden in the late 1930s*



### Directions to Villa La Pietra

Bus 25 from Santa Maria Novella Station runs via Piazza San Marco to Via Bolognese. The closest stop is "La Pietra 1", just beyond the gate of the Villa. On foot, there is a scenic road called Via di Montetughi that passes by the Stibbert Museum and arrives directly at the Villa gate. If arriving by car, parking is available inside the gate. Please ring for admittance.

### Open Week

Free guided tours of the Acton Collection and Garden are offered to the public, by appointment, during the third week of April and the third week of October. Booking starts one month before each Open Week.

For further information  
and visiting policies please  
check the web site  
[www.nyu/global/lapietra/opening.html](http://www.nyu/global/lapietra/opening.html)



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## Villa La Pietra

"For me beauty is the vital principle pervading  
the universe- glistening in stars,  
glowing in flowers, moving with clouds,  
flowing with water,  
permeating nature and mankind.

By contemplating the myriad manifestations  
of this vital principle we expand into  
something greater than we were born.  
Art is the mirror that reflects these expansions,  
sometimes for a moment, sometimes for perpetuity."

Harold Acton, *Memoirs of an Aesthete*, 1948.

**The Acton Collection and the Garden**





## The History

The name La Pietra derives from a stone pillar indicating one Roman mile along Via Bolognese from the Florence city gate of San Gallo. For many centuries, Villa La Pietra was the home of prominent Florentine families: the Macinghi in the 14th century; the Sasseti from 1460-1545; the Capponi from 1545-1876; and the Incontri until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was in 1903 that the Anglo-American Acton family took up residence, joining a thriving community of culturally passionate expatriates, and enriching the house with their own eclectic collection. The structure of Villa La Pietra still manifests its Renaissance origins. The floor plan is built around a once-open courtyard where the

## The Collection

The Acton collection comprises more than 3,500 objects ranging in date from the Etruscan period to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There is a concentration on Italian Gothic and Renaissance art, though styles from later centuries and the Far East are also represented. A remarkable library of 10,000 volumes with many first editions, an archive holding thousands of family letters, and an important series of historical photographs are also part of the collection. The key to appreciating the Acton legacy is to recognize how a distinctive atmosphere was created by the arrangement of the collection in their home. Themes and motifs echo and interplay with each other. For example, the Four Seasons and other symbols of nature are visible in many places. Another recurring motif is the Medici coat of arms, appearing on tapestries, olive oil jars, and majolica. The Actons enjoyed appropriating this symbol and thereby linking themselves to the greatest age of Florentine cultural patronage. At different times of the day a new effect is achieved as slanting sunbeams pass across a carved relief or are

## The Garden

The garden of La Pietra is one of the most celebrated in Italy. As a Renaissance revival garden, it reflects the tastes of the large Anglo-American community that lived in Florence at the turn of the nineteenth century. Laid out by Arthur Acton beginning in 1908, it drew its inspiration from the 16<sup>th</sup>-century gardens of Florence such as the Boboli Gardens and the garden of Villa di Castello. On the east side of the house the main garden falls away in a series of geometric enclosed 'rooms' with fountains and low box edging. Vantage points along the main axes of the garden allow views through arches of foliage or stonework, always carefully designed to frame a sculpture or a vista or to invite further exploration. One of the most famous features of the garden is the Teatrino, a green theatre where a grass stage is enclosed by topiary side wings and footlights. It is animated with some of the most charming sculptures of the garden: lively figures by Francesco Bonazza, which, as Harold pointed out, look as though they stepped out of one of Goldoni's comedies.

## The Restoration

The structural restoration of the Villa was begun in 1998 and completed in 2002. It included comprehensive repairs from the skylights to the cellars. Renovations have also brought the electrical, plumbing, climate-control, and security systems up to date. Such intensive work in a historical structure was a challenging proposition. In general, the modifications are designed to be as unobtrusive as possible so as not to detract from the atmosphere of what has always been a private family home. During the restoration work, the art collection was



main axis extends through the house into the gardens. Fanciful frescoes of ruins, birds, and landscapes from the Capponi era and Baroque stucco decorations contrast with the more austere grey and white vaulted rooms typical of Florentine villas. In 1881 the courtyard was changed into an enclosed rotunda with a grand, sweeping staircase. When Arthur Acton and his wife Hortense Mitchell settled in Villa La Pietra, they and their two children, Harold and William, became immersed in a society of writers, historians, artists, and art collectors. As Harold Acton wrote in his *Memoirs*, "true culture is universal" and this idea is something they surely experienced on a daily basis in this remarkable house. To perpetuate their legacy, the Actons decided to leave La Pietra to a university with the expertise and vision to care for and benefit from their estate. This generous gift, including five villas and 57 acres, was granted to New York University upon the death of Sir Harold Acton in 1994, ensuring that the intellectual, cultural, and artistic life of Villa La Pietra would be shared with future generations of students, scholars, and the wider international community.



caught in a glass paperweight. Fine art exists side by side with household objects, books, textiles, furniture, souvenirs, shells, and coral. Though there is a clear emphasis on collecting Tuscan works, many objects come from around Venice, Rome, and Naples. Additionally, silk upholstery, carpets, and even headdresses were brought from China by Harold Acton. Though the Actons acquired a few paintings by famous masters such as the *Holy Family* by Giorgio Vasari and - the *Madonna and Child* by Bernardo Daddi, - in general, they were more interested in color, form, material, style, and subject matter. Villa La Pietra survives as a splendid example in the history of art collecting, for not only is the collection displayed intact in the setting of the Acton family home, but the historical styles present in the Villa itself echo and enhance the artworks.



The walled kitchen garden or Pomario is the oldest part of the garden, and here in winter the Limonaia houses over a hundred lemon and orange trees in terracotta pots. Along the rocaille-decorated walls, beds of violets, irises, and yellow roses bloom. Typical English elements introduced by the Actons are the yew topiary including urns and peacocks. In 1999 New York University began a ten-year project to restore all the gardens and agricultural land that make up the La Pietra estate. The restoration work aims to recreate the garden as it was at its best in the 1930s. Fortunately, the layout of the garden has remained largely unaltered throughout the vicissitudes of the 20th century. During the restoration, where possible original plantings have been saved and the stone work has been repaired only in places where it was unsafe. The uneven pebble mosaics, the mossy fountains, and mature tree trunks show the garden's age while the rejuvenated hedges and neatly clipped topiary breathe fresh life into the garden's soul.



documented, packed, stored, and then afterwards redisplayed as it was when Sir Harold Acton died in 1994. An effort has been made not to overtly change the presentation of the collection, which meant finding a balance between the house as a former home and its function as a house museum. The approach to conservation treatment of individual artworks emphasizes *preservation* rather than *restoration*. Works of art in danger of deteriorating, in particular polychrome wooden sculptures and tapestries, have been stabilized by local conservators working in partnership with NYU's Conservation Center of the Institute of Fine Arts. A team of textile conservators continues to work in a studio on site supported by a grant from the *Ente Cassa di Risparmio di Firenze*. All projects are carried out under the general supervision of the *Soprintendenza per i Beni Architettonici ed il Paesaggio e per il Patrimonio Storico Artistico, e Demoetnoantropologico per le Province di Firenze, Pistoia e Prato*, as the collection and the Villa have been officially listed as cultural heritage protected by the Italian government.