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## Le Carnet de France: La Villa Médicis

By Martine Dulles

*Le Carnet de France* is taking you outside of the "Hexagon" (as France is so often called due to its geographic shape) to present another French heritage treasure: the Villa Medici (*La Villa Médicis*), which houses the *Académie de France à Rome* (the French Academy in Rome). Today, it is located on one of the seven hills of Rome, the Pincio Hill from which you can admire a magnificent view of Rome and the Vatican City.

The history of the French Academy in Rome goes back to 1666, when King Louis XIV (*le Roi-Soleil*, the Sun-King) made major improvements and installed himself in the Louvre and then built the Palace of Versailles. He decided to create the "Grand Prix de Rome" (the First Prize of Rome), which was given to the best sculptors, selected by the king himself. These artists were sent to Rome for five years where they learned how to copy antique and Renaissance sculptures. They would then come back to France, and their work would be used to decorate the king's French palaces.

At the beginning, the French Academy was located in other parts of Rome, but in 1803, after the French Revolution, Napoléon moved it to its present location. Earlier, in 1540, Car-

dinal Giovanni Ricci de Montepulciano built a villa on this Pincio Hill. In 1576, Cardinal Ferdinando Ier de' Medici, who was born in Florence in 1549 and who later moved to Rome, purchased the Villa and gave it his family name.

The cardinal, like other very wealthy dignitaries during the Renaissance period, was an avid collector of antique art. He wanted to show his collection to his friends, and today one can still admire some of his magnificent sculptures, marble columns and bas-relief (low relief sculpture) on the garden façade of the Villa (see picture). They depict scenes from antique myths and texts that were of great interest then.

The large garden is also filled with sculptures, including an Egyptian obelisk (the only obelisk displayed in a European private garden). The cardinal had another passion: the study of botany. He collected live animals, birds and exotic plants from the rest of the world, unknown in Italy at the time. (Apparently, he imported a turkey from the New World.) He had a small pavilion built in the garden, where he kept sculptures and books and where he studied. Jacopo Zucchi, a Florentine painter (1541-1590), painted the ceiling as a pergola where one can see all the birds that flew in

the garden. Jacopo Zucchi also painted the ceilings of the cardinal's apartment in the main building.

Sculptors were the first French artists to study at the Academy in Rome, but they were then followed by architects, painters, poets, writers, musicians, filmmakers and restorers. The original five-year study term became four years and later two years. The artists were not required to "copy" anymore but to create their own works of art. More than 2,000 "pensioners," as they are called as they are granted a full pension, have had the chance to reside and study at the Academy. The artists do not have to be French nationals anymore, but they do need to be fluent in the French language.

Every year, the Academy in Rome receives an average of 600 applications but only 12 to 16 are accepted!

Many "pensioners" have become very well known. Among famous painters: Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732-1806), Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780-1867), and Hubert Robert (1733-1808), whose engravings of Italian ruins are now very appreciated. Among the musicians, we know Hector Berlioz (1803-1869), Claude Debussy (1862-1918) and Georges Bizet (1838-1875) (who wrote the very popular opera *Carmen*),



PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

### The majestic facade of the Villa Medici.

were in attendance. Madame Lili Boulanger (1893-1918), a French composer, was the first woman accepted at the Academy in 1913. She was also the first woman winner of the "Prix de Rome" composition prize.

The architect, Charles Garnier, who designed the opera house in Paris, known as the Opéra Garnier, as well as the opera house in Monte Carlo, was a pensioner in 1849.

In 1961, André Malraux, state minister of cultural affairs during the presidency of Général de Gaulle, appointed the famous Polish Prince Balthazar Klossowski de Rola, the painter also known as Balthus, as the director of the Academy, where he stayed until 1977. Balthus undertook many reforms. The pensioners' stay became almost one

year, from September to July. In 1968, the "Grand Prix de Rome" was abolished. The Villa underwent many decorative changes, and the Villa was opened to the public, which could finally discover the beauty of the site.

It became a cultural center, offering concerts and lectures. Each year, at the end of their term, the pensioners exhibit their works.

"*La Villa est une ambassade de la culture française et, surtout, un lieu de création contemporaine.*" (The Villa is an embassy for French culture and, above all, a space for contemporary creation) as the current director since 2020, Sam Stourdzé (himself a pensioner at the Villa in 2007-2008), mentioned in an interview for a French magazine recently. Mr. Stourdzé invited

a very well-known Italian designer to create new furniture for the Villa that would blend with the existing furniture.

Today, you can even stay one or two nights in this magnificent Villa during your next visit to Rome, but you need to request a reservation at least two months in advance — contact: [standard@villamedici.it](mailto:standard@villamedici.it). Short of that, a guided tour in English is well worth the visit.

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