

*Great
Gardens
of Italy*

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Tuscany

La Foce is in the Val d'Orcia, sixty miles south of Siena, a hundred miles north of Rome, a countryside that is harsh, wide open and unyielding. This is where Iris Cutting and her new husband the Marchese Antonio Origo decided to move to in 1924 when they got married. It was a radical, unusual decision for two well-off aristocratic young people. There was no grand house, just an inn that they converted and a large farm with 3,500 acres of impoverished land and scores of equally poor tenants.

But Iris Origo had grown up in Florence in the centre of the expatriate community that was making gardens such as I Tatti, La Pietra, Gamberaia and her mother's garden at Villa Medici in Fiesole. Cecil Pinsent's design partner, Geoffrey Scott, married Iris's mother, Lady Sybil Cutting, and Pinsent was hired to work on the garden of Villa Medici. So, maintaining the almost incestuous closed shop, Iris hired Pinsent to work on her new garden at La Foce. But it was a scheme that evolved over decades. One reason for this was that, initially at least, most of the couple's money was being spent on the land. Mussolini's new Fascist government – which came into power a couple of years before the Origos bought La Foce, was by and large enthusiastically supported by the aristocracy and the expatriate community – did a great deal to rejuvenate the countryside, pumping in money and enabling large holdings like La Foce and Ninfa to become viable.

I visited at the end of July when the landscape was lying bleached and shimmering after harvest. I arrived in the middle of their annual music festival and the household was starting to clear up after a concert held the previous evening. A large courtyard with a low stage at one end was filled with pink pelargoniums. Passing into a small courtyard with chunky box hedges and immaculately clipped bay in pots, I caught a glimpse of a vaulted, cellar-like kitchen busy with people. It is a scene from the inn that La Foce used to be.

A narrow, sloping path – almost coping stones – hugged a bay hedge skirts lemons in terracotta pots. I am struck by the minute attention to strong,

simple detail. The stone strip around the mown grass, the low box hedge tight to the wall, the rather tall plinths that the pots stand on. I am met by a tall, elegant woman with a strong, handsome face. This is Benedetta Origo, Iris's daughter and owner of La Foce. She was born in Rome but came here as a tiny baby in 1942 with her parents, so has known the house and garden for seventy years. Pinsent regularly visited La Foce until his death in 1963, so Benedetta remembers him well. "He was a tall man, always seemed to be wearing tweed and smoking a cigar. He had a lovely dry wit." I asked if the garden evolved or if Pinsent had a masterplan from the outset. "You must remember that when my parents came here they had no money for a garden. For five years they just concentrated on the farm and in fact established fifty farms in fifteen years, each based around the central fattoria of La Foce under the old mezzadria system." This was the centuries-old relationship between landlord and tenant whereby the tenant gave half the produce to the landlord and in return had use of the land, buildings and equipment. In the 1930s the Fascist government turned many of these farms over to the tenants and after the Second World War it all but died. But in the 1920s and '30s it meant that a benevolent landlord like Antonio Origo could profoundly improve the lives of his tenants, and he did. But it devoured his fortune and the impoverished land gave up very little in return. They were seriously strapped for cash and Benedetta tells an obviously well-rehearsed story of the moment this changed. "My parents would walk on the hillside before dinner each evening to discuss the day's work. One day my mother wanted an umbrella but my father said they could not afford it. An umbrella for her meant going without a pair of oxen on the farm. They were in the middle of this discussion when a telegram arrived. It was from America, telling my mother that she had inherited a huge fortune from a distant relative. It transformed their lives."

The most immediate transformation was that Pinsent was hired to build a garden. "Not just the garden," Benedetta stresses. "He designed all the structure, the urns, paths, steps, vases and all

the buildings. He did everything.” But there was no rush. It took fifteen years for the garden to be completed and Pinsent watched over every detail throughout that period. Every stone – including every paving slab – was cut to fit. Pinsent loved the travertine stone and used it throughout in paving, steps, urns and balustrades which adds another level of unity and harmony. Every detail, that is, other than most of the planting, which many a British gardener would regard as the only detail that matters. But La Foce shows that the structure of a garden, be it from soft or hard landscaping, can make and carry it to the extent that much of the planting becomes mere infill that can be adapted and changed without altering its essence.

Certainly the central section of the garden based around the main path from the house, buffered by square-section box hedges, is masterly. It makes distinct compartments but the divisions are kept broad and low so the whole thing can be seen and the regularly spaced terracotta pots with citrus stand tall. This makes a space that falls between a parterre and the idea of garden rooms. The result feels very modern and yet has its roots sunk deep into garden history. The centre of each is a small grassy lawn and unlike a parterre they are all interlinked by entrances and paths so that the effect is a cumulative one of grass and hedges making a massively solid yet open space for people to use. That is one of the overriding impressions of La Foce. Despite its grandeur and monumental qualities, it is a private garden that the family who made it use every day. The swimming pool resonates to the sound of grandchildren playing and the much-scuffed goalmouth of a football net is clearly as important as Pinsent’s work. It is a home.

The garden is built on an awkward site, with the ground tilting and falling away steeply in two directions. Pinsent got round this by having three main terraces that are almost lost through the use of the hedges which start low on one level but drop down on the other side in front of a retaining stone wall on the next level. It is a trick he uses at I Tatti and although simple enough has the smack of genius because the resulting hedges – which are essentially two quite separate ones joined at the top

are exceptionally wide and pleasing and their perfectly level top fools the eye into making the ground seem much flatter than it is – despite the steps rising and falling in almost every direction.

A steep flight of steps rises to a long wisteria tunnel that goes from the house for hundreds of yards, following the contours of the hillside before become a vine tunnel with a long billowing berm of lavender following at its feet all the way along. As it extends out the view goes from the garden to the countryside, including the famous zigzag road lined with cypresses running through fields that is so often used as an icon of Tuscan landscape. There is a widely disseminated story that it was created by Pinsent to enhance the view from the garden, but Benedetta scotches that dismissively. It was, she said, a farm track put in by her father as one of his many agricultural improvements, which makes it none the less handsome. The long terrace behind the wisteria walk used to be the rose garden but the roses are being gradually replaced by herbs and herbaceous plants. This gives it a curiously English feel and, to an Englishman visiting, curiously unsatisfactory. There really seems to be no need. A very steep flight of steps flanked by cypresses with terraces flaring off to each side leads to a statue and seat. This is where Iris Origo’s telegram came. I close my eyes and wish hard.

The garden has one last section that was made after the rest was completed. This is a large cypress-lined triangle that you look down on, descending to it via a pair of matching steps with a nymphaeum below. It is the last thing that Pinsent did just before the war, box hedges arrowing in to a pond and a seat at the sharp end. It is cleverly done, playing with perspective and creating good lines with the chamfered hedges, but it is too brutal and reminiscent of fascist insignia to be enjoyed. The hedges are like troops on parade or a rally. It is grand and magnificent but unlike the rest of the garden it feels dated and without any of its playfulness or charm. It is not Pinsent’s finest hour.

But La Foce, seen as a whole, is truly fine and in particular its heart, the lemon garden, with its subtle but superb simple handling of levels, is a beautiful inspiration.



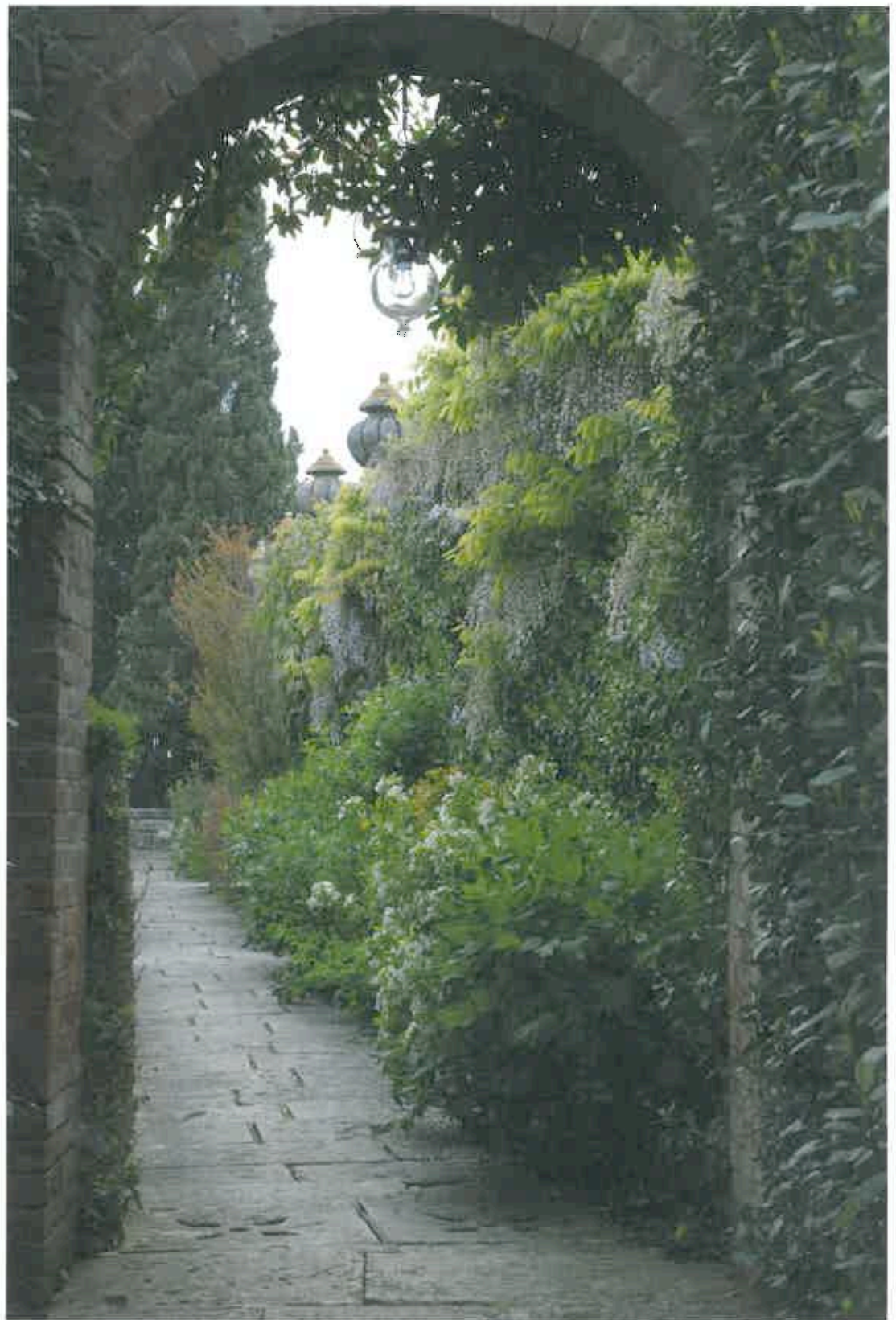
Above: The Lower Garden was the last section to be made, begun by Cecil Minson in 1989. The perspective cleverly reassembles the triangular space with the box hedge narrowing in to the pond at the end. It is a simple space – just green box and cypress hedges and grass – but stunning.

Opposite: La Focca made use of windward sites, sloping in two directions. Placed markers first by direct use of barrows, using the bank he developed at F'icut of planting hedges in front of the remaining walls as well as on top of them, with the front row growing up and being clipped to make one very broad hedge

so that the two sides already flanked both sides of hedges everywhere. The pergola supporting vitis and a vine was added in 1996 and used for hundreds of vines along the hedges, underplanted with a bunch-like lavender hedge.







Opposite top: The central section of the garden, divided into irregular sections by hedges taller than they are high, contains flowers in less than a dozen pots. Everything in the garden was designed by Cecil Pinnet from the planting to the ornamental urns and the boxes the pots stand upon.

Opposite bottom: There is a much-mentioned myth that this Ionic cypress-lined road was made by Pinnet just as a decorative eye-catcher from the garden. In fact it was made as a purely functional access track by the Origo as part of their improvements in the 1980s.

Above: Although it is set in a dramatic Tuscan landscape there is a touch at La Foce that reflects the Englishness of Cecil Pinnet and, rather more remotely, of his Origo. This doorway leading to the lemon garden could be taken in the garden of any number of British stately homes.