An Englishman’s masterpiece

Writer Iris Origo longed for a verdant, pretty garden at La Fosca in arid, windswept southern Tuscany. English landscape architect Cecil Pinsent made it a reality.

WORDS ANNA PAVORD PHOTOGRAPHY ALEX RAMSAY AT ALAMY AND SIETSE DE VRIES
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A 'locale' is the Italian garden made famous by the writer, Iris Origo, who came here as a young bride in 1928. It sits, not in the rich, land-part of Tuscany, but in the much harsher country called the Crete Senesi, south of Siena. It was, as she wrote, 'a land without mercy and without shade'.

In her classic memoir, *Images and Shadows*, Iris describes how she looked out over the dry, windy landscape and longed for 'green English fields and big trees — and most of all, for a pretty house and garden to come home to in the evening'. The man who made that dream come true was the English landscape architect Cecil Pinsent.

Iris had grown up with her Anglo-Irish mother at the Villa Medici in Florence. When she got engaged to Antonio Origo, an Italian marquis, her grandmother bought them the 3,500 acres of the La Foce estate, set on the high, and windswept land between the river Ombrone and the Tiber near Montepulciano.

Pinsent had worked for several of the English and American expatriates in Florence, but La Foce was his masterpiece. He designed the house, originally no more than an inn, as well as the garden, and in the years he worked there (1924-1939) La Foce acquired a powerful spirit of place, with the garden gathering round the house like a protecting cloak.

Well on the garden only became possible when a pipe was laid to bring water from an abundant spring six miles away and it continued in phases until war broke out in 1939. Cleverly, Pinsent civilised the 'alien, inhuman' landscape by framing it in particular viewpoints from the garden. The most famous is the zig-zag road that he laid out as a vista from the 'wild' garden beyond.

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Cecil Pinsent (1884-1963) garden designer

Cecil Pinsent had the good fortune to find a powerful patron while in his early twenties. American art historian Bernard Berenson asked him to make a garden at Villa I Tatti near Florence (I Tatti harvard.edu). Berenson was one of the many expatriates who adopted Italy as their cultural home.

The garden at I Tatti was Pinsent’s first attempt to recreate a garden in the early Renaissance style. His work there, which was on an incredibly steep site, enabled him to explore the monumental, pared-down formality that later became his trademark.

The Bernoullis recommended Pinsent to Iris Ding’s mother, Lady Sybil Cutting, who had arrived in Florence in 1930 as a young widow. Experiencing Italy with Medici connections and Lady Sybil had one of the greats – Villa Medici itself. When Lady Sybil moved in, the top terrace was divided into three grass rectangles, punctuated with lemon trees and two immense paulownias. To the west of the house Pinsent made a grotto, a large terrace with a simple geometric layout, with a lower-edged bed around an elegant oval fountain.

During 15 years in Florence, Pinsent worked on eight major gardens, including Villa Le Balze in Fiesole, where he started work in 1933. He created both house and garden from scratch, working on a site that was even steeper and narrower than the garden at I Tatti. It is enchanting. In the Orange Garden, he used the traditional technique of stucco (a kind of mosaic) to make a grotto, four medallions on the façade.

At the Villa Cipponi, Pinsent modernised the villa that had previously belonged to Lady Scott of Acrum, grandmother of the late Queen Mother. He got involved in the early 1930s and added a swimming pool screened by cypresses that had elegant dolphins spouting water at either end.
the house. Lined with cypresses, this has now become one of the most photographed views in Tuscany, a picture you'll find on almost every postcard stand in Italy.

The formal garden at La Foce, now home to Iris di Lusignano Beccegatti, lies in a series of enclosures on the south side of the house accessed by a stone ramp, made from the beautiful travertine stone that is a specialty around Siena. Next to the house is the fountain garden where a high wall protects an elegant dolphin splashing in a boat-shaped bowl.

Tall pillars topped with vases (designed, as is the fountain, by Pisani) mark the entrance to the Lemon Garden. This was in place by 1933, with huge lemon trees in terracotta pots set on stone plinths. Roses, honeysuckle and Trachelospermum jasminoides animate the retaining walls. It is, as Benedetta says, a "high maintenance garden, but also a garden to live in, a place to enjoy, as my mother enjoyed it."

One of the great moments at La Foce is the flowering of the wisteria on the curving 180m-long pergola that follows the contours of the hill, providing a vital spine to the design of the garden. From here you get dramatic views out over the landscape to Monte Amiata and beyond. The pergola, in place by 1938, is pierced by a stone staircase, leading to a lookout at the top of the hill.

Gradually the formal nature of the design with stone-edged flower beds alongside the pergola, drifts into a wilder woodland garden where the hillside is planted with Judas trees, flowering quinces, fuchsia, pomegranates, shrub roses, and herbs such as lavender, thyme and rosemary. The path leads eventually to a small peaceful cemetery where the Orlòs buried their only son, Gianni, who died of meningitis when he was just seven years old.

Pisani's final gift to La Foce was the wedge-shaped Magnolia Garden in 1939 - now without its magnolias and known as
Once again, and rather brilliantly, Pinsent was able to adapt his design to the lie of the land, following the contours of a difficult site.

USEFUL INFORMATION
La Foce, 53042 Chianciano Terme, Italy
Tel +39 (0)578 69001
Email info@lafoce.com
Website lafoce.com
Open Wednesday afternoons and every weekend from April to the beginning of November. There are guided tours and admission is €6. A music festival is held at La Foce every July (http://lafoce.org).

RECOMMENDED READING
• Images and Shadows by Iris Origo
A memoir of the writer’s time at La Foce
• War in Vol d’Orcia by Iris Origo
A diary of the German occupation 1943-44
• La Foce: A Garden and Landscape in Tuscany by Laurie Oh and Benedetta Origo
A tribute by Iris Origo’s daughter Benedetta.