THE RENAISSANCE BELVEDERE
IN FLORENTINE VILLAS AND PALACES

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During the Dugento and Trecento in Italy there emerged a development in the Arts which is referred to today as the Proto-Renaissance. In literature, this meant an interest in Roman antiquity as reflected in the writings of Petrarch, who, as Thorndike remarked, conceived of the new era as "a purification of Latin diction and grammar, a revival of Greek, and a return from medieval compilers, commentators, and originators to the old classical texts." In sculpture, it meant a revival of Roman classical form as evidenced in the work of Nicola Pisano and Arnolfo di Cambio.

In painting, however, the Proto-Renaissance did not concern a revival of classical forms but rather a return to naturalism and an emulation of nature which was first evident in the work of Giotto and was praised by his contemporaries. Petrarch's disciple Giovanni Boccaccio described Giotto's greatness in terms of his innovative, naturalistic style:

Giotto ebbe uno ingegno di tanta eccellenza, che niuna cosa dà la natura, madre di tutte le cose e operatrice, col continuo girar de' cieli, che egli con lo stile e con la penn. o col pennello non dipignesse si simile a quella, che non simile, anzi più tosto dessa paresse, in tanto che molte volte nelle cose da lui fatte si trouva che il visivo senso degli uomini vi prese errore, quello credendo esser vero que era dipinto. E per ciò, avendo egli quella arte ritornata in luce, che molti secoli sotto gli error d'alcuni, che più a dilettar gli occhi degli' ignoranti che a compliacere allo 'ntelletto de' savi dipignendo, era stata sepulta, meritamenta una delle luci della fiorentina gloria dir si puote . . . .
(The genius of Giotto was of such excellence that there was nothing produced by nature, the mother and operator of all things, in the course of the perpetual revolutions of the heavens, which he did not depict by means of stylus, pen or brush with such truthfulness that the result seemed to be not so much similar to one of her works as a work of her own.)

This aesthetic appreciation and adulation of nature was reflected in the vivid descriptions of landscape and views found in the writings of Dante and Petrarch, and resulted in the rise of landscape painting as an important element in Florentine art. Thus in the High Middle Ages the revival of naturalism was paralleled by a desire to view nature.

The importance of the relationship between architecture and nature was firmly established by Piero de' Crescenzi, a Trecento contemporary of Dante. In the first book of his agricultural treatise, *De Ruralium Commodorum*, Piero was concerned with the selection of an agreeable site for the castle or villa. Chapter one outlines five basic considerations.


(The purity of the air, the frequency of breezes, the sanity of the water, the abundance of the land, and the overall quality of the site.)

Crescenzi's treatise in fact reflected elements of contemporary building practices. In order to provide a view of the landscape site, late medieval architects designed several types of belvedere structures that were based on Roman prototypes. These belvederes were incorporated into various areas of domestic architecture—in particular, the villa and the urban palace. Possibly under the influence of Crescenzi’s agricultural treatise, late Trecento villas began to incorporate a covered loggia belvedere supported on a corbeled arcade at the top of defensive walls or at the summit of towers. Such a structure provided a view and thus linked the villa with the surrounding landscape.

Covered loggia belvederes are still evident in the Trecento