INTRIGUE AND POWER IN
THE GARDEN PLOT:
SCENERY IN PRINCELY VILLAS

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Robert Redford asks in The Electric Horseman, "When was the last time you were surprised?" The question is evocative, nostalgic in its implications of wild freedoms and sudden visions now lost. His movie's exploration of the contest between settled corporate routines and the prankish individual resembles a similar tension that organized the designs of villas in Cinquecento Italy.

The conclusions then were the opposite of Redford's. Despite numerous calls for surprises and marvels, a ruling aristocratic concern was to display a life style ultimately untroubled by the unpredictable: there were to be no unannounced visitors, whether from the heavens, the local river, or the tenants. In order to promote the image of their own enduring stability, landowners in the Veneto during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries developed some of the most influential forms for proclaiming their control over the unruly. The frescoes of their great country houses and the designs of gardens reduced the energetic, dangerous, and intuitive into model toys, noticed only when wanted for a moment's delight and then passed by in a visit that provided diversion for a day or two.¹

This paper explores some of the classical and Renaissance designs for taming nature. In particular, the discussion concentrates on the ways in which artists represented the intrigues of passion within the orderly axes and frames of
SCENERY IN PRINCELY VILLAS

virtue. After briefly reviewing some theoretical backgrounds supporting Renaissance designs, this study turns to the programs of imagery in scenic frescoes at the Villa Emo at Fanzolo and in the gardens of the nearby Villa Barbarigo at Valsanzibio. In both these sites in the Veneto, artists displayed in related forms the contest between fruitless action and assured reserve.

The source for villas as instructive rhetorical compositions is ultimately Roman. Although some may think of the Renaissance as exciting and liberating in its innovations, Italian princes and thinkers admired ancient Rome most for its imperial authority, not its permissiveness. A kind of military discipline ruled gardens as well as villas. The well-known and often-printed letters of Pliny the Younger contain long descriptions of two of his estates. These letters became building manuals for artists and patrons in the Renaissance, who often invoked Pliny's authority for their designs that brought Roman rule to the landscape.²

Pliny's descriptions were especially suitable to powerful landowners, for he organized thoroughly the exterior world into a theatre where mountains, trees, sun, and shade were part of a performance seemingly put on for him. He wrote one letter taking a friend on an imaginary tour of his Tuscan villa and noted "the very beautiful countryside" outside his window: "Picture to yourself a vast amphitheatre such as could only be a work of nature; the great spreading plain is ringed round by mountains, their summits crowned by ancient woods of tall trees..." Continuing the description, he further emphasized his role as spectator who organized nature to his artificial focus: "It is a great pleasure to look down on the countryside from the mountain, for the view seems to be a painted scene of unusual beauty rather than a real landscape and the harmony to be found in this variety refreshes the eye wherever it turns."³ Such picturesque vistas were the stuff of villa decoration long before Pliny. Vitruvius listed the ways in which artists converted nature