In 1433 Cosmo de Medici, the head of a powerful banking family in Florence, was exiled to Venice. He was most stimulated and inspired by what he found there.

One of the world’s first true democracies, the free city of Florence was successful some years previously in defending itself from an invasion from the north by the tyrant Gian- Galeazzo who was based in Milan. The Florentines were inspired in their struggle by reading about the historic democracies of Greece and Rome. Once the threat of invasion was removed, Florence enjoyed a flowering of the various arts, seeking inspiration from Greek and Roman precedents.

In 1434 Cosmo de Medici was invited to return to Florence by the Signoria (the governing body of the city). He gave new leadership and considerable financial support to the cultural upsurge taking place there. In the succeeding years three generations of Medici enjoyed this position of leadership in Florence; the most famous of whom was Lorenzo the Magnificent, grandson of Cosmo. Under the patronage of the Medici all the arts flourished. Ghiberti, Donatello, Brunelleschi and Michelangelo excelled in sculpture; Masaccio, Pollaiuolo, Francesca, Botticelli and Leonardo da Vinci as painters; Alberti and Michelozzo led a school of architects.

Though ideas from China and the East had sparked off the Renaissance in Italy, Christianity still maintained a strong hold on men’s minds and the clergy still played a leading role in society. Only a few daring spirits ventured beyond the limits set down by the Church and they, like Galileo, were constantly frustrated by Christian dogma and finally were forced to succumb to ecclesiastical dictation.

The works of classical Greece and Rome being native to Europe, and having an emotional rather than an intellectual appeal, were more acceptable to the Church; and the sculptors, artists and architects were free to seek inspiration from these sources. As a result, Western scholars assume that the art of landscape design and garden making was also derived from classical precedents. What is forgotten by them, or perhaps just not understood, is that the strong flow of landscape ideas and garden inspiration that we have outlined, had been coming to Italy from the East for many centuries.

The formal Islamic garden culture fitted well with the forms of Greek and Roman architecture. This is the reason the inspiration for Renaissance gardens came from Muslim sources rather than from China. China’s influence on European gardens did not mature until centuries later.

Italian gardens of the early Renaissance period were most strongly influenced by a Muslim garden tradition which came, paradoxically, not from the east geographically but from the west—that is, from Spain, which had been conquered and occupied by the Muslims many centuries previously. One of the Italian gardens of this early Renaissance period that made a tremendous impact extending far beyond Italy itself, was Poggio Reale in Naples. It was built in the middle of the fifteenth century. At that time, Italy was not the unified country we know today: Naples was then under the domination of Spain. Aragon had conquered Naples in 1442 and for sixteen years, Naples was a part of the Kingdom of Aragon. When in 1458 it was made a kingdom again, the royal house of Naples was Aragonese.

Alphonso of Aragon, when he was Crown Prince, built the Poggio Reale; in it he incorporated the most advanced Islamic garden design which he knew from the royal gardens of Spain, which had been taken over from the Muslims. Poggio Reale was full of water devices derived from the Muslim gardens: water was used decoratively in cascades, water stairways, fountains and canals. Water was also used as a humorous device: at unexpected moments, sprays would suddenly spurt out, flooding the whole Court and courtiers, much to the amusement of those ‘in the know’. “The Spaniards brought with them the water stairway, the cascade and a positive passion for water in the garden.”

When Charles VIII of France conquered Italy in 1495, he was greatly impressed with the Poggio Reale and endeavoured to emulate it in France, taking there the design ideas, including this infantile one of practical jokery which was to be much employed subsequently in the royal gardens of France, including Versailles.

The influence of Spain had already extended further throughout Italy when in 1455 Alfonso’s private secretary, the Spaniard Alfonso Borgea, was elected Pope. This resulted in a great inflow into Italy of Spaniards who were equally familiar with the Alhambra and the Generalife at Granada, then a Royal garden; and they quite naturally also transplanted design ideas and water devices from these beautiful gardens of their homeland.

Financial advisers to the Holy See in Rome were the Medici family of Florence, who intermarried with the Borges family; so garden ideas from Spain soon reached Florence from this direction as well.

In 1458 Lorenzo de Medici employed the architect Michelozzo Michelllozzi to design for him a villa in Fiesole outside Florence, as a rural retreat. It bears a strong resemblance to the Generalife in Granada. It occupies a steeply sloping site, the garden built in three terraces with the villa on the highest level. Like the Generalife, its terraces command superb views of the surrounding countryside. The garden courts are rectangular in shape and are laid out in a formal way. The Villa Medici is in a very good state of preservation today.

Such Muslim influences on the design of Italian gardens of the early Renaissance period are clear. Yet despite this very obvious kinship between the gardens of Italy and the earlier ones created by the Muslims in Spain, Derek Cliff-
Villa Medici at Fiesole. 'It bears a strong resemblance to the Generalife in Granada. The villa and its formal gardens are superbly related visually with the countryside beyond.'

The Villa Medici from its main terrace. The high defensive walls of the medieval period have disappeared, replaced in this case by equally high retaining walls to support the terraces.

ord, in the introduction to his otherwise excellent work *A History of Garden Design* writes: 'For all practical purposes the history of gardening as an art begins at the Renaissance.'

The theory that the Italian Renaissance gardens were derived from Greece and Rome is almost universal and has long gone unchallenged. Mr G.A. Jellicoe, a most important landscape design authority who has made a superb contribution in the field of landscape architecture, subscribes to this view. In this study, *The Italian Gardens of the Renaissance*, he writes:

Classical Roman planning upon which it (the Renaissance villa garden) is based technically, had pointed the way to an organisation of space which
appropriately expressed the Roman sense of law and order. It is, however, to pre-Alexandrian Greece that the Italian garden owes its real origin. Although the Roman developed the technique of garden making through his villas, it was the Greek, who did not make gardens, who evolved the philosophy. 8

He elaborates his theory a little later in the same essay:

Geographically, the gardens of Italy are fairly evenly distributed northwards from Naples. As with the sister arts, the highest achievements centre on Rome, Florence and Venice. Each of these three great States made a separate contribution to garden art. It may be said in principle that the garden art of Rome was a kind of climax to the contribution of antiquity to the Western civilisation, the ultimate significance of which is seen in the Villa Lante at Bagnaia; that Florence illustrates man poised between the ancient and modern world as we know it today; and that Venice and the Venetian mainland are the spring board of the future. 9

These quotations imply that the vast panorama of landscape design and garden art that had unfolded outside Europe prior to the Renaissance, was of little consequence to European designers.

We believe, on the other hand, that the gardens of Italy were derived from the Muslim gardens of Spain (which had been brought directly from Central Asia) and form a continuity in development which was natural and inevitable. In our opinion Mr Jellicoe, in outlining his arguments for the classical origins of the villa gardens, has reversed the order of historic development. We believe that the Renaissance started in Venice, then moved to Florence and reached Rome considerably later. Let us now examine the villa gardens of Rome and the arguments concerning their origins.

ROME

The earliest of the villa gardens of Rome was the Villa Madama. Built early in the sixteenth century, its original designer was Raphael. It has been frequently modified, but the basic structure remains and it bears remarkable similarity to the Villa Medici in Fiesole, built fifty years earlier. This villa, which we have just described was clearly inspired by the great Muslim garden of the Generalife in Granada. The Villa Madama is on a sloping site overlooking Rome and, as with the Medici villa and the Generalife, is terraced along the hillside.

The Villa Madama has been sympathetically restored by the Italian government and is now used to accommodate important State visitors. Because of its recent restoration, it is not overgrown like some of the early villa gardens. Its parterre and alleys may probably be closer to the original form than many of the other historic Italian gardens.

The best-known of the villa gardens of Rome, and perhaps the most typical of the Italian gardens of the Renaissance, are the Villa d’Este in Tivoli and the Villa Lante in the little country town of Bagnaia some forty miles north of Rome. Let us first consider these two Renaissance villa gardens as Mr Jellicoe sees them — that is, as the direct products of classical inspiration.

Mr Jellicoe considers that the design of the villa gardens is derived from earlier Renaissance painting. In establishing the relationship between painting and garden, he first analysed the painting by Perugino, *Christ giving the keys to St Peter*, in the Sistine Chapel: ‘Behind the foreground figure is a great patterned space containing a domed building anchored to the earth by four porches penetrating the sky. On either side are classical triumphal arches, as it were, guarding the central building. There are no boundaries, and the landscape appears to contain all the splendour of human aspiration in time, namely, identity with a glorious past, leading to identity with the revolving universe itself.’ 10

The Villa d’Este he describes thus: ‘It is overwhelmingly impressive, not only for its architecture, its disposition, and even its somewhat robust and crude detail, but also for the sound of its waters, which, to the visitor walking about it, varies like the tones of a gigantic organ. The true greatness of the Villa de’Este however, lies in the fact that it is an indirect translation of Perugino’s picture into reality, causing a sense of fulfillment to follow that of wonder.’ 11 (Our italics.)

Transferring to the Villa Lante, Mr Jellicoe continues: ‘Finality and perfection in pure classical garden planning were reached in the curious and original Villa Lante at Bagnaia, about forty miles north of Rome. Begun a few years after the Villa d’Este, by Vignola and Giulio Romano, Lante has been felt by many to be the most contemplative of all gardens. It contains the elements of the Perugino picture, the place of the domed buildings being taken by the

Villa Madama, Rome. Designed originally by Raphael, it has been frequently modified and recently restored, but the basic structure remains. It is now used by the Italian Government to house important State visitors.

Looking from the upper floor of the Villa Madama to the parterre, tank and countryside beyond.