Giardino di Boboli (Boboli Gardens), Florence, Italy

Known the world over as one of Italy’s most important gardens, Boboli is also part of the Medici Villas in Tuscany UNESCO World Heritage Site. This is a living history course in Italian garden design from the Renaissance to the 19th century. Niccolò Tribolo was commissioned to design the original garden behind Pitti Palace in the 16th century, and the cypress avenue designed by Giulio Parigi was planted in 1630-31, but many others worked at Boboli between those times. The Kaffeehaus, the limonaia and the Palazzina della Meridiana were added in 1775-78, and other changes were made in the 19th century.

Boboli Gardens was created to display ancient and modern statues and has become an outdoor museum of garden sculpture that includes Roman antiquities as well as 16th and 17th century works. It also contains every element essential to the Italian garden from the amphitheater to the island garden, citrus trees, and long winding avenues through the woods. The mid-16th-century garden style, as it was developed here, incorporated longer axial developments, wide gravel avenues, a considerable “built” element of stone, lots of statuary and fountains, and numerous classical accents such as grottos, nymphaeums, and garden temples. The openness of the garden, with an expansive view of the city, was unconventional for its time. The gardens were very lavish, considering no access was allowed outside the immediate Medici family, and no entertainment or parties ever took place in the gardens.

You enter through the massive, stark courtyard of Pitti Palace, and through an unimpressive walkway to get to the magnificent formal gardens, designed to impress.

The front of Pitti Palace (L), the vast paved area in front of the Palace (LC), the massive Ammannati’s courtyard of the Palace (RC) and a dark corridor with a flight of low stone steps (R) that gives entrance to the Gardens.
Off to one side of this entrance is Grotta di Buontalenti (also known as Grotta Grande or the Big Grotto). In 16th century Tuscany decorative grottos — reconstructions of natural caves, often using real limestone concretions taken from actual caves and decorated with fountains, sculptures, and frescoes, often with magical, allegorical, or fantastic themes — were an essential element of the Italian garden. Built by Bernardo Buontalenti between 1583 and 1593, this grotto consists of three rooms decorated with stalactites and originally equipped with waterworks and luxuriant vegetation, with different themes in a bizarre and surreal atmosphere. Beyond the Grotto is one of the exits from the Garden.

The primary axis of the garden, centered on the rear façade of the palace, runs through the dramatic amphitheater and goes up a series of steps up Boboli Hill. This area was originally the quarry where stone for the Palace was excavated, and in the first phase of the Garden’s development it had just hedges along the edges. Between 1630 and 1637 it was replaced by a masonry structure with six tiers of steps topped by a decorative balustrade on a high base. Originally there were 24 niches with statues based on Roman myths and statues of dogs and other animals at their sides, but in 1818 the amphitheater was renovated with terra cotta urns painted faux marble placed between the statues along the perimeter. In the center of the amphitheater there is an Egyptian obelisk originally from Luxor and moved from Villa Medici in Rome here in 1789 and a massive granite basin designed by the architect Pasquale Poccianti (looking like an oversized bathtub) that was set there in 1840.
After two flights of stairs up the steep slope (passing a semicircular lawn and various statues) you’ll come to the large La Vasca del Forcone (Fork Basin), designed by Zanobi del Rosso who transformed an existing 16th century pool to build this one, used to collect water to irrigate the garden. It gets its name from the fountain with the bronze statue of Neptune with Naiads and Tritons by Stoldt Lorenz (1565-68). Stop and look back toward Pitti Palace as you ascend, as the garden was designed to have dramatic views of the city of Florence as its backdrop!

Continue on up above this pool to the statue of Abundance, a white marble figure with a bronze sheaf of wheat started by Giambologna in 1608 as an allegorical figure, featuring the likeness of Giovanna of Austria, the wife of Francis I, and completed in 1637. From Abundance you can go to the left to get to the Kaffeehaus, with the imposing walls of Forte di Belvedere and the trail that leads down to the Great Grotto. This building, designed by Zanobi del Rosso and built in 1776, replaced a vegetable garden to keep up with the fashion of the times for European nobility to have a place for drinking coffee inside a special building or outdoors on the terrace. Or go right to climb the steps of dual curved staircases around the old circular coffeehouse with ancient statues of the Muses built in 1792 by Giuseppe del Rosso to get to the Giardino de Cavaliere, on the rampart of the walls built by Michelangelo in 1529.
Walk through the Giardino de Cavaliere (previously planted with medicinal herbs) with a central fountain and boxwood parterres filled with roses (and overlooking houses and farms and olive trees on the adjacent hills) to go into the building housing the Porcelain Museum, originally intended as a place to store pots!

The Giardino de Cavaliere (L), the Porcelain Museum (LC) with various exhibits (RC). The view of adjacent estates and olive trees from the garden in front of the Museum (R).

Continue along on gravel paths by green lawns to see various other statues and artwork set amid the tall trees, including the only modern contemporary sculpture in the Gardens, Igor Mitoraj’s Tyndareus Cracked (1998) – a large face with cracked façade – which was part of an exhibition, then remained in the garden after the exhibit.

Tall trees (L) flank a wide lawn (LC and C) where Igor Mitoraj’s contemporary sculpture Tyndareus Cracked is (R).

From there head down the second main axis of Boboli — the dramatic steep sloping Viottolone, or Cypress Avenue, a wide boulevard flanked by tall cypresses and classical and late 16th century statues alluding to heroic myths or games — to the large water feature at the base. The earthworks for this wide boulevard that runs perpendicular to the main axis that runs through the amphitheater began in 1612 and the double rows of cypress trees were planted in 1637. The path itself has remained essentially the same, but the areas on either side have gone through many changes.

Looking down the Viottolone (L and C) and back up the slope (R).
Paralleling the Viottolone are narrow side alleys or arborways (cerchiate or “arbors made of branches of trees bent in an arc”) that are covered with holm oaks and vegetation trained on metal arches (earlier poles of chestnut wood were used). The areas surrounding the Viottolone are divided into section by three cross paths. One cross path leads to the Botanical Garden, only open in summer, and in the other direction the fountain of the Mostaccini. One side of the avenue was once a maze and the other hunting grounds that also contained the walled kitchen garden. Statues, small gardens, and other elements are scattered throughout the area.

One of the main pathways leads off the Viottolone (L), a section of cerchiate parallel to the Viottolone (LC), a cross path (C), a statue at the end of one path (RC), and a path leads to a small open area of lawn and a fountain (R).

At the bottom of the Viottolone, the Isolotto, laid out in 1612, is an oval-shaped artificial island in a large pond with the fountain of Oceanus by Giambologna (1576, but actually a copy with the original now in the city’s Bargello Museum) in the center, with numerous potted citrus, historic rose varieties and geranium plants around it. The nominal figure presides over smaller figures representing the Euphrates,

The Isolotto (L) surrounded by a moat with a central fountain of Oceanus (R) in the middle (LC and RC).

The center of the Isolotto has many potted plants (L), iron gates with large columns (LC and RC) and fanciful sea creatures around the perimeter (R).
Nile and Ganges, and all four stand atop a gigantic fountain basin carved from a single block of granite transported to Florence from the island of Elba. Distinctive sculptures of fanciful sea creatures dot the perimeter of the pool, with iron gates supported by large columns on either end of the axis from down the Viottolone. Along the outside, 16th and 17th century sculptures depicting rural Italian folk are set into a dense espalier of holm oak.

The Isolotto is surrounded by a hedge (L) with statues depicting rural Italians of the time (LC, LC and RC).

The Prato Delle Colonne (Meadow of Columns) is a large, semicircular patch of grass that closes off the garden to the south. Designed by Niccolò Gaspero Paoletti, it is set with tall sycamore trees along the curving outer edge and has two red columns, but little else to make one linger.

If you continue on around the corner, at the edge of the property with the nearby houses and other buildings visible above the hedges and high walls, you will go by the immense, elegant white limonaia built by Zanobi del Rosso in 1777-78 in Rococo style (replacing a ruined greenhouse that was used to keep exotic animals) to house a collection of hundreds of unusual citrus plants begun by Cosimo I, who collected citruses between 1554 and 1568. It is too cold to have lemons and other citrus outdoors year-round in Florence, so the trees are grown in huge terra cotta pots outside in the summer months and then moved indoors into this purpose-built building in the colder months until they could return outside. The façade has four bays framed by pilaster strips and abstract entablatures in the classical style of the large orangeries of Europe typical of the period. Vegetables and flowers — including many ancient varieties of rose, camellia and bulbous plants — are planted in the boxwood parterres out front protected by Giuseppe Cacialli’s impressive wrought iron fence and gates. It is still used to overwinter some of the over 500 potted citrus trees in the Gardens, many of which are now rare in cultivation.

The Limonaia (L) has an impressive wrought iron fence (C) and plantings in boxwood parterres out front (R).
On your way to the exit onto Via Romana you’ll pass another horticultural building used to overwinter plants, with a large collection of labelled, potted citrus and other plants sitting on the stone terrace in front of it and one last feature, the Annalena Grotto constructed in 1817 by Guiseppe Cacialli containing the sculptural group Adam and Eve by Michelangelo Naccherino (c. 1616).

There are many other features at Boboli but there usually isn’t time to see and appreciate everything on the 111 acres in one visit (even a virtual one).

– Susan Mahr, University of Wisconsin – Madison

Additional Information: