BELLAGIO CENTER - VILLA SERBELLONI
A brief history - Breve storia

Translation / Traduzione

Paola Bianchi
The Rockefeller Foundation’s proud history with the Bellagio Center began in 1959, when Ella Holbrook Walker, the American Principessa della Torre e Tasso, offered her Italian villa “for purposes connected with the promotion of international understanding,” and Dean Rusk, the Foundation’s president, accepted her generous donation and embraced its enormous potential.

During the 50 years since, the Bellagio Center has served as a backdrop for many meaningful advances. The Center was a launching pad for ideas that underpin modern systems of international finance. It was a staging ground for efforts to mobilize an agricultural revolution that saved a billion lives in Latin America and Asia. It was the setting for negotiations and agreements that make it easier for people suffering from HIV/AIDS and other devastating, deadly afflictions to access better vaccines and drugs, more efficiently, in more places.

Today, the world faces new economic challenges, different social strains, and unprecedented environmental threats. Therefore, the Bellagio Center’s work–and way of working–has never been more significant. The Center cross-pollinates disparate traditions of expertise, inquiry, and innovation by hosting scientists and artists, theorists and practitioners, those who shape
policy and those affected by it. It fosters dialogue and discovery, conversation and candid, robust exchanges of ideas. It infuses unorthodox, radical thinking into searches for solutions to critical global issues. It marries the fundamental functions of right brain ingenuity and left brain rationality. It brings people together from countries far and wide, challenging them to find common ground and push the boundaries of collective knowledge and action.

If history is any guide, the Bellagio Center’s extraordinary residents and conference participants will certainly envision and implement some of the next half century’s most innovative ideas. My Rockefeller Foundation colleagues and I are eager to join them in all that’s sure to come.

Judith Rodin

INTRODUCTION

Since I became managing director of the Bellagio Center in 2005, I have imagined writing a book that could provide visitors, guests, friends of the Rockefeller Foundation, and Center employees with a clear sense of the remarkable history of the place.

The Bellagio Center’s 50th anniversary as part of the Rockefeller Foundation provides a perfect opportunity to share everything I have learned about the property’s unique and glorious history. Because the Center’s extraordinary success over the last 50 years in bringing together people from all over the world in an effort to promote international understanding and dialogue is wonderfully depicted in another book, Elisabetta Rurali and I have concentrated our efforts in the history of the place.

Our account is not intended to be a definitive history; rather our hope is that this narrative will provide an introduction to the rich history of our Center and that it might encourage interested readers to pursue additional research.

By adding as many images as we could collect to accompany our text as we travel through the centuries, we hope to tell something of the permanence
of this place, its consistent spirit in spite of its many changes over time. From a notorious fortress on the top of the promontory in ancient times, to a luxurious palace in the end of the Middle Ages, from a villa and a monastery in the hands of wealthy families to the private home of a generous and kind Princess, and now as a philanthropic Center, the property has served many functions in its long life.

Through the ages, however, it has always been owned by people concerned with the well-being of others, people committed to serving, sustaining and supporting their communities, near and far.

Today, the Bellagio Center is an efficiently run site for international conferences and residencies for artists and scholars, so it is hard to imagine the difficulties the Foundation faced half a century ago when it received the property as a gift. The isolated grounds in the hills of Northern Italy were then home to the families of a dozen staff members, a small working farm with cows, hens, and peacocks, and four main buildings surrounded by gardens.

What could an American foundation, dedicated to tackling the world’s most intractable social problems, do with an historic villa on 53 remote acres so far from the Foundation’s New York headquarters? Dean Rusk, then the
Rusk, l’allora Presidente della Fondazione Rockefeller, non solo dovrà essersi più volte posto personalmente, ma che certamente gli sarà stata posta da molti altri.

Dean Rusk ha tuttavia intuito, con perspicacia, che la proprietà di Bellagio forniva alla Fondazione un’opportunità senza precedenti di portare avanti un tipo innovativo di filantropia, una filantropia imperniata sul dialogo, studio e fratellanza fra persone provenienti da ogni dove, aventi ruoli decisionali o in posizioni chiave che avrebbero potuto aiutare a promuovere la crescita delle comunità nel mondo. E' quella lungimiranza di Dean Rusk, del 1959, che si è tramandata ad ognuno dei successivi direttori del Centro e che si è palesata nella progressiva trasformazione da una villa residenziale – dimora di una nobildonna, nel senso più profondo del termine – in luogo in cui persone appartenenti a diverse culture, regioni e discipline, a diverse regioni geografiche, possano riunirsi, interagire e trovare brillanti soluzioni ai maggiori problemi contemporanei che affliggono il mondo. Quella che era una struttura in grado di ospitare solo 8 residenti e 2 conferenze nel suo primo anno, è oggi un Centro in grado di accogliere 50 conferenze e 150 residenti all’anno.

Dopo averne ripercorso la storia, provo un rinnovato senso di orgoglio per il lavoro che svolgiamo al Bellagio Center e per la nostra partecipazione alla missione filantropica della Fondazione Rockefeller e sono onorata di aver l’opportunità di commemorare l’encomiabile attività dei direttori che mi hanno preceduto alla guida del Bellagio Center.

Sono lieta di condividere questo libro con lo staff del Bellagio Center e mi auguro che possa essere motivo d’incoraggiamento per ognuno di loro a partecipare al mio orgoglio per l’importante lavoro che svolgiamo, dietro le quinte, per supportare ed aiutare coloro che si stanno prodigando per un mondo migliore.

Mi auguro, inoltre, che questo libro possa fornire a coloro che ci visiteranno una più approfondita percezione dell’articolata storia di questo luogo, della profonda dedizione profusa da chi vi ha lavorato per rendere il Bellagio Center degno erede dei suoi storici proprietari, nonché della straordinaria saggezza condivisa tra la donatrice e la Fondazione che, 50 anni or sono, riconoscevano un’opportunità incomparabile.

Pilar Palaciá

Rusk, the then President of the Rockefeller Foundation, not only had to put himself forward personally, but that question had been asked many times.

Rusk quickly realized, however, that the Bellagio property provided an unparalleled opportunity for the Foundation to pursue an innovative brand of philanthropy, one focused on dialogue, study, and fellowship among far-flung people in decision-making or galvanizing positions who could help enhance communities around the world.

It is Dean Rusk’s 1959 vision that has been passed down to each of the subsequent directors of the Center, resulting in the step-by-step transformation of a residential villa - the home of a noblewoman, in every sense of the word - into a place where people from different cultures, geographic regions, and disciplines can meet, interact, and spark solutions to major contemporary problems across the globe. What was once a facility that supported only eight residents and two conferences in its first year now hosts some 50 conferences and 150 residents annually.

After revisiting its history I have a renewed sense of pride in the work we do at the Bellagio Center as part of the Rockefeller Foundation’s ongoing philanthropic mission and I am honored to have an opportunity to celebrate the achievements of the Bellagio Center directors who preceded me.

I am delighted to share this book with the staff of the Bellagio Center with the hope that it will encourage each of them to share my pride in the important work we do, behind the scenes, to support and aid those who are working for a better world.

As a result of this book, I hope that those who visit us will have a better understanding of the extensive history of this place, and of the remarkable shared wisdom of the donor and the Foundation who, 50 years ago, saw an incomparable opportunity and worked to make the Bellagio Center a worthy heir of its previous owners.

Pilar Palaciá
Bellagio Center with the two branches of Lake Como

Next page: Bellagio's promontory with the Bellagio Center

Pagina successiva: Il promontorio di Bellagio con il Bellagio Center
THE PROMONTORY

Twenty-thousand years ago, glaciers covered the mountainous territory that is now home to the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center. Then, only the highest peaks were visible: Mount San Primo (1,686 meters, or 5,530 feet, above sea level) served as a buffer to the south of Bellagio, slowing the progression of the ice tongues and very likely causing one to split into what would become the two branches of Lake Como as the glaciers melted. Shaped like an inverted Y, this is now Italy’s deepest lake.

Stretching from the shores of Lake Como to the summit of a hill, the grounds of the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center occupy 53 rolling acres of the town of Bellagio, which is nestled at the end of the peninsula that divides the lake in two. In fact, the name “Bellagio” is said to come from the Latin word bi-lacus, or “two lakes.”

IL PROMONTORIO

Ventimila anni fa i ghiacci ricoprivano il territorio montano che oggi fa da cornice al Bellagio Center della Fondazione Rockefeller. A quell’epoca in questo territorio, quasi completamente sommerso dai ghiacci, emerse solamente le vette più elevate. La presenza del monte S. Primo (1,686 mt. s.l.m.) alle spalle di Bellagio, costituendo un ostacolo all’espansione verso sud delle lingue glaciali, aveva probabilmente favorito la biforcazione di una di esse dando così origine ai due rami del lago di Como. Ciò conferì allo stesso (il più profondo d’Italia) la sua attuale conformazione, paragonabile a quella di una Y rovesciata.

La proprietà si estende dalle rive del lago fino alla sommità del promontorio occupando 21,45 ettari nel comune di Bellagio, una graziosa cittadina situata all’estremità della penisola che divide il lago di Como in due parti. Alcuni ritengono, infatti, che l’etimologia del nome Bellagio, derivi dal termine latino Bi-Lacus (due laghi).
During the glaciers expansion, the valleys and the shores were completely under the ice and only the highest peaks could be seen. The ice tongue of the Adda river, fed from the north by the glaciers of the Valtellina and Val Chiavenna, on its way to the south suffered several ramifications that constituted, besides the morainic mountainous structure of Lecco, the one well preserved of Como, and all the Peralpine lakes.

Nel corso delle espansioni glaciali le vallate e i fianchi dei rilievi erano completamente sommerse dai ghiacci da cui emergevano solo le cime più alte. La lingua glaciale dell'Adda, alimentata da nord dai ghiacciai della Valtellina e della Val Chiavenna, scendendo verso sud subì diverse ramificazioni che hanno costituito, oltre agli apparati morenici di Lecco, quello ben conservato di Como e l'articolato complesso dei laghetti perialpini.
Map of Lake Como during Paolo Giovio's time
L’EPOCA ROMANA

La regione del lago di Como è stata per secoli culla di una ricca mescolanza di differenti culture. A partire dal V secolo a.C. il nostro territorio venne invaso da alcune popolazioni celtiche; solo all’inizio del II secolo a.C., nel 196, i Romani riescono a conquistare il territorio comasco, per volere del console M. Claudio Marcello. Successivamente giunsero nella regione massicci gruppi di coloni latini unitamente a consistenti contingenti militari e a cinquecento coloni greci inviati probabilmente dal Sud. Nel 49 a.C. Giulio Cesare concesse agli abitanti di Como la cittadinanza romana. Tutto ciò comportò la diffusione della lingua latina, la conoscenza delle norme del diritto romano e soprattutto favorì lo sviluppo degli scambi commerciali e dell’agricoltura. Il paesaggio che circonda Bellagio porta ancora oggi i segni di quell’epoca di sviluppo poiché è proprio in quel periodo che vennero introdotte nuove essenze arboree, come l’ulivo e l’alloro sulle sponde del lago e il noce e il castagno nelle zone più collinari.

Questo progressivo benessere, unitamente alla bellezza dei luoghi, fece sì che le personalità romane di maggior spicco incominciassero ad interessarsi al Lario (nome latino con cui è conosciuto il lago di Como) come luogo prediletto di villeggiatura ove costruirono le loro sontuose dimore. 

Forse il più importante fra queste fu il famoso senatore e scrittore romano Plinio il Giovane, nato a Como nel 62 a.C. In suo Epistulae, egli menziona spesso le sue ville in questa regione. 

STATUA DI PLINIO IL GIOVANE, BELLAGIO CENTER

La regione del lago di Como è stata per secoli culla di una ricca mescolanza di differenti culture. A partire dal V secolo a.C., our territory was invaded by some Celtic tribes; only at the beginning of the II century a.C., in 196, the Romans succeeded in conquering the comasco territory, at the behest of consul M. Claudio Marcello. Subsequently, numerous Latin colonists and military expeditions arrived, along with some 500 Greeks, likely sent from the south, to teach the locals how to travel on the lake.

In 49 B.C., Julius Caesar granted Roman citizenship to the inhabitants of Como. The law and language of the empire took root in the region; trade and agriculture flourished. The landscape surrounding Bellagio still bears the mark of this period of development as it was at this time that several varieties of new trees were introduced, including the olive and the laurel along the shores and the walnut and the chestnut in hilly areas.

The region’s economic progress, along with its natural beauty, made the Lario (as the lake was known in Latin) a favorite setting for the country houses of distinguished Romans. Perhaps the most important of these was Roman senator and writer Pliny the Younger, born in Como in 62 A.D.

In his Epistulae, he often mentioned his villas in this territory. One of his...
best-known descriptions is of two buildings, one close to the lake and the other on a hill, called, respectively, Commedia and Tragedia.

Since the 16th century, local historians have tried to find the precise location of these two villas. Paolo Giovio and later Benedetto Giovio believed that the promontory of Bellagio was where the Tragedia stood, as a letter from Pliny (IX, 7) indicates:

One is set high on a cliff... and overlooks the lake; the other is by the lakeshore. Therefore, I call the former tragedy and the latter comedy. The first one because it is supported by rock, as if by stilt-like shoes of the actors in a tragedy; the second as if lying on low clogs... This one embraces a gulf with a gentle bay, while the one on a very high cliff divides two gulfs.

Though many books state that the famous Plinian villa was built in Bellagio, no archaeological proof has been found to support this claim. Nevertheless, the hypothesis is reinforced by an epigraph, now located in the Musei Civici di Como (Civic Museums of Como) and found in this area, where the name of Marco Pliny appears.

Historians indicate that Pliny was a family name particularly common among families throughout the Como region, with no relation to Pliny the Younger.

Plinio il Giovane, nato a Como nel 62 d.C. Nelle sue Epistulae parla spesso delle ville che possedeva in questo territorio. Particolarmente famosa è la descrizione di due edifici, l’uno costruito vicino al lago e l’altro su un promontorio, chiamati rispettivamente Commedia e Tragedia. Dal XVI secolo gli storiografi locali hanno cercato di stabilire l’ubicazione precisa delle due ville. In particolare, dapprima Paolo Giovio ed in seguito Benedetto Giovio riconobbero il promontorio di Bellagio come il luogo su cui era stata edificata la “Tragedia”. Questa tesi era facilmente attendibile leggendo la lettera di Plinio (IX, 7) che recita:

Una situata sugli scogli... domina il lago; l’altra é sulla riva del lago. Pertanto sono solito chiamare quella tragedia e questa commedia; quella perché é come se si ergesse sulle alte calzature indossate dagli attori mentre restano una tragedia, questa su dei bassi zoccoli... Questa abbraccia un unico golfo con una morbida insenatura, quella situata su un altissimo promontorio, ne divide due.

Quindi, sebbene l’ipotesi di riconoscere in questi luoghi quelli in cui venne edificata la famosa villa pliniana sia riportata in innumerevoli testi e sia affascinante, non è però mai stata supportata da alcun riscontro archeologico che permettesse di porre un punto fermo e indiscutibile. Tuttavia questa ipotesi viene avvalorata anche dalla citazione di un’epigrafe (ora conservata nel Musei Civici di Como) ritrovata in questa zona, in cui
famous family. The Romanization of the region is evident in the inscription that can also be seen in the altar to Jupiter on the east terrace of the current Bellagio Center.
The period of peace and prosperity typical of the Roman Empire in the area began to change around 250 when the region was invaded by several Germanic tribes, and Como became the headquarters of one of the four imperial fleets tasked with defending the territory and transporting troops and supplies. Among several barbaric incursions are those of the Visigoths in 403, the Huns, whose Mongol tribe guided by Attila crossed the Alps in 452, and the Vandals. It is very likely the promontory of Bellagio played a fundamental role during this period, when the Roman Empire’s defensive line was strategically located in the northern limit.

In 568 the Longobards conquered many towns around the lake, but it took them more than two decades to seize the fortress of Isola Comacina, run by Commander Francione who was also at the helm of the fortress in Bellagio. During this long struggle, the Roman authorities and their families often found refuge in Bellagio, which, even in those days, was described as a place full of rich villas, flowered and cultivated fields, and olive and laurel trees.5

When the Longobard king, Autari, finally forced Francione to surrender in 588, the remnants of the Roman Empire disappeared in the area.
Instead of destroying the conquered fortresses, the Longobards strengthened them. The fortress in Bellagio was among those improved and restored by them and it was visited by their king, Liutprando, in 744. In the following years, as centralized power decreased and small independent states began to develop, Bellagio fell under the control of the town of Lecco.

Nel 588, infine, il re longobardo Autari, costrinse Francione alla resa e questa sconfitta comportò la scomparsa di ogni retaggio dell’Impero Romano.

Tuttavia i Longobardi non distrussero i capisaldi appena conquistati, ma li fortificarono ulteriormente, come avvenne per quello di Bellagio che ospitò anche il loro re Liutprando, nel 744. Negli anni immediatamente successivi però, quando il potere statale cominciò ad essere decentrato, e iniziarono a crearsi piccoli stati indipendenti, Bellagio finì sotto il controllo della contea di Lecco.
Ruins of the castle’s chapel, viewed from the lake, Bellagio Center

Next page: Ruins of the chapel and the fortress (yesterday and today)

Vista dal lago dei resti dell’abside della chiesa nel castello, Bellagio Center

Pagina a fianco: Resti della chiesa e delle fortificazioni, (ieri e oggi)
Ruins of the castle's chapel, detail of the apse (yesterday, today)

Page 35: Ruins of the castle's chapel
MIDDLE AGES

At the end of the eighth century, Pope Stephen II (752-757) asked the Franks' assistance in expelling the Longobards, whose defeat was finally accomplished by Charlemagne in the siege of Pavia (773-774). The consequences were enormous: not only was Charlemagne crowned emperor by Leo III (December 25, 800), but his reign became the foundation of an empire that lasted more than a thousand years.

During Charlemagne's time, when the church was very powerful both spiritually and politically, some local luminaries were granted direct control of large but limited territories. This gave rise to a type of feudal system in which serfs were bound to the land where they were born; they worked for landowners in exchange for security in case of invasions.

An imperial diploma of 934 indicates that Gherardo de Castello and his descendants were granted the castle at Menaggio and the neighboring jurisdictions; it is likely that Bellagio was among them. Littardo de Castelli (the lord of Bellagio at the end of the 13th century) may have been a descendant of the Gherardo de Castello family.

Some documents of the 10th century link the name Bellagio to the word...
In some documents of the X century the name of Bellagio is associated with the term *castellum* which means “fortress” in Latin. This has led historians to speculate that a defensive fort already existed on the Bellagio’s promontory, the ruins of which can be seen today, and which we now call the Castle.

Among the ruins on the promontory, there is a room, very likely built in the first half of the 11th century, that may have been a small chapel inside the fortress. Its apse, with a slot-like window and molding all around the interior wall, has kept its original shape. These architectural characteristics show attention to detail in sharp contrast with the simplicity of the heavy granite architrave at the chapel’s entrance. There, visible only from within, is an old opening in the chapel wall in the shape of a cross.9

This structure is believed to have been built in the 11th century, in part because a second church was built on the property in the 1080s with many of the same characteristics. It was called St. Peter’s and stood on the south façade of the main building, now known as the Villa, into which the St. Peter’s old bell tower has been incorporated. The structure’s stonework recalls that of other church towers in the area, which are characterized by uniform stones, perfectly aligned with a thin mortar layer, and blind arches as decorative elements. The matching stones used to construct the arches were generally smaller than those used in the walls. The more skilled the master builder, the more uniform the stones in the arches.

In alcuni documenti del X secolo il nome di Bellagio viene accostato al termine *castellum* che, in latino, significa “fortezza”. Tutto ciò farebbe quindi supporre che, a quel tempo, esistesse già sulla sommità del promontorio, una struttura difensiva le cui rovine si possono ancora vedere oggi e che noi definiamo il “Castello”. Fra le rovine ora presenti si può ancora individuare un vano, molto verosimilmente edificato verso la metà dell’XI secolo, che si ritiene potesse costituire una piccola cappella all’interno della fortezza. La sua abside ha mantenuto la forma originaria, con una finestra a feritoia e un cornicione interno che ne percorre tutta la muratura. Questo particolare suggerirebbe una certa ricercatezza nelle tecniche costruttive che si contrappone però alla semplicità del pesante architrave in ghiandone al suo ingresso. Su questa parete è chiaramente riconoscibile un’apertura a croce che non è però visibile dall’esterno.9

A supportare tale datazione vi è il fatto che veniva costruita un’altra chiesa all’interno della proprietà verso la fine dell’XI secolo con le medesime caratteristiche stilistiche. Conosciuta come S. Pietro, era situata nella facciata sud dell’edificio principale, attualmente chiamato Villa, e di cui oggi resta la torre campanaria, inglobata nella sua muratura.

I blocchi di pietra quadrati e perfettamente allineati con un leggero strato di malta e gli archetti utilizzati come elementi decorativi costituiscono caratteristiche costruttive che richiamano quelle impiegate in altre torri di
Today, contrasting construction techniques remain visible at the base of the tower: layers of fish-bone masonry and horizontal, flat, regular stones; and layers of round pebbles and horizontal, flat, uniform stones. The stone used to build St. Peter’s church is known locally as Moltrasio, after one of the lake towns where it is quarried. Dark in its natural state, it becomes lighter upon contact with air, due to oxidation.

We know St. Peter’s was probably a large church, given the size of its only existing bay, which is covered by a wide crossed vault, now in one of the bedrooms on the Villa’s first floor. The architectural style is similar to that of the town church of San Giacomo, and maybe to that of the tower found in the southeast corner of the square at Bellagio. Many believe the tower served as an entrance to the fortified area around the castle. From the second floor of the tower, a little bridge once led to the gardens of the Villa. (In 1984, the Rockefeller Foundation donated the bridge and tower to Bellagio’s town hall.)

Lake Como was the scene of many battles between Otto I, the Holy Roman Emperor (of the German Nation), and Berengario d’Ivrea, King of Italy.10 This century-long struggle continued until, at the beginning of the 11th century, Holy Roman Emperor Henry II defeated his rivals with the assistance of Como. He granted Como’s bishop, Eberardo, rights over some towns in the

10 Understood as only the Northern part of Italy.
Opposite page: The Villa tower, previously bell tower of St. Peter’s church, Bellagio Center

This page: Walls of the bell tower in St. Peter’s church

Next page: Bellagio square tower, and its bridge to Villa Serbelloni

Pagina a sinistra: La torre, già campanile della chiesa di S. Pietro, Bellagio Center

Muratura del campanile della chiesa di S. Pietro

Pagina seguente: La torre e il ponte già parte delle mura della Villa Serbelloni
region, including Bellagio, which lost its connection with Lecco. The Bishop’s control, however, was largely in name alone, as communes\textsuperscript{11} began to develop in an attempt to diminish the power of the large feudal families.

Many towns on the lake resisted Como’s dominance and sided with Milan against the city during the Ten Years’ War (1117–1127); during the war, Bellagio was attacked annually and its population sought shelter in the inner fortress of the promontory. Como finally relinquished control of the lake towns to Milan. In 1154, however, Frederick Barbarossa, king of Germany, created an alliance with Como against Milan, returning the city’s power over the lake towns, which, like Bellagio, were forced to pay penalties and pledge loyalty to Como.

A legendary figure in the territory, Frederick Barbarossa was heir to two warring dynasties in Germany, the Waiblingens and the Welfens.\textsuperscript{12} In 1152, he was elected king with the hope that he could put an end to the conflict between these two families. Three years later, he came to Italy to be crowned Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire (of the German Nation). His presence, and the conflict he brought with him between the Waiblingen and Welfen dynasties, exacerbated existing political tensions.

Italian factions took sides using the names of the German dynasties, which pontilettot tramite il quale si accedeva ai giardini di proprietà della Villa, a cui apparteneva anche la torre stessa fino al 1984, anno in cui fu donata al comune di Bellagio dalla Fondazione Rockefeller.

Il Lario fu teatro di scontri tra l’imperatore del Sacro Romano Impero di Nazione Germanica, Ottone I, e Berengario d’Ivrea, re d’Italia\textsuperscript{10}. Questi conflitti, iniziati nel secolo precedente, perdurarono per anni e fu all’inizio dell’XI secolo che l’imperatore Enrico II ebbe la meglio con l’aiuto dei comaschi e Como venne ricompensata con la donazione di alcuni territori, tra cui Bellagio, che passò sotto il diretto controllo del vescovo comasco Eberardo, perdendo il suo legame con Lecco. Tale controllo fu più nominale che reale e durante questo periodo si andavano costituendo i Comuni\textsuperscript{11} contro il dominio delle grandi famiglie feudali.

La maggior parte delle città del lago non si assoggettò facilmente al dominio di Como e ben presto le popolazioni lariane si schierarono contro la città, a fianco di Milano, durante la guerra dei Dieci Anni (1117–1127).

Nel conflitto Bellagio subiva continui attacchi e la sua popolazione cercava rifugio all’interno della fortezza sul promontorio. Como, infine, venne sconfitta e dovette cedere il controllo delle città a Milano. Tuttavia la rivincita non tardò a venire quando Federico Barbarossa, re di Germania, strinse nel 1154 un’alleanza con Como contro Milano, restituendo alla prima il potere
were later transformed into Ghibellines (who generally supported the Emperor) and Guelphs (who generally supported the Pope). With alliances constantly changing, this period was one of the most politically complex in the history of Italy.

Federico Barbarossa is a legendary figure in this territory. He was elected king of Germany in 1152 with the hope of being able to put an end to this ancient conflict between the two families, ruling peacefully in the country. Three years later, he was crowned, in Italy, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. His presence and the dynastic conflict it brought with it exacerbated the tensions already existing in the Italian political scenario. The factions in opposing decided to use the dynastic terms of the German families, translated into Guelfs and Ghibellines, to support the Emperor (Ghibellines) or the Pope (Guelfs). It is true that alliances were constantly changing, making this period one of the most confused and politically complex in Italian history.

**VISCONTI AND SFORZA PERIODS**

At the end of the 13th century in Como, the Guelphs defeated the Ghibellines, who found refuge in the castle of Bellagio. Starving after a siege led by Commander Francesco Carcano, of the Guelph Vittani family, the Ghibellines were forced to surrender in 1292. The situation changed again, however, stabilizing when Matteo Visconti, Lord of Milan, later conquered Bellagio; he became the owner of the promontory, and put the town under the jurisdiction of the Duchate of Milan.

To strengthen the lake towns against Como, Bellagio was granted the right to host the Captain of the Larius, who was the authority in charge of controlling potential attacks from pirates and smugglers. He lived in a small castle with an angular tower near the port, where the Hotel Florence is now located. In 1397, the Captain of the Larius was Cristoforo Stanga, father of Marchesino Stanga, who would later play an important role in the area that would become the Bellagio Center.

Around 1365 Galeazzo II Visconti, successor of Matteo, gave the order to demolish the castle on top of the promontory at Bellagio. Some sources say that mercenaries and pirates had begun using it for shelter; others think that the feudal lord of the castle had become aligned with the...

**LE’À VISCONTEA E SFORZESCA**

Alla fine del XIII secolo i Ghibellini comaschi vennero sconfitti e trovarono rifugio nel castello di Bellagio dove furono però costretti alla resa, per fame, nel 1292 in seguito all’assedio comandato da Francesco Carcano della famiglia guelfa dei Vittani. Tuttavia la situazione cambiò nuovamente e si stabilizzò solo quando Matteo Visconti, allora signore di Milano, conquistò Bellagio, diventando proprietario del promontorio e facendo entrare la città nel ducato di Milano. Proprio per aumentare l’importanza dei paesi lariani, in contrapposizione a Como, al nostro borgo fu concesso il privilegio di ospitare il “Capitano del Lario”, cioè quell’autorità che doveva vigilare sulle possibili incursioni di pirati e contrabbandieri. La sua dimora era un piccolo castello con torre angolare che si trovava nei pressi del porto, dove ora è ubicato l’Hotel Florence. Nel 1397 Capitano del Lario fu Cristoforo Stanga, padre di Marchesino che ricoprirà, in seguito, un ruolo importante nella storia della proprietà, destinata a diventare l’odierno “Bellagio Center”.

Intorno al 1365 Galeazzo II Visconti, successore di Matteo, ordinò che il castello di Bellagio venisse distrutto. Alcuni adducono come motivazione il fatto che fosse diventato covo di malfattori e pirati; altri ritengono invece che l’allora feudatario si fosse schierato con i Guelfi, in contrasto con i ghibellini Visconti.
VISCONTI AND SFORZA PERIODS

At the end of the 13th century in Como, the Guelphs defeated the Ghibellines, who found refuge in the castle of Bellagio. Starving after a siege led by Commander Francesco Carcano, of the Guelph Vittani family, the Ghibellines were forced to surrender in 1292. The situation changed again, however, stabilizing when Matteo Visconti, Lord of Milan, later conquered Bellagio; he became the owner of the promontory, and put the town under the jurisdiction of the Ducate of Milan.

To strengthen the lake towns against Como, Bellagio was granted the right to host the Captain of the Larius, who was the authority in charge of controlling potential attacks from pirates and smugglers. He lived in a small castle with an angular tower near the port, where the Hotel Florence is now located. In 1397, the Captain of the Larius was Cristoforo Stanga, father of Marchesino Stanga, who would later play an important role in the area that would become the Bellagio Center.

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View of the Bellagio’s port,
19th-century print

Il porto di Bellagio
in una stampa del secolo XIX
Guelphs against the Visconti family, which was Ghibelline. Gian Galeazzo Visconti (1351-1402) – the son of Galeazzo II Visconti – not only confirmed the order that the castle should be demolished, but went even further by ordering that it should never be rebuilt. So the walls and main tower were destroyed, sparing only the structure thought to have been a Romanic chapel.

This was documented during the pastoral visit to the Bellagio region made between 1589 and 1593 by the bishop of Como, Feliciano Ninguarda, who wrote that since the church of St. Peter’s had already been profaned, mass had to be celebrated in the chapel built on top of the promontory.

The region enjoyed relative peace from the end of the 14th into the 15th century. By this time, Bellagio – close to the Alps and northern Europe – had become an important trading center for silk, spices, textiles, and food. A 1376 document 14 in which Gian Galeazzo Visconti granted tax exemptions to Antonio di Licino, one of the chamberlains of Visconti’s father, indicates that, at that time, the property was a farm where olive and grapes were cultivated.

When Gian Galeazzo died in 1402, his son Filippo Maria inherited the property and became Duke of Milan. In 1418 the property was sold to Blasio Malacrida, whose family, in spite of being Guelph, had sworn loyalty to Filippo Maria and so was granted the same tax exemptions. Perhaps because of the growth in trade, a new port was built in Bellagio during this time. In 1447, when Filippo Maria died without heirs, a group of noble families claimed the Ambrosian Republic in Milan. However, Francesco Sforza, son-in-law of Filippo Maria and commander of his troops, became Duke of Milan and seized control of the area, including Bellagio.

Sforza was an efficient ruler and the next 40 years were prosperous for Bellagio. In 1483, Blasio Malacrida’s son, Gabriele Malacrida, suffered financial difficulties and began selling portions of the property his father had purchased. In 1486, the entire property was sold to Daniele Birago, commendatory abbot of the Abbey of Rona, who in turn sold it around 1489 to Marchesino Stanga, 15 son of Cristoforo Stanga, who had been Captain of the Larius. Marchesino belonged to a noble family of Cremona, and was the first Count of Castelnuovo Bocca d’Adda (southeast of Milan). He served as secretary to Francesco Sforza, and was a friend of Francesco’s son, Ludovico Sforza, who was known as “the Moor.”

Marchesino’s 15th century deed of sale provides a full description of the property where the Bellagio Center now stands. It mentions a piece of land, in part terraced, part rocky, with vineyards, olive groves, hay fields, bush

Quest’ultima linea diretta venne confermata anche dal figlio Gian Galeazzo Visconti (1351-1402) il quale, inoltre, ordinò espressamente che il castello non avrebbe più dovuto essere ricostruito. Tutto questo comportò la distruzione delle mura e del mastio, mentre fu risparmiata solamente la struttura che s’è sempre considerata una cappella (d’età romanica) come attestato anche dalla relazione della visita pastorale alla pieve di Bellagio, effettuata tra il 1589 e il 1593 dal vescovo di Como Feliciano Ninguarda. Egli sostiene che, essendo ormai stata profanata la chiesa di S. Pietro, la Messa doveva essere celebrata nella cappella costruita sulla sommità del promontorio.

Alla fine del XIV secolo, grazie ad una situazione di relativa tranquillità politica, l’economia e i commerci ripresero vigore. Bellagio era divenuto un importante nodo commerciale per la seta, i tessuti, le spezie ed altri generi alimentari anche grazie alla sua vicinanza con le Alpi ed il Nord Europa. Come ci attesta un documento del 1376 14, in cui si evince che Gian Galeazzo Visconti concedeva dei privilegi fiscali ad Antonio di Licino, uno dei ciambellani di suo padre, la proprietà era diventata un’azienda agricola in cui si coltivavano viti ed ulivi. Alla morte di Gian Galeazzo, nel 1402, suo figlio Filippo Maria ereditò la proprietà e divenne Duca di Milano. Nel 1418 la proprietà fu venduta a Blasio Malacrida la cui famiglia, nonostante fosse guelfa, aveva giurato fedeltà a Filippo Maria e alla quale furono concesse le medesime esenzioni fiscali. Durante questo periodo, forse per la continua espansione commerciale, a Bellagio venne edificato un nuovo porto. Nel 1447 Filippo Maria morì senza lasciare eredi e per questa ragione un gruppo di famiglie nobili milanesi decise di proclamare la Repubblica Ambrosiana. Tuttavia, Francesco Sforza, già condottiero di Filippo Maria, nonché suo genero, sconfisse le truppe della Repubblica Ambrosiana e divenne Duca di Milano.

I successivi 40 anni furono prosperi per Bellagio, anche grazie alle capacità direttive dello Sforza. Nel 1483 Gabriele Malacrida, figlio di Blasio, trovandosi in gravi difficoltà finanziarie, iniziò ad alienare parte dei suoi possedimenti. Alcuni anni più tardi, nel 1486, l’intera proprietà fu venduta a Daniele Birago, abate commendatario dell’abbazia di Rona che a sua volta la rivenne, tre anni più tardi a Marchesino Stanga 15, figlio di Cristoforo, già nominato in precedenza. Costui apparteneva ad una nobile famiglia cremonese, fu il primo Conte di Castelnuovo Bocca d’Adda (a sud-est di Milano), ma soprattutto era segretario ed amico personale di Ludovico il Moro, figlio di Francesco Sforza.

Molto interessante è l’atto di vendita della proprietà allo Stanga che fornisce una descrizione dettagliata del territorio su cui ora si erge il Bellagio Center: in parte terrazzato, in parte roccioso, costituito da vigneti, oliveti, boschi, campi coltivati e prati. Include anche una torre diroccata (probabil-


land, and lowland. It also includes a ruined tower, probably that on the top of the promontory, and a defensive wall with small towers (very likely the current Bellagio Center studios called Santa Caterina and San Francesco), a house for the farmer and one for his tenant (these no longer exist), and two water cisterns: one near the tower, seen today by the ruins of what was once the chapel of the promontory, and the other near the house, on the east terrace of the current Villa. Finally, the deed of sale also includes the church of St. Peter's, with the bell tower that is now part of the Villa.

The document indicates as well that the boundaries of the property were much the same as they are today. On the south, north, and east, the property was bordered by the lake and on the west by the town. Below the house of the owner, there was another building that belonged to an Antonio Maranese.16 It is no surprise that this building is still called “Il Maranese.”

16 Maranese, very likely a transformation of Maranesi, is still a very common last name in Bellagio.


16 Maranesi, sicura trasformazione di Maranesi, è un cognome ancora oggi molto diffuso a Bellagio.
Opposite page: Santa Caterina studio, and detail of a fresco, probably the coat of arms of the Stanga family.

This page: San Francesco studio, and detail of inscription above its door, “Guardian of the Forest.”
Above: Water cistern in the east terrace
Below: The castle of Bellagio.
Print dedicated to Duke Serbelloni Storondi by the Artaria editors
Next pages: The Maranese, Bellagio Center

A fianco: La cisterna per l’acqua, presso la terrazza est della Villa
Sotto: Il castello di Bellagio.
Stampa dedicata al Sig. Duca Serbelloni Storondi dagli editori Artaria
Pagine seguenti: Il Maranese, Bellagio Center
THE PROPERTY DURING MARCHESINO STANGA’S TIME

When M archesino bought the property, he decided to build what would be the first Renaissance residential villa on Lake Como, an edifice that was not linked to agricultural activities. Set in the middle of the hill, facing south, it was considered to be such an important building that the cartographer who illustrated Paolo Giovio’s “Larius” some years later (1537) included not just Bellagio but the building itself, calling it Marchesina Villa.

A more detailed image of the building can be seen in one of the frescoes commissioned by Gian Giacomo Medici, the so-called Medeghino, to commemorate his defeat of the Spanish. Painted around 1532-1537 and kept in the Castle of M elegnano, the fresco shows the enormous rectangular villa with symmetrical openings, between two towers, one of which is that of St. Peter’s and the other, probably part of an older fortified structure. As it appears in the fresco, the image is not entirely accurate; though the villa is turned toward the northwest to better depict the battle honored by the fresco, this image tells us a great deal about the importance of the property at that time.

Marchesino probably built his castle in Bellagio, so far away from Milan, at the behest of Francesco Sforza, who had realized in an expedition to the Valtellina in 1486 that the location had great potential as a way station for important travellers on the lake. Soon after Marchesino finished the construction of this luxurious palace in December 1493, he began to receive many distinguished guests and carried out governmental and confidential tasks.

For example, in 1497, Sforza requested M archesino Stanga to press Leonardo to finish the fresco of The Last Supper in the Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan. It was between 1493 and 1518 that Leonardo, appointed court engineer in this region, described the Fiumelatte (small river near Varenna) in his Codex Atlanticus (now in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan):

Opposite Castel Bellagio is the Fiume Latte which falls from a height of more than 20 yards from the source whence it springs, perpendicularly, into the lake with an inconceivable roar and noise. The spring flows only in August and September.

In the political arena, Marchesino’s influence was also important. He helped Ludovico Sforza, who was worried about France’s control over the area, to arrange for Ludovico’s niece, Bianca Maria, to marry the son and heir of the Hapsburg emperor, Frederick III, the future Maximilian I. The marriage was celebrated by proxy in August 1493, in the cathedral of Milan.

È molto probabile che M archesino abbia deciso di costruire un palazzo a Bellagio, così distante da Milano, su richiesta dello stesso Sforza che, in una delle sue spedizioni in Valtellina nel 1486, aveva valutato la potenzialità di questo luogo quale utile approdo per i viaggiatori sul lago. La costruzione di questo sontuoso palazzo terminò infatti nel dicembre del 1493 e M archesino cominciò presto a ricevere ospiti di rango elevato, svolgendo incarichi di carattere governativo e confidenziale. Nel 1497, ad esempio, lo Sforza richiese il suo intervento per sollecitare Leonardo a portare a termine l’affresco raffigurante L’Ultima Cena in Santa Maria delle Grazie a Milano. Fu tra il 1483 ed il 1518 che Leonardo, nominato ingegnere di corte in questa regione, riportò nel suo Codice Atlantico (ora nella Biblioteca Ambrosiana di Milano) le proprie impressioni su quest’area in una descrizione del Fiume Latte effettuata da Bellagio:

Riscontro a Bellagio castello è il fiume laccio, il quale cade da alto più che braccia 100, dalla vena donde nasce, a piombo nel lago, con inestimabile strepito e romore. Questa vena versa solamente agosto e settembre.

Anche nell’arena politica l’influenza di Marchesino acquisì una notevole importanza. Difese ad esempio il suo intervento per sollecitare Leonardo a portare a termine l’affresco raffigurante L’Ultima Cena in Santa Maria delle Grazie a Milano. Fu tra il 1483 ed il 1518 che Leonardo, nominato ingegnere di corte in questa regione, riportò nel suo Codice Atlantico (ora nella Biblioteca Ambrosiana di Milano) le proprie impressioni su quest’area in una descrizione del Fiume Latte effettuata da Bellagio:

La proprietà nell’età di Marchesino Stanga

Quando M archesino acquistò la proprietà diede subito inizio alla costruzione di un palazzo che sarebbe stato in seguito considerato come la prima dimora rinascimentale con finalità unicamente abitative, disgiunta daologia e romanica. Costruita a metà del quindicennio, rivolta verso sud, fu ritenuta di tale importanza che il cartografo che illustrò solo pochi anni dopo (1537) il Larius di Paolo Giovio, indica non solo Bellagio, ma nello specifico la dimora come Marchesina Villa.

Un’immagine più fedele della struttura edificata dallo Stanga è riconoscibile in uno degli affreschi commissionati da Gian Giacomo Medici, detto il Medeghino, per commemorare lo scontro con le truppe spagnole e la loro sconfitta. Nell’affresco, dipinto fra il 1532 e il 1537 e conservato nella Sala delle Battaglie del Castello di Melegnano, si vede chiaramente un palazzo di grandi dimensioni, dalla struttura rettangolare, con aperture simmetriche, compreso tra due torri. L’una è quella della chiesa di S. Pietro e l’altra era, probabilmente, qualche resto delle precedenti fortificazioni.

Come si desume dall’affresco, l’immagine non è totalmente veritiera (in quanto la villa è leggermente girata verso nord-ovest per sottolineare il conflitto) ma la sua presenza fa percepire l’importanza assunta dalla proprietà in quell’epoca.
In early December, the bride and her family arrived in Como to meet the emperor’s representative, who would take her to her new home. They stayed in Marchesino’s palace at Bellagio, where he organized elaborate celebrations. Later, in 1496, the Villa was also visited by the emperor himself when he came both for official reasons and to enjoy some hunting.

Marchesino was probably the most influential owner of the property, and not just because he built a majestic Renaissance villa there. Before 1493, he had also given Bellagio a new defensive wall that made it look like a fortified city. Where there was once a drawbridge, the wall started at the upper part of a street in Bellagio that is now known as Salita Serbelloni. It stretched down to the current Genazzini-Metropole Hotel, which stands near the point that marked the entrance to Marchesino’s walled city. The wall then ran all the way to the small castle of the Captain of the Larius, bulwark of the city, up to the San Giacomo church, linked it to the tower in the south of the square, and went further to the drawbridge at the top of Salita Serbelloni.

Ludovico Sforza was Marchesino’s guest on several occasions. In 1499, Ludovico made Bellagio a fief of Stanga—independent of Como and with its own jurisdiction. That same year both men were caught by the French, who wanted to take over the Duchy of Milan. Marchesino died in 1500 in the...
Opposite page: Bellagio square tower and bridge, previously part of the Villa Serbelloni’s walls, Bellagio

Below: Bellagio square tower (yesterday)

Pagina a fianco:
La Torre nella piazza di Bellagio
con l’annesso ponte,
già parte delle mura della Villa Serbelloni

Sopra: La Torre nella piazza (ieri)
non fu più assoggettato alla giurisdizione di Como. Lo stesso anno furono entrambi catturati dai Francesi che volevano impossessarsi del Ducato di Milano. Marchesino venne imprigionato nel Castello Sforzesco\textsuperscript{20} dove morì nel 1500 lasciando in eredità il promontorio alle figlie Beatrice e Barbara che lo vendettero nel 1539, quando era ormai seriamente in rovina, a Francesco Sfondrati.

\textsuperscript{20} Ludovico venne tenuto prigioniero nel castello di Loches, in Francia, dove morì nel 1508.
THE SFONDRATI FAMILY

If Marchesino Stanga was among the most powerful owners of the Villa, the Sfondrati family was responsible for giving the property its enduring character by adding most of the current buildings. Renaissance genealogists believe the family came originally from Germany. According to family history, Conrad, one of the first to come to Italy, tore a branch from a nearby tree when his sword broke in battle and used it to beat his enemies, forcing them to flee. He came to be called Sfondratus, after the Italian verb sfrondare, meaning to clean up a branch to make it useful, and the family became known as the Sfondrati. The emblem of the family is a tree with a branch missing.

The first half of the 16th century, a period during which the Sfondrati became owners of the property, was an era of turmoil in the Lombardy region. Power changed hands frequently as a result of constant battles, many of which were carried out on the lake itself. Lake pirates, the Cavargnoni, rampaged and pillaged towns on the lake shores, causing great harm and injury throughout the area. In Bellagio, pirates inflicted heavy damage on the historic property on the promontory21.

In 1523, the battles between France and Spain, the two most prominent

GLI SFONDRATI

Se Marchesino Stanga risultò probabilmente essere tra i proprietari della Villa quello più influente, alla famiglia Sfondrati può sicuramente essere ricondotta la sua stabilità nel tempo attraverso la costruzione della maggior parte degli edifici odierni presenti sulla proprietà. Studiosi di genealogia del Rinascimento sostengono che la famiglia degli Sfondrati fosse originaria della Germania. Dalle vicende della stessa si evince che Conrad, uno dei primi a giungere in Italia, divenne il ramo di un albero per sostituire la spada che gli era spezzata in battaglia e, grazie a questo espediente, riuscì a sconfiggere i suoi nemici, costringendoli alla fuga. In seguito a questa sfortuna, venne soprannominato Sfondratus, e la famiglia, Sfondrati. Il suo emblema, infatti, è una pianta priva di un ramo.

La prima metà del XVI secolo, periodo in cui gli Sfondrati entrarono in possesso della proprietà, fu caratterizzata da molti cambiamenti relativi al controllo politico della Lombardia. Il potere continuava a passare di mano in mano a causa dei numerosi scontri, di cui lo stesso lago fu teatro, che spesso si riducevano ad azioni di pura brigantaggio e che funestavano tutta l’area. Queste incursioni di pirateria, operate dai feroci Cavargnoni anche a Bellagio, determinarono ingenti danni alla proprietà sul promontorio21.
Le due potenze principali a contendersi il controllo sulla regione erano Francia e Spagna, ma la situazione si inasprì ulteriormente quando nel 1537 quando un assalto causò danni significativi al piccolo castello del Capitano del Lario e alle abitazioni limitrofe. La struttura a cui diede vita è sostanzialmente quella che vediamo oggi: incorporò la chiesa di San Pietro nel palazzo prolungandolo ancora oggi: incorporò la chiesa di San Pietro nel palazzo prolungandolo verso ovest.

La situazione si assestò con l’ascesa al trono dello spagnolo Carlo V (1535), dando un vantaggio a Spagna. Poiché Francesco Stordati, membro di una famiglia con origini lariane, era stato alla corte spagnola in qualità di ambasciatore di Francisco II Sforza e aveva ampiamente dimostrato la propria lealtà verso questa corona, nel 1537 gli venne concessa la posizione strategica del Lario e della Valsassina insieme alla nobilissima di Duca della Riviera. Non essendo originario del luogo e non conoscendo le tradizioni, chiese al famoso storico comasco Paolo Giobino di fornirgli una relazione dettagliata di questa zona in quanto desiderava conoscere meglio i luoghi che avrebbe dovuto amministrare. Ecco perché il Giovio intraprese un viaggio in barca, toccando ogni paese situato sulle sponde del lago e scrisse il “Larius”, in cui descrisse le singole cittadine includendo parte della loro storia e delle loro caratteristiche. Sebbene fosse stata seriamente danneggiata dalle piraterie e dall'incuria, Giovio elogiò la proprietà che si distingueva sia per la naturale bellezza, che per la sua posizione militarmente strategica. Fu così che nel febbraio 1539, convinto forse anche dal rapporto del Giovio, Francesco Stordati acquistò tale proprietà dalle figlie dello Stanga.

Sebbene gli venne concessa da Carlo V la possibilità di costruire ovunque sulla proprietà, lo Stordati decise di rimanere sulle rive della villa dello Stanga. La struttura a cui diede vita è sostanzialmente quella che vediamo ancora oggi: incorporò la chiesa di S. Pietro nel palazzo prolungandolo verso ovest.

Il cuore della villa era un giardino interno che si estendeva fino al punto in cui oggi si trova lo studio “Veduta”. Pare che fosse una loggia colonnata ad ovest, che venne costruita seguendo le linee del “Larius”, nel quale venivano appunti descritte le singole cittadine includendo anche la storia di questi luoghi.

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Il cuore della villa era un giardino interno che si estendeva fino al punto in cui oggi si trova lo studio “Veduta”. Pare che fosse una loggia colonnata ad ovest, che venne costruita seguendo le linee del “Larius”, nel quale venivano appunti descritte le singole cittadine includendo anche la storia di questi luoghi.

Le due potenze principali a contendersi il controllo sulla regione erano Francia e Spagna, ma la situazione si inasprì ulteriormente quando nel 1537 quando un assalto causò danni significativi al piccolo castello del Capitano del Lario e alle abitazioni limitrofe. La struttura a cui diede vita è sostanzialmente quella che vediamo oggi: incorporò la chiesa di San Pietro nel palazzo prolungandolo verso ovest.

La situazione si assestò con l’ascesa al trono dello spagnolo Carlo V (1535), dando un vantaggio a Spagna. Poiché Francesco Stordati, membro di una famiglia famosa di origine lariana, era stato alla corte spagnola in qualità di ambasciatore di Francisco II Sforza e aveva ampiamente dimostrato la propria lealtà verso questa corona, nel 1537 gli venne concessa la posizione strategica del Lario e della Valsassina insieme alla nobilissima di Duca della Riviera. Non essendo originario del luogo e non conoscendo le tradizioni, chiese al famoso storico comasco Paolo Giobino di fornirgli una relazione dettagliata di questa zona in quanto desiderava conoscere meglio i luoghi che avrebbe dovuto amministrare. Ecco perché il Giovio intraprese un viaggio in barca, toccando ogni paese situato sulle sponde del lago e scrisse il “Larius”, in cui descrisse le singole cittadine includendo anche la storia di questi luoghi.
Concession by Charles V, undersigned by the Senate of Milan, which allows Count Francesco Sforzati to publish the documents related to the properties of Bellagio in Milan, instead of the Bishopric of Como. Milan, March 1st, 1540.
The Emperor Charles V confers a special authorization to the senator Francesco Sforzati, due to his political and social role. The document follows the concession received by Francesco Sforzati in 1538 of Bellagio Feud and the authorization to restore the palace. E sino Lario, Archivio Pietro Pensa
mention a more colorful landscape; in 1567, for example, Tuscan writer Tomaso Porcacchi visited Lake Como and described the Bellagio property this way:

“...At the present time there is here a proud and magnificent palace, adequate for the entertainment of any large and numerous group of gentlemen; ... in its spacious courtyard, this palace has a charming and delightful garden with fine orange and citrus trees; and on the hill below the fortress, surrounded by high crenellated walls with abutments, are everywhere figs, olives, and laurels in great abundance and all sorts of fruit trees... which adorn the hill that nature could not have made more beautiful...”

When his wife died, Francesco started a new career in the church; he served as ambassador to Pope Paul III and became cardinal in 1544. The property was left to his sons, Nicolò and Giovanni Paolo. Nicolò became Duke of the Riviera and followed an ecclesiastical career, later becoming bishop of Cremona; Giovanni Paolo became Baron of the Vallassina. Nicolò improved the property, which was later attended to by Giovanni Paolo, who had married Sigismonda d’Este, a daughter of one of the most influential families in northern Italy. The two brothers developed a strategy to obtain the cardinalship for Nicolò. Giovanni Paolo moved to the Vatican and began a diplomatic career.

Nel 1567, per esempio, lo scrittore toscano Tomaso Porcacchi, fece visita al Lago di Como e descrisse così la proprietà di Bellagio:

“...Qui si erge un magnifico e superbo palazzo, in grado di dare ospitalità a numerose persone; ... nella sua corte spaziosa questo palazzo presenta un giardino incantevole ed affascinante con aranci e limoni di qualità superiore; e sulla collina al di sotto della fortezza, circondata da alte mura merlate vi sono ovunque fichi, ulivi ed alberi in grande abbondanza e tutti i tipi di alberi da frutta ... che adornano la collina che la natura non avrebbe potuto creare più bella...”


I due fratelli avevano messo in atto una strategia per far sì che Nicolò ottenessa la nomina cardinalizia. Giovanni Paolo si era trasferito in Vaticano,
He was ambassador for Philip II of Spain at the court of Savoy in Turin (as his father had served for Charles V, Philip II’s father), and he became acquainted with Cardinal Borromeo (future Saint Charles of Milan). The Cardinal visited him in Bellagio and was so impressed that he soon went to Rome, where he spoke to Pope Gregory XIII on Nicolò’s behalf. Nicolò was finally appointed cardinal in December 1583.

Giovanni Paolo was a great diplomat; for his service he was awarded the order of Santiago (Saint James of Compostela), one of the three highest orders at the king’s disposal. He died prematurely, leaving three sons: Ercole, Francesco, and Paolo Camillo, who also followed the ecclesiastic career.

Nicolò Sfondrati became Pope Gregory XIV in 1590. Though he was a very religious man and concerned with pastoral issues, he was ill-prepared for the challenges of the papacy. Not only did he lack experience in political affairs; he granted key positions to family members who were as unsuitable for them as he was for the papacy. He appointed Ercole as commander of all papal forces and promoted Paolo Camillo as cardinal and, soon afterwards, secretary of state with power over all civilian matters.

Pope Gregory XIV died 10 months later, and Ercole retired to Bellagio, as he had inherited the property. He discovered that the Cavagnoni had resumed their evil activities, continuing to plunder and kidnap for ransom around the lake in boats that they kept hidden near Menaggio. When they attempted to conquer the town of Asso in 1591, Ercole defeated them; this was the last raid the Cavagnoni ever attempted. With this new stability, the lake acquired prestige and was again the place where people wanted to build palaces or agricultural enterprises. Having secured peace, Ercole decided, like the first Sfondrati, to become a builder. His first building was the small chapel of the Madonna del Monserrato. It is on the southern side of the promontory and, though solidly based, seems to be perched on a great slab of limestone.

It is an 18th-century reconstruction of the original chapel that had been built a little lower, of which only some ruins among the vegetation are visible today. The current chapel, built because the original was thought to be unstable, has a Gothic Revival style, painted in red (now quite faded by exposure to the elements), with a small circular rose-window on the central top. An inscription in stone built into its inner wall reads:

HERCULES SFONDRA TUS
S.R. ECCLAE
CAPS. GEN. S
ANNO M.D.XXXXXI

ERcole SFONDRA TUS
of the Holy Roman Church
Captain General
In the year 1591

Papal forces and promoted Paolo Camillo as cardinal and, soon afterwards, secretary of state with power over all civilian matters.

intraprendendo la carriera diplomatica. Era ambasciatore di Filippo II di Spagna alla corte del Savoia a Torino (poiché suo padre aveva servito Carlo V, padre di Filippo II) ed aveva fatto la conoscenza del Cardinale Borromeo (il futuro San Carlo), che gli aveva fatto visita a Bellagio. In seguito a questa visita, al suo rientro a Roma, il Cardinale Borromeo parlò al Papa Gregorio XIII di Nicolò, che venne infine nominato cardinale nel dicembre 1583.

Giovanni Paolo, gran diplomatico, ricevette successivamente l’ordine di Santiago, uno dei tre ordini maggiori a disposizione del re. Morì prematuramente lasciando tre figli: Ercole, Francesco e Paolo Camillo, che intrapresero a sua volta la carriera ecclesiastica. Nicolò Sfondrati divenne pontefice nel 1590 ma, se pur uomo di forte religiosità e fondata mente conquistò la pace, decise così, come il primo degli Sfondrati, di abbellire la proprietà con nuove costruzioni.

Il primo edificio fu la piccola cappella della Madonna del Monserrato. Si trova sul lato sud del promontorio e, se pur con solide fondamenta, sembra quasi appollaiata su una gran lastra di calcare. È una ricostruzione ottimecenta della cappella originaria che era stata edificata poco più sotto e di cui non restano che pochi ruderi, avvolti dalla fitta vegetazione.

L’attuale cappella, costruita perché si riteneva che l’originaria fosse ormai pericolante, è in stile gotico revival, dipinta di rosso (ormai sbiadito dalle intemperie), con un piccolo rosone nella cuspide centrale. Sui due muri all’interno è conservata una lapide che cita:

HERCULES SFONDRA TUS
S.R. ECCLAE
CAPS. GEN. S
ANNO M.D.XXXXXI

ERcole SFONDRA TUS
Di Santa Romana Chiesa
Capitano Generale
Anno 1591

24 La posizione della cappella originaria è comprovabile anche da una mappa del Catasto Teresiano, dove è indicata con la lettera V. ASCo: Catasto Teresiano, mappa 74, foglio 7.
Above: Portrait of Ercole Sondrati
Below and opposite: Monserrato Chapel, Bellagio Center

Sopra: Ritratto di Ercole Sondrati
Sotto e a destra: Cappella del Monserrato
Iscrizione di Ercole Sfrondati, Cappella del Monserrato, Bellagio Center

Opposite page: Madonna con Bambino, olio su tela, Cappella del Monserrato
An oil painting of the 16th century inside the Monserrato shows the Virgin holding the Child in her arms before a jagged mountain range that the Child tries to cut with the saw in His hand. Because of the similarity of landscape, it is dedicated to the Virgin of Monserrato, a famous Spanish sanctuary honoring the Virgin; this dedication also demonstrates loyalty to the Spanish crown, which is further testified by the visit of two governors of Milan: The Count di Fuentes (1604) and Prince Ferdinand, brother of Philip IV, King of Spain (1634).

Ercole Sondrati later built another chapel, dedicated to Saint Nicholas. According to his contemporary historian Boldoni, there were 400 steps that, passing in front of this building, would link the castle on the top to the lakeshore. Today only ruins are visible among the vegetation. A map documenting the property when it was rented in 1887 includes a more accurate depiction of the chapels.

Ercole also began to develop the compound on the lakeside. In 1595 he built a residence for his cardinal brother, Paolo Camillo, next to a three-story tower, the complex currently known as Sondrata. The cardinal received guests in the great hall of its eastern wing where nine fine vaults rest on four granite pillars; these structures can still be seen today in what is now the dining room.
Opposite page: S fondrata dining room, Bellagio Center

This page: The S fondrata

Page a sinistra: S fondrata, sala da pranzo, Bellagio Center

Sopra: La S fondrata
Planimetry bound to the authorization for the construction of the Stendrato port (dock)

Planimetria allegata all'Autorizzazione della costruzione del porto (attuale darsena) della Stendrato
Opposite page: Spondrata Tower and Dock House (yesterday and today)
Above: F. Possenti Bagno della Villa Serbelloni, 1912, color lithography
Below: Villa Serbelloni beach
Next page: The Spondrata Tower
In 1591 Ercle married Lucrezia Cybo, from a noble family of Massa Carrara. Accustomed as she was to the splendor of court life, she found the Bellagio Villa too rustic for her taste. Thus Ercle built a villa for her in Varenna, where they enjoyed a more refined and elegant way of life than was possible in Bellagio.

To honor his wife after her death in 1609, Ercle was determined to construct a Capuchin monastery. He went to Milan and submitted to the Provincial Chapter his offer to give the land and bear the building expenses if they agreed to have the monastery on his property in Bellagio.

Early the following year, 14 Capuchins arrived, carrying with them the first foundation stone blessed by the general custodian of their order for the province. Ercle Sfondrati attended the placement of the first stone as a sign of devotion and, with this same aim, inhabitants of the neighboring towns volunteered to work toward the building’s construction.27

He attempted to construct a rich and ornamental building befitting his position, but the friars objected, insisting on following their principles of poverty and austerity. In 1613 a modest structure with a simple nave and a small side chapel dedicated to Saint Francis was consecrated as the Church of the Immaculate Conception.

Over time, the structure of the monastery changed to adapt to the needs of the monks. Though it initially housed a dozen monks, additional cells were built to house visitors and as a kind of infirmary. In 1717 the monastery was enlarged for the preaching monks, to counterbalance the Protestant influence arriving from the Valtellina region.

The building’s shape changed, then, from an open U to a closed square. The monks were buried either in a crypt inside the monastery or in a small cemetery below the Monserrato, near the lakeshore. The entire cemetery, however, vanished in the early 1970s into the lake due to a landslide.

Ercole was as concerned with the gardens on his property as he was with his construction work. He planted ivy toward both the Sondrata and the promontory, where he also built a meditation loggia that later became an impressive vantage point for taking in the northern side of the lake. He constructed huge pools to collect rainwater and joined them to an irrigation system that refreshed the gardens during summer heat.

In 1629 the monk Roberto Rusca described the gardens as full of orange, lemon, and pomegranate trees, as well as rose and jasmine bushes, all of which created a wonderful aroma. Within the park, among the box and laurel trees, were orderly rows of pines and cypress and paths inviting

Previous page: The Frati, Bellagio Center
Above: St. Francis, fresco, Frati
Below: “Memento mori”, fresco, Frati
Opposite page: Planimetry of the Frati
(first half 20th century)

Pagina precedente: L’edificio “Frati”, Bellagio Center
Sopra: S. Francesco, affresco, Frati
Sotto: “Memento mori”, affresco, Frati
A destra: planimetria del complesso Frati
(prima metà del XX secolo)
Frati corridor, first floor 
(before and after the renovation)

Opposite page: Frati cloister, 
detail before the renovation

Frati: il corridoio del primo piano, ieri e oggi

Pagina a destra: Il chiostro dei Frati, 
nel dettaglio come appariva prima 
degli interventi di ristrutturazione
The eastern cliff after the landslide of 1973, Bellagio Center

Opposite page: The "Meditation Loggia", detail of view of Varenna from the "Meditation Loggia"
relaxing strolls past cages holding small birds. Filippo Meda remarked on the richness and beauty of the gardens in 1639 during his visit to his brother, the guardian of the Capuchin monastery. He praised the salubrious environment, pleasing to all the senses, with its aroma of Olea fragans, abundance of fruit trees (peach, apple, quince, orange, cedar, lemon, pomegranate, walnut, etc.), rose bushes, tall plants (laurels, oaks, junipers and furs), and even caper trees.

Sondrati also cared for and protected the population of Bellagio. In 1630, during the Thirty Years’ War between France and Spain when mercenaries (called Lanzichenecchi) attacked many towns around the lake, the plague also arrived in the region. In order to avoid spreading the deadly disease, Ercole posted armed guards in barricades on the road leading to the town, as well as in lookouts along the shore, to prevent any strangers from getting too close. Alessandro Manzoni described this period with great sympathy in The Breadthrod.

As much as he could, Sondrati also attended to the needs of the people in his Riviera across the lake. Each day he placed on a rock offshore, known as “Il Sasso del Pane” (the bread rock), rations of grain for the inhabitants from the eastern shore, who would pay by placing their coins in a black Varenna marble bowl full of vinegar.

In the area, there was not a single case of the disease in Bellagio.

As a result of these strategies, there was not a single case of the disease in Bellagio.

Some years later Ercole died, followed soon by his son Valeriano. The property was then inherited by Ercole II, who, among other things, promoted the Baroque transformation of the San Giacomo church, closer to his property, so that it became the parish of Bellagio, taking over the title as such from the church in the neighboring district of San Giovanni.

When he died in 1684, Ercole II was succeeded by his son, Giuseppe Valeriano, who supported Austria rather than Spain, since the former then had power over Lombardy. He died in 1749; in addition to several daughters, his heirs were Ercole III, Francesco, and Carlo.

Ercole III had three children who died before him. Francesco followed the ecclesiastical career. Carlo, therefore, inherited everything. Though he tried to keep his feudal power, he lost it due to a stronger control by the State, which then was the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Carlo never married or had children and was therefore the last Count of the Riviera; in addition, he had to sell many of his properties to pay the debts of his father, his elder brother, and himself. He kept the property of Bellagio.

Inoltre, poiché aveva degli eredi orfani che non gli ereditò, cercò di fornire assistenza anche alla gente che abitava su quella sponda. Ogni giorno faceva posizionare su uno scoglio al largo, detto da allora “sasso del pane”, delle razioni di grano che venivano pagate con monete rateate sul medesimo scoglio, immerse in una ciotola di marmo riculma d’aceto. Grazie a questa strategia, a Bellagio non vi fu un solo caso di peste.

Alcuni anni dopo Ercole morì, seguito ben presto dal figlio Giuseppe. La proprietà venne dunque ereditata da Ercole II il quale si fece promotore anche della trasformazione barocca della chiesa di San Giacomo, più vicina alla proprietà, tanto che la stessa divenne la chiesa parrocchiale di Bellagio, estendendola oltre le mura del vicino distretto di San Giovanni. Alla sua morte, avvenuta nel 1684, gli successe il giovane figlio Giuseppe Valeriano il quale, seguendo il nuovo governo a cui era stata assegnata la Lombardia, abbandonò l’alleanza spagnola a favore dell’Austria. Morì nel 1749, avendo come eredi quattro figlie e i figli Ercole III, Francesco e Carlo. Ercole III ebbe a sua volta tre figli che morirono addirittura prima del padre. Francesco seguì la vocazione religiosa e fu dunque il fratello Carlo ad ereditare ogni bene. Sebbene tentasse di mantenere inalterato il proprio potere feudale, fu costretto ad assoggettarsi al nuovo potere dello Stato rappresentato dall’Impero Austro-Ungarico.

Egli, non avendo eredi diretti, fu l’ultimo conte della Riviera; si trovò inoltre
however, and when he died in 1788 he left it to his great friend Alessandro Serbelloni, asking him to also use Sfondrati as a second last name, becoming thus Serbelloni-Sfondrati.

a dover vendere molte delle sue proprietà per pagare i debiti del padre, del fratello maggiore e i propri. Mantenne, tuttavia, la proprietà di Bellagio che alla sua morte, avvenuta nel 1788, lasciò all’amico Alessandro Serbelloni, chiedendogli soltanto di aggiungere anche il cognome Sfondrati al proprio, diventando così Serbelloni-Sfondrati.
THE SERBELLONI FAMILY

Alessandro Serbelloni belonged to one of the richest and most noble families in Lombardy and was Gentleman of the Chamber to His Imperial and Royal Majesty in the court of Austria. Among the most important members of his well-known family was Fabrizio Serbelloni, an uncle, who was a cardinal and served as an ambassador of the Pope. A bust of Fabrizio Serbelloni stands in the gardens of the Villa today.

The Sfondratis and the Serbellonis had known each other for many years. Duke Gabrio Serbelloni, Alessandro’s father, had been under the order of the Superintendent General of the army in Milan, Giuseppe Valeriano Sfondrati (Carlo’s father). Carlo and Alessandro had been friends since they were children when the Serbellonis had a villa in Bolvedro of Tremezzo, and they spent summer vacations there, under the guidance of their tutor, the poet Giuseppe Parini. According to author Giosuè Carducci, a part of the poem *Il Giorno* (The Day) was written while Parini was in Bellagio as a guest of Carlo Sfondrati. In leaving the Bellagio property to his friend, Carlo might have asked Alessandro to join their two last names so that both might be perpetuated through Alessandro’s two sons. In 1802 Alessandro began to develop the property. He recognized the importance of making improvements in the town as well. He joined forces with the owners of the

I SERBELLONI

Alessandro Serbelloni apparteneva a una delle più nobili e ricche famiglie lombarde e ricopriva un ruolo importante alla corte austriaca (Gentiluomo della Camera di Sua Maestà Reale e Imperiale). Fra i più importanti membri della famosa famiglia vi era Fabrizio, zio di Alessandro, cardinale e nunzio papale a corte. Di lui si può ancora scorgere un busto posizionato nei giardini della villa.

Le due famiglie si conoscevano da anni. Il Duca Gabrio Serbelloni, padre di Alessandro, era agli ordini del Soprintendente generale Giuseppe Valeriano Sfondrati (padre di Carlo) nella milizia della città di Milano. Carlo e Alessandro si frequentavano fin da bambini in quanto i Serbelloni avevano una villa a Bolvedro di Tremezzo e li trascorreva le vacanze estive, sotto la guida del loro precettore, il poeta Giuseppe Parini. Secondo quanto testimonia Giosuè Carducci, una parte del poema *Il Giorno* fu composta dal Parini a Bellagio, mentre era ospite di Carlo Sfondrati. Quest’ultimo potrebbe aver chiesto ad Alessandro di unire al suo cognome il proprio, in modo tale che entrambi i nomi avrebbero potuto perpetuarsi nel tempo, avendo Alessandro due figli maschi a cui lasciare la proprietà.

Nel 1802 Alessandro incominciò a darsi da fare sia per la sua proprietà che per il paese di Bellagio. Unitamente a Carlo Venini, proprietario di Villa Giu-
Table showing the owners of Villa Serbelloni from the Sfondrati to The Rockefeller Foundation

Next page: Bust of Fabrizio Serbelloni, Bellagio Center

Schema del passaggio di proprietà dagli Sfondrati fino a The Rockefeller Foundation

Pagina seguente: Busta di Fabrizio Serbelloni, nel giardino del Bellagio Center
other two big villas in town: Carlo Venini, owner of Villa Giulia, and Marquis Ludovico Trotti, of Villa Trotti. Together they finished the road that links Erba (between Lecco and Como) to Bellagio.

Inside the property, Alessandro created 13 kilometers—some nine miles—of paths. He also built a tunnel below the castle, wide enough for his carriage. The tunnel was designed to allow a magnificent double perspective: standing in its midpoint one could see the town of Varenna across the lake on one side, beautifully framed by an arch of rocks; across the other side of the lake, the town of Tremezzo, home of the impressive Villa Carlotta, was also visible. Finally, in order to have better access to town, he transformed the external area of the walls into a wide set of steps that are still known as the Salita Serbelloni.

While he was carrying out all these improvements, Alessandro acknowledged the complexity of the tasks and the hard efforts required by his workers. Thus, he provided them with a simple meal, a dish of polenta, for lunch each day. The meal was prepared in a tower-like structure which still exists on the property today; it is known as the Polenta in honor of its important historical role.

Although these expensive construction projects, which required many
Previous pages: Some paths of the property, Bellagio Center
This page: View of Varenna from the tunnel
Opposite page: Polenta (yesterday and today)
Next page: One of the Villa's caves

Pagine precedenti:
Alcuni sentieri della proprietà, Bellagio Center
A lato: Veduta di Varenna dalla galleria
Pagina a destra: “Polenta” ieri e oggi
Pagina seguente: Una delle grotte presenti nei giardini della Villa
workers and a great deal of equipment, diminished Alessandro’s fortunes, he nevertheless committed resources to the gardens as well as to the buildings.

He introduced new kinds of trees, and also built the caves still found in the eastern terrace of the Villa. Alessandro carefully considered the potential viewing points he was creating and, as a result, one of the caves is said to be “five-fingered” because from its center one can enjoy five different views. Alessandro also placed a bust of his friend Carlo Sondrati in the east terrace of the Villa, the one that belonged to his uncle Fabrizio and he probably also installed the statue of Pliny in the niche that divides the roads leading to the castle perched on the promontory.

The Austrian Emperor Francis I visited Bellagio in 1816 and was so impressed by the beauty of the place that he returned in 1825 to visit the Serbelloni, Trotti, and Melzi villas. The town of Bellagio became famous among the European aristocracy as a result of his reports of its unmatched splendor. The gardens were also praised by the famous scholar Carlo Amoretti who visited them in 1815, as well as by the Swiss painter J. J. Wetzel who travelled to the region in 1816 to immortalize the Lombardy lakes. His fabulous drawings were soon translated into aquatints by the most important engravers of the time.

Consapevole della magnificenza delle viste panoramiche godibili da questo punto, creò la grotta detta delle “cinque dita” perché permette di osservare cinque punti differenti. Alessandro fece collocare anche un busto del suo amico Carlo Sondrati nella terrazza orientale della Villa, quello già menzionato in precedenza dello zio Fabrizio e molto probabilmente anche la statua di Plinio situata in una nicchia ad un crocevia di sentieri che conducono al castello sulla sommità del promontorio.

Quando nel 1816 l’imperatore d’Austria Francesco I visitò Bellagio, fu così colpito dalla bellezza dei luoghi che vi ritornò nel 1825, visitando le ville Serbelloni, Trotti e Melzi e, grazie alla sua testimonianza sull’incomparabile splendore di Bellagio, il borgo acquisì notorietà a livello europeo.

La bellezza dei giardini ci viene testimoniata anche dall’erudito e scienziato Carlo Amoretti che li visitò nel 1815, come pure dal pittore elvetico J. J. Wetzel che nel 1816 venne in Italia per immortalare i laghi lombardi. Le sue stupende vedute furono presto tradotte in acquatinte dai più importanti incisori dell’epoca. Alcune delle vedute dei suoi album hanno un commento: in quello dedicato alla villa se ne esalta la bellezza della posizione e il fascino del parco, ricco di punti panoramici, di cascate artificiali, di essenze arboree preziose 33.

Alla morte di Alessandro, avvenuta nel 1826, l’intera proprietà passò al fi-

Engraving by J. J. Wetzel, 19th century

Opposite page: Bust of Carlo Sondrati, Bellagio Center

Page 119: Frati Chapel, Bellagio Center with detail of the former altar

J. J. Wetzel, incisione, XIX sec.

A destra: Busto di Carlo Sondrati, Bellagio Center

Pagina 119: La chiesa sconsacrata dei "Frati" e nel dettaglio l'antico altare
Some landscapes in his albums are accompanied by a commentary praising the property’s beauty, the position and structure of the fascinating park, its remarkable panoramic views, artificial falls, and precious species of trees.\textsuperscript{33}

When Alessandro died in 1826, his first-born son, Ferdinando, inherited the property. Ferdinando’s inheritance was complicated by the fact that, like his father, he was pro-Austria while the other members of the family supported the French. In a historical moment characterized first by the French Revolution and then by the reinstatement of the Hapsburgs, such alliances were not without consequence. In spite of the Hapsburg Empire’s control over Lombardy, the ideals of freedom and independence introduced by Napoleon found fertile soil even in Bellagio. There, the Rezia brothers, sons of Giacomo Rezia, a general in the Napoleonic army, organized secret meetings in their home calling for action against the Empire. When they were discovered, one of them was sent to the Alcatraz-like Spielberg prison, where he received the same severe punishment as that of the patriot Silvio Pellico.\textsuperscript{34}

The Rezia brothers’ influence was strong. Many in Bellagio defended the liberal ideas of the French Revolution. Along with other lake town residents, people in Bellagio also participated in the revolutionary mutinies of 1821 and 1831, and especially in those of March 1848.


\textsuperscript{34} Silvio Pellico, author of Le mie prigioni (My Prisons), was a famous defender of the independence and freedom of Italy from Austria.

\textsuperscript{34} Silvio Pellico, famoso patriota piemontese, autore de Le mie prigioni.
After these events, the Austrian troops, who had taken the Capuchin monastery in Bellagio, were forced to surrender, only to take control again in August of the same year. Even though the soldiers had left, the monks believed that their church was profaned by the occupation and so abandoned the monastery.

The Frati, as the building is known today, continued to function as a free school for another century, as it had since the end of the 18th century. Its chapel remained in use until it was deconsecrated in the 1960s. In 1842 Ferdinand retired from his military career with the Austrian army and returned to the Bellagio property, being now able to take good care of it. Both the house and gardens had suffered so much in his absence that Princess Metternich, travelling in Italy with Emperor Ferdinand I in 1838, wrote that Villa Serbelloni was falling to ruin, that the vegetation was beautiful but uncurated for, chaotic, and overgrown.

Apparently the situation changed, since the property was again praised by many important visitors, including the French writers Gustave Flaubert and Stendhal. In 1845 Flaubert described the majesty of the trees, the beauty of the surrounding landscape, and noted that he found the concentration of natural splendor here such that he wished “to live here or die.”

Ferdinand had in mind to take control again only to take control again in August of the same year. Even though the soldiers had left, the monks believed that their church was profaned by the occupation and so abandoned the monastery.

Ferdinand’s most important contribution was the construction of the road for carriages that extends from behind the San Giacomo church in the town square to the Villa. The earth that resulted from the necessary excavation was used to fill the old port and create the open area that still exists between the Florence and the Metropole Hotels.

When he died in 1866, the property was inherited by his daughter Marianna, who had married Count Alberto Civelli. Their son was authorized in 1878 to live here or die.”

Stendhal, on the other hand, mentions the Villa with its old name of “Sfondrata” and places it among his “lieux enchanteurs”. In fact, in his most famous novel, The Charterhouse of Parma, he writes: “… the sacred wood of the Sfondrata, and the bold promontory which divides the two arms of the lake, that of Como, so voluptuous, and the other which runs towards Lecco, grimly severe: sublime and charming views which the most famous site in the world, the Bay of Naples, may equal, but does not surpass.”

Ferdinand died in 1858 and was buried, with his brother who had died four years before, in the cemetery of San Giacomo, where their parents already rested. Since he did not have children, the property then passed to Giuseppe Serbelloni, a cousin who allowed the property to fall once again into disrepair.

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Project to rearrange Villa Serbelloni in Bellagio
presented by Antonio Mella
to Countess Maria Serbelloni Crivelli,
June 1st, 1871.

Antonio Mella suggests some improvements
to Villa Serbelloni to transform it
into a luxury hotel.
Above: Detailed inventory of the Villa Serbelloni estate and assets prepared for the rent agreement with Hotel Grande Bretagne, Bellagio Center Archive

Below: Glimpse of the terrace as hotel annex

Opposite page: Two views of the Villa as hotel annex

A lato: Inventario dettagliato dei beni della Villa in occasione di una affitanza all’Hotel Grande Bretagne, Archivio Bellagio Center

Sotto: La Villa adibita ad albergo, Archivio Bellagio Center

Pagina a destra: La Villa adibita ad albergo
Fountain in the east terrace, (yesterday and today)

La fontana del giardino ad est della Villa, (ieri e oggi)
The Swiss Arturo Bucher, who in 1918 became the new owner of the hotel, decided to sell the Villa in 1929 to the American-born Principessa della Torre e Tasso, Ella Walker. However, aware as he was that the name “Villa Serbelloni” was well-known not only in Europe but all over the world, in the sales contract he maintained the right to continue to use the name; from then on the Grand Hotel Bellagio becomes the Grand Hotel Villa Serbelloni.

Tissot indicates that “this hotel is like an auction room; it is a sorry place with a mortuary odour. The park makes up for all these unhappy aspects by the seduction of its gardens, the variety of its plants, and their odours, the beauty of its magnolia trees and palms, the diversity of its splendid vistas…”  

Fauré, who chose the park of the Villa as the setting for one of his best novels, “L’amour sous les lauriers-roses” (1905), gives nothing but praise in the long description in his tour guide.

In 1907, the owner of the Grand Hotel Bellagio bought the property and retained some 40 gardeners to tend the park and gardens.

Avendo però ben compreso che il nome della Villa Serbelloni era conosciuto non solo in Europa, ma in tutto il mondo, si riserva con una clausola nel contratto di vendita, di poterlo utilizzare come marchio. Da allora il Grand Hotel Bellagio diventa Grand Hotel Villa Serbelloni.

Tessere indica che “questo hotel è come una sala d’aste; è un luogo misero, con un’aria funesta. Il parco compensa tutti questi avvilenti aspetti con la seduzione dei suoi giardini, la varietà delle sue piante, ed i loro profumi, la bellezza delle magnolie e delle palme, la diversità dei suoi splendidi panorami…”

Fauré, invece, che ambientò uno dei suoi romanzi migliori, L’amour sous les lauriers-roses (1905), proprio nell’incantevole parco della villa, è prodigo di lodi nella lunga descrizione che fornisce all’interno della sua guida.

Nel 1907 il proprietario del Grand Hotel Bellagio acquistò la proprietà mantenendo in forza ben 40 giardinieri per far fronte alla manutenzione di parco e giardini. Lo svizzero Arturo Bucher, che era diventato il nuovo proprietario dell’Hotel nel 1918, decide di vendere la villa nel 1929 all’americana Ella Walker, principe della Torre e Tasso.

37 Marc Tissot, The Innocents Abroad in: The Unabridged Mark Twain (USA: Running Press, 1976), I, 112.

38 V. T ISS OT, La Suisse inconnue, in Larius 1966, tomo II, vol. 2, pp. 63-64.
Descendant of a wealthy American family, Ella Holbrook Walker was born in Detroit, Michigan, on August 17, 1875. Her grandfather, Hiram Walker, founded the famous Canadian Club Whiskey distillery, envisioned and developed the entire community of Walkerville. A millionaire from birth, Ella lived in Detroit as a young child, but, traveling frequently, she spent most of her life in Europe. In 1897 she visited Egypt, where she met Count Manfred von Matuschka, an officer in the Bodyguard Regiment of the German Emperor William II and they married soon afterwards.

She lived with him in his home in Bechau, Silesia, a historical region of Central Europe located mostly in present-day Germany, Poland, and the Czech Republic. They did not have children of their own, but she convinced the Count to adopt two of his nieces.40 The younger sister, who had always been fragile, died in her early twenties. Ella always cared for the other sister, Huberta von Matuschka, who later married Baron Hans von Schoen of Germany, and had a son and two daughters, all of whom remained close to their aunt Ella.

In 1921 Ella moved by herself to Rome and some years later she married again, this time to James Hazen Hyde, a wealthy American, with whom she
Parigi. La loro unione, però, dura solo pochi mesi ed Ella torna presto a Roma, ospitata nel palazzo di una cara amica, la Duchessa Vittoria Sermoneta.

Quando, nel 1929, il Grand Hotel Bellagio mette in vendita la Villa Serbelloni, acquista la proprietà ma continua ad abitare a Roma anche durante i restauri della Villa che torna ad essere nuovamente una residenza privata. Questa trasformazione da albergo a residenza dura quasi due anni.

In 1932, Ella Walker married for the third and final time, to a prince of the Holy Roman Empire, Alexander Karl von Thurn und Taxis, Duke of Duino, near Trieste. Son of Princess Hohenlohe, to whom Rainer Maria Rilke dedicated his Duino Elegies, his name later became Alessandro Carlo della Torre e Tasso when Austria lost that region to Italy after World War I.

With this marriage Ella Walker became Her Very Serene Highness the Princess of the Holy Roman Empire Lady Ella della Torre e Tasso, Duchess of the Castle of Duino. When the prince died in 1937, the princess might have lost her title, which had been given to her only as a result of her marriage. However, in 1939, a royal decree signed by Vittorio Emanuele III, King of Italy, and Mussolini, as head of the Italian government, granted her the right to keep the title until her death.

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Nel 1932 si risposa, per la terza ed ultima volta, con un Principe del Sacro Romano Impero, Alexander Karl von Thurn und Taxis, anche Duca di Duino (vicino a Trieste) e figlio della Principessa Hohenlohe a cui il poeta e scrittore tedesco Rainer Maria Rilke dedicò le sue Elegie duinesi. Come conseguenza della Prima Guerra Mondiale, però, l'Austria aveva perso questa regione a favore dell'Italia ed il nome del principe divenne Alessandro Carlo della Torre e Tasso. Ella Walker in seguito al matrimonio con lo stesso, acquisisce il titolo di “Sua Altezza Serenissima Principessa del Sacro Romano Impero Donna Ella della Torre e Tasso, Duchess of the Castle of Duino”. Alla morte del principe, nel 1937, tale titolo sarebbe dovuto decadere, ma così nonostante nel 1939, per decreto regio firmato da Vittorio Emanuele III Re d'Italia e da Mussolini, in veste di Capo del Governo Italiano, ad Ella viene concesso il diritto di poterlo conservare fino alla morte.

I coniugi trascorrono la loro breve vita matrimoniale a Villa Serbelloni, che per la Principessa risulta essere, anche in seguito, la residenza prediletta. La
During their brief marriage, the prince and princess lived in Villa Serbelloni and the princess maintained residence there after her husband’s death. The Villa had, as previously mentioned, been restored as an elegant private home. The renovation was the work of architect Piero Magistretti, from Milan. On the first floor he remodeled the corridor that had been built when the Villa was a hotel, and he eliminated all the partitions added to create more guest rooms. The princess decorated the Villa by buying furniture and works of art, usually following the expert advice of her antiquarian friend, Duke Hely Tailleynrand de Perigord, and bringing furnishings from her other properties.

The princess is well remembered both among her relatives and the people of Bellagio, who still refer to her by her Italian title, Principessa. From Baroness Henriette von Schoen, daughter of her adopted daughter Huberta von Matuschka, we know that the Principessa was a very generous woman who was deeply concerned about others; she had a great sense of responsibility for her community and recognized that her wealth and position made it not just possible to help others but essential for her to do so.

The Baroness still has two of the last photographs taken of the Principessa. “The photo of my aunt walking in the park illustrates her personality perfectly,” she said. “The other, older one, shows her as she used to await her guests, walking in the park...”

Villa, come menzionato in precedenza, era già stata, a quel punto, trasformata in un’elegante residenza privata. La ristrutturazione era avvenuta sotto le direttive dell’architetto Piero Magistretti di Milano.

Al primo piano si era intervenuti sul corridoio costruito quando la villa era un hotel ed erano state eliminate tutte le pareti divisorie che, in tempi precedenti, erano state innalzate per avere più stanze. La Principessa comincia dunque ad arredare la Villa sia con mobili ed opere d’arte acquistate seguendo il consiglio dell’amico antiquario, Duca Hely Tailleynrand de Perigord, sia portandovi beni provenienti da altre sue proprietà.

La sua memoria è ancora particolarmente viva sia fra i suoi parenti diretti che fra gli stessi Bellagini che, parlando o riferendosi ad Ella Walker, la definiscono sempre “La Principessa”. Da un’intervista con la Baronessa Henriette von Schoen, figlia della figlia adottiva Huberta von Matuschka, la Principessa risulta essere una persona estremamente generosa, profondamente interessata al benessere altrui e con un forte senso di responsabilità verso la comunità: tutto questo dettato dalla consapevolezza che, sia la propria posizione, sia il cospicuo patrimonio di cui dispone, le forniscono l’opportunità di aiutare gli altri, cosa che per lei diventa assolutamente essenziale fare. La Baronessa possiede ancora due delle ultime fotografie scattate alla Principessa. "La foto di mia zia che cammina nel parco fa risaltare esattamente la sua personalità, ci dice. L’altra, antecedente, la ritrae quando
The Baroness' memories of her aunt confirm the Principessa's attention to detail and the concern and care with which she entertained her guests. Though we have no documentary records of visitors to the Villa during this time, it is well known that many distinguished personalities travelled to Bellagio to see the Principessa. She entertained, for instance, King Farouk of Egypt, a family friend whose parents she had known very well as a young woman in Egypt; Princess Jolanda, Countess Calvi di Bergolo, daughter of King Vittorio Emanuele III of Italy, and her children; the French poet Paul Valéry; and the man of letters and diplomat Duke Tommaso Gallarati Scotti, among others. According to her niece, the Principessa often invited friends and relatives to spend restorative time at the Villa when they were tired, worried, or grieving after the death of a loved one.

Today the peace and tranquility that was intrinsic to the property remains apparent and the Principessa's wealth and generosity are legendary. Helle Comneno, the Principessa's secretary for many years, described her as 'a beautiful woman of rather small stature, perfectly proportioned, with auburn hair which became perfectly white in her old age; a fair complexion,
magnificent blue eyes, and a marvelous smile; most affable and winning in her intercourse, but at the same time always full of dignity.

All who met her fell under the spell of her charm. She retained her beauty in her old age and was an extraordinary good-looking old lady, always dressed with perfect good taste and careful of her appearance. She had a remarkable character: a very strong will, a great sense of responsibility and duty, a keen intelligence combined with a practical mind, deep sympathy and understanding for the needs of those in trouble. She was always extremely generous, very straightforward, telling people to their faces what she thought.

She had a great sense of humor, which made her laugh a lot and look at the funny side of anything that happened around her. Her self-control was really astounding and many were the instances where she showed great power to control her feelings.

One such occasion occurred during World War II. In October 1943, Nazi Air Force officers appeared at the Villa and ordered the Principessa to leave within 24 hours. While the terrified members of her household nearly collapsed with anxiety and fear, the Principessa kept absolutely calm as she directed everything for her flight and quietly boarded the
In questa pagina: Nomina a Commendatrice titolare di S. Pietro di Deusto in Spagna, Roma, 16 novembre 1932

Pagina seguente: I giardini della Villa

Miss Comneno, poiché persona conosciuta, riesce a rimanere nella Villa che viene assegnata alle Forze Aeree Tedesche come luogo di degenza per ufficiali in convalescenza. Viene poi raggiunto un accordo con i Tedeschi che la riconoscono come legale rappresentante della proprietaria, e in tali vesti può rimanere a controllo nominale della tenuta, continuando ad occuparsi persino delle retribuzioni del personale attingendo da fondi ancora a sua disposizione. Uno fra i suoi compiti è di provvedere alla legna necessaria per il riscaldamento della Villa. Per un tacito accordo con gli occupanti, che non chiedono delucidazioni sulla provenienza della stessa, purché venga fornita quotidianamente, Miss Comneno fa in modo di farla arrivare di notte via lago, alla Sfondrata, consegnandola ai Tedeschi durante il giorno. Grazie alla sua ingegnosità nel procurarsi la legna al di fuori della proprietà, Miss Comneno riesce a preservare gli alberi dei giardini e del parco, molti fra cui già decennali o addirittura ancor più vecchi; piante che sono sopravvissute a guerre e battaglie di ogni genere e che permangono a testamento della lunga ed illustre storia della Villa.
In 1944 when Mussolini had installed the Salò Republic in Lake Garda, and being over the period during which the Villa Serbelloni had been under the control of the German Air Force, the property was handed over to the Salò Republic as an Ufficio Cerimoniale, a Protocol Section of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where the diplomats lodged in the Hotel Grande Bretagne could be received.

During this time, Miss Comneno was arrested because she was Greek (though many believed then and now that she was actually a Russian princess in exile) and confined for a time; nevertheless, the staff at the Villa kept her informed of everything happening on the property. For example, when the Germans were preparing to leave, they loaded trucks with furniture from the Villa.42

When Miss Comneno heard of this, she contacted a member of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs who had been a close friend of the Principessa’s first husband, and the furnishings were returned to the Villa. When it became clear to Italian authorities that the Germans might lose the war, they allowed Miss Comneno to return to the Villa and resume residence in her apartment in the former Capuchin monastery on the grounds. They required, however, that the gates of the property remain locked at all times, and two Italian sentries were posted at the main gate.

42 A precise description of all the plants and flowers in the Villa’s garden was made by O. Mazzoni who was a guest in 1924.
It was evident that Italian Foreign Office officials wished to have her as a witness to prove that they were not abusing the property. Miss Comneno was, in fact, obliged to sign a statement to that effect, which the Italians presented when they were arrested by the allied forces that later occupied Bellagio.

That year Bellagio, as well as the rest of the lake towns, was subject to incursions by the English air forces. Since the territory was controlled by the Salò Republic, the Allies wanted to block all civil and commercial communication. Thus, all kinds of boats with merchandise were systematically bombarded, as well as the railway that linked Lecco to the northern towns on the lake. Though the civil population was spared, it was challenging for everyone to get supplies and to cultivate the fields.

The basic products were rationed and bread, the most common food, was not made with wheat flour, but with sorghum or any other available ingredient. When the Fascists lost in April 1945, American soldiers took control over the Villa Serbelloni and started to distribute supplies among the population, partially solving the food shortage emergency.

After the war, the Principessa returned from Switzerland and spent the rest of her life in the Villa Serbelloni surrounded by her beloved gardens. According to Miss Comneno, the Villa was the Principessa’s favorite of her properties, the one closest to her heart. In 1959, feeling that the end of her life was near, Ella Walker began to consider options for the future of her lakeside retreat.

Princess Diane of Bourbon Parma, one of the Principessa’s step-granddaughters from her marriage to the Prince, remembers that the Principessa, concerned with Huberta’s delicate health and fearing that the property might become a burden for the family, discussed the matter with them. Always a great philanthropist, the Principessa expressed her hope that she could leave the beautiful property to an organization that would use it to be of benefit “to the world, particularly to Italy and the United States.”

While the Principessa considered many options, Helle Comneno played a decisive role in the Villa’s fate. Miss Comneno had visited Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, and had been impressed both by the renovation, partly paid for by J. D. Rockefeller, and by “the manner in which the place was kept.” As Miss Comneno put it, “the name Rockefeller seemed to me the symbol of great humanitarian and charitable activities.” So she contacted the American Consul General in Milan, Charles E. Rogers, who immediately wrote to the US Ambassador, the Honorable James David Zellerbach.

After Ambassador Zellerbach’s visit to the Bellagio property, and an exchange avvertendo di essere prossima alla fine, Ella Walker cominciò a prendere in considerazione diverse opzioni riguardanti il futuro della Villa.

La Principessa Diane de Bourbon, una fra le nipoti acquisite da Ella Walker in seguito al suo matrimonio con il Principe, ricorda come la Principessa, particolarmente preoccupata per lo stato di salute di Huberta (la figlia adottiva) e per il fatto che la proprietà avrebbe potuto costituire un pesante far- dello per la famiglia, abbia discusso di questo argomento con i vari membri della stessa. Gran filantropa da sempre, la Principessa espressò la sua disposizione di donare la sua bella proprietà ad un’organizzazione che la possa utilizzare a beneficio del mondo intero, ed in particolar modo per l’Italia e gli Stati Uniti d’America.

La Principessa prende dunque in considerazione diverse alternative ed ancora una volta il ruolo di Helle Comneno risulta essere decisivo per il destino della Villa. Una visita da lei effettuata alla cittadina di Williamsburg (Virginia), la affascina in modo particolare e rimane profondamente impressionata sia dal rinnovamento architettonico (pagato in parte da J. D. Rockefeller) sia da il modo in cui il posto veniva gestito. Miss Comneno spiega che il nome Rockefeller mi appariva come il simbolo di grandi attività umanitarie e filantropiche. Contattata quindi il Consul Generale americano a Milano, M. r. Charles E. Rogers, che scrisse immediatamente all’Ambasciatore americano, l’Onorevole James David Zellerbach.
In seguito alla visita di quest’ultimo alla proprietà e ad un cospicuo scambio di corrispondenza con Dean Rusk, l’allora presidente della Fondazione Rockefeller, alla Principessa vengono illustrate l’attività e la missione della Fondazione di cui resta particolarmente compiaciuta ed impressionata, tanto da indurla ad aggiungere alla donazione della proprietà anche tutte le opere d’arte e due milioni di dollari per supportare la manutenzione degli edifici e dei giardini. Inizialmente, tuttavia, malgrado la sbalorditiva generosità dell’offerta, i dirigenti della Fondazione non sono totalmente sicuri di poterla accettare. Cosa potrebbero farci – e come potrebbero giustificare il possesso – di una villa così lussuosa in una remota cittadina in un lontano Paese straniero? È la lungimiranza di Dean Rusk e la sua certezza dei molteplici utilizzi a cui la proprietà può essere destinata, in modo particolare come luogo d’incontro e discussione per la risoluzione di problemi che coinvolgono persone di tutto il mondo, a convincere, infine, i membri del Consiglio di Amministrazione che l’accettare questa donazione rafforzerebbe la missione ed il futuro della Fondazione.

Il 20 giugno 1959, solo una settimana dopo la firma dei documenti provvanti il trasferimento della proprietà, la Principessa muore nella sua stanza, quella che oggi è la biblioteca principale della Villa. Tutti i personale e molti fra i Bellagini si uniscono alla famiglia per l’estremo saluto. La salma viene trasferita nel Castello di Duino, dove riposa a fianco del suo consorte.
Acquiring the Villa represented an unusual challenge to the Foundation. Because the Principessa died unexpectedly so soon after making her gift official, there had been no time for the Foundation to determine the best future use of the Villa. The Foundation, therefore, invited a group of scholars to visit the property to discuss the possibilities; they decided that the buildings and grounds were perfectly suited for hosting a combination of residencies and small conferences.

It could be said that this initial group of scholars held Bellagio’s first conference. However, the property that they visited was quite different from the Bellagio Center we know today. The grounds were certainly expansive, but the Villa was the only building with a heating system. The park, neglected for a decade, had become overgrown and dark. Some twelve families of the staff were living in the property’s various buildings in apartments, most lacking indoor plumbing and electricity. The Sfondrata was used both to store corn and to serve as a barn, housing turkeys, ducks, and chickens, along with three cows (called Traviata, Aida, and Tosca), and a bull (Rigoletto) – the names a testament to the Principessa’s sense of humor.

Jesse Perry became the property’s first administrator on behalf of the Foundation.

LA FONDAZIONE ROCKEFELLER

L’acquisizione della Villa rappresentava un’insolita sfida per la Fondazione. L’inaspettata morte della Principessa, avvenuta immediatamente dopo l’ufficializzazione del donativo, non aveva lasciato il tempo materiale alla Fondazione per poter stabilire quale avrebbe potuto essere l’utilizzo migliore della Villa negli anni a seguire. La Fondazione invitò dunque un gruppo di studiosi a visitare la proprietà per discutere le varie alternative. Decisero che sia gli edifici che l’ambiente circostante fossero assolutamente idonei ad ospitare una combinazione di periodi dedicati a studiosi residenti e conferenze circonscritte ad un numero limitato di partecipanti. Si potrebbe tranquillamente asserire che questo primo gruppo di studiosi abbia costituito la prima conferenza tenutasi al Bellagio Center. La proprietà che loro visitarono presentava, tuttavia, una connotazione piuttosto differente rispetto all’attuale. Il territorio era certamente molto ampio, la Villa era l’unico edificio con un impianto di riscaldamento e il parco, trascurato da circa un decennio, era cresciuto a dismisura diventando intricato e buio.

Una dozzina di famiglie dello staff viveva in appartamenti dislocati nei vari edifici della proprietà, la maggior parte dei quali era senza neppure impianto idraulico interno ed elettricità. La Sfondrata veniva utilizzata come magazzino per il grano e come stalla, ospitando tacchini, anatre e polli insieme a tre mucche ed un toro – chiamati rispettivamente Traviata, Aida, Tosca e...
Planimetry of the Sfondrata (first half, 20th century)

La planimetria della Sfondrata (prima metà XX sec.)
The first steps he took included curtailing farming operations, selling the animals, and eliminating the oldest and no longer productive vines along with the crops needed to support the livestock. Much former farmland was turned into open fields and grassy gardens. Though it was impossible to maintain the Principessa’s large staff, Dean Rusk honored her wish to continue employing the staff through the initial transition period; additionally, Rusk made efforts in the following years to rehire former Villa employees whenever possible. Those who stayed on witnessed tremendous changes and modernization throughout the property, including both basic repairs and major renovations. In the Sfondrata, a dining room for guests was built, and confeferences were soon able to meet at the conference room in the Tower.

In the summer of 1959, John Marshall, associate director of the Rockefeller Foundation’s Humanities program, became director of the Villa. His annual reports frequently mention Helle Comneno’s invaluable assistance in running the Villa. During his leadership of almost 11 years, Marshall and his wife, Charlotte, made many changes to expand the number of available guest rooms. Many members of the Principessa’s staff, then working for the Bellagio Center, continued to live on the property and the Foundation never considered asking them to leave; instead, their living quarters were renovated, preparing them for future use as guest quarters.

Rigoletto, a testimonianza del gran senso dell’umorismo della Principessa che li aveva così apostrofati, Jesse Perry fu il primo amministratore della proprietà per conto della Fondazione. Iniziò a ridurre le attività agricole vendendo gli animali ed eliminando sia i vecchi vigneti non più produttivi, sia le coltivazioni necessarie al mantenimento del bestiame. Gran parte dei terreni precedentemente coltivati vennero sostituiti da estesi campi e zone a prato. Sebbene risultasse impossibile mantenere in forza tutto il personale della Principessa, Dean Rusk rispettò comunque il suo desiderio, continuando ad impiegarlo per tutto il periodo transitorio iniziale. Rusk fece inoltre, negli anni successivi, grandi sforzi per cercare di riassumerne, ogni qualvolta fosse possibile, ex dipendenti della Villa. Chi rimase, poté assistere alla realizzazione di consistenti cambiamenti e rimodernamenti in tutta la proprietà, da interventi di prima necessità a restauri di maggiore entità. Nella Sfondrata fu costruita una sala da pranzo per gli ospiti e ben presto i confe-rencieri furono in grado di riunirsi nella sala conferenze della Torre.

Nell’estate del 1959, John Marshall, associate director del Programma di Studi Umanistici della Fondazione Rockefeller, divenne direttore della Villa. Nei suoi rapporti annuali menziona frequentemente la preziosa assistenza, prestata da Helle Comneno, nella gestione della Villa. Durante la sua dire-zione, poco più che decennale, John Marshall e la moglie Charlotte appor-tarono numerosi cambiamenti per poter incrementare il numero di stanze disponibili per gli ospiti. Molti membri dello staff della Principessa, divenuti
As staff members retired and moved away, more and more spaces became available for conferees and residents. Miss Comneno stayed with the Foundation until 1963, assisting Bellagio Center administrators with management of the staff, as well as with the implementation of conferences and residencies. Some still remember her in her studio, above the current piano room.

During the early years, it was possible to have either a conference or residents, but rarely both. Residents would come with their families for periods of four days to three months. In 1960, the first full year of operation, there were eight conferences, 12 residents, and 58 employees, whose average salary was $56 per month. While serving as director, John Marshall and his wife wrote for internal use, “The Castle’s Keep,” a history of the property through World War II. He also hired M.R. Perugi, an administrator, to help him manage the Center by handling all the accounting and legal issues and entertaining guests, among other duties. One of the most exciting events during Marshall’s tenure at the Center was the June 30, 1963, visit of President John F. Kennedy, who stopped at the Center on his way from London to Rome. His trip most likely marked the very first time a helicopter had landed on the property.

In 1970, the Marshalls retired and William C. Olson, an associate director from the Foundation’s Humanities program and a scholar in international
relations, assumed management of the Center with his wife, Betsy. More changes followed, including the transformation of the circular Veduta from a fire pump location to its current incarnation as a studio. The Olsons also oversaw the conversion of the Casa sull’Acqua (Dock House) from a lakeside staff apartment to the setting for conference rooms that it is today. During their tenure, one of the Olsons’ biggest challenges was a landslide in 1973 that destroyed many of the paths on the north side of the property and that pushed the cemetery of the Frati monks into the lake. A geological exam is now part of the routine maintenance of the property, even in the area that, since the landslide, has been closed to guests and maintained as a natural reserve for birds.

In 1979 the Olsons left the Bellagio Center and the buildings and grounds manager, Roberto Celli, became director. His wife, Gianna, joined the staff in 1985, the year after the tower in the town square was donated to the town hall. The tower now houses several local associations.

All this time, staff would collect the grapes cultivated on the grounds to make one of the red wines served at dinner. Unfortunately, this tradition was terminated when it became too expensive.

In 1986-87, the Cellis oversaw a major renovation of all buildings except...
Work during the 1986 renovation
Page 176: Green house (yesterday and today)
Page 177: Villa’s main door (yesterday with some staff members and today)

I lavori di ristrutturazione del 1986
Pagina 176: La serra (ieri e oggi)
Pagina 177: L’ingresso della Villa (ieri con alcuni componenti dello staff e oggi)

For 18 months, the Bellagio Center did not host any guests and the office staff moved to the Frati, with the rest of the employees receiving training or taking vacations. In the Villa, all the windows in the front were replaced, their style changed, some bedrooms in the east wing on the first floor became offices, and rooms were modified to allow most of them to have a private studio. The current tea room and small dining room had been previously used by the staff, whose quarters were relocated one floor down, next to the kitchen; the main laundry, which had been on the west wing of the first floor, was moved to the Maranese, where four bedrooms and studios were created.

As a result of the improved facilities, it was possible to host up to 15 residents at a time, whereas previously only nine could be accommodated. The design of the main entrance to the entire property was developed and put into place, as we can see it today, and the Frati chapel was renovated. Since the conferees had been housed in different buildings, the Sfondrata was reconfigured so that a single compound could house 23 rooms for conferences. The stucco was removed from the Sfondrata tower, restoring its original style of Moltrasio stones.

After Roberto Celli’s sudden death in 1990, Francis X. Sutton, a former Ford Foundation vice president, stepped in as acting director for more than a year;
La biblioteca della Villa (ieri e oggi)
Pilar Palaciá, a Humanities professor and former general manager of the Latin American office of the Rockefeller Foundation, had been appointed the Bellagio Center managing director in January of that year. Considering that the last overall renovation was done more than 25 years before, it was again necessary to upgrade the facilities. Thanks to the support of Peter Madonia, chief operating officer of the Foundation, it has been possible to carry out major changes to the property. This time, however, it was decided to carry them out without interrupting activities, which presented a different kind of challenge.

Among the improvements that have been made in the current administration we can mention a complete transformation of the main kitchen and general laundry; renovation of the conference room and a whole new roof for the Villa; a larger Frati dining room; paving of the main road to reduce dust, and the addition of some bathrooms in the Sfondrata. These functional changes have been made alongside general maintenance projects which are no small undertaking, considering the age and diversity of the Center’s buildings.

Since the Foundation acquired Villa Serbelloni half a century ago, the directors and staff have tirelessly worked to make this historic property a modern center devoted to creative thinking, problem solving, and artistic endeavors.


In March 1998, Gianna Bellei Celli became managing director of the Bellagio Center. It was her idea to transform the Frati, where she was living at the time, into a second conference unit. This renovation, which lasted a year and a half, was particularly challenging because it aimed at combining the needs for a modern conference unit with the architectural style of a former monastery. With room for conferences of up to 19 people, the new Frati—the austere and intimate personality of the monks’ original structure intact—was inaugurated in September 2001. It was during this time that the Bellagio Center garage and second tennis court were built. After these changes the number of participants at the Bellagio Center conferences rose from around 600 in 2000 to more than 1100 in 2002, the first full year of the revitalized Frati’s operation.

In the summer of 2003—a particularly hot summer—she had an air-conditioning system installed at the Center. After the transformation of the Sfondrata porch into a conference room, a renovation completed in July 2005, Gianna retired.
Today the Center may host some 50 conferences and 150 residents annually. Since 1959, nearly 30,000 conference participants and 4,500 residents have come through the front gates, all intelligent and energetic individuals laboring in many fields, in many different countries, with the common aim of improving the general state of humanity.

By supporting them and preserving the magic atmosphere of the Bellagio Center, everyone from staff to guests has helped fulfill the Principessa’s dream and the Rockefeller Foundation’s goal of using this unique property to foster greater international understanding and create more transformative opportunities for people and communities all over the world.
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