

NEWSGRAM

News in brief from the Conservation Center

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Villa La Pietra

Twenty Years Since That First Visit

Today, **Villa La Pietra**, New York University's campus in Florence, is a vibrant nexus of undergraduate students, provocative international conferences, literary readings, edgy concerts, raucous plays, and clever pop-up exhibitions.

Twenty years ago, it was a very different place.

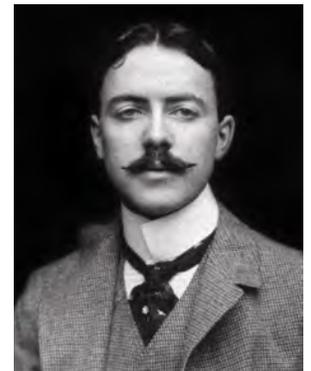
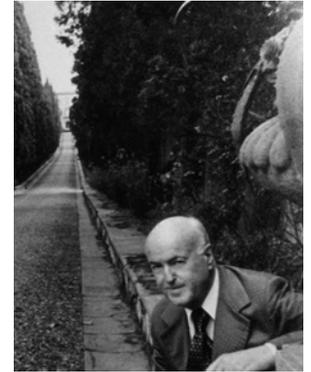
On a sweltering, muggy July day in 1995, Margaret (Peggy) Holben Ellis '79 drove slowly down the dusty *viale* while pondering her broad mandate assigned by top management: assess the Villa and its collections and suggest how they might fit into the education mission of NYU. A year earlier the property had been bequeathed to the University upon the death of Sir Harold Acton, the last member of the Acton family remaining at the Villa. Duncan Rice, then Vice-Chancellor of the University, and James McCredie, then Director of the Institute of Fine Arts, had designated Peggy as a representative of the University, in particular, of the Institute of Fine Arts, which seemed like the most *simpatico* potential partner for the Villa. La Pietra had initially been offered to the Institute itself, under the directorship of Craig Smyth, but it was decided that maintaining the Villa, in all its complexity, was better undertaken by the University as a whole.



Approaching the Villa from the viale

With the estate largely settled, eyes and ears were needed on the ground. Peggy, then Chairman of the Conservation Center, recalls, "I was directed to simply gather and share my thoughts and impressions" with Rice and then President Jay Oliva, "on how the Villa could be fitted into the complex curricula of NYU."

She was received with attitudes ranging from reverence to resentment. The Florentine art community felt keenly that La Pietra was part of its cultural patrimony, one of the last links to the world of the Anglo-American residents of Florence in the 19th and early 20th centuries. There was anxiety, occasionally erupting into anger, that what was most precious about the place—its quirky history, idiosyncratic decorative schemes, even its hard to describe "patina,"—could easily be destroyed. Indeed, it took years of gentle diplomacy for those feelings to fade; perhaps, they still linger in some parts, one hopes only as memories. Peggy's visit was intended to serve as a first step toward calming local suspicions and building a strong and trusting relationship between NYU and Florence. It helped that she was already well-acquainted with Italy, having been a fellow at the American Academy in Rome the previous year, the first conservator to win that prize.



The Acton Family (from top): Sir Harold Acton, photographed by Cecil Beaton (1904-1980); brother, Willim, photo c. 1920s; father, Arthur Acton; mother, Hortense Acton, painted around 1907 by Julius Rolshoven (1858-1930)



Harold Acton in the Sala da Pranzo, photo by London Weekend Television, 1976⁶

At the Villa itself, she says, “I felt like visiting royalty!” The skeletal staff was headed by Michael Holmes, former British consul and the first director of the Villa. Elisabetta Clementi, now the Assistant Director of Budget and Accounting, and Sabrina Melillo, now Immigration and Facilities Coordinator, had arrived shortly after Sir Harold’s death; Barbara Bonciani, now Assistant Director for Villa La Pietra Operations, had also joined the team. Key to the transition were Alexander Zielcke, who had been in residence at La Pietra for many years, and Andrea Scavetta, the attorney for the estate. Giovanni Conti, an antiquarian who had made the inventory of the collection was also frequently consulted. There were many discussions, but this being Florence, there was also plenty of good food—in particular, she remembers one “marvelous dinner in Fiesole in the refreshing evening air.”



The Medici tapestry and spirited wall color of the Camera Blu, shown here in 1997⁷

What now functions as a house museum was twenty years ago still a functioning house, one that had welcomed many visitors over the years. Most famously, Charles and Diana, the Prince and Princess of Wales, visited in the early years of their marriage, staying in the *Camera dei Genitori*, Sir Harold’s parents’ enormous bedroom overlooking the formal gardens. “I stayed in the blue bedroom (*Camera Blu*),” Peggy remembers. This somewhat cozier guest bedroom is named for the intense color of the walls, based on a paint recipe from 19th century Florentine art dealer Stefano Bardini, which shows the paintings, sculptures, and tapestries to full effect. The Villa has been added to and adapted over at least seven centuries, so the floorplan is labyrinthine. Like most of the



The study (above) piled with cards and papers in 1997, and a corridor, also 1997, showing the patched and dirty walls^{8,9}

rooms, the *Camera Blu* has multiple doors: one to the entrance foyer, another door leading to the adjoining bathroom (large enough to be a studio apartment in Manhattan housing an equally enormous tub), and yet another to the adjacent ballroom.

Peggy set up her computer on an antique inlaid tabletop near the window, overlooking the *viale*, the quarter mile long (then ragged) cypress-lined drive. Her meals were served to her in the *Sala da Pranzo*, where she was watched over by its 13th century polychrome sculptures and a relief by Donatello. Meanwhile in the kitchen, Sir Harold’s huge Bernese Mountain Dog Zorro, “ferocious looking” but actually sweet, was having his own dinner. Sir Harold himself was still virtually present. His clothes still hung in and his shoes still lined the floor of the armoire, and cards from Christmas 1993 were piled in his study.

“It was stifling hot, and filthy.” The housekeeping staff was overwhelmed; basic building maintenance had been postponed for years, if not decades. There was “evidence of dry rot in the attic, leaks in the roof, spalling of exterior stucco.” Where the paint was not peeling off the walls, it was streaked with dirt. All of the systems were antiquated. “I reached behind a tapestry and turned on a light switch and connected with an arc of electricity.” While she saw no mice, there were mouse-traps everywhere. “And there was a bat in the *Rotonda*,” the three story, sky-lit atrium in the center of the building. The atmosphere was “creepy, like Miss Havisham’s”, a reference to *Satis House*, the decrepit and dilapi-

dated residence from Charles Dickens' classic, "Great Expectations". The night guards said they heard wood worm munching on the rafters, and sometimes saw ghosts.

For five days, she explored "every nook and cranny in the Villa, including the attic and cellar." Simply moving through the rooms was difficult and slightly dangerous—the decoration was dense with furniture, every marble top of every gilded console was covered with ornate porcelain clocks, vases, mineral specimens, and glass knick-knacks while the carpets had gaping tears. Like the building, the collection had a neglected air. Paintings were flaking, many works were precariously installed, or might fall apart with the slightest touch. The textiles were in particularly bad shape: antique silk velvets and damasks used for upholstery, curtains, and wall coverings were shattered and worn and embedded with dirt. The tapestries, hung from metal rings in bright light for almost a century, were pulling apart from their own weight.

One aspect of the collection that struck her then has been an ongoing point of discussion: the blackamoors, sculptures of Africans, mostly in the guise of servants. "The one with the lantern in the *Ingresso*, the one with a plate of glass fruit at the top of the stairs, they were everywhere. And they made me uncomfortable." An integral part of the elaborate and highly personalized décor, how could they remain in a



Corey Smith Riley '06 treating a Villa tapestry

modern American university proud of its diverse faculty and student body?

The garden, created by the Actons at the beginning of the 20th century, was on its last legs. Many plants were reaching the end of their life cycles, as was the retaining wall supporting the *viale*. Sculptures were covered with moss, which, while adding its own romantic effect, was eating away at the stone. Shells were missing from the roccaille decoration; fountains were silent and stagnant. The garden staff,

some second generation at the Villa, did its best against enormous challenges.

Meanwhile, there were issues of security, liability, and access to be decided, yet, in that moment, it was unclear who was in charge. A few days after her visit, a group of paintings that had been stolen from the Villa decades before were recovered and returned. One of these, by Bernardo Daddi, had lost its frame during its adventures; who was to choose a new one?

"I was trying to think what we could possibly do with this place." Peggy wrote a report, a series of recommendations for the collections. It outlined the most basic steps needed to begin to address the various problems, but also hinted at the potential, which she described as "unique" and "limitless," "an unparalleled opportunity to explore and design innovative teaching and learning opportunities for our faculty and students."

Over the next twenty years, there would be huge progress. To begin with, the dirt and varmints were removed. A multi-year renovation of the building itself replaced the dangerous wiring and leaking roof. Under the administration of Villa Director Elyn Toscano, the art conservation policy at La Pietra is conservative and balanced: the goal is to preserve the individual objects, the unity of the collection, and the uniqueness of its display.



The Villa garden with Eliza Spaulding '10 (left) and Katie Patton '12



Amy Tjong '10 treating a marble sculpture from the Villa's collection

Francesca Baldry examining prints of the Acton children, Harold and William, after treatment, summer 2014



The program, overseen by Michele Marincola '90 since Peggy stepped down as Chairman in 2002, is based on partnerships between American and Italian conservators. With the help of Collection Manager Francesca Baldry, a core group of conservators has supervised numerous projects in which students from the Conservation Center have steadily implemented a broad-based collection care program. The University works in close consultation with representatives of the *Soprintendenza*, the Italian cultural ministry, who have always been very positive about the University's achievements. The process is truly collaborative.

The story of those two decades will be told another time, but a few milestones might be noted. The tapestry that hung over the bed in the *Camera Blu* would not only be conserved, but also recognized, by Helen Spande '03 as one from the Medici collection, long believed to be lost. That large, adjoining bathroom would serve as a work space for the conservation, under the supervision of Pam Hatchfield '86, of a Chinese coromandel screen. The *viale* outside the window, along with the entire garden, would be restored under the expert guidance of Nick Dakin-Elliott, to both physical stability and stately beauty. The returned Daddi was re-framed, not once, but twice, the second time after research showed the design of the frame as the Actons had known it. The University continues to wrestle with the complex issues surrounding the presence of the blackamoors.



Treatment of the coromandel lacquer screen carried out by Jessica Walthew '15 in the bathroom of the Camera Blu



Peggy Ellis at the Villa, summer 2015

In 1995, Peggy closed her report writing, "I am grateful to have had the opportunity to visit and stay in the magnificent Villa La Pietra and to make recommendations for the care and management of its collections. I look forward to contributing to this worthwhile endeavor in the future."

After twenty years at the Villa, Peggy says, "I look at how it's improved and it's remarkable. The overwhelming restlessness and anxiety that afflicted me so badly during my initial visit in 1995 have subsided, thanks to the many skilled hands that have been at work over the years. Today, one can wander through the house and gardens and discover the Acton's deliberate and playful 'scenes.' Surely, this is what the family intended for their guests and we, as 21st century visitors, are lucky to be embraced by the light-hearted spirit of Villa La Pietra."

—Jean Dommermuth '96

Jean is a paintings conservator in private practice, adjunct faculty for the conservation program at NYU, and serves as a conservation consultant for Villa La Pietra

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