



VILLA DEI VESCOVI

First docent MONUMENTAL ENTRANCE COURTYARD – Direction/Location: WEST front

Start= Greet the guests, give brief introduction about themselves and about the school.

Topic: Brief summary of Villa dei Vescovi's history from 1201 to today

1201: Bishops used to own lands in the Euganean Hills and managed the harvest. The diocese consisted of a church, a graveyard and a baptistery. The original building was not the bishop's residence, but a lodging for people who worked the bishop's fields or anyone passing through.

1474: The bishop Jacopo Zeno decided to build the first Episcopal residence, with a square plan and a central *impluvium*. The church was moved to its current location (Pieve di San Martino) and the baptistery was knocked down.

1535-1542: The current Villa was built as a countryside residence for the Bishop of Padua, Francesco Pisani. He was a "Bishop Prince" because he came from a wealthy family of bankers, the "Pisani Dal Banco" and he was more an intellectual than a pastoral man. He wanted the Villa to host the artists, humanists and scholars of the time.

Villa dei Vescovi was designed by Giovanni Maria Falconetto, who died a few months before the work started. However, the work continued to be supervised by the scholarly nobleman Alvise Cornaro.

IMPORTANT: This is the first example of a mansion situated in a non-urban landscape in the Veneto region during the Renaissance period. It represents the prototype model of a Renaissance villa and precedes the introduction of the Palladian concept of a villa.

Nobody lived there all year round because it was used as a summer residence for the bishops of Padua.

In the 17th century, it hosted people affected by plague.

In the 19th century, the house was abandoned for a period.



In the 20th century, the Villa hosted the homeless people of the Second World War and for a period the Discalced Carmelite nuns. It was also used as a spiritual retreat for elementary school children for a week before they started the school in October.

1962: It was sold to Vittorio Olcese, a textile entrepreneur from the Lombardy region.

2005: Maria Teresa Olcese Valoti, Vittorio's second wife, donated the Villa to the Italian National Trust (FAI), which restored it over a six-year period.

OBSERVATIONS ON THE COURTYARD

The 16th-century Italian garden was restored by FAI according to Renaissance drawings.

The crenelated courtyard has three portals with IONIC columns and capitals= its building was promoted by bishops Francesco and Alvise Pisani.

Coats of arms and inscriptions on portals:

Francesco Pisani was Bishop of Padua from 1524 to 1564. He was the first to commission the Villa (South portal, with a wooden gate that leads to the private residence of Countess Olcese).

Alvise Pisani, Francesco's nephew, was bishop from 1567 to 1570. He took charge of supervising the work immediately after his uncle (West and North portal).

Federico Cornaro was bishop from 1577 to 1590. A cousin of the Pisani family, he promoted the construction of the monumental stairways on the East and West fronts (set in the centre of the portico).

Observe the brick portico and the double staircase leading to the terrace that surrounds the Villa.

REMINDER: this entrance was added after GIOVAN MARIA FALCONETTO's initial 1535 project, and a second architect called ANDREA DA VALLE completed it by 1570. The original entrance was the South one---- At this point the group climbs the stairs towards the South front.



Second docent: SOUTH FRONT TERRACE

Topic: Architecture

FALCONETTO's project: a square-plan villa with a central *impluvium* (from the Latin words "In" = inside and "pluvia" = rain: it was a flat-bottomed square tank designed to gather the rainwater coming through the *compluvium* in the roof, from where the sunlight enters, illuminating all the adjacent rooms with reflected light). Two lodges, at the West and East wings, with arcades retaining Roman architectural features, and friezes with classical decoration: Doric capitals, *bucrania* (ox skulls: Greek custom of hanging the skulls of sacrificial animals outside the temples) and *patère* (a circular ornamental bas relief that kept away evil spirits), winged victories at the sides of the central arch, and the Pisani family's coat of arms (the rampant lion) with two hats above it (the hats belonged to a bishop and a cardinal, positions held by Francesco Pisani). The initial idea was for a lodge that also ran along on the South front. Reminder: say who Falconetto was and where he worked = e.g. Padua, Odeo and Loggia Cornaro, (property of Alvise Cornaro, who managed the work on Villa dei Vescovi until 1543), Porta San Giovanni and Porta Savonarola (two of the city of Padua's gates).

Falconetto died before he could start to build the Villa, so Andrea da Valle took charge of the construction project under Alvise Cornaro's supervision.

GIULIO ROMANO'S CONSULTANCY: Bishop Francesco Pisani asked Giulio Romano to join the Villa's construction after he had a rift with Alvise Cornaro between 1542 and 1543.

Who was Giulio Romano? He was an Italian painter and architect born in Rome in 1499. He was Raphael's pupil and worked with him on the frescos in the Vatican loggias and on many other paintings Raphael had been commissioned for. Giulio Romano inherited Raphael's workshop when he died in 1520 and continued his work. From 1526, the Gonzaga family asked him to build Palazzo Te, in Mantua, where he died in 1546.

Giulio Romano decided to put an ashlar on the lower part of the building for a more majestic appearance; he closed the South loggia by walling up two lateral arches in order to subdivide the internal spaces more effectively.



OBSERVATIONS ON THE SOUTHERN FAÇADE

Original entrance of the first design; key elements:

1. Natural hill with steps for easy access;
2. Ashlar arch of great size and volume;
3. The two benches on the sides of the portal (a reference to the patronage system of the Roman world: *clientes* (clients), e.g. lawyers without cases and teachers without students went to their *patronus* (patron) for their daily survival. *Clientes* had the duty to vote for their *patronus* in the assemblies and aid him in wartime.

REMINDER: In the end, Bishop Francesco Pisani changed his mind about the original project and he decided to rotate the Villa 90 degrees and to give greater monumentality to the entrance with the courtyard that we saw a short time ago.

From here you can observe the private garden and *barchessa* (near the bookshop) = they remained as Countess Olcese's residence, after she had donated the Villa. If someone asks about the owl, it was placed there by the Olcese family, perhaps as a good luck charm.

Third docent. OBSERVATIONS ON THE EAST FAÇADE.

Observe the portal at the end of the perimeter wall. It is located to the East because Padua, the Bishop's hometown, is to the East. Once through the gate, you walk around the Villa and then walk up the natural slope on the South side.

It has four hectares of terrain that are all cultivated with grapes, but it was an orchard until the beginning of the 20th century. Local winery *Vignalta* grows some of its grapes here; the winery has a shop next to the bookshop.

The Villa uses its grapes to produce *Pinot Bianco*, *Fior d'Arancio* and *Chardonnay*. In the northeast corner of the park is a flat area with a pond, children's swings and some trees, which are perfect for a picnic in the shade. FAI placed some beehives in this area to protect bees from pesticides and to save them from extinction. Bees do not only produce honey, they also play an important role in pollination, which makes it possible to grow fruit and vegetables. The Monumental Staircase, which leads from the terrace to the vineyard, was designed by Vincenzo Scamozzi, a late 16th cen-



ture pupil of Palladio. Scamozzi built a small grotto under the staircase where he put a statue of Neptune and fountains (the statue no longer exists and FAI is raising funds to restore the cave). However, the stairway from the lodge to the platform on the eastern façade was built in 1700.

Fourth docent. EDUCATIONAL EXHIBITION + HISTORICAL CENTRAL AREA

Direction/Location: GROUND FLOOR/TERRACE, central area of the Villa.

Theme: comparisons between the Villa's two design phases = architectural summary.

First model: Falconetto's design: square plan, large cube, opening of two lodges, *impluvium* with a central courtyard, the only access from the natural slope in the South to the ground floor, masonry indoor stairs to reach the Noble Floor from the ground floor (the original indoor stairs are no longer there. The Olcese family built the current stairs; see the date 1964 sculpted into the steps).

Second model: project with later additions. In 1560, Andrea Da Valle created a more monumental entrance on the West side: a square courtyard garden with three portals, a crenelated wall, a portico, and the stairs that lead to the West terrace floor. On the East side, Vincenzo Scamozzi built the stairs that connect the vineyard with the East terrace in the late 1500s. The stairs that connect the East terrace with the East lodge are from the 1700s. The *compluvium* was bricked up in the same century to create a larger reception room on the Noble Floor.

OBSERVATIONS ON THE CENTRAL POINT AND ITS OCTAGON

Mention that this is the centre of Villa dei Vescovi, both of its architecture and its history. Look at the octagon in the terracotta floor, probably the original baptistery.

According to other theories, it might have been a tower that dates back to a settlement built after the Lombard invasion. Reminder: an archaeological dig found human skeletons in the original cemetery and the remains of earlier settlements. (Cross-reference for the end of the visit = photography exhibition about the restoration). The *impluvium* was situated here, in this central area. It was a flat-bottomed basin with a cistern below it to collect rainwater from the *compluvium*, a square hole located at the centre of the roof. The water was reused for domestic chores.



REMINDER: this floor was designed for rooms such as kitchens, closets, or storage rooms etc. On this floor, FAI has organized a photography exhibition of the restoration works. Furthermore, you can find a range of services for visitors and a coffee point with tables and sofas where guests can sit down (it can be a point of reference for visitors to go back to at the end of their visit).

At this point, visitors go upstairs via in the indoor staircase to reach the NOBLE FLOOR. On the left is the STANZA DEL PUTTO (CHERUB ROOM).

Fifth Docent: NOBLE FLOOR and STANZA DEL PUTTO (CHERUB ROOM)

Start by saying that the *Piano Nobile*, which means "Noble Floor", is entirely frescoed and furnished. The furniture is partly original, collected and donated by the Olcese family, or taken from other FAI properties.

FAI wants to give the impression that the Villa is still a home rather than a museum. For this reason, in order to ask the visitors not to sit down, FAI opted for an original solution: placing pinecones on the chairs rather than signs.

The Noble Floor is higher than the ground floor. Since it was a reception floor, there are not many bedrooms. In the sixteenth century, it was used by the bishop to receive artists, literati and humanists. It continued to be used for reception purposes when the Olcese family moved there in the twentieth century. The family slept on the ground floor.

The Noble Floor and the loggias were frescoed by a Flemish artist called LAMBERT SUSTRIS from 1542 to 1548. He was very good at painting landscapes, as all the Flemish artists were. Thanks to his travels around Italy, he learnt to paint fine human figures and to use light and colours skilfully. Furthermore, thanks to his visits to Rome, he could reproduce Ancient Roman remains.

In those days, the "idealised landscape" was used to represent nature and the ruins of Ancient Rome. Nature was also a theme that was very dear to the bishop, Francesco Pisani, because he understood that it helped to raise the spirit and foster intellectual meditation.

This room takes its name from the cherub frescoed onto the left wall. This delicate-looking figure is seated on a fake balcony and recalls, as all this room's frescoes do, the main features that reoccur in all of the Villa's frescoes:

1. A return to the classical tradition with mythological figures. Also see the painting of Apollo and Daphne on the right wall. The myth went that Apollo, the god of arts and music, was in

love with the nymph Daphne. Daphne, however, did not want to give herself to Apollo, as she had taken a vow of chastity and was not in love with him. When Apollo captured her, Daphne saw her only means of escape as calling her father, a river god, who turned her into a laurel tree. From then on, the laurel was Apollo's sacred plant and he is often depicted wearing a crown of laurel leaves.

2. The connection between imaginary nature and real nature. The background figures are not real, but imaginary and painted with elegant clothes. The false painted architecture, and the vases as well, are certainly classically inspired but set in real landscapes.

The cherub is holding a bunch of Garganega grapes, typical produce of the Euganean Hills.

3. The dialogue between interior and exterior space. We are inside the Villa, but it's as though the walls do not exist and we can enjoy an ideal view from the interior, one that invites people to contemplate.

Sixth Docent. STANZE DELLE FIGURE ANTICHE (ROOM OF ANCIENT FIGURES) ----- Direction/Location: Looks onto SOUTH front.

Theme: PAINTING, THE TRIUMPH OF ANTIQUITY. COMBINATION OF NATURAL LANDSCAPES AND LANDSCAPES WITH ROMAN RUINS. MYTHS OF ANTIQUITY.

IMPORTANT: the first example in Veneto of a revival of ancient themes, figures, figurative elements in a Renaissance villa (they were painted even before the frescos by Paolo Veronese at Villa Barbaro in Maser).

Lower register: ancient-style emperors and empresses in Roman clothes; niches with painted statues, completely grey tone-on-tone grisaille technique); false marble columns.

Upper register: alternation of frames with war trophies (armour, helmets, shields, weapons and antique vases) decorated with pastoral scenes and mythological characters; glimpses of Roman ruins, temples and obelisks in the landscapes.

In one of the armour frames there is the only reference to Francesco Pisani's term as a bishop: a red-and-green mitre, the bishop's headgear.

Mythological frescoes:

- 1) Young Bacchus on a donkey carrying a wine barrel. Bacchus was originally a demigod, but he was transformed into a god by Zeus, because he had discovered wine: the nectar of the gods!

2) Diana, goddess of hunting, with her hounds. The myth of Diana and Actaeon. The hunter Actaeon enraged Diana, who caught him peeking at her while she was bathing naked in a river. In order to prevent him from speaking about what he had seen, Diana transformed him into a deer. Actaeon's hounds, which Diana had sent into a frenzy, failed to recognise their master and killed him.

3) Ariadne abandoned on the island of Naxos. The myth of Ariadne, Theseus and the Minotaur. The Minotaur was a monster, half-bull and half-human, who devoured men and women. He was therefore confined to a labyrinth from which it was impossible to escape, both for him and anyone who might attempt to kill him.

The only hero that overcame this challenge was young Theseus, who could never have succeeded without Ariadne's help. Ariadne gave him a ball of wool to unravel and then wind back up in order to find the exit, once he had killed the Minotaur. Ariadne's father decided to give his only daughter away as Theseus' bride to thank him for his heroic act. The couple left for their honeymoon, landed on the island of Naxos and Theseus, who was not in love with Ariadne, abandoned her there. This led to the Italian expression *piantare in asso* ("to leave in the lurch") where "in asso" ("in the lurch") sounds like *in Nasso*, the Italian for "on Naxos".

4. The Rape of Proserpina. Proserpina, daughter of the goddess of abundance Ceres, was abducted by Pluto, ruler of the underworld. But Pluto had to make Proserpina eat something to make her stay forever. Being aware of this, Proserpina preferred to fast, until one day she was tricked by Pluto. He offered her 12 seeds, and she ate 6 of them, as she thought it was not food. In the meantime, the situation in the world of the living was deteriorating: the goddess of abundance, saddened by her daughter's disappearance, refused to produce anything to eat, driving the world to famine.

At this point, it was necessary to come to a compromise. Since Proserpina ate only six of the twelve seeds, therefore six months a year she was able to return to the world of the living. These months would be spring and summer in which her mother, happy to have her daughter back again, produced plenty of food. The remaining six months coincided with autumn and winter, and Proserpina had to go back to the underworld. This is the reason why there is less food in the cold season. This is the myth of how the seasons were created.



Seventh docent: STANZA DEL CAMINO (FIREPLACE ROOM), STUDY and EAST LOGGIA.

You enter a sitting room where the first thing you notice are photographs of the Olcese family standing on the chest to the right. Another feature is the fireplace, built in the 18th century, at the same time as the central hall. The external frieze of the balconies starts here, with its *bucranium* (ox skull) and *patera* (flower-shaped offerings plate).

The fireplace was walled up during the restoration work on the Villa to enable the passing of electrical wires for the mansard floor. Observation on the frieze on the higher part of the walls: THEME OF THE GROTESQUE, which you can speak about in the EAST LOGGIA.

The Italian word “Grottesco” (grotesque) comes from the word “Grotta” (cave) because the ruins of Domus Aurea (home of the Emperor Nero) were discovered at the end of the 15th century. These ruins were underground, and Renaissance painters let themselves down with ropes to study and copy the Roman frescos. Now, quickly point out the “study”, say that it’s one of Vittorio Olcese’s two offices. Point out that there is a plaque which says “Office of... and a name”: it’s the name of the donor who gave a large sum of money for the restoration of Villa dei Vescovi.

EAST LOGGIA.... **Direction/Location:** EAST FRONT

Theme: THE GROTESQUE DECORATION AS A REDISCOVERY OF ANCIENT TIMES. THE LOGGIA WAS SUPPOSED TO RECREATE THE WALK NOBLE ROMANS WOULD TAKE. THE IDEAL OF A CONNECTION BETWEEN NATURE AND LANDSCAPE.

The first loggia was frescoed in the 16th century. The painter is once again Lambert Sustris. He painted arches on the interior wall as large and high as the real ones, carefully reproducing even the balustrade. This was supposed to recall the covered walks that noble Romans took in their country villas.

As this location is extremely popular, FAI decided to furnish it with wicker sofas, which allow visitors to relax while enjoying the landscape.

Eighth docent. SALONE SETTECENTESCO (18TH-CENTURY HALL) -----Direction/Location: NOBLE FLOOR/CENTRE OF THE VILLA

Theme: 18th-century architectural changes

In the 18th century, the Bishop of Padua Niccolò Giustiniani, decided to build a larger reception room by:

- closing the *compluvium* (in the roof) and eliminating the *impluvium* on the ground floor;
- closing the central courtyard and paving the floor with one type of material: TERRAZZO VENEZIANO;
- demolishing the walls of the large rooms on the West and East side of the Villa which originally overlooked the central courtyard, in order to create a single magnificent HALL;
- covering the original frescoes and decorating the walls of the central Hall with a Rococò decoration;
- redistributing the interior space by creating five rooms on the left and right sides of the hall.

REMINDER: the two WOODEN BENCHES and the CHANDELIERS are original pieces of Villa furniture restored by FAI.

Nowadays, this hall is still used as a reception room, since concerts and weddings take place here.

From here you can go back inside the villa and move to the NORTH area— —- LIBRARY + BISHOP'S ROOM

Ninth docent, LIBRARY and STANZA DEL VESCOVO (BISHOP'S ROOM):

The library can be considered as a second small office for Vittorio Olcese. On the bench are two black-and-white photographs: Vittorio Olcese and his second wife Maria Teresa, who currently lives in the *barchessa* next to the bookshop.

The walls are painted with a “wallpaper” motif. The spikes in the upper part of the walls, were used to hang up paintings or tapestries, which were not only used as decorative furnishings, but also to insulate the Villa's walls in order to keep the rooms warmer.



There is a leather chest on the desk that was an ancient letter-holder and beside it is a chair with goat hoofs.

Bishop's Room: we know for sure that it is the bishop's bedroom because it faces north-east. It is therefore the coolest room of the house in summertime, but also the warmest in winter, because it's the only one with a working fireplace.

The red velvet bed is very wide but not very long, because in the 1500s people preferred not to sleep lying down; they were convinced that only the dead lied down, and therefore it brought bad luck, since death could have taken their body. So, they slept half-lying down propped up with lots of pillows. In addition, they used to eat a lot, and this position improved digestion.

The kneeler is located in the wall. The art conservator maintained the top of this wall in a damaged state on purpose. She wanted it to be a witness to history. Villa dei Vescovi once housed plague victims and, when the plague was over, the paintings were covered with lime in order to disinfect rooms. This material has to be applied to an internal surface, that's why the top of the wall is damaged.

Tenth docent. STANZA DA PRANZO (LUNCHEON ROOM)----- Direction/Location: looking onto the North façade

Mention that from 1535 it became a second home for the bishops of Padua. They came here for short stays, mainly in the summer, as well as to take a break from their engagements and get away from the hustle and bustle of the city.

Here, during the Renaissance, the bishops met their cultured Paduan friends. RUZANTE, a playwright from Padua, was one of them. He probably had some of his plays performed at the villa.

Mention that ALVISE CORNARO, the Episcopal dining hall manager, was summoned by Francesco Pisani to supervise the work on the villa. He spread the idea of a healthy and peaceful life in a natural environment and from this moment on, many nobles from Padua and Venice, in addition to bishops, started building their residences in the Veneto countryside.

The Villa was never a full-time residence, and for this reason it was abandoned and neglected for decades, especially during the 19th century.



During the 20th century: it was a place of refuge for the homeless during the Second World War, a place of spiritual retreat for young people, and for a short period of time, also a Discalced Carmelite nunnery.

Theme: THE ARCHITECTURAL CHANGES INTERPRETED THROUGH THREE FRESCOES

Luncheon Room: it was used by the Olcese family for their receptions. Originally, it had a different shape and function.

In this characteristic room, we can see three different types of fresco that suggest what the original structure looked like. In the original project, the room was split in two by a wall between the two doors, which divide the room horizontally. As we can see, there are:

1. Walls next to the windows: Pompeian-type frescoes with square frames, plant motifs and small ancient-style figures were part of one room.
2. Walls next to the central hall; large frescoes of landscapes with Roman ruins. Two mythological scenes: ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE. APOLLO AND MARSYAS. Since they are both myths about music, we can suppose that this room, which overlooks the original central garden, was a music room.

Apollo and Marsyas: Marsyas was a faun, half-man, half-goat. He played the flute so well, that he irritated Apollo, the god of arts and music, who decided to challenge him to a music contest. Apollo played the lyre, a string instrument, and Marsyas played the flute. Neither of them won, since they were both fine musicians.

Unsatisfied, Apollo called for another contest, but he changed the rules. According to these new rules, the contestants had to play their instrument upside down and sing at the same time. Obviously, the winner was Apollo because the lyre is a string instrument and the sound does not change if it is turned upside down. In addition, the lyre allows the musician to sing and play at the same time. The flute, however, does not play if turned upside down and it is impossible to sing and play it at the same time. The contest rule said: The winner would be able to do whatever he wanted with the loser. Therefore, Apollo decided to flay Marsyas alive.



3. The central-hall dividing wall: these frescoes were painted in the eighteenth-century when the central hall was constructed and they were painted in the same way as the ones on the central hall walls.

Eleventh docent. APARTMENTS, BATHROOM AND WEST LOGGIA.

Between the dining room and the West loggia is an ante-bathroom with a spiral staircase. FAI¹ built it to reach the two apartments in the attic, which are today available for guests. Both apartments are symmetrical and have two bedrooms, with two beds and a bathroom in each room; the communal area has a kitchen and a lounge. The apartments are managed by the English website “The Land Mark Trust”, which gives them extensive international visibility. The minimum stay is three nights. Go to the bookshop for further information. The apartments can be visited on the two FAI Days in spring by FAI members only.

The bathroom was built by the Olcese family. The furnishings are antique of various origins, and their purpose is give the bathroom an ancient feel. The beautiful marble sink comes from a stall; it is very deep and was used as a drinking trough for horses.

There is also a commode, i.e. the wooden seat that hides the toilet. Above the commode is a ring where **the toilet [il water] / cistern [la scatola da dove viene l'acqua] once stood** [*non mi è chiaro quale dei due*]. The restorer did not want to remove a testimony to the passing of time, namely that the bathroom had actually been used.

From here, visitors leave the house and enter the WEST LOGGIA; the tour ends here.

Mention that Villa dei Vescovi is **NOT a STATIC MUSEUM or a VILLA TO BE VISITED PASSIVELY**, but is a place to be experienced. Guests can enjoy the surrounding landscape and the beauty of this place, stop here to think, and sit and rest in the loggia, or in the park. They can remain at the Villa as long as they want to fully appreciate the reason the Villa was built, which is the same as it is today: **TO CREATE A HARMONIOUS RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HUMANS AND THE ENVIRONMENT, AND TO STRIKE A BALANCE BETWEEN ARCHITECTURE AND LANDSCAPE.**



Villa dei Vescovi is not only the destination for excursions, but also the venue for free public events and private functions, such as weddings, dinners and conferences. It is also equipped for school outings for pupils from kindergarten to secondary school. It is important to remember that FAI is for everyone and you can help it as volunteers or by joining FAI, which allows you to visit all FAI sites free for one year. It also offers discounts on cultural sites across Italy. Find out more about joining by going to the bookshop.

IMPORTANT: anyone who joins today will be refunded the price of the ticket!!!

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