

Roman hideaway: a peek behind the secret doors of Villa Albani Torlonia

One of the greatest collections of ancient sculpture is now open to visitors

Villa Albani Torlonia © Fondazione Torlonia Photo/Massimo Listri

Clive Cookson MAY 17 2019

As they wander through the Villa Borghese gardens, visitors to Rome may be curious about Villa Albani Torlonia, a couple of hundred metres east of the city's landmark museum and gallery.

They will not find much information in guidebooks, because the Albani villa and its gardens have never been open to the public. Yet art historians revere it as one of the richest and most interesting sites in the entire city.

“Even people living in Rome generally have little idea that this marvel is hidden in the centre of the city,” says Professor Salvatore Settis of the University of Pisa, doyen of Italian classical archaeology. “Yet it is Rome's only example of an 18th-century villa still in a more or less pristine state; it has one of the world's great collections of ancient sculpture — and it is important as the birthplace of neoclassical taste.”

Cardinal Alessandro Albani (1692-1779), the most voracious collector of classical art in history, built the villa to display his

third collection, having sold the first in 1728 to the Elector of Saxony in Dresden and the second to Pope Clement XII, who made it the basis of Rome's Capitoline Museums in 1738. The Albani family maintained the villa and contents until 1866, when they were bought by the Torlonia banking dynasty — financiers to the Vatican — who still own them today.

The loggia © Fondazione Torlonia Photo/ Massimo Listri

As soon as Cardinal Albani completed his villa in 1763, he welcomed cultivated visitors to admire the collection, which immediately became a highlight for British aristocrats on the Grand Tour. Indeed, its main purpose was to show off his taste and erudition.

Although people with the right connections have always been able to arrange private visits, the Torlonias are now cautiously opening Villa Albani to a wider range of visitors under the auspices of Fondazione Torlonia, which the head of the family, Prince Alessandro Torlonia, set up to preserve the collection three years before his death in 2017. (The hereditary papal title was created in 1803 by Pope Pius VII.)

“When we first thought about how to make this cultural heritage available, we reflected upon how to achieve this without altering the villa's delicate balance,” says Alessandro Poma Murialdo, Torlonia's grandson, who chairs the foundation. “We wanted it to be experienced today as it was conceived, as a ‘dream of classicism’ . . . Every visit is guided by an art historian who can revive the important history of this place to rediscover classical art.”

My visit in the company of local expert Roberto Valeriani started inside the splendid stone entrance to the Albani estate on Via Salaria. We walked down a straight avenue with an unusual, slightly domed grass surface, lined with neatly clipped box and holm oak trees, to the Piazzale della Stella.

'Il Parnaso' by Anton Raphael Mengs (1760-61) at Villa Albani Torlonia © Fondazione Torlonia

Eight paths and avenues radiate from this green circus, in whose centre is a stone column bearing an eight-pointed star, emblem of the Albani family. But the glory of the garden lies high above our heads: a group of seven majestic umbrella pines, thought to be the oldest in Rome, framing the piazzale.

“When Albani established his villa, this area consisted of small vineyards just outside the city walls,” says Valeriani. “The cardinal acquired pieces of land from different owners and consolidated them into a dispersed, open garden with little pavilions.” Giovanni Battista Nolli, a celebrated surveyor of 18th-century Rome, is credited with the landscaping and garden layout.

Continuing down the avenue for another couple of hundred metres, I emerged from the greenery on to a terrace to see a huge parterre planted with low box hedges in a rococo pattern.

Its original centrepiece is now in the Louvre; the Fontana dei Facchini, a stone basin supported by four Atlas figures, was part of a haul of Roman antiquities taken to Paris by the French army in 1797. After Napoleon’s defeat in 1815 much of the booty was returned to its original owners, but some treasures

remained in Paris because the costs of transporting them home were too high.

Looking left from the terrace is the *casino nobile*, the villa's main building, rising behind a lavish loggia. To the right is a semicircular portico with 11 bays, and behind it a pavilion known as the *kaffeehaus*, where Albani and his guests repaired for coffee. The architect behind this harmonious complex was Carlo Marchionni, a protégé of Albani.

Marble relief of Antinous © Fondazione Torlonia/Massimo Listri

Marble statues of gods and goddesses, emperors and lowly Roman citizens decorate every niche and resting place in the loggia and portico. Albani bought some of them from older collections but most were excavated during his lifetime, as the city grew beyond its ancient walls and 18th-century builders stumbled upon the remains of ancient villas.

The greatest treasures are inside the *casino nobile*. Many remain in the settings designed for them by Albani, Marchionni and Johann Joachim Winckelmann, the celebrated German scholar who served as the cardinal's librarian and curator. Winckelmann is regarded today as the first professional art historian — the first archaeologist to work out an accurate chronology of classical works, distinguishing between (rare) Greek originals and the stages of Roman art that followed.

The superstar item in a stellar collection is a marble relief of Antinous, the young favourite of Emperor Hadrian, who drowned in the Nile in AD130. Sculptures of the beautiful youth

were made across the Roman empire as an Antinous cult arose after his death, but none is as fine as this one, excavated in 1735 from the ruins of Hadrian's private apartments in his villa at Tivoli. The head and upper body of Antinous were found in almost perfect condition and Albani installed the sculpture above a rococo fireplace, where it remains today.

“

The collection immediately became a highlight for British aristocrats on the Grand Tour

Winckelmann described this sculpture, together with a rather androgynous head of Antinous, now in the Louvre, as “The glory and crown of the art of this period and of all periods.” It is hard to disagree. Plaster copies proliferated during the late 18th and 19th centuries when the Albani Antinous became one of the world's most celebrated works of Roman art.

For Winckelmann, the villa was the ideal base from which to promote neoclassicism, through his writings and the paintings of his close friend Anton Raphael Mengs, one of the most popular artists of the mid-18th century. A large fresco of Parnassus by Mengs in the main gallery at Villa Albani is “the world's first truly neoclassical painting, a manifesto for neoclassicism”, says my guide Valeriani.

The *casino nobile* has just one bedroom. Though Albani slept there occasionally, he usually came to the villa for the day and travelled home for the night by carriage to his urban palazzo on

Via delle Quattro Fontane; his guests were also expected to return to accommodation elsewhere. This bedroom, the Salotto Cinese, stands out from the decor elsewhere in the villa with its oriental lacquer walls and profusion of Chinese and Japanese objects.

House & Home Unlocked

© Dreamstime

Welcome to a new newsletter for smart people interested in the property market and curious about design, architecture and interiors. Every Friday, in your inbox.

[Sign up here with one click](#)

Though the Torlonia family has been split by a legal dispute between the heirs of Prince Alessandro over their inheritance, the future of Villa Albani and its collection seems secure under the protection of Fondazione Torlonia. Visits must be booked well in advance; they are free, though people are requested to contribute at least €50 each to the foundation's restoration fund. Anyone can apply via the [foundation's website](#).

Villa Albani is very different from Galleria Borghese, which was built 150 years earlier and today teems with tourists taking pictures of its treasures. In contrast, Villa Albani is utterly peaceful, photography is forbidden and there are no signs, labels or written material to tell you what you are looking at. You really rely on your own historical knowledge and aesthetic sense, as well as your guiding art historian.

Settis feels encouraged about the future prospects for Villa Albani. “It will never be suitable for mass tourism with hundreds of people in its rooms, but we should be grateful to the Torlonia family for making it possible for individuals and small groups to visit,” he says. “People today should appreciate the original intention of Cardinal Albani to make each room a conversation piece where they have time to discuss what they are seeing.”

Clive Cookson is the FT's science editor

Follow [@FTProperty](#) on Twitter or [@ft_houseandhome](#) on Instagram to find out about our latest stories first. Subscribe to [FT Life](#) on YouTube for the latest FT Weekend videos

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2020. All rights reserved.