



In the nymphaeum's central octagonal Atrium of the Four Winds, the travertine-covered niches in the lower part of the walls once contained bronze statues of the room's eponymous winds. Above these spaces are stucco statues personifying the Four Seasons by the sculptor Francesco Brambilla (1530–1599). They have crowns of flowers, wheat, fruits, and laurel. Two of them flank Mercury (shown in the center), while Venus is above another doorway

STORY Francesca Oddo

PHOTOGRAPHS Giulio Ghirardi

THE MISCHIEVOUS COUNT AND HIS GARDEN GROTTO

The Villa Visconti Borromeo Litta in Lainate was the creation of Count Pirro I Visconti Borromeo. He wanted it to become a “place of enchantment” but he was not speaking only aesthetically; he had in mind far more prankish ways to delight his visitors

“Take great care not to walk alone in the gardens of Lainate,” warned Stendhal in 1817 in his travel journal, *Rome, Naples, and Florence*. He was staying at the villa belonging to the Visconti Borromeo Litta family, near Milan in northern Italy. “The garden is full of concealed spouts designed to soak visitors. As soon as I stepped onto the lowest step of a certain staircase, no fewer than six jets of water sprayed up between my legs.”

It's a prank that might still catch visitors unawares today. As you walk through the nymphaeum, water can spurt from an array of jets set in unexpected places, which are triggered, at just the right moment, from small rooms hidden among the grottoes. Count Pirro I Visconti Borromeo would have been delighted. This fun-loving aristocrat, who was also an enlightened intellectual and an extroverted member of Milan's political

circles, was responsible for installing these mechanisms in the latter quarter of the sixteenth century. In doing so, he fulfilled a dream to create a place where he could welcome and amaze illustrious guests, confirming his standing in the eyes of his peers while also revealing his innovative, playful, and nonconformist side.

The count occasionally amused himself by turning on the water jets by hand through narrow slits in the walls of specially made hiding places. Usually, the fountain attendants, or *fontanieri*, would monitor the routes taken by the unsuspecting guests as they wandered through the park and then surprise them with sprays of water shooting up from the ground or out of statues, vases, and automata. At other times, it was the unfortunate visitors themselves who set off the water jets, perhaps by perching on a seat. Meanwhile, the crafty count watched with delight, the joke having worked so well.

These ingenious devices turned this attractive country abode, built on a family estate, into a fashionable villa of delights that was surrounded by nature, far from the hustle and bustle of city life. As a patron and collector, the count wanted his home to surpass all other noble residences, such as the Medici villas in Tuscany that had first inspired him. The estate soon became the

backdrop for feasting and entertainment, a place for study, a laboratory for new ideas, and a refuge for royalty, literary scholars, artists, and poets.

Choosing from the best of Milan's creative talent, Count Pirro I entrusted the building works to the architect Martino Bassi, one of the most brilliant minds of the period, who had also worked on the cathedral of Milan. Bassi put a team of gifted and experienced stone-masons, sculptors, and painters to work. Nowadays, on entering the formal courtyard, visitors are met by two buildings from different eras: the sixteenth-century villa and an eighteenth-century extension that was built by the Visconti Borromeo Arese and Litta families. The first structure houses the Hall of Aeneas, decorated with scenes of Aeneas's flight from Troy and of his legendary journey to Rome as well as pieces that were originally in the nymphaeum and have been saved from the ravages of time. Among the later building's best-preserved rooms is the ballroom, with its frescoes by the neoclassical artist Giuseppe Levati and ornately stuccoed musicians' balconies supported by magnificent telamones.

Beyond the villa to the north stands the undisputed masterpiece of the extensive park, the nymphaeum. Like a treasure chest waiting to be opened and examined, it is full of symbolic references and allegorical meaning. It was designed by Count Pirro I in homage to his bride, Camilla Marino, an art enthusiast. Yet this love token is a place where enchantment is combined with the more prosaic appeal of practical jokes.

Bursting with travertine embellishments, the layers of architectural, sculptural, and pictorial styles in the nymphaeum reflect tastes stretching back over three centuries. Its artificial grottoes are decorated with shells and stony coral known as madrepora (evidence of the count's passion for the marine environment), as well as automata, statues, mosaics, and wall paintings of gods, animals, and monsters. Water, the emblem of life, is the theme, but in the count's rather mischievous hands, it also becomes a playful instrument.

Water pervades the dozen rooms that were once used to house the count's collections and that run almost symmetrically to the right and left of the Atrium



Above: the north facade of the neoclassical sandstone nymphaeum, with the white water tower seen in the distance. The tower contains a copper tank that can hold 1,980 US gallons of water, and this supplies all of the water features. Right: the Windmill Court is named after the fountain in the center, which includes a

windmill that can shoot out jets of water. Fountains can also appear from among the pebbles on the floor. Seen behind the Windmill Court is the Atrium of the Seat, with statues of Dawn and Twilight, the figures reclining as they do on Michelangelo's tomb for the Medici family in the church of San Lorenzo in Florence. Across the atrium from the

statues, you might be tempted to take a seat but you would not stay dry if you did. Opposite: on the south side of the nymphaeum, the facade has travertine encrustation between the architectural features and stucco statue niches. Sprays of cooling water can issue from jets hidden in the paving and from the top of the ornamental stone vases





Above and top right: the semicircular walkway of the Old Caves, on the eastern end of the nymphaeum, is barrel-vaulted with travertine formations and stalactites surrounding mosaic panels and statues in the niches. Some of the mosaic designs are abstract, and others are pictures of flora and fauna. They are made up of black

and white pebbles, some of which were painted, after being set in place, in tempera shades of brown and turquoise to add detail. Arrangements of seashells are included elsewhere as decorative focal points. Right: stony coral forms and stalactites are encrusted around the setting for the hen automaton in the Egg

Room; also found here are colored semiprecious stones and animal figures. Delicate restoration work has brought back the original trickery to this room; water springs from the small basin in the niche above the hen, down into the larger rose marble basin, where it activates a central jet that levitates the egg



Left: as well as in panels in the Old Caves part of the nymphaeum, mosaics cover the walls of all the other rooms, varying in design throughout. They are made up of black limestone and white quartz pebbles set in abstract patterns and give every room a beautifully

bold appearance. Since it was first built, the rooms of the nymphaeum have been used to exhibit the family's collection of sculptures, busts, paintings, and curiosities, as well as to surprise strolling visitors with the ingenious and unpredictable hidden water features. Below: the old

hydraulics pipework has been carefully restored, bringing many of the fountains and water special effects back to life. It is an ongoing project to recreate and maintain all of Count Pirro I's water games



of the Four Winds. This octagonal space is surrounded by a series of basins that once held bronze statues personifying the winds, which blew air and sprayed jets of water. Above those spaces, you can still see niches with the stucco statues of Venus and Mercury flanked by those representing allegories of the four seasons. In the dome above, the painted columns are deceptively out of line, prompting visitors to move into the center where the pillars appear straight. Here, treading on a sprung mechanism activates water jets that spray the unsuspecting guests. With a little imagination, you can almost hear the rustle of the count's cloak as he walks through the hall, grinning with glee.

Everywhere, the figure of Count Pirro I is present, inviting us to enter his magic caves. Leading into the rooms, the black-and-white pebble mosaics covering the floors and walls create an air of enchantment. Like a precious web of two-colored motifs, the effect is very attractive and surprisingly modern for the aesthetic taste of the time. One room contains another surprise: under a fine spray of water from the ceiling of the Egg Room, visitors encounter a hen-like automaton. The count had come across *Wunderkammern*, literally "rooms

This marvelous place combines hydraulics and art, engineering and architecture, science and alchemy, reality and mystery

of wonder," that were used to display collections of curiosities at many European courts. These often included automata, which had become fashionable in Europe in the sixteenth century although their origins date back to ancient Greece. Count Pirro I was among the first enthusiasts, fitting one in his nymphaeum almost two centuries ahead of a similar automaton, the so-called "Digesting Duck" of 1739 by Jacques de Vaucanson.

Once the hidden fountain attendant had activated the automaton, water started to spurt from the crest and the hen laid an egg – a symbol of life – which was then lifted by another spout of water. Symbology adorns the walls: the figure of a butterfly, representing metamorphosis, together with shells that symbolize

femininity, and serpents that allude to virility. Here, in the Egg Room, the enterprising count spent time on his alchemical experiments, inspired by an awareness of empirical principles, scientific curiosity, and magic applied to science, a characteristic of courts in the late sixteenth century.

At one end of the nymphaeum, the Old Caves evoke a sense of suspense through the faint splash of diaphanous spray falling in front of Venus, the goddess who was born from the sea, and two naiads (protective freshwater spirits). In contrast, mischievous and sacrilegious jets of water provide moments of complete hilarity by suddenly spurting up from the floor.

The southern facade of the nymphaeum has its own water features, with a sequence of fountains along the straight stone balustrade. Here, the geometric patterns and arabesques of the floor mosaics seem to echo the poetry that Count Pirro I liked to read outside (he was a member of the Accademia dei Facchini della Val di Blenio, an association of artists, craftsmen, musicians, and actors). But take care, because while you are admiring these beautiful surroundings, you may get sprayed with water, thanks to the jets hidden in the niches.

When designing the nymphaeum's hydraulic system, the count turned to the engineer Agostino Ramelli, who in turn was inspired by Leonardo da Vinci's research on mechanical engineering and hydraulics during his time at the court of Ludovico Sforza (or, il Moro). The Water Tower contains a well where an Archimedean screw was driven by a horse, harnessed to a spoke, that walked around in circles to pump water into the large reservoir (this is now automated). Thanks to a drop of 66 feet and a dense network of pipes buried in the walls and under the floor, the water flowed to the jets through valves operated by the fountain attendants, as is still done today. It was an ingenious system, especially when you think that houses of the time lacked any running water.

The estate fell into disrepair in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Fortunately, it was purchased by the municipality of Lainate in 1971, and, nine years later, a major restoration program was started. The water features have been revived thanks to the Friends of Villa Litta, founded in the early 1990s to raise awareness of the architectural complex. It is through their efforts that the memory of the count who enjoyed a practical joke continues to live in this marvelous place. Its magic combines hydraulics and art, engineering and architecture, science and alchemy, reality and mystery. Pirro I Visconti Borromeo has been proved right: the most brilliant ideas often emerge from contradictions. ♦

Translated by Lucinda Byatt



This page and opposite: on floors, walls, and ceilings, the black limestone and white quartz mosaics, in symmetrical designs of geometric and floral motifs, today look far more modern than their age. The creator of the majority of the mosaics was Camillo Procaccini (1561–1629), an artist who came from Bologna. The black-and-white features are complemented by gray-veined limestone doorway jambs as well as wooden doors and window shutters that have been painted a deep green

