

pliny –the tuscan villa

Book Five - Letter 6

To Domitius Apollinaris

The kind concern you expressed when you heard of my design to pass the summer at my villa in Tuscany, and your obliging endeavors to dissuade me from going to a place which you think of as unhealthy, is extremely agreeable to me. I confess indeed, the air of that part of Tuscany which lies towards the coast is thick and unwholesome; but my house is situated at a great distance from the sea and at the foot of one of the Apennine mountains, which of all others is most esteemed for its salubrity. But that you may lay aside all apprehensions on my account, I will give you a description of the temperature of the climate, the situation of the country, and the beauty of my villa, which I am persuaded you will hear with as much pleasure as I shall relate.

The winters are severe and cold, so that myrtles, olives, and other trees which delight in constant warmth will not flourish here; but it produces bay trees in great perfection; yet sometimes, though indeed not oftener than in the neighborhood of Rome, they are killed by the sharpness of the seasons. The summers are exceedingly temperate and continually attended with refreshing breezes, which are seldom interrupted by high winds. Hence old men abound; if you were to come here and see the numbers who have lived to be grandfathers and great-grandfathers, and hear the stories that they can entertain you with of their ancestors, you would fancy yourself born in some former age.

The disposition of the country is the most beautiful that can be imagined; figure to yourself an immense amphitheater, such as the hand of nature could not alone form. Before you lies a vast extended plain bounded by a range of mountains whose summits are crowded with lofty and venerable woods, which supply an abundant variety of game; from hence as the mountains decline they are adorned with under-woods. Intermixed with these are little hills of so strong and fat a soil that it would be difficult to find a single stone upon them; their fertility is nothing inferior

to the lowest grounds; and though their harvest indeed is something later, their heavy crops are as well matured.

At the foot of these hills the eye is presented, wherever it turns, with one unbroken view of numberless vineyards, which are terminated below by a border, as it were, of shrubs. From thence you have a prospect of the adjoining meadows and fields. The soil of the latter is so extremely stiff, and upon the first plowing it rises in such vast clods, that it is necessary to go over it nine several times with the largest oxen and the strongest plows before they can be thoroughly broken; whilst the flower enameled meadows produce trefoil and other kinds of herbage as fine and tender as if it were just sprung up, being everywhere refreshed by never-failing rills.

But though the country abounds with great plenty of water, there are no marshes; for as it is rising ground, whatever water it receives without absorbing, runs off into the Tiber. This river which winds through the middle of meadows, is navigable only in the winter and spring, when it transports the produce of the lands to Rome; but its channel is so extremely low in summer that it resigns the name of a great river, toward the autumn, however, it begins again to renew its claim to that title.

You could not be more agreeably entertained than by taking a view of the face of this country from the top of one of the neighboring mountains. You would imagine that not a real, but some painted landscape lay before you, drawn with the most exquisite beauty and exactness; such an harmonious and regular variety charms the eye which way soever it throws itself. My villa, though situated at the foot of the mountain, commands as full a view as the summit; yet you go up to it by so gentle and insensible a rise that you find yourself upon an elevation without perceiving you ascended. Behind, but at a great distance, stand the Apennine mountains. In the calmest days we are refreshed by the winds that blow from thence, but so spent and weakened by the long tract of land that they travel

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over that they are entirely divested of all their strength and violence before they reach us.

The exposure of the principal front of the house is full south; and thus seems to invite the sun, from midday in summer (but something earlier in winter), into a spacious and well-proportioned portico, consisting of several members, one of which is an atrium, built after the manner of the ancients. In front of the portico is a sort of a terrace divided into a great number of geometrical figures, and bounded with a box-hedge. Thence you descend by an easy slope, adorned with the representation of divers animals in box answering alternately to each other, into a lawn over-spread with the soft, I had almost said the liquid acanthus.

This lawn is surrounded by a walk enclosed with tonsile evergreens shaped into a variety of forms. Beyond is an allée laid out in the form of a circus, ornamented in the middle with box cut in numberless different figures, together with a plantation of shrubs, either low-growing or prevented by the shears from running up too high. The whole is fenced in with a wall masked with box, rising by different ranges to the top. On the outside of the wall lies a meadow that owes as many beauties to nature, as all I have been describing within does to art; at the end of which are several other meadows and fields interspersed with thickets.

At the extremity of the portico stands a grand dining-room. Which through its folding doors opens upon one end of the terrace; while beyond there is a very extensive prospect over the meadows up into the country; from the windows you have a view on the one hand of the side of the terrace and such parts of the house which project forward; on the other, of the woods enclosing the adjacent hippodrome. Opposite almost to the center of the portico stands an apartment, something backwards, which encompasses a small shaded by four plane-trees, in the midst of which a fountain rises, from whence the water running over the edges of a marble basin

gently refreshes the surrounding plane-trees and the verdure underneath them.

This apartment consists of a bed-chamber free from every kind of noise, and which the light itself cannot penetrate; together with my ordinary dining-room that I use to when I have none but familiar friends with me. This looks upon this little area I just now described, also upon the portico and the whole prospect thence. There is besides, another room, which being situated close to the nearest plane-tree enjoys a constant shade and verdure; its sides are incrustated with marble up to the cornice. There is also above a foliage painted, with birds intermixed among the branches, which has an effect altogether as agreeable as that of the marble. In this room is placed a small fountain, that playing through several small pipes into a vase produces a most pleasing murmur.

From a wing of the portico you enter into a very spacious chamber opposite to the grand dining-room, which from some of its windows has a view of the terrace, and from others of the meadow, as those in the front look upon a cascade just beneath them, which entertains at once both the eye and the ear; for the water falling from a great height, foams round the marble basin, which receives it below. This room is extremely warm in winter, being much exposed to the sun, as in a cloudy day the heat from the adjoining stove very well supplies his absence.

From hence you pass through a spacious and pleasant undressing-room into the cold-bathroom, in which is a large gloomy bath; but if you are disposed to swim more at large, or in warmer water, in the middle of the area is a wide basin for that purpose, and near it a reservoir from whence you may be supplied with cold water to brace yourself again if you should perceive you are too much relaxed by the warm. Contiguous to the cold-bath is one of a middling degree of heat, which enjoys the kindly warmth of the sun, but not so intensely as that of the hot-bath, which projects farther. This last consists of three several divisions, each of different degrees of heat; the two former lie open to the full sun, the latter though not so

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much exposed to its heat, receives an equal share of its light.

Over the undressing-room is built the tennis-court, which admits of different kinds of games and different sets of players. Not far from the baths is a staircase which leads to a gallery, after having passed through three apartments: one of these looks upon the little area with the four plane-trees round it; another has a sight of the meadows; and from the third you have a view of the vineyards, and have as many different prospects as exposures. At one end of the gallery, and indeed taken off from it, is a chamber that looks upon the hippodrome, the vineyards and the mountains; adjoining it is a room which has a full exposure to the sun, especially in winter; from thence runs an apartment that connects the hippodrome with the house. Such are the villa's beauties and conveniences on the front.

On the side is a summer gallery which stands high, and has not only a prospect of the vineyards but seems almost to touch them. From the middle of this gallery you enter a dining-room cooled by the wholesome breezes which come from the Apennine valleys; from the windows in the back, which are extremely large, there is a prospect of the vineyards, as you have another view of them from the folding doors, but through the gallery. Along this side of that dining-room where there are no windows, runs a private staircase for the greater convenience of serving at entertainments; at the farther end is a chamber from whence the eye is entertained with a view of the vineyards, and (what is equally agreeable) of the gallery. Underneath this room is an enclosed portico something resembling a grotto, which in the midst of summer heats retains its pent-up cool and enjoying its own air, neither admits nor wants the refreshment of external breezes.

Behind both these galleries at the end of the dining-room stands a portico, which as the day is more or less advanced serves either for winter or summer use. It leads to two different apartments, one containing four chambers, the other three, which enjoy by turns as the sun advances, both

sun and shade. In front of these agreeable buildings lies a very spacious hippodrome, entirely open in the middle, by which means the eye, upon your first entrance, takes in its whole extent at one view. It is encompassed on every side with plane-trees covered with ivy, so that while their heads flourish with their own green, their bodies enjoy a borrowed verdure; and thus the ivy twining round the trunk and branches spreads from tree to tree and connects them together. Between each plane-tree are planted box-trees, and behind these, bay-trees, which blend their shape with that of the planes. The path around the hippodrome, which here runs straight, bends at the farther end into a semi-circle and takes on a new aspect, being set around with cypress-trees and obscured by their denser and more gloomy shade; while the inward circular walks (for there are several) enjoy the full sun. Farther on, the path has roses and corrects the coolness of shade with the pleasant warmth of the sun.

Having passed through these several winding alleys you enter again a straight walk, which breaks out into a variety of others, divided off by box hedges. In one place you have a little meadow; in another the box is cut into a thousand different forms; sometimes into letters, expressing the name of the master, or that of the artificer; whilst here and there little obelisks rise inter-mixed alternately with fruit trees, when on a sudden in the midst of this elegant regularity you are surprised with an imitation of the negligent beauties of rural nature; in the center of which lies a spot surrounded with a knot of dwarf plane-trees. Beyond these are interspersed clumps of the smooth and twining acanthus; then trees cut into a variety of names and shapes.

At the upper end is a semi-circular bench of white marble, shaded with a vine which is supported by four small pillars of Carystian marble. From underneath this bench the water gushing through several little pipes as if it were pressed out by the weight of the persons who repose themselves upon it, falls into a stone cistern underneath, from whence it is received into a fine polished marble basin,

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so artfully contrived that it is always full without overflowing. When I sup here, the tray of hors d'oeuvres and larger dishes are placed round the margin, while the smaller ones swim about in the form of little vessels and water-fowl. Opposite this is a fountain which is incessantly emptying and filling; for the water, which it throws up a great height, falling back again into it, is by means of connected openings returned as fast as it is received.

Fronting the bench (and which reflects as great an ornament to it as it borrows from it) stands a chamber of lustrous marble, whose doors project and open into a green enclosure; as from its upper and lower windows the eye ranges upward or downward over other spaces of verdure. Next to it is a little private closet (which though it is distinct may be laid into the same room) furnished with a couch; and notwithstanding it has windows on every side, yet it enjoys a very agreeable gloominess, by means of a spreading vine which climbs to the top, and entirely overshades it.

Here you may lie and fancy yourself in a wood, with this difference only, that you are not exposed to the weather. In this place also, a fountain rises and instantly disappears. In different quarters are disposed several marble seats, which serve, no less than the chamber, as so many reliefs after one is wearied with walking. Near each seat is a little fountain; and throughout the whole hippodrome several small rills conveyed through pipes run murmuring along, wheresoever the hand of art has thought proper to conduct them; watering here and there different spots of verdure, and in their progress refreshing the whole.

And now I should not have hazarded the imputation of being too minute in this detail if I had not proposed to lead you by this letter into every corner of my house and gardens. But I did not fear that you would think it a trouble to read the description of a place which I am persuaded would please you were you to see it; especially as you have it in your power to stop and by throwing aside my letter sit down, as it were, and rest yourself

as often as you think proper. Besides I have gratified my own passion; as I confess I have a great one for this villa, which was chiefly built or finished by myself. In a word (for why should I conceal from my friend my sentiments whether right or wrong?) I look upon it as the first duty of a writer frequently to throw his eyes upon his title page and to consider well the subject he has proposed to himself; and he may be assured if he closely pursues his plan he cannot be tedious; whereas if he drags in extraneous matters, he will most certainly incur that censure.

Homer, you know, has employed many verses in the description of the arms of Achilles, as Virgil also has in those of Aeneas; yet neither of them is prolix, because they both keep within the limits of their original design. Aratus, you see, is not esteemed too circumstantial, though he traces and enumerates the minutest stars; for he does not go out of his way for that purpose; he only follows where his subject leads him. In the same manner (to compare small things with great), if endeavoring to give you a view of my whole villa I have not wandered into anything foreign or, as it were, devious, it is not my letter which describes, but my villa which is described, that is to be deemed large.

But not to dwell any longer upon this digression lest I should be condemned by the maxim I have just laid down, I have now informed you why I prefer my Tuscan villa to those which I possess at Tusulum, Tibur and Praeneste, I here enjoy a securer, as it is a more profound leisure; I need never put on full dress; nobody calls from next door on urgent business. All is calm and composed; which contributes no less than its clear and unclouded sky to the salubrity of the spot. Here I am peculiarly blessed with health of body and cheerfulness of mind, for I keep my mind in proper exercise by study and my body by hunting. And indeed there is no place which agrees better with all my household; I am sure at least I have not yet lost one (under favour be it spoken) of all those I brought with me hither. May the gods continue this happiness to me, and that honor to my villa!