

landscape

GORGEOUS GROTESQUES

Monsters and nymphs animate the medieval gardens at Bomarzo

STORY BY PAULA DE LA CRUZ



A MILE-LONG ROAD WINDS FROM ITALY'S MEDIEVAL Orsini Castle in Bomarzo, outside the province of Viterbo, north of Rome, into an increasingly dense forest of fig, chestnut and oak trees. It is eerily silent except for the occasional crunch of chestnut husks underneath my feet. As the woodland grows denser and darker, I arrive at Bomarzo Bosco Sacro — or Sacred Grove (also known as Parco dei Mostri) — a garden of fantastical stone creatures created by Pier Francesco "Vicino" Orsini, the Duke of Bomarzo, in the mid-16th century. The scale of the figures is striking, and most are there to frighten visitors far more than to delight them.

Once inside Orsini's imaginary world, giant tufa mouths look like they want to devour you, and nymphs lie seductively, despite the toll of centuries of erosion on their mineral bodies. Vicino Orsini was an avid reader, and perhaps the most popular book of his time was Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, an epic tale in which Poliphilo con-

Above: A stone dragon sculpture, in a section of Bomarzo, being attacked by a dog, lion and wolf — symbols of spring, summer and winter. To the left, a reclining Neptune. The masons who completed the work throughout the garden are unknown. One theory attributes the sculptures to prisoners of war granted to the creator of the garden, the Duke of Bomarzo, Vicino Orsini.

quers his beloved Polia in a feverish dream on the island of Cytherea. Besides the heroic acts, the tale is bizarrely peppered with descriptions of architecture, illustrations of phallic woodcuts and passages describing "the crowd of young lovers and divine amorous girls." The depictions of the woods and gardens on the island where Polia finally falls for her suitor influenced artists and architects as well as the structure of many 16th- and 17th-century gardens, Bomarzo in particular.

The animals and masks set around the garden are meant to elevate the mind and spirit, but are less ostentatious than their counterparts in the Mannerist gardens of Rome and Florence, which are notable



for their excessive detail.

Entering through Bomarzo's gates, a sign on a sphinx reads: "He who does not visit this place with raised eyebrows and tight lips will fail to admire the wonders of the world." A path descends toward a cascade, past two colossi fighting, with the stronger one ripping the weaker one apart by his legs. Perhaps this is an ironic allusion to the false grandeur of commissioning colossal figures for Roman gardens, because it is inevitable that the figures' limbs fall off. To the left of the gate, a sea monster resembling an Etruscan Medusa makes room enough for me to venture inside its cavernous mouth. The face balances a globe showing traces of red pigment, and there's a castle sitting atop it, which is a symbol of the Orsini family.

In fact, many of the statues once were painted, just as ancient Etruscan ones were before. Until the 4th century B.C., Viterbo was a bustling center of Etruscan life. Orsini was very proud of the area's Etruscan past and celebrated this by placing an artificially aged mausoleum and a bench with an Etruscan façade in his park.

Closer to the valley bottom, near a stream, the woodland is darker and the stone is thickly carpeted with moss. At first glance, there are no colors, just light and shadows, and the scene is like a black-and-white photo. Mammoth animals rise abruptly from hidden nooks, much as in the Hercynian forest described by

Above, left: The monsters of *Bosco Sacro*, or Sacred Grove — the main attraction in the Italian town of Bomarzo — are overseen by this grotesque entry to *Orcus Grotto*. Just inside the ogre's mouth is a table with benches. **Above, right:** Nearby, a pegasus, *Pegaso*, is poised for flight. Often referred to as Monster Park, the garden was dedicated to the memory of Orsini's wife, Giulia, who died before most of the construction was completed. After languishing in obscurity for many years, the park was restored beginning in the 1950s, and is now open to the public year round.

Colonna "where there was nothing but the lairs of dangerous beasts and caverns full of noxious creatures and fierce monsters." A giant turtle perched on the edge of a cliff, obscured by holm oaks and European hornbeams, slowly makes its way into the open jaws of a whale. Farther down, closer to a ravine, the figures become racier and far less heroic, including three graces who display their voluptuous bodies. Directly across from the graces and a nymphaeum, there is an oval pool edged by dolphins.

The pursuit of sex and love was central to Orsini's happiness; he once described himself as "a dry straw before the flames of lust." His most erotic figure is a reclining nymph whose genitals are only barely covered. She seems to be in a deep sleep, much like *Psyche* who meets her lover *Cupid* in a secret place where he could visit her only under cover of

darkness. The statue could also be a reference to Orsini's playfulness and extramarital curiosity. The statue's body was carved carelessly, which has led experts to believe local masons were employed — if not the prisoners of war awarded to Orsini after his successful military campaigns. But these are all theories, for no one really knows who designed the terraces and coves of this woodland garden, though it's generally believed that the Mannerist architect Pirro Ligorio did the overall design and layout. A life-size elephant with a castle on its back, carrying a dead soldier in its trunk, is the only sculpture that alludes to the duke's military career. It could also be a memorial for Orsini's son Orazio, who died in the Battle of Lepanto in 1571. The missing tusks were probably real ones, and the hollowed eyes may have been set with polished stones.

After Orsini's death in the 1580s, the park was abandoned, adding to its mysterious aura. Trees and shrubs were left to grow wild, its lake vanished altogether and tall grasses covered much of the bases of the sculptures, until the Italian art critic Mario Praz and Salvador Dali rediscovered it in 1949. Dali became fascinated by the emotional tension of the random stone grotesques and by local stories of some appalling sexual act that took place in the garden that the Orsini family had since tried to cover up. In 1954, Giovanni Bettini bought the land from the Borghese family, restored it and opened it to the public, but not without a precautionary exorcism first.

Walking up from the valley, there is a house built at an angle, which looks as if it is crumbling. It is a bit dizzying to walk inside it and an immense relief to leave. The path from the house leads to an open plane decorated with urns that likely held oil lamps used to light great parties. Nearby, a dragon is being attacked by a mask with a gigantic gaping mouth and teeth. Inside, there is a 6-foot-long table surrounded by benches. The chamber was probably used as a cool summer retreat for picnics or for Orsini's obscure rituals. A sign around the mouth reads, "Abandon all thought, ye who enter here," an allusion to Dante's *Inferno*, where the gate to hell bears the inscription, "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."

As you leave the garden, a mausoleum is the only building that makes sense, signifying a return to the rational world. But like the advice of the sphinx at Bomarzo's entrance, visit this garden so your eyes widen with surprise and your mouth hangs open in amazement. Learn more at bomarzo.net. ➤

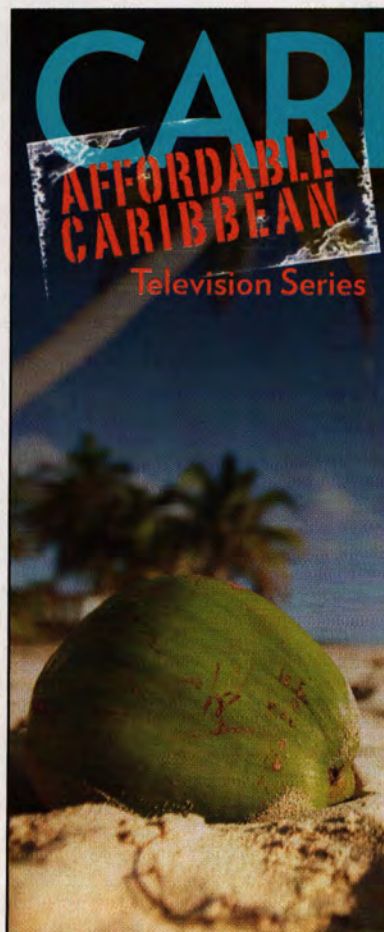


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