

# The American Friends of Versailles Tour the Lakes of North Italy

JANUARY 10, 2023



American Friends of Versailles travelers visiting Villa Balbianello on Italy's Lake Como.

TRAVEL • BY: SHARON HOGE

*Aristocratic villas, sumptuous gardens, and historic sites* surrounding picturesque northern Italian Lakes Garda, Iseo, Como, Orto, and Maggiore were autumn destinations on the annual tour of the American Friends of Versailles. Organized to help support preservation projects at the celebrated chateau, the group welcomed

the chance to study derivative and similar vernal settings in Italian regions, which were intermittently ruled by the dynasty of **Marie Antoinette** who was born a Hapsburg princess.

Assembling on a late September evening at Sirmione overlooking Lake Garda, international AFV participants from New York, Boston, Texas, Chicago, Nantucket, Palm Beach, Sarasota, Cape Coral, Lake Forest, Vail, Washington, DC, California, France, Italy greeted each other for a sunset dinner on the terrace of the Villa Cortine Palace Hotel.

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The group gathered at the Villa Cortine Palace Hotel.

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The opening dinner was served on the Cortine Palace Hotel terrace overlooking Lake Garda.



Introductions and reunions.



Toasting old and new friends.



*L. to r.:* Gale Arnold; Robert Arnold.



Jaqueline Arnold.



L. to r.: Nathalie de La Bedoyere; Alicia Bryan.





*L. to r.:* Bonnie Deutsch; Claire Dwoskin.



Erin Falk.



*L. to r.: Jane de Moret Foster; Michele Fiesci-Fouan.*



*L. to r.:* Deborah Glass; James Conrad Hanson.



Francis Hammond.



*L. to r.:* Katherine Harris; Phillip Hartung.



*L. to r.:* Sir Richard Hitt; Susan Kendall.



Sharon King Hoge.



*L. to r.:* Pamela Miles; Lily O'Boyle.



*L. to r.:* John Parkerson; Gilbert Lang Mathews.





*L. to r.:* Suzanne Mathews; AFV Co-Founder Olivier de Rohan.



AFV Executive Director Kristin Smith.



*L. to r.: Joseph Street; Laura Street.*



*L. to r.:* Marjorie Vickers; Susan Walling.

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*The next morning the AFV boarded a launch to Isola Garda for a private tour of the Venetian-influenced Palazzo Borghese Cavazza where they were greeted and guided by charming hostess **Alberta Cavazza dei Conti Cavazza** who described how she and her siblings have been restoring the villa and grounds.*

After lunch on the terrace, the group proceeded by boat to sightsee at Vittoriale degli Italiani, the monumental property, which was home until his 1938 death to infamous **Gabriele D'Annunzio**, Italian poet, writer, army officer, aristocrat, and “Decadente.” Back to Sirmione, a seaside dinner was served at Michelin star La Speranzina Restaurant, highlighted by the menu’s acclaimed “ Riso, oro e zafferano” risotto topped with a square of edible gold leaf.

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Speeding across Lake Garda to Isola Garda.



Olivier de Rohan.

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# Lago di Garda

TRENTO



Riva del Garda Torbole

Limone sul Garda

Tremosine

Malcesine



Toscolano Maderno



Torri del Benaco

Salò

San Felice del Benaco

Garda

Bardolino

Manerba

Sirmione

Lazise

Desenzano

Peschiera



BRESCIA



VERONA



The guide's hand towel map showed the day's destinations.



Palazzo Borghese Cavassa shows Venetian influences.



Alberta Cavazza welcomed us to the family estate which she and her siblings are restoring.





Jaquine Arnold admires the plantings.



James Hanson at the Villa Cavazza facade.



Al fresco luncheon was served on the Villa Cavazza terrace. *Inset:* Fresh home-grown strawberries were served for dessert.



Approaching Vittoriale degli Italiani, the historic complex where D'Annunzio resided.



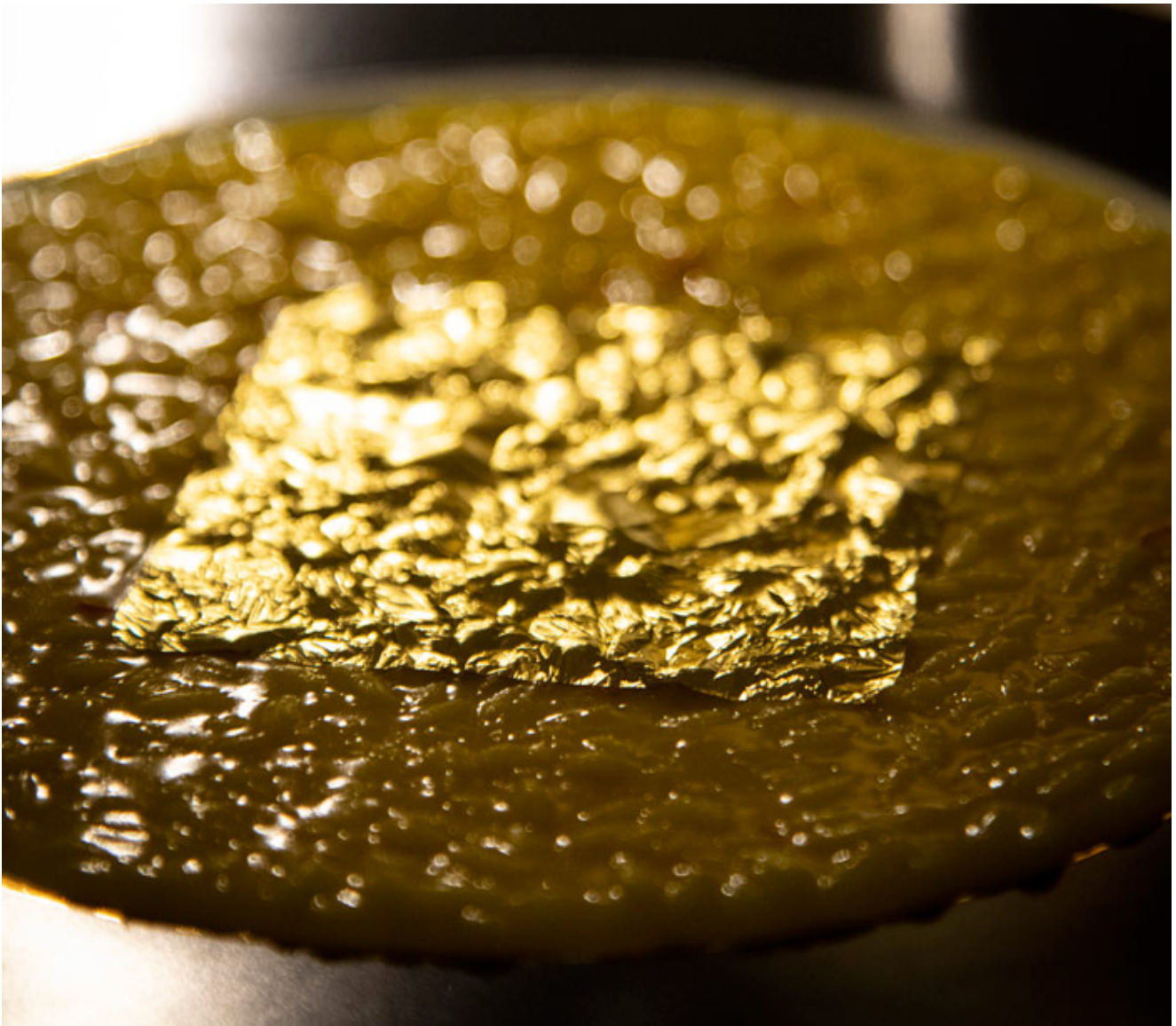
A self proclaimed Animal of Luxury, D'Annunzio crowded rooms with collectibles.



Sandy Parkerson admires D'Annunzio's personal effects exhibited in the museum.



D'Annunzio's bespoke shoes display a suggestive motif.



An edible gold leaf embellishes risotto at La Speranzina.

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*Sheltered from Alps winds, with a mild climate* and rich glacial soil, Italy's lake area is emerging as a major wine region known for its Franciacorta sparkling wine, made using the same method and some of the same grapes as Champagne. Hosted by owner **Vittorio Moretti**, the AFV visited Bellavista, the family winery he has expanded overlooking Lake Iseo. AFV members sampled three Bellavista vintages at lunch.

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Princess Beatrice introduced host Bellavista owner Vittorio Moretti who transformed a small family-owned property into a full-fledged winery.



Bellavista wines are made by blending traditional methods with new technology.



Joseph and Laura Street touring the wine cellars.



Luncheon at Bellavista.



Three glasses per setting for sampling Bellavista vintages. *Inset:* Italy's Franciacorta sparkling wine.

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*Proceeding to Lake Como, the group gathered* at the historic neo-classical Teatro Sociale Como for an elegant cocktail dinatoire before attending a charming “in the round” production of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*.

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Cocktail dinatoire before the opera.



Joseph and Laura Street with James Hanson.



Sir Richard Hitt and Le Vicomte de Rohan sample the fare.



Suzane Mathews, Katherine Harris, and Alicia Bryan.



Erin Falk and Deborah Glass with past opera posters.



Susan Kendall.

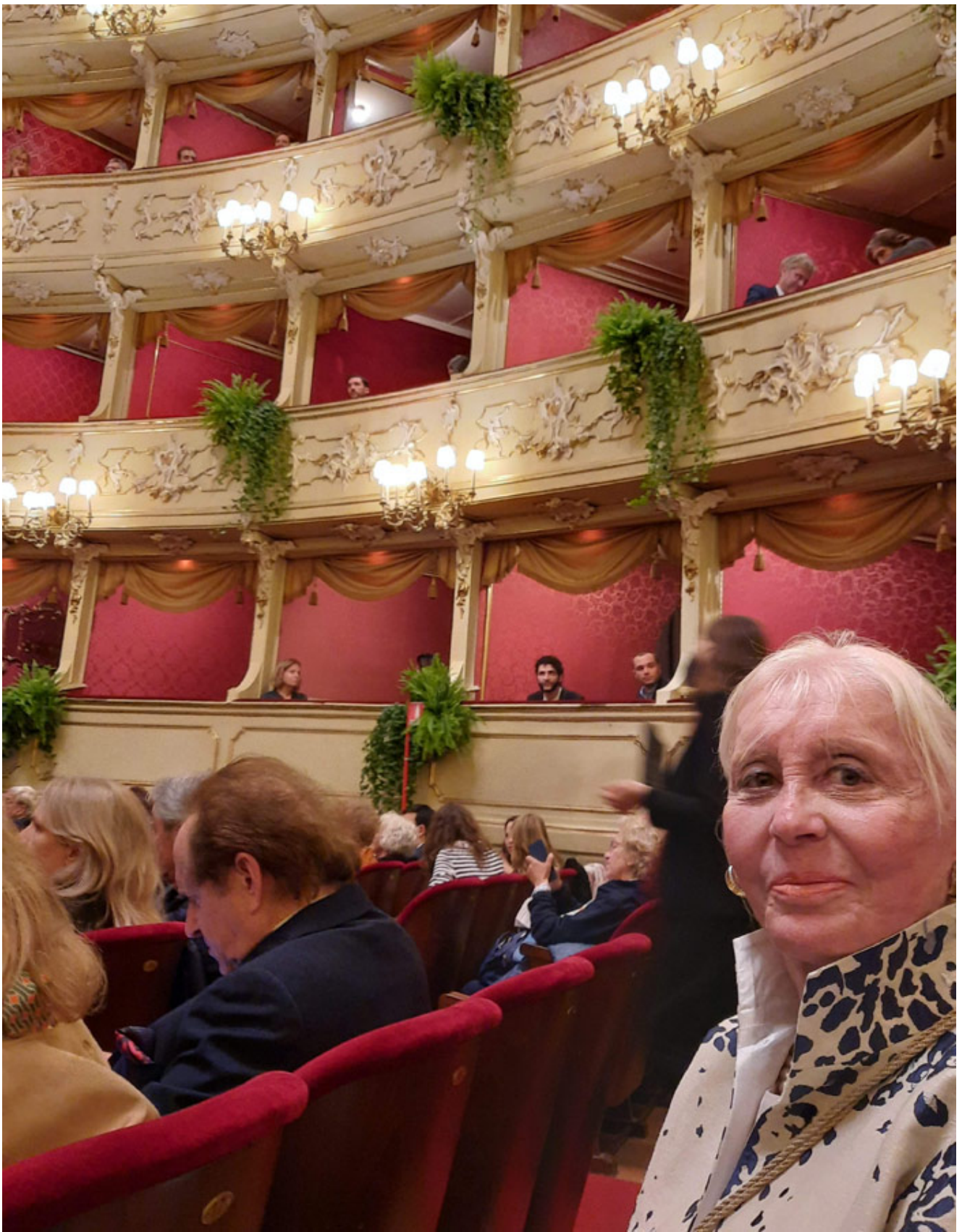




Princesse Beatrice sips the popular Aperol aperitif.



Awaiting the performance of *Don Giovanni*.



Bonnie Deutsch in the opera hall.



*Don Giovanni* curtain call.

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*Exploring Lake Como, the AFV set off in the rain to tour astounding Villa Balbianello.* Originally a 13th-century Franciscan monastery it has evolved into a site famous for elaborate terraced gardens and art and artifact collections amassed by Standa department store heir **Guido Monzino**, who led Italian Mount Everest and North Pole expeditions and collected reverse glass paintings, Beauvais tapestries, antique maps, French boiserie. It has been used as a setting for scenes in films such as *Star Wars Episode 2* and the James Bond's *Casino Royale*.

Crossing to Bellagio, “the most beautiful city in Italy,” for memorable fettuccini at renowned Restaurant Suisse, the group wandered along the lakeside promenade and enchanting gardens of 19th-century Villa Melzi, then returned to a dinner party hosted by **Patrick and Francesca Premoli Droulers**. Patrick is a brother of AFV French

Board Member **Nathalie, Comtesse Serge de La Bédoyère** — both siblings of a family that once owned and managed the renowned hotel Villa d'Este, known as Italy's finest five-star hotel.

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Sailing past George Clooney's villa, alas he was out of town.

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A Villa Balbianello terrace was seen in the James Bond film *Casino Royale*.



Robert and Jaquine Arnold toast the Balbianello library.



Gilbert Mathews admires artifacts from Monzino expeditions.





Monzino's collection of reverse glass paintings.



Promenade in the Villa Melzi gardens.



Host Patrick Droulers and his wife Francesca Premoli with Nathalie de La Bedoyere and Jaquine Arnold.



Michele Fiesci-Fouan and Susan Walling. *Inset:* Jaunty deviled egg hors d'oeuvres.



Nathalie de La Bedoyere hosts a table at her brother Patrick's dinner party.



Hartung wedding anniversary. Bonnie and Phillip married during a prior AFV tour of Sicily.

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*After a morning excursion to the picturesque museum and botanical gardens of Villa Carlotta, the AFV group boated to the summer residence of Nathalie de La Bédoyère, whose Villa Silva perches directly on Lake Como. After admiring the swimming pool, which disappears under a retractable stone terrace, the group was welcomed to the elaborate buffet luncheon by “George Clooney” — alas merely an impersonator.*

There was time for shopping and a Como city tour, then the group dressed for a formal dinner served in a private salon of Villa d’Este.

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Villa Carlotta features an important museum and extensive botanic gardens.

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Canova statues are collection highlights.



Admiring Carlotta's Alexander the Great frieze which was intended for Napoleon.



Crossing Lake Como to Nathalie's villa.



Welcomed by hostess Nathalie de La Bedoyere and Princesse Beatrice.





Pre-lunch aperitifs on Nathalie's terrace.



A festive lunch in Nathalie's waterview dining room.



Could that be George Clooney!!!!??



No, alas, a George Clooney impersonator.



Dressed up for dinner at Villa d'Este.



A private dining room at Villa d'Este.



Sirloin with truffle was served at Villa d'Este.

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*Responsible for the splendid greenery of the Borromeo gardens*, Maestro Giardiniere Gianfranco Giustina, proclaimed the 2014 Best Gardener in Europe by the Royal Horticultural Society, guided the AFV through a recent project, the gardens of the Villa Lorello overlooking Lake Orta created for the Spadoni family, friends of Princesse Béatrice.

A sunny buffet lunch served on the terrace was followed by a bus trip to Italy's second largest lake, Maggiore, where the group checked into the lavishly decorated, luxury, five-star Grand Hotel des Iles Borromees and Spa, then boated to the historic gardens of Isola Madre for sunset aperitifs before dinner at elegant Ristorante Milano where chef **Agostino Sala's** dishes are savored "like creative works of art."

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Featured in Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms*, the extravagant Grand Hotel des Isles Borromees has been a Lake Maggiore feature for over 150 years.



Hotel Borromeo cupid elevator garlands.



Assembled in Hotel Borromeo's grandiose lobby.





An outing to Villa Lorella.



Welcomed to Villa Lorella by Princesse Beatrice, her friends Dott. Tozzi Spadoni and Signora Mariasilvia Spadoni, and gardener Gianfranco Giustana.



Celebrated gardener Gianfranco Giustina explained the Villa Lorella garden designs.



Giustina shared ideas about gardening.



Garden vistas were planned to frame perspectives of Lake Orta below.



Tall grasses enhance the view toward Villa Lorella.



Patriarch of the Garden, this ancient chestnut tree is mentioned in medieval literature.



*L. to r.:* A buffet luncheon was served on the terrace; Princesse Beatrice beside the table flower arrangement.



Important gardens surround Palazzo dell'Isola Madre.



Stairways connect the garden terraces.





Rare white and golden peacocks thrive in the Isola Madre gardens. Napoleon had one shot to take home as a souvenir.



Stately white peacocks.



Felled in a storm, this monumental Kashmir cypress was reerected by celebrated gardener Gianfranco Giustana.

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Lakefront Ristorante Milano is one of the region's acclaimed eateries.



Lively conversation at Ristorante Milano.

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*A highlight of the final day was an excursion to Isola Bella, where a villa, lush gardens, and vistas created by the Borromeo banking family adorn what was originally not much more than a large rock in the water. After admiring huge plaster heraldry decorations, walls lined symmetrically with paintings, a room where Napoleon had slept, and the massive open air amphitheater, the group boated to Villa Intragnola, where owners **Dott. Gian Luca and Donna Giovanna Rusconi Clerici Sarto** led a tour through gardens with international plantings and hosted a delicious poolside luncheon.*

Back across Lake Maggiore, L'Ermittagio, **Donna Giovanna's Rusconi Clerici** family lakeside villa was the setting for the closing night dinner. Raising toasts commemorating Princess Béatrice and AFV Founder **Catharine Hamilton**, the group concluded another elegant, edifying, and memorable journey.



Villa Intragnola was a luncheon destination.



Host Dott. Gian Luca Sarto shows the prized conifer collection of Villa Intragnola's gardens.



Aperitifs poolside at Villa Intragnola.



Luncheon buffet at Villa Intragnola.





Boatloads of soil were brought from the mainland to transform a rocky island into lush, elegant Isola Bella.



A three story domed salon bears the family motto Humility.



Elaborate plaster coats of arms adorn walls of Palazzo Borromeo.



A Palazzo Borromeo guest bedroom. After Napoleon's visit, the staff described Empress Josephine as More Polite than her hero husband.



Facing walls are lined with paintings arranged symmetrically.



Shells and mirrors are encrusted into the palazzo's underground grottoes.



Gathered at L'Eremitaggio for the closing reception.



Goodbyes and future plans.





Susan Kendall and Pamela Miles at the closing reception.



Dinner in the stately dining room.



Gilbert Mathews farewell toast.



Receiving thanks from the group, Princessesse Beatrice bids adieu.

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*Founded a quarter century ago by Catharine Hamilton*, the AFV has been supporting restoration projects at Versailles — the Bosquet des Trois Fontaines, the Pavillon Frais, the baroque fresco on the ceiling of Marie Antoinette’s Queens Guards Room, and the Queen’s Bosquet.

This coming **June 9-12** they will be celebrating with another Grand Dinner Gala at Versailles.

People interested in participating in the 25th Anniversary events are invited to consult the website **HERE** or to contact the Chicago office at 312 943-0173.

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American Friends of Versailles Founder  
Catharine Hamilton.



Bosquet des Trois Fontaines restored at Versailles by AFV.



Restored Pavillon Frais in Gardens of Versailles.



Restored ceiling of Marie Antoinette's Queens Guards Room in Versailles.

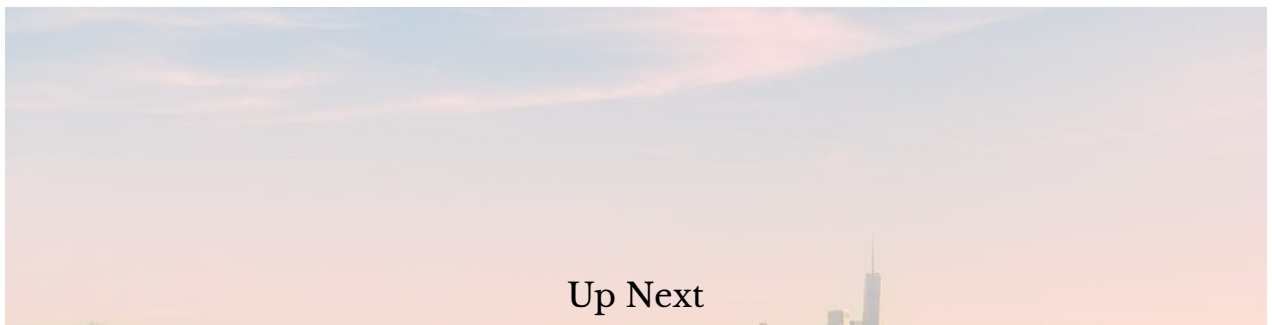


Restored Queens Bosquet within the Gardens of Versailles.

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*Photo Credits: Francis Hammond, Michele Fiesci-Fouan, Kristin Smith, Sharon King Hoge*

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