



## Stresa and its Green Entrepreneurs

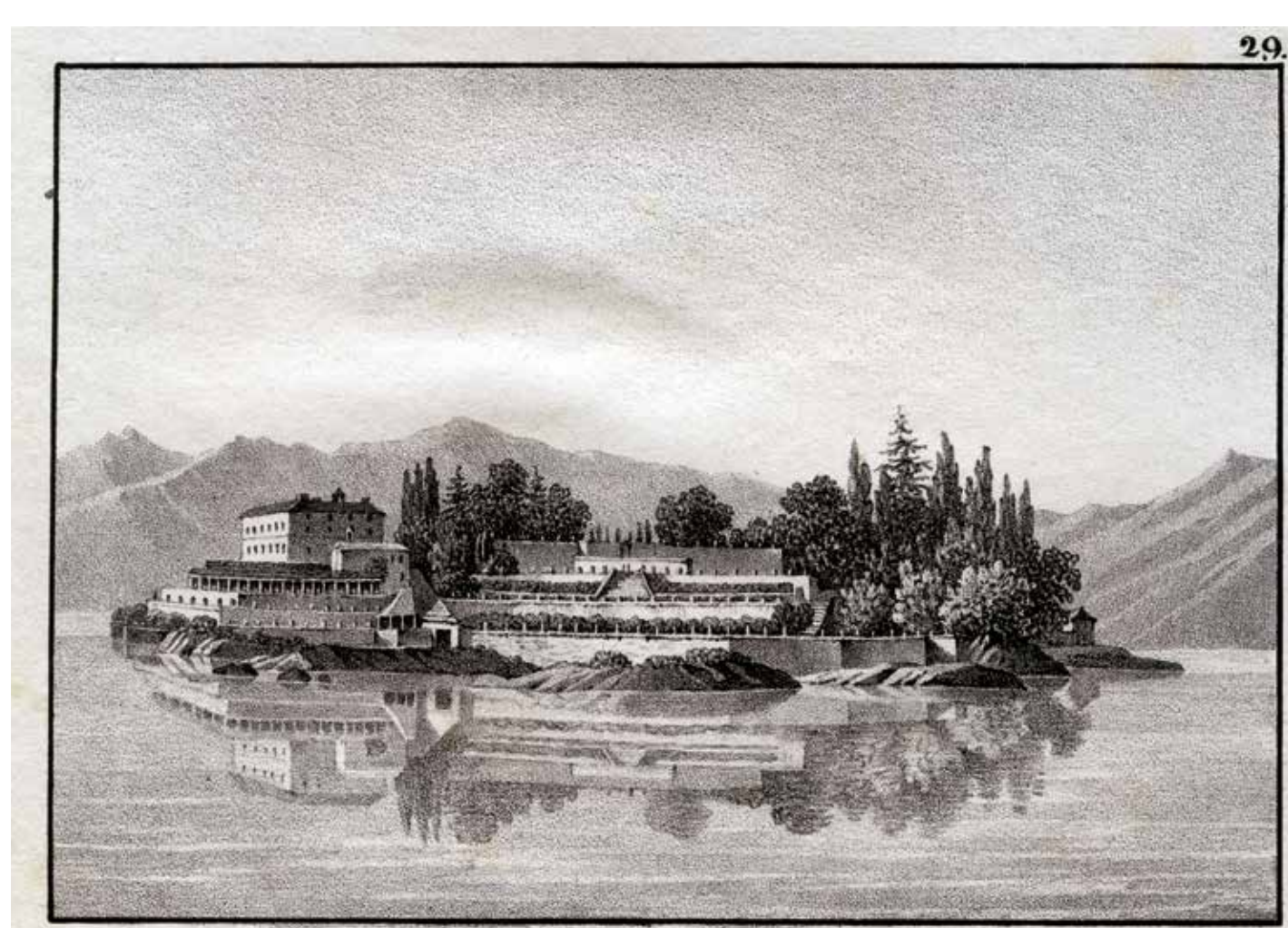
Meticulous historical and archival research has unearthed hundreds of names of gardeners, horticulturists, and nurserymen present around Lake Maggiore, from the early “hortolani” in the service of the Borromeo family on Isola Madre and Isola Bella (16th-17th century) to modern-day business owners, often family-run, active in various sectors (nurseries, garden design, commerce, competitions). The most significant presence, of both Italians and foreigners, is recorded in the 19th-20th centuries, when the construction of villas and hotels with lakeside parks and gardens intensified.

Villa owners showcased a vast array of rare plants, originating from the Americas and the East and subject to hybridization experiments, such as camellias, rhododendrons, azaleas, gardenias, orchids, oleanders, magnolias, camphor trees, cedars, araucarias, eucalyptus, palms, and bamboo. This would not have been possible without the Borromeo family procuring seeds from all over the globe in the first half of the 19th century and transforming Isola Madre into the lake’s first botanical acclimatization garden. Similar experiments were conducted (circa 1866-1887) in the park of Villa Ada in Ghiffa (Verbania) by Prince Petr Troubetzkoy, who had previously introduced hundreds of species into his botanical garden near Moscow. In Stresa, the art of gardening boasts many illustrious representatives. Among the first was Antonio Cantamessa, born in Agliè (Turin) in 1830 into a family of gardeners employed by the House of Savoy. He arrived in Stresa around 1860 to work at the villa of the Duchess of Genoa, later becoming the successful owner of a business with his son Michele (1862-1946). Michele, the owner of nurseries and a shop, was active in various sectors: public works (Viale Duchessa di Genova, lakefront flowerbeds), garden design in Stresa (Villas Zinelli and Rosmini-Candiani-Zucchi), Baveno, and Oggebbio, competitions and exhibitions, and creating decorations for streets, squares, or ceremonies. A similar path was followed by the De Paoli family, beginning with Ambrogio, born in Vische (Turin) in 1851, who came to Stresa around 1875-1876 as the professional gardener of Villa De Martini and later became a renowned entrepreneur. The company, carried on by his son Paolo (1894-1987), had a nursery in the area of the current Palazzo dei Congressi, equipped with a large tank for aquatic plants. Every year, gardeners celebrated their patron saint, St. Phocas, with a banquet.



Villa De Martini, in the center of the photographic image, with gardens designed by Ambrogio De Paoli (in a postcard sent in 1909); the villa was demolished in 1907.

Below: The flower nursery of Paolo De Paoli, located in the area of the current Palazzo dei Congressi. Bottom left: The basin for aquatic plants. Right: Two photographs of the nursery, one with Villa Ducale in the background, partially rebuilt after the disastrous fire of 1946, and the other with a view of the Regina Palace



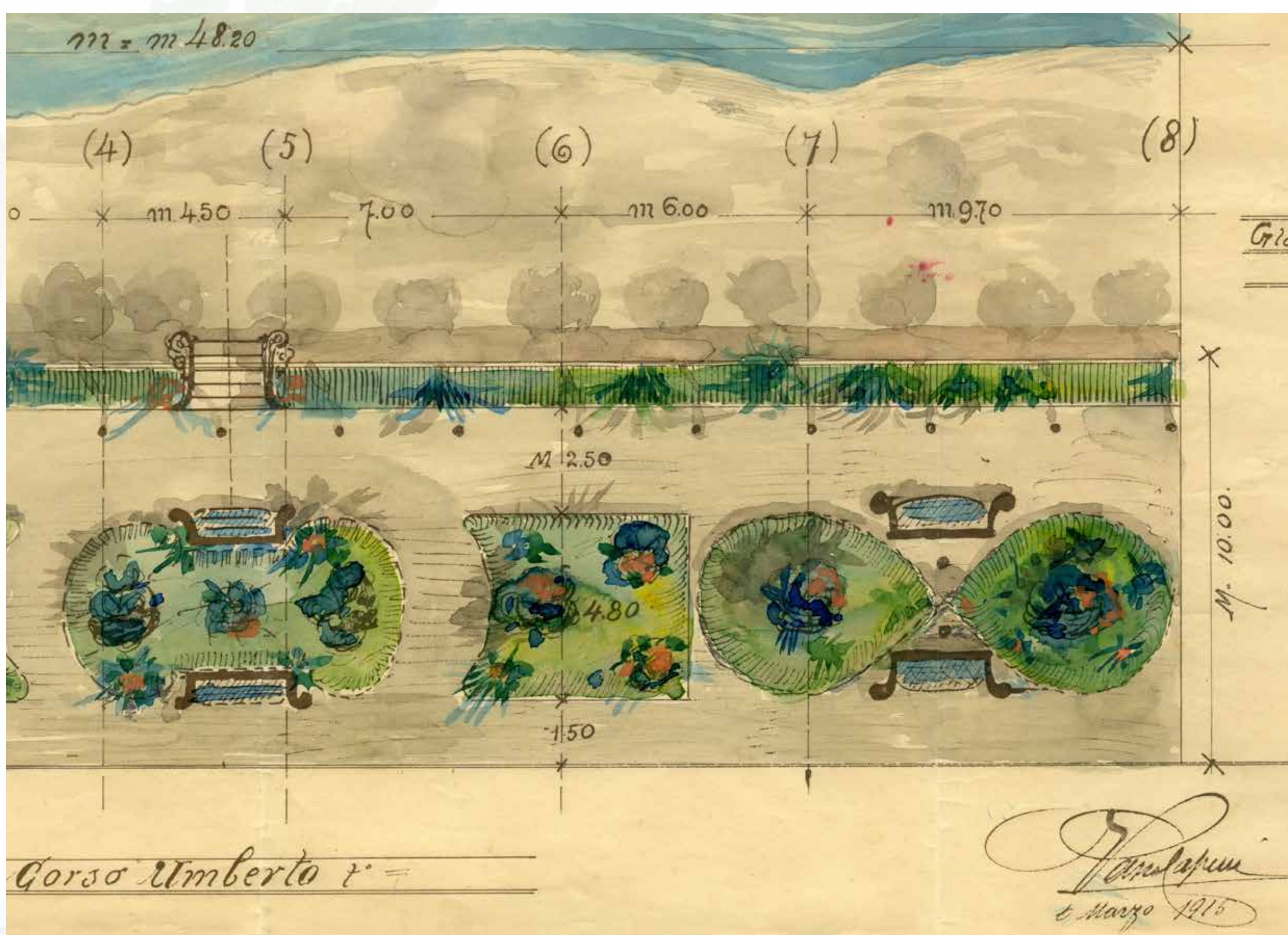
Side and below: Isola Madre in a 17th-century print, showing the work on the terracing, and in an early 20th-century photograph, documenting the transformation of the gardens into their current appearance.



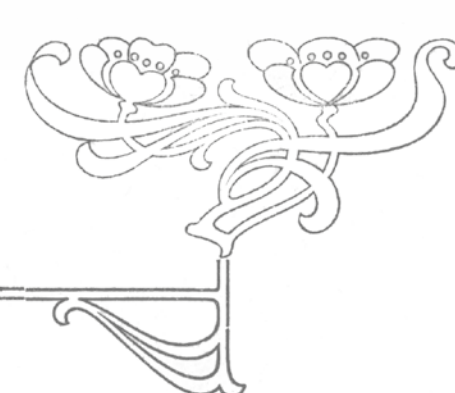
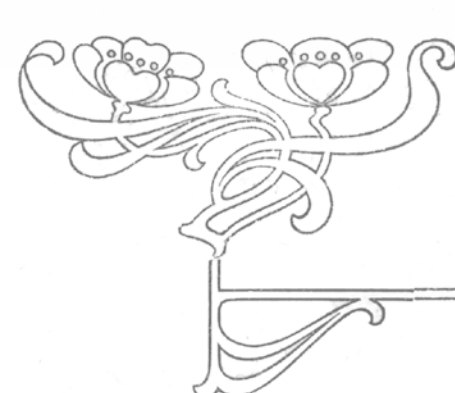
Preparation and planting work by Michele Cantamessa at Villa Barberis in Baveno (left) and Villa Zinelli in Stresa (right).



Una committenza privata e una pubblica a Michele Cantamessa: il parco di Villa Zinelli e il viale Duchessa di Genova.



Design by the master builder Vasco Capucci for some lakefront flowerbeds in front of Villa Baisini.



English

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