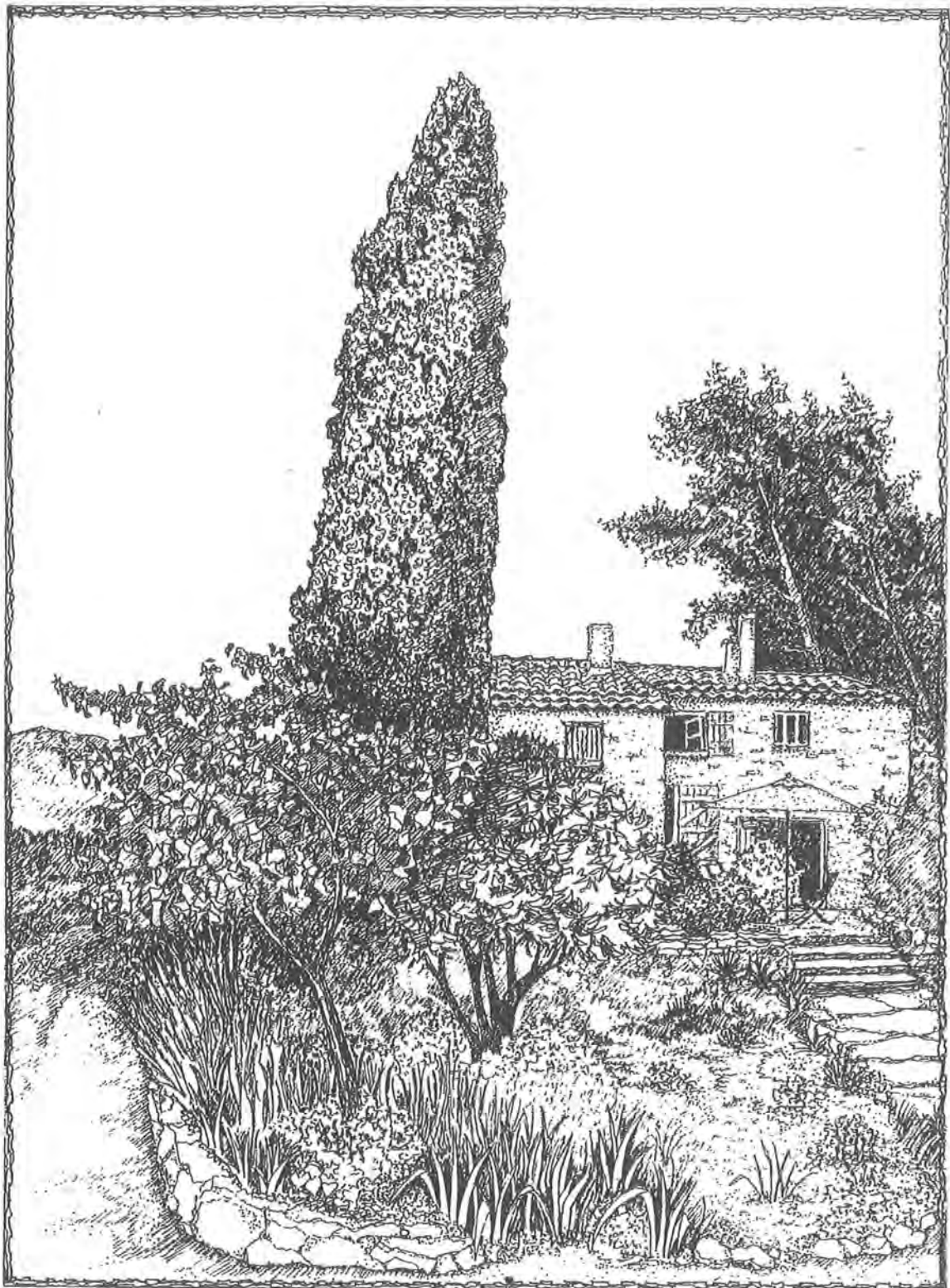


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IL BOSCO DELLA RAGNAIA

Carole Cross

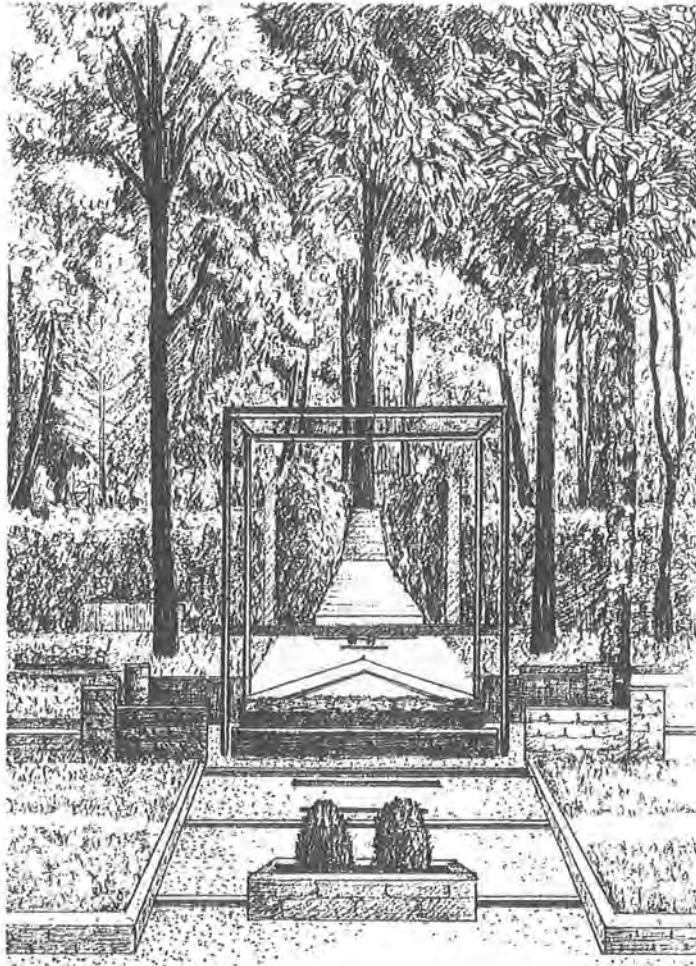
I first went to Il Bosco della Ragnaia in the autumn of 2003 as part of the programme of events organised when the AGM of the Mediterranean Garden Society was held in Tuscany. It was certainly the most unusual of the gardens we visited and I had always meant to return. The location of the 2007 general meeting of the Italian Branch at nearby Bagno Vignoni meant that attending members could enjoy a morning visit to La Ragnaia at San Giovanni d'Asso – and what a perfect morning we had for this memorable experience. The sun was shining brightly, the air was warm and the birds were singing as we gathered at the entrance. Sheppard Craig, the creator of this garden, and some of his helpers were on hand to guide us round in groups, explaining how the garden was developed over the past ten years and giving us an insight into some of the more enigmatic features. This is a garden that can be enjoyed in many different ways, however, and one does not have to be privy to the meaning of all the installations and inscriptions to realise that one is in a magical and mystical place. According to Sheppard, spring is the season when the garden is at its best and so we eagerly made our way along the Grand Triumphal Entry, a narrow path flanked by green hedges, where each visitor is encouraged to think of one personal triumph and thus begin his or her own personal “Magical Mystery Tour”.

At the end of the Grand Triumphal Entry the garden comes into view far below: a wide, cool space that invites you to descend and enjoy its peace. The design of the garden is clear from above. Layers of green upon green, periwinkle, ivy, box, bay laurel, holm oak and other evergreen shrubs cover the ground or edge narrow paths between Sheppard's thought-provoking, but never intrusive, installations. Towering trees form a canopy and stand like guardians of this place as they have done for hundreds of years, for this was an area of old woodland that has been tamed but not radically changed. In ancient times it was believed that the sages ruled the woods. They knew that the woods had a meaning, something precise

and enchanting, but they could never be sure what it was and so any interpretation was deemed to be possible, none was right and none was wrong. So, as we descend to the heart of La Ragnaia, we are invited to decide for ourselves the meaning of this garden within an ancient wood. It would appear that the garden is a metaphor for knowing and not knowing, with narrow paths and wide spaces, bright sunlight and deep shade. In an interview with Maria Sebregardi, Sheppard admitted that he did not think he was a “a wise person” and that he did not “tolerate indeterminacy well”, hence the first sculptural piece entitled “The Little Tabernacle”. Here certainty is represented, as we know it through electro-magnetism, with gravity and the speed of light. The remaining installations, however, all keep faith with the ancient sages, offering suggestions for reflective thought.

Passing down moss-covered steps we become aware of the gentle splash of water and, on arriving at the woodland floor, discover an ingenious man-made waterfall, a narrow moving stairway of water that appears to dance on every tread as it catches the sunlight gently filtering through the trees. Now we are free to engage in some philosophical thinking as we encounter Sheppard’s installations, to ponder on the elusiveness of things or merely to wander and soak up the quiet peace of this place. Lovers of colourful displays of flowers within a garden will be disappointed, for flowers only occur as if by accident here. On this visit the occasional pale mauve periwinkle, a greenish-white native hellebore or a stem of orange berries, a reminder of last year’s *Iris foetidissima*, glint amongst clumps of bright sword-like leaves. These small jewels, however, serve to enhance the beauty of the green tapestry woven around us. An optical illusion, created by flanking a path with terracotta pots of diminishing sizes, reiterates the need to consider what is real and what is unreal, until, like the sages, we realise that all things are possible and nothing wholly right or wrong. If all this is too much for the casual visitor, the sight of delicate, self-sown violets nestling in the wind-blown leaf mould gathered inside each of these pots should be enough to raise the spirits to a higher level.

Climbing again to the sunlight, we leave the woodland by a different path and see before us Sheppard’s new project. On



La Ragnaia

drawing by Freda Cox

an area of grassland to the side of La Ragnaia a new garden is taking shape. This project is only three years old but already it looks exciting and the “bones” of the garden are in place: pathways, platforms and columns, new plantings of rosemary and box and an impressive formation of *Cupressus sempervirens* marching down a gentle grass-covered slope. To me, at this stage of its development, it looked like an area of ancient Greek or Roman ruins perfectly in harmony with its surroundings. As one member commented, it is a huge leap both in imagination and energy to embark on a new garden with nothing but the contours of the land to work with, whereas with La Ragnaia, the wood was already there to be formed. I shall definitely be going back to San Giovanni d’Asso to see how this garden develops and to enjoy once more the tranquillity of La Ragnaia.

This article first appeared in the newsletter of the Italian Branch.