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## IL BOSCO DELLA RAGNAIA

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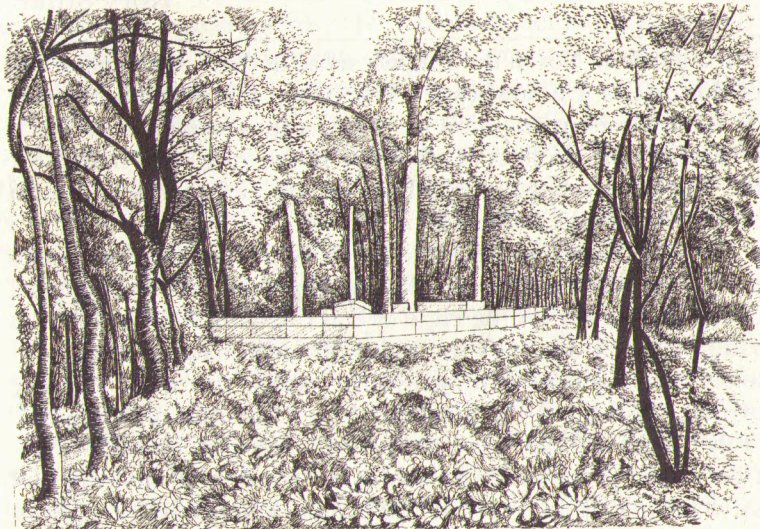
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Is it a garden? Not in the English sense of the word, a place full of flowers. Is it a landscape? Yes, partly, but it requires more detailed, close-up attention than landscapes usually demand. It is certainly the product of a human 'interfering' with nature for the sake of meaning, and perhaps beauty, and therefore it must be a horticultural work of art.

MGS members who came to the AGM in Italy some years ago may remember visiting this fascinating work which Sheppard Craige is creating on the edge of San Giovanni d'Asso, 30 miles south of Siena. Recently the Italian Branch made a return visit to see how the work is progressing, because this is an on-going project. 'Will it ever be finished?' was a question on some lips. Only Sheppard can tell, and perhaps even he doesn't know. Uncertainty is one of the themes of this work, continually picked up in the inscriptions carved into plaques and stones throughout the wooded valley.

The site is divided into two complementary parts, the shady woodland where it has been necessary to thin the trees before planting some formal hedges and adding some manufactured objects, and the open field, full of light, where Sheppard has been able to start construction and planting from scratch. In the wood, like a sculptor chipping away at a block of marble to reveal the chosen form, he has been removing the scrub so that the great evergreen oaks are revealed; in the field he has worked like a modeller, adding piece by piece. The wood, which now seems well-established, if not finished, is set in a steep-sided valley, and as the visitor looks down, the colours, lit by the shifting light filtering through the canopy, are all green and brown – moss, evergreen hedges, fallen leaves of oaks, the fresh leaves of spring, an occasional glint of water. The descent is steep. One is reminded of Virgil's famous lines: "*facilis descensus Averno/ noctes atque dies patet atri ianua Ditis;/ sed revocare gradum superasque evadere ad auras/ hoc opus; hic labor est*" – 'Easy is the descent to Hell; night and day the doors of Dis's gloomy kingdom stand wide; but to retrace your steps and return to the upper air, that

is hard work indeed'. The doors of Sheppard's kingdom, too, stand wide at all hours of the day and night.



Il Bosco della Ragnaia  
drawing by Freda Cox

To the left, as one descends, a narrow water stair nods, peremptorily, in the direction of classic Italian gardens. Once on the valley floor we become aware of a greater variety of colour – columns that are ochre, poles that are scarlet. Some parts of the wood are formally arranged, so that they seem like aisles, sometimes leading to what might be an altar; other parts are, apparently, left to their own devices. On the Altar of Skepticism we read the words “Que sais-je?”, Montaigne’s question to himself, and typical of the doubts that are a theme of this creation. Sheppard himself writes that the Bosco della Ragnaia has three themes: the tension between certainty and doubt; nature, “is it there open to us, thrilling and generous, or is it veiled, always just a step beyond our comprehension?”; and, thirdly, the mystery of time. This last theme finds expression in four plaques inscribed with the words ‘mai’ (never), ‘sempre’ (always), ‘a volte’ (sometimes), and ‘spesso’ (often), four words that sum up all we can say about one aspect of time. The Centre

of the Universe is an open sand circle, guarded by four columns; and, of course, while the relativist visitor is there it is the centre of his or her universe. Among other incidents in the wood are The Pavilion of Nothing, The Fountain of Good Sense, The Little Tabernacle of Great Certainties and A Place that Could Be Otherwise. If all this is too puzzling, there is an oracle to solve the mysteries – The Oracle of Oneself; Sheppard warns “answers may not be explicit”.

From one edge of the wood, there is a spectacular view down into the sunlit valley where the new garden is being made. Here all seems formally arranged at first sight, though closer examination proves otherwise: the two sides slope symmetrically down to a circle, and from that point the valley opens like a fan as it slopes away to the right. Straight, descending paths allow access to the valley bottom, and then ascend the opposite hillside where they terminate at two magnificent pencil cypresses. As in the wood the building material is khaki-coloured tufa, but here interspersed with blocks of white stone; neither, however, is covered with the moss and lichen that the shade of the wood encourages. Sometimes the tufa blocks are piled one on another, with no mortar and no overlap, so they seem unstable and temporary. And perhaps they have been placed where they are simply as an experiment; Sheppard explains that his workers have become quite used to taking apart a structure they have only recently finished, if it seems discordant. The natural theatre is used for summer concerts. In this sunlit valley there are no words, but who needs words when the place is flooded with light?

The mysterious woodland takes its name from the ‘ragnaia’, the nets in which birds were caught. The work that Sheppard has created similarly captures his visitors’ imagination. Like the garden at Little Sparta, created by Ian Hamilton Finlay (one of the great influences on this garden), this is a highly original and challenging art work. And has it a meaning? Your response is the meaning – for the moment in which it happens. And if you respond by smiling or laughing that, too, is appropriate, for this is a garden full of humour. I love the wit of the word ‘fruscio’, the onomatopoeic Italian for the rustle of the wind in the trees, carved in stone so it can’t be heard, until we read it

aloud. When the artist was asked if the place had a meaning, this was Sheppard's response: "No, I'm not trying to teach anything. There's no exam at the end. All I do is offer suggestions for things to think about." But the Bosco della Ragnaia, like Keats' Grecian urn, seems also to "tease us out of thought". Certainly few gardens do so much to stimulate the visitor both emotionally and intellectually.

*Two books of photographs of the Bosco, with a brief text in English and Italian, have now been published. Copies can be ordered from Sheppard Craige at: [sheppard@franceslansing.com](mailto:sheppard@franceslansing.com)*