

Eclectic Abodes

Many Capri villas sport crenellated towers, ceramic decorations and crossed arches, left behind by previous artist and painter owners with a penchant for the Orient

by Salvatore Borà

As Capri's fame spread far and wide in the second half of the 19th century many eccentric artists and painters found the island to be a perfect place to portray a primitive beauty, an arid landscape burnt by the sun and colonized by agave plants, prickly pears and palm trees, not to mention the bleak scenery, the deep blue sea, and its white houses with their extrados arches – the very picture of the Orient in the Mediterranean.

In his wonderful book *L'isola di Capri*, written in 1853, Gregorovius notes: "The Moorish architecture is both bizarre and original." The oriental tendency visible in a scattering of houses on the island became more widely adopted by painters who, used to dressing in caftans, wearing a fez and inhaling intoxicating substances from hookahs, gave the surrounding countryside an even more oriental look.

This influx of painters and artists led to demand for new and refurbished homes. In line with general European trends of the time and a penchant for eclecticism, the resulting "style" was a far cry from the islanders' small, modest houses.

No distinction was drawn between the style of a building and its decoration; it was widely believed that architectural style lay more in the way that a building was decorated, in the design of a frieze or the silhouette of a window, than the way its various spaces were arranged.

More important than anything else, each homeowner wanted his home to look different from the other houses on the island. A

Passion for the Exotic The man who launched the fashion for eclecticism on Capri was American painter Charles Caryl Coleman. In 1870 he purchased the guest quarters of the Santa Teresa Convent and turned it into a garish home, which he baptized *Villa Oleandro*, in reference to the plants in the courtyard. He finished off the edifice with neo-Moorish and neo-Ottoman tiles. Both the horseshoe arch gateway and Persepolis-style merlon are neo-Moorish, whereas the decorative glazed ceramic tiles that give the building a highly original and colourful look are neo-Ottoman. The ceramics were made by Rome-based potter Tommaso Castellano, as may be seen from the initials "TC Roma" inscribed on a tile.

Over the years the house was refurbished in the long-popular classicist neo-Medieval style: one such detail is the Pompeiian courtyard with an impluvium for which the idea perhaps came from the American School of Archaeology, members of which were regular visitors to Coleman's salon. The villa's name was changed to *Villa Narciso*, in honour of a copy of the statue of Narcissus in the initial courtyard – according to Cerio, the statue was "the symbol of Coleman's self-glorifying lifestyle." In *Frammenti Postumi*, Lea Vergine writes: "A copy of the National Museum of Naples' Narcissus stands under the arch. This tutelary deity of a cult of beauty and self-infatuation – a religion in which Coleman wished to be the sole officiant – is an admonishing presence." Eccentric American painter Elihu Vedder was a lover of the exotic who often dressed in

an oriental style, and was frequently to be found at Coleman's villa. The painter commissioned master builder Luigi Desiderio, a descendant of the famous "Marzianellos", to build a villa on the slopes of the Torina, in a high and dominant position. The three-storey villa is characterized by a large square tower oriented in the four cardinal directions, the "four winds" as he later called it. The tower is topped with a bell-shaped dome covered in rectangular terracotta roof tiles. Below the roof, there is an extraordinary two-storey specimen of an oriental-inspired space overflowing with detail. Mullioned windows with four lights are set into all four walls, built out of horseshoe arches supported by slim cylindrical columns with rectangular capitals. The lower part of the building is crowned by three-lobed crenellations formed by Moorish-style arrow slits. The floor is paved in majolica tiles with geometric motifs. Both Vedder and Coleman drew some of their oriental inspiration from the Chicago World Exposition, where they had viewed reconstructions of Indian, Turkish, Egyptian and Chinese villages. In neither of these houses have the Moorish and Islamic influences completely supplanted typical Capri-style architectural features. One can still see expanses of whitewashed tufa, vaulted indoor ceilings, and colonnaded arbours along the arcades.

Villa Discopoli occupies a dominant site in the countryside along Via Tragara, with its square tower capped by a small dome reminiscent of the bell tower in the Piazzetta. The villa takes its name from the Latin term *de scopulis*, meaning cliffs, after it was built high on the rock by French painter Hanri Daras around 1880. Neo-Islamic style reigned supreme in this villa, with its ceramic decorations and widely adopted neo-Moorish and neo-Ottoman tiles along the façade friezes and cornices. The stucco tracery incorporating geometric motifs based on Arab minaret decorations is particularly fine, as is the crossed-arch motif, the Persepolis-style crenellations and the broad swathes of majolica tiles just below, which bear more than a passing resemblance to Moorish decorations at houses in Cordoba. The horseshoe-shaped stucco cross arches are supported by slim columns, just like in Muslim mosques.

German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, Queen Margherita of Savoy and photographer Morgan Heiskell all stayed in the villa. It was Heiskell who took photos in 1910 documenting French painter Guillame Dubufe's conversion of Villa il Fortino, which he had just bought. The initial crenellated medieval tower with two-light mullioned windows built in 1870 was adorned with a small Moorish spire.

Villa Capricorno, built around 1890 by German banker Ugo Andreas, lies not far from Villa Discopoli. Twenty-five-year-old architect Riccardo designed the villa; he also built the Chiesa di Marina Piccola for Mr. Andreas. The villa's Moorish style was more likely inspired by painter Augusto Lovatti, who was a friend of both Andreas and Krupp, and had become infatuated with Arab architecture during his travels in Egypt.

As years went by and fashions changed, the villa became more neoclassical in style, though it still retains a magnificent oriental-style patio, with a sequence of slim columns topped with trilobe arches of Arab inspiration. The garden is still full of magnificent exotic plants, replicating the flora found in oriental countries.

Crenellated Towers and Blue Ceramic Tiles Villa Helios, located along the Via Croce and set in its own gardens including a huge ficus magnolia, was built in 1904 by the Swiss baroness Barbara Meta von Salis Marschlins, a friend of Rainer Maria Rilke's and Nietzsche's, and a writer in her own right. The magnificent building has its own

crenellated towers decorated with Moorish arches and columned windows. The blue ceramic tiles, manufactured by the famous Di Donna pottery in Naples, are Spanish/Moorish inspired, and are used in an original way on the panel around the door, and in the window surrounds.

The tiles on the gateway pillars are identical to tiles used in the Casa Rossa gateway, in Anacapri, which was built by American Confederate Colonel John Clay MacKowen between 1876 and 1899. The Pompeii red house built around an old Aragonese tower incorporates a number of different styles. The façade includes a Greek inscription over the gateway (greetings, citizens of this land of leisure), which refers to a quote from Augustus, and incorporates twin-light mullioned windows combined with a wide range of different decorative approaches, in rooms that almost all seem to lack symmetry.

This is what Cerio had to say about the residence in L'ora di Capri: "Unable to resist the urge to turn his home on the edge of the town into a museum, he plastered the walls not just with marble fragments found on the island, but also a vast quantity of sculptures and epigraphs, many of which were imported apocrypha... He succeeded in creating a model 'archaeological villa', so eagerly yearned for by foreigners in search of classical living, who end up overwhelmed by a blend of ancient artefacts without context very few of which are necessarily authentic."

Villa Torricella is another house strongly influenced by Vedder and Coleman's oriental inclinations. Built in different periods, starting in 1902, it belonged to American ladies Sade and Kate Wolkott-Perry, who were friends of Count Fersen – the very life of the foreign colony on Capri in the first couple of decades in the 1900s, described wryly by English writer Compton Mackenzie in his novel *Vestal Fire*.

The building combines a number of different styles: Moorish decorations on the loggia balustrades jostle with interweaving external flights of stairs in a lattice design built by master builder Luigi Desiderio, who did all the work on the building. The two towers after which the Villa is named are crowned by bulbous, minaret-like cupolas, while other decorative elements – particularly the twin light mullioned windows with spiral columns – are drawn from Islamic and neo-Gothic architecture. Just one or two elliptical arches and extradados vaults hark back to Capri's indigenous architectural style.

The Sun Sets on the East

By the time Curzio Malaparte commissioned his villa on Punta Massullo in 1938, the oriental fashion had waned. He described the building as a "hard, severe and sad house", and called it Casa Come Me (House Like Me). His design for the flight of stairs from the solarium was modelled on the steps leading to the Santissima Annunziata Church on Lipari, where he was sent on internal exile. In his instructions to the architect, Malaparte stated that he wanted: "No Romanesque columns, no arches, no external stairs, no ogival arches, none of those hybrid combinations between Moorish, Romantic and Gothic styles which people who shall be nameless brought to Capri, polluting the purity of Capri-style homes."

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