

Villa Firenze
The Residence
of the Ambassador of Italy
to the United States

An extract from the book “Il Palazzo sul Potomac”
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Exterior. Photo courtesy of the Embassy of Italy in Washington.





Photo courtesy of Home & Design – Lydia Cutter.

THE RESIDENCE

Historical-Architectural Description

The Residence of the Ambassador of Italy to the United States is located in one of the most beautiful neighborhoods in the heart of the nation's capital, overlooking a vast green space with more than ten thousand trees that extends to Rock Creek Park.

“Villa Firenze” was purchased by the Government of Italy in 1977 when Roberto Gaja was serving as Italy's Ambassador to the U.S. The decision to purchase a new Residence for the Chief of Mission came in light of the many changes that the city was undergoing as well as the important role assigned to official entertaining and diplomatic functions commensurate with Italy's standing in the diplomatic corps.

Ambassador Gaja's idea was to separate the different activities of an Embassy into two structures: the Chancery building located on the corner of 16th and Fuller Streets for official activities; the new Residence of the Ambassador for others. A similar transition was also being made by many of the other important foreign diplomatic missions in the capital city.

Chosen as the new Residence was an impressive construction that had served as home to prominent American families with notable presence and impact in the city's history.

The original owner of the Tudor structure, with Russell O. Kluge as architect and H. F. Huber as designer, completed in 1927, was Blanche Estabrook, a member of the noted New Jersey construction family. From 1930 to 1941, it was leased to the Government of Hungary.



In 1941, the property was sold to Colonel Robert Guggenheim who christened his new estate *Firenze*, the Italian translation of his mother's name, Florence.

Following a fire in 1946, the villa was renovated and restored to its former splendor by architect Michael Rosenauer.

In 1976, Guggenheim's widow decided to sell the property and found a perfect buyer for prestigious Florence House in Italian Ambassador Roberto Gaja, who was at the time searching for a new diplomatic residence.

Immediately after the Government of Italy's purchase, a series of renovations and improvements were made, always in the respect and safeguard of the artistic value of the structure.

At the same time, *Villa Firenze* was enhanced by select pieces of Italian furnishings and works of art whose ornamental values and artistry evoked our time-honored cultural traditions.

It was in 1977 that the impressive Villa became the Residence of the Ambassador of Italy to the United States of America and was officially inaugurated in July by then Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti on the occasion of his official visit to Washington.

Since then, the Residence has been, together with our Chancery, the point of reference for constant exchanges, meetings, ceremonies, events, receptions, working lunches and dinners of special importance to the political, economic, financial, cultural, scientific, and migration relationships between Italy and the United States.

Between 2010 and 2011, also in view of planned celebrations for the 150th anniversary of Italian Unification, the Residence underwent a number of renovations, particularly to the furnishings of its public spaces, as shown in the photographs that follow of *Villa Firenze's* individual rooms.

The dining room has been completely restored. New carpets have been added and all the sofas have been reupholstered in burnished fabrics that match the draperies in the living and dining rooms.

From the end of World War II, with the first visit taking place in 1947 by then Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi, the Embassy of Italy in Washington has hosted Presidents of the Republic: Giovanni Gronchi, Antonio Segni, Giuseppe Saragat, Giovanni Leone, Alessandro Pertini, Francesco Cossiga, Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, and Giorgio Napolitano. The same is true for Prime Ministers: Mario Scelba, Antonio Segni, Amintore Fanfani, Aldo Moro, Mariano Rumor, Emilio Colombo, Giulio Andreotti, Giovanni Spadolini, Bettino Craxi, Giovanni Goria, Ciriaco De Mita, Giuliano Amato, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, Lamberto Dini, Romano Prodi, Massimo D'Alema, Silvio Berlusconi, Mario Monti, and Enrico Letta. It has also opened its doors to Chairmen of the Chamber of Deputies and Senate, Presidents of the Constitutional Court, Cabinet level Ministers, and numerous state, regional, provincial, and municipal delegations.



Photo courtesy of Home & Design – Lydia Cutter.

THE FOYER

A Venetian-style mirror with wood framing sculpted in floral designs and painted in shades of green and gold graces the wall on the right, positioned above a console of the same color.

At the center of the foyer is a Florentine style table covered with an 18th century marble top.

On the balustrade are two vases from southern Italy, likely from Apulia, dating back to the predominantly Greek influenced 4th and 5th centuries B.C.





The Study. Photo courtesy of Home & Design – Lydia Cutter.

THE STUDY

On the left of the main entrance is the study – library, an architectural gem and replica of the Oxford study of Sir Christopher Wren, one of the most prominent and acclaimed British architects in history. After the great fire of 1666, Sir Wren was responsible for the reconstruction of fifty-five churches in London, including his masterpiece, St. Paul's Cathedral, which was completed in 1710.

In the study is a 16th century (Vasari period) lectern.





The Great Hall. Photo by "lydiacutterphoto.com"

THE GREAT HALL



The Great Hall, just steps from the foyer, with its balcony and gallery, is an integral part of the Residence public reception area and leads directly into the reception hall and the dining room.

Above the enormous fireplace dominating one side of the room is a 17th century painting of the “Campidoglio” by an unknown Italian artist. Both sides of the fireplace are graced by Venetian statues in hardwood.

A 17th century Flemish tapestry depicting peacocks in a woody landscape adorns the wall above the staircase.

Located at the top of the staircase is a centennial organ made in 1925 by the Aeolian Company of New York for Colonel Arthur O’Brien.



The Great Hall. Photo courtesy of the Embassy of Italy in Washington.



The Great Hall. Photo courtesy of the Embassy of Italy in Washington.



The Aeolian pipe organ after the restoration. Photo courtesy of the Embassy of Italy in Washington.

THE AEOLIAN PIPE ORGAN

The Aeolian Organ, no. 1569, located above the Great Hall is one of the most important pieces in the Italian Residence. The rare pipe organ was built in 1925 by the Aeolian Company in New York for Colonel Arthur O'Brien and his wife.

The organ's pipes, originally covered in gold, were recently renovated in lighter tones of silver. The organ is a very elaborate instrument with 1011 pipes arranged in 13 ranks: it can be played either by an automatic machine called "Duo-Art" contained within the console or manually by an organist. The automatic player uses a perforated paper roll to activate the notes and stops. The library of rolls is large and quite varied with orchestral versions of traditional musical scores being the most prevalent. Although the main body of the organ is located in the Great Hall, the blower which provides wind for the instrument is located in the basement.

The console in the Great Hall is composed of two keyboards, each with the standard 61 keys in ivory. The pedal board has the standard 32 keys in maple and ebony. The organ chamber, which is located on the opposite side of the console, can be accessed through an adjacent sitting room. The pipes on the façade are for appearance only. The working pipes are located inside the organ chamber. Under the pipes is a mechanism that admits wind to certain pipes when a corresponding key is played. This mechanism is connected to the keyboard by a complex system with hundreds of copper wires each carrying a signal to activate a specific pipe when a note on the keyboard is played.



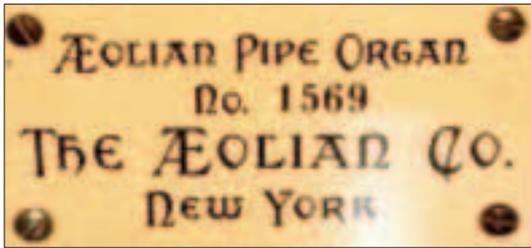
The archive of the rolls that can be played by the Aeolian organ.



Detail. Photos courtesy of the Embassy of Italy in Washington.



The pipe of the organ located on the upper level of the Great Hall. Photos courtesy of the Embassy of Italy in Washington.



Detail of the manufacturer.



The engine damaged by a fire in the 1940's.



The pipes before the restoration. Photos courtesy of the Embassy of Italy in Washington.

Since the Government of Italy purchased Villa Firenze in 1976, the organ had never worked.

There was a fire in the house in the late 1940's. It was not a devastating event, but the organ was significantly damaged by water and smoke and the repairs were far short of the necessary. The organ's many pipes had fallen over, mechanisms in the organ no longer worked, and many parts were broken. Subsequent renovations in the building cut off the electric supply to the blower motor and generators. The organ was completely non-functioning.

Miraculously, all the pipes were still present and the console still had all its original player mechanism and other systems inside. About 60 years of dust and reconstruction dirt had settled in the organ chamber, leaving it quite filthy. Part of the restoration effort consisted in a thorough cleaning which involved completely dismantling the entire organ and console down to the last screw. Every piece of leather, every piece of electrical wiring, every one of the over 1000 pipes needed cleaning, repairing, or replacing.

On the occasion of the 150th anniversary of Italian Unification and the celebrations of this milestone in the United States, the organ was brought back to work thanks to the invaluable support of the Italian company SISAL S.p.A., and its CEO, Emilio Petrone.

The restoration effort started in July 2011 and was completed in the fall of 2012. Eight people in all, technicians, electricians, and pipe-makers, worked on various aspects of the project. David M. Storey, the organ-builder who carried out the restoration, tells us that the restoration was partially a work of discovery since there was no documentation anywhere about how the organ was supposed to work.



The Reception Hall. Photo courtesy of the Embassy of Italy in Washington.

THE RECEPTION HALL

It is intended to host large receptions, cultural events, and larger formal and official meetings. The area is opulent and spacious. The overall ambiance is one of sumptuous elegance and luminosity, from the glow and reflection of external light filtering through the large windows and the rotunda.

To accommodate guests, the hall is furnished with sofas, couches, and armchairs positioned around cocktail tables, creating an ambiance conducive to conversation. Adding further to the stately and elegant atmosphere are paintings, furniture, and decorative pieces from Italy.

The splendid marble fireplace is a particularly elegant accent, above which hangs an Italian painting depicting “Piazza del Popolo.”





The Dining Room. Photo by "lydiacutterphoto.com".

THE DINING ROOM

The reception area gives way to the dining room, traditionally called the “Adam Dining Room” because of the style copying masterpieces by Scottish architects Robert and James Adam (1732-1794).

The room is primarily dedicated to the noble art of conviviality in keeping with the rites and traditions of Italian gastronomy and enology.

As in previous publications on our diplomatic missions abroad, we would also like to recall Talleyrand’s response to King Luigi XVIII during the Congress of Vienna: “Sire, I need cooks more than I do diplomats.”

What better way to underscore how a successful convivial event is often, for the Ambassador and spouse, a precious instrument to gain the trust of those invited, and at the same time highlight Italy’s style and foster a meeting of the minds in a ‘relaxed and warm’ context?

For official events, the table is set with original dinnerware and cutlery bearing the gold crest of the former Kingdom of Italy.

A painting depicting the Nativity from the late 15th century Botticelli school hangs above the fireplace. The room also holds a 17th century oil on canvas by Gaspare dei Fiori titled “Women with Flowers.”





The Dining Room. Photo courtesy of the Embassy of Italy in Washington.





The dining room.



Detail. Photos courtesy of the Embassy of Italy in Washington.



The Veranda. Photo courtesy of Home&Design – Lydia Cutter.



THE VERANDA

The veranda, a lovely and harmonious characteristic of the Residence, offers guests the chance to enjoy the soothing effects of green spaces right in the heart of the city.



The Veranda. Photo courtesy of Home&Design – Lydia Cutter.





The Patio. Photo courtesy of Home&Design – Lydia Cutter.

THE PATIO



The receiving areas of the Residence lead out to the patio, which extends the entire width of the home and gives way into the garden.

Primarily used during the spring and summer and up until fall, the patio provides guests with delightful outdoor surroundings and an incomparable panorama of the property, which extends down to Rock Creek Park.

The patio overlooks the trees, plants, and flowers that color and cheer the green and woody landscape.



The Patio. Photos courtesy of Home&Design – Lydia Cutter.



The Garden. Photo courtesy of the Embassy of Italy in Washington.

THE GARDEN

Behind Villa Firenze, adjacent to the veranda and the reception areas, is a splendid green area that extends down to Rock Creek Park. Spring and summer blooming plants and flowers cheer the surrounding area with their scents and colors.





The Garden. Photo by "lydiacutterphoto.com".





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