

Behind palace walls

We all know about the masterpieces of the Renaissance, but how did fifteenth-century Italians really live? **Ross King** investigates

In 1411 a famous Greek scholar named Manuel Chrysoloras had a frustrating experience in Rome. In a letter to his brother he described how he found himself wandering the city's streets like a "boorish lothario", shinning up the walls of palaces and trying to peer through the windows to see something of the beauties inside. By "beauties" he meant not "living bodies", he hastily added, but rather "stones, marbles and images".

Chrysoloras was right in thinking that marvels of painting and sculpture could be found behind the thick walls of Italian palaces. As the V&A exhibition 'At Home in Renaissance Italy' so tantalisingly reveals, the private palaces of Florence and Venice served as repositories for some of the finest artistic handiwork of the Renaissance: marble and bronze statues, musical instruments, tapestries and fabrics, books and manuscripts and painted portraits. Yet the exhibition also reveals how they were considerably more than that. No matter how grand, the Italian Renaissance palazzo was always a family home and, as such, a vibrant place of social interaction – of eating and drinking, entertainment and devotion, birth and death. 'At Home in Renaissance Italy', therefore, not only offers a tour of the art treasures of Italian palaces, but also resurrects – through their cutlery, corsets, pastry-cutters and ear-cleaners – the people who lived inside them.

One of the exhibits, a robust-looking architectural model of the Palazzo Strozzi in Florence, shows there was a good reason why Chrysoloras found the palaces none too easy of access. The Palazzo Strozzi featured a typically austere and massive façade, with thick walls of rough-hewn masonry that give a trusty account of its strength and solidity. In the fifteenth century the elegant urban palazzo may have replaced the towered fortress of the Middle Ages as the new style of urban residence, but many Italian cities were still dangerous and unstable places. There was not only casual street violence (the Dutch scholar Erasmus was mugged twice during his stay in Bologna in 1507), but also factional fighting that sometimes claimed hundreds of lives. So the palace still had to function as (and in some cases it still looked like) a rugged stronghold. A typical Renaissance palazzo had studded wooden doors that would have done

justice to a castle, while the few small windows on the ground floor were usually protected by iron bars and (as Chrysoloras discovered) located well above eye-level. The architect Leon Battista Alberti was careful to note that, no matter how elegant the building, storage rooms should always be set aside for “arms both offensive and defensive” – a stark reminder of the lingering perils of urban life.

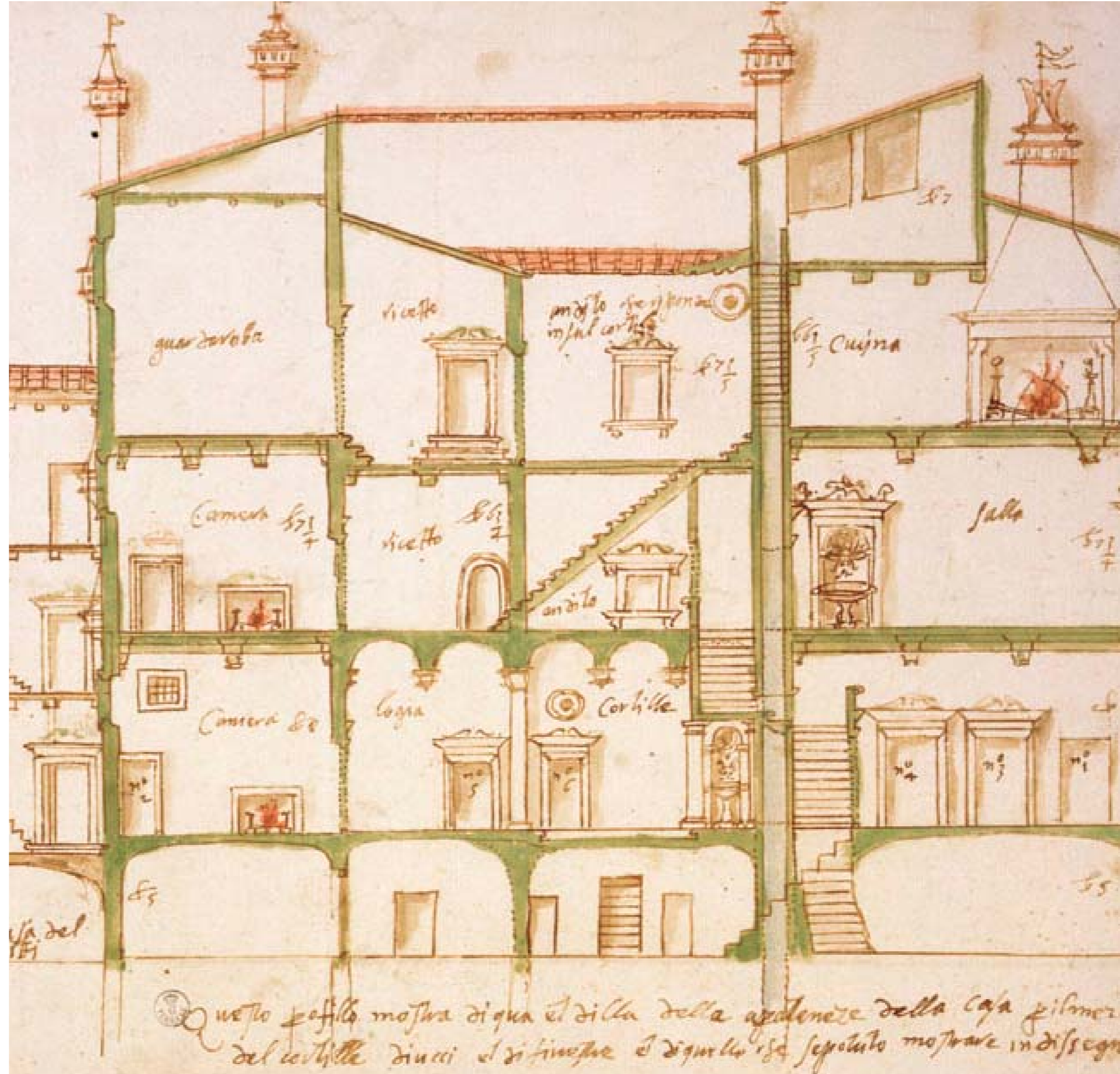
In a city such as Florence, architecture was always something of a competitive sport. It comes as no surprise, then, that Florentine palaces were often constructed as monuments to the wealth and ambition of their builders. Cosimo de' Medici kicked off a game of architectural one-upmanship in 1444 when he began constructing his enormous home in the Via Larga. Luca Pitti, a banker and Medici rival, wanted a building to trump Cosimo's and so, according to legend, ordered his architect to design windows as large as Cosimo's doors and a courtyard big enough to swallow the

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entire Palazzo Medici. Alas, he soon fell from political favour and his palace (now the famous museum south of the Arno) eventually passed into Medici hands.

No matter how imposing, though, these enormous edifices were never really sealed off from the life of the neighbourhood outside their walls. Many had purpose-built arcades on the ground floor with space that was leased to merchants for shops. Another hospitable feature was the stone benches skirting their foundations. These were seats where merchandise was displayed and (as still happens today) people gathered to loiter and gossip. Some palaces in Florence included a loggia built across the street from the building – arbours in which people came together to debate, play chess, or transact business. A member of the Rucellai family was said to have arranged the marriages of three of his daughters in the loggia in front of the Palazzo Rucellai.

Palaces were usually as busy inside as out, since they thronged with both extended families and their visitors. Luca Pitti's was said to be “full of people of every sort”: family, friends, business associates, political allies, servants and even escaped criminals, to whom he offered sanctuary so long as they were handy with tools and could help him to



Previous page: Faenza maiolica originated in the town of the same name during the sixteenth century. This plate with the arms of the Salviati family is by Pietro Bergantini, c.1531. © The Trustees of The British Museum. **Left:** the built-in fountain, or *acquaio*, was a feature of many Florentine homes.

This one from the Girolami palace almost reached the ceiling. © V&A Images. **Facing page:** plan and cross section of the Gaddi family house in Florence, c.1560. The reception rooms, or *sala*, are at the front and the private rooms, or *camere*, at the back. © Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence



Above right: carved walnut cradle, Italy, sixteenth century. © Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan. **Facing page: Fra Filippo Lippi, *Portrait of a Woman and a Man at a Casement*, c.1438-1440.** © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Above: ivory-decorated harpsichord, by Giovanni Antonio Baffo of Venice, 1574. © V&A Images. **Below: kitchen scene, by Vincenzo Campi, 1580s.** © Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan. **Facing page: Fra Filippo Lippi, *Portrait of a Woman and a Man at a Casement*, c.1438-1440.** © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



guests and showcasing valuable works of art. It typically had a high ceiling and plenty of light, thanks to its large windows that usually gave a bird's-eye view of the street or piazza, or, in the case of Venice, of the Grand Canal. The Venetian *sala* often included a balcony. Florentine palaces sometimes featured small wooden balconies, known as *sportelli*, though many of these were ripped down as fire hazards. They might also have been removed as moral hazards, since the *Romeo and Juliet* scenario of a young man in the street addressing a young woman on a balcony was fraught with indecorous possibilities. The women of the house needed to be guarded as carefully as its other treasures.

finish the gargantuan building. Teams of maids and other domestic servants – some of them slaves from the Near East – were naturally required to keep these homes running. The preacher Bernardino of Siena urged masters to keep them busy sweeping floors and scouring pots: “Do not give her any leisure,” he warned. “As long as you keep her occupied, she won’t be leaning out the window.” Their quarters, usually small rooms on the top floor, were carefully distinguished from those of the owner, though boundaries were sometimes transgressed: in 1510 the grandson of Lorenzo the Magnificent had a child, Alessandro de’ Medici, with a North African slave named Simonetta.

Most palaces had an inner courtyard from which a wide staircase led to the first floor. This level was known as the *piano nobile*, or “noble floor”. Its lavish reception room, the *sala*, was the grandest in the building, a place for dining, entertaining distinguished

If the palazzo’s exterior celebrated the family name with touches such as a coat-of-arms above the entrance portal, then this heritage was commemorated on the inside with painted portraits and marble busts. ‘At Home in Renaissance Italy’ includes a number of fine examples that would have hung on the walls of the *sala* or, more likely, the bedroom, or *camera*. Among them is Filippo Lippi’s remarkable *Portrait of a Woman and a Man at a Casement* (c.1438-1440). Illustrating a well-dressed young couple, Lorenzo Scolari and his wife Angiola, this painting was probably commissioned by Scolari on the





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occasion of his marriage. It extols not only Angiola's extravagant dress sense (she sports an elaborate headdress known as a *sella alla francese*, or “French saddle”), but also the Scolari family's armorial bearings, clearly visible in Lorenzo's hands.

Despite the fond glances passing between Lorenzo and Angiola, most marriages among the grandest families were political or economic alliances, rather than love matches. Of the greatest importance to a man was the size of a woman's dowry and, for the purposes of childbearing, the size of her hips. After the wedding, it was the wife's duty to produce an heir. The list of aristocratic women who died in childbirth – such as the brilliant Beatrice d'Este, wife of Duke Ludovico Sforza of Milan – is depressingly long.

Several items in the V&A's exhibition allude to the perils of childbirth. Paolo Veronese's portraits of Iseppo da Porto and his family (c.1551) depict Iseppo's wife Livia – apparently pregnant at the time of the painting – draped in a marten stole. The marten supposedly had powers to protect pregnant women from misfortune due to the fact that, in one of those endearingly quirky Renaissance misconceptions, it was

Left from top: Andrea Boscoli, *Marriage Feast at Cana*, c.1561-1570. © Museo Correr, Venice. A northern Italian sixteenth-century X-frame chair. Chairs such as this were more common than those with backs. © V&A Images. The birth tray

was a traditional pregnancy gift. This one, by Giovanni di Ser Giovanni, was painted with the *Triumph of Fame for the birth of Lorenzo di Piero de' Medici*, Florence, 1448-1449. © 1995 The Metropolitan Museum of Art

believed to get pregnant through its ears, doing away with the need for anything so vulgar and dangerous as sexual intercourse. One of the most charming of all the pieces in 'At Home in Renaissance Italy' is the jewel-encrusted marten's head, an amulet worn by pregnant women. Superstition of this sort was rampant even at the highest levels of Italian society. As level-headed as Leon Battista Alberti believed that paintings depicting beautiful figures might somehow help women to conceive more attractive offspring, while Niccolò Machiavelli consulted both astrologers and fortune-tellers.

A successful childbirth, as well as the *camera* of a typical Venetian palazzo, is shown in Vittore Carpaccio's *The Birth of the Virgin* (c.1504-1508). With an appealing disregard for anachronism, the artist depicts Saint Anne in a contemporary setting, propped on her elbow in her curtained bed, as a maid, perhaps a wet nurse, holds the child. Servants and various other attendants mill through the series of interconnecting rooms, while on the floor, oblivious to the historic event, two rabbits placidly feed themselves. This humble scene is a reminder – like the baby-walker and ear-cleaner also on show in the exhibition – that behind its sturdy walls and high windows the Renaissance palazzo was home to “living bodies”, as well as stones, marbles and images.

'At Home in Renaissance Italy', V&A, London SW7 (020 7942 2000, www.vam.ac.uk), until 7 January

Renaissance food

Italy before the tomato

“It's hard to imagine Italian food without tomatoes or peppers, isn't it?” Antonio Carluccio asks me with a grin. “But Leonardo's pasta came without either!” The master chef and founder of the expanding chain of Italian restaurants that bears his name is also something of a food scholar. He points out that while pasta had been eaten in the region since Roman times, many of the other staples of Italian cuisine had not yet reached Italy by 1500. “Not just *pomodori*, but things such as the potato and polenta too.”

Does this mean that Florentine, Genovese, Venetian and Milanese food was still stuck in the Dark Ages while the art and architecture was enjoying its Renaissance? Antonio thinks not. “China and India have a longer history, but Italy has long had one of the world's best cuisines,” he says. “When Catherine de' Medici left for France to marry the Dauphin in 1533, she took 50 chefs and the recipe for duck in orange sauce with her.”

So what was the daily fare of Catherine and the Renaissance princes? It seems they ate a lot of meat – beef, rabbit, wild boar and hare, for example – which would have been marinated in spices and then boiled or spit roasted. Poultry, such as capons, partridges and even peacock, was usually reserved for special occasions, while vegetables and salads became increasingly popular among the wealthy during the sixteenth century.

So much for the aristocrats, but what of those lower down the social order? “Of course, there was an upstairs-downstairs division between cuisines,” says Antonio. “Ordinary people would have eaten some game, beans, pumpkin, vegetables, bread and lentils, as well as the wild fruits they could find, such as chestnuts or mountain strawberries.”

But as Carluccio points out, in an era when Machiavellian plotting was the order of the day, the delicacies enjoyed by the aristocracy could be dangerous. The Borgias made a fine art of poisoning food, using a fungus, *amanita phalloides*, which looked just like a mushroom but caused fatal liver failure. “The beauty of the this poison was that it was tasteless, and the effect only came on a few days after it was eaten, so the murderers usually couldn't be traced.”

Carluccio is a promotional partner for 'At Home in Renaissance Italy'

Antonio Carluccio's recipe for the Renaissance era

Anatra all'arancia (duck in orange sauce)

Serves: 4

Ingredients:

1 duck, about 2.5kg (5lbs)

5 oranges

60ml (1/4 cup) beef broth

60ml (1/4 cup) dry white wine

salt and pepper to taste

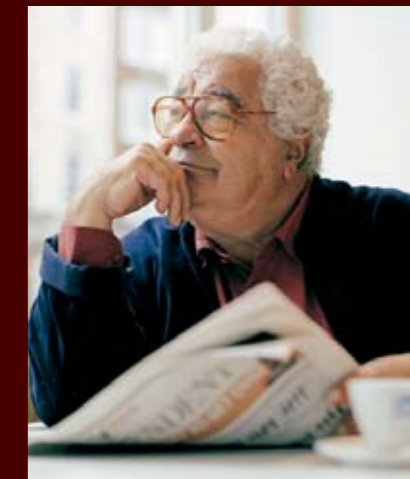
60gr (2oz) sugar

30ml (2tbs) vinegar

Preheat the oven at 220°C (400°F). Prick the duck skin all over and rub the cavity with salt and pepper. Fill the cavity with the peel of two oranges cut into strips. Bake for about 1 1/2 hours, so that the fat melts. Gather the fat in a bowl. Take the duck out of the oven to drain. Cut into serving pieces and keep warm.

Bring to boil a pot of water. Cook the zest of the other three oranges, cut into strips, for five minutes, then drain them. In a pan, caramelize the sugar until golden; add the vinegar, the juice of two oranges and the cooked orange strips. Stir in the broth and reduce for a few minutes. Mix the orange caramel with four spoons of duck fat; pour it over the duck pieces, along with the wine, and put back in the oven to taste for twenty minutes.

Peel the leftover oranges, freeing them of their membranes, and serve the duck in its sauce with orange wedges as garnish.



Antonio Carluccio: “Of course, there was an upstairs-downstairs division between cuisines”