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Villa Hériot: a historical profile



The Villa Hériot complex consists of four buildings: the main house, a guest-house, a servants' house and a boathouse. In 1929, when the Villa was inaugurated, its original name was 'Villa Michelangelo', after the newly named adjoining street of 'Calle Michelangelo' commemorating the great Renaissance artist, who found shelter in that part of the island of Giudecca (behind the

Chiesa delle Zitelle – Church of the Spinsters) four centuries before.

The Villa was erected on land that had long been uncultivated, after various buildings were pulled down in the early nineteenth century (during the French occupation of Venice) to provide a military training ground. In 1926, the area was bought by a wealthy French family (the Hériots), which owned the Grands Magasins du Louvre in Paris.

Raffaele Mainella, a Venetian by adoption and well known painter (the best loved Italian water-colourist of his day) and interior and garden designer was commissioned to design the Villa. The Hériots knew Mainella well as they had entrusted him with the building of a villa at Cap Martin, on the Côte d'Azur, and the restoration of the cloister of the *Abbazia di San Gregorio* – St. Gregory's abbey, which was an old convent near the church of *Santa Maria della Salute*, in 1911. The building works of the Villa were overseen by Ippolito Radaelli, an architectural engineer, and his surveyor, Merlo.

All the interior and exterior decorations (apart from the antique wooden statue of Michael the Archangel located above the internal stairway of the main house) were designed by Mainella, who drew his inspiration partly from the Veneto-Byzantine style, and partly from ideas developed during his travels in the Near East (Egypt, Syria and the Holy Land). The only notable exception was an ancient wooden statue of Michael the Archangel, placed at the top of the stairway inside the country house.

Mainella worked in France and in Italy for several members of high society. These included: the Empress Eugénie (Napoléon III's widow), for whom he built a villa at Cap Martin; Lady Zakarof, for whom he created a splendid garden at Balincourt Castle, in northern France (declared by the French government to be "a monument of national interest"); Baroness Ernesta Stern, for whom he built a villa at Cap Martin and restored the *Palazzo Michiel-Malpaga* at St. Barnaba, Venice (now known as the *Palazzo Stern*).

In 1895, Mainella was a collaborator of the first *Biennale d'Arte* – the Venice Biennial arts festival – co-ordinating the fitting-out of pavilions. In 1897, he was asked to

design a gondola to take the King of Italy (Humbert I) to the inauguration of the second Venice Biennial. He was then also asked to design four ceremonial boats (of the *bissone* type) for the royal cortège.

From its inauguration in 1929, the Villa was a place of sumptuous parties, until the outbreak of the Second World War, when the Hériots had to go back to France. The abandoned buildings were subsequently requisitioned by the Germans and then by the Allies, and were stripped of their interior furnishings, only the dining room of the main house having been spared, it retaining its chandelier and wall lights (made of wrought iron and glass), wooden wall panels and fireplace.

In 1947, Auguste Hériot, a childless bachelor and the sole surviving member of the Hériot family, sold the Villa to the Comune (local-government authority) of Venice, which converted the various buildings into schools. A primary school (*C. Goldoni*) was installed in the main house (now the premises of the *Società Europea di Cultura* and the *Università Internazionale dell'Arte*). The guest house became an open-air school (*D. Manin*) for impoverished children prone to TB; in the 1980s it was turned into a recreation room and teaching library (the *Bettini*); and since the year 2000, it has been the offices of the *Casa della Memoria e della Storia*, which is



comprised of three associations: the *Istituto Veneziano per la storia della Resistenza e della Società Contemporanea* (IVESER), *rEsistenze – Associazione per la storia e la memoria delle donne nel Veneto* and *Olokaustos*. Lastly, a nursery school (*San Francesco*) is now located in the former servant's house, and it uses the former boathouse – the water portal now bricked up – as a gym.