

## VILLA BARTHOLONI - MUSEUM OF THE HISTORY OF SCIENCE GENEVA

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Villa Bartholoni is situated on a gentle slope leading down to the lake. At first glance, one marvels at its pleasing proportions and the play of light on the façade with the deeply shaded doorways of the forecourt. On seeing the Villa for the first time, with its spectacular view over the lake and to the Alps beyond, Hans Wilsdorf was moved to exclaim: « Truly, this is the Pearl of the Lake » – hence the name given to the site as a whole, and which remains to this day.

The Villa was built in 1829/30 for two brothers, Jean-François and Constant Bartholoni, on a large estate acquired from the Melly family in 1825. Its Italianate architecture and English style gardens, are a good illustration of suburban residences under the Restoration. Yet for Geneva



it appears to be unique. The Bartholoni brothers, both established bankers in Paris, intended it to be a residence for holding receptions during their brief visits to Geneva. There they would entertain a glittering and cosmopolitan society, well-versed in the arts and music. The Villa was therefore designed with this in mind. It is indeed an aristocratic jewel of a « pavillon de plaisance », sacrificing to pomp and ceremony, domestic charm and family pleasures so dear to the bourgeois heart. The ground floor was reserved for the sumptuously – decorated reception rooms: drawingrooms and parlours, dining-room, billiard-room, reading-room and even a bathroom which, like Mme Récamier's in Paris, could be converted into a kind of boudoir. On the first floor were the owners' and friends' apartments, and in the attic the servants' quarters and other guestrooms

The drawings of the Villa were the work of a young and talented Parisian architect Félix-Emmanuel Callet, who was awarded the Prix de Rome in 1819. A connoisseur of Italian architecture, Callet found his inspiration in the Palladian style. The plan is a neo-classic interpretation of the Mannerist style. Callet followed the basic rule of symmetry but introduced within it ternary components, thus modulating the interplay of proportions between various surfaces. As Palladio, Vignole or Galeazzi Alessi before him, Callet toys with the geometrical simplicity of volumes and the massiveness of the beautiful façade, itself halved by two superimposed loggias.

However, it is the multicoloured interior decoration of the ground floor which earned the Villa its fame. It was designed by Callet, executed by

a team of Italian artisans and supervised by the artist François-Edouard Picot. Both the decorative motifs and the fresh, clear colours of the paintings are reminiscent of Pompeii: mythological scenes, cupids, goddesses, sea monsters, winged creatures, still lifes, garlands, palm fronds, Greek scrolls, and so on. The opulent décor is served by an abundance of detail, exquisite craftsmanship and the use of a wide choice of materials. For the wall coverings alone, Callet recommended about ten different colours of marble, most of which had to be made from stucco. Various species of wood were used for the floorings, door frames and paneling. The ornamental work was graded and adapted to the function of each room: the entrance hall, for instance, is the most plain, whereas the « Grand Salon » (the main reception room) – the heart of the structure is magnificently luxurious.

Since 1964, Villa Bartholoni houses the Museum of the History of Science. Between 1984 and 1990, it was completely renovated by the architects Thierry Sauvin and René Born, thus restoring it to its original splendour.

Anastazja Winiger-Labuda

## The renovation of the interior

The Genevese authorities awarded the work of restoring the painted interior decoration of the Villa Bartholoni to the Ateliers Crephart.

The work was done in two phases. The first consisted of a series of tests carried out in 1985 to assess the amount of restoration work done on the original finish completed in 1829/1830 by Félix-Emmanuel Callet and his team.

The second phase (from 1986 to 1992) was the actual conservation and restoration work done on the wall and ceiling paintings as well as the stucco foundation. Areas damaged by the infiltration of rain water were cleaned; layers eaten away by salt deposits were resurfaced and the flaky, sometimes powdery film over some designs was treated with a fixing solution. Once this had been done, several clumsy and ill-considered retouches were removed – there were quite a few and the colours had

often altered with time. Cracks and holes had to be plastered; large parts missing in the ceilings or the friezes were simply reconstituted since the design was repetitive. In order to reverse the process at any time if need be, the technique of water colour applied on a lime base was used.

Fortunately, the non-repetitive subjects, such as those on the diningroom panelling and those in the Etruscan drawing-room on the ground floor in the south wing, were little affected. It was decided to keep certain mythological themes on the bathroom walls, since these had been completely restored at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The false marbles in the entrance hall, the lobby and staircase leading to the first floor were given the same minute care as the paintings. Small rectangular glass 'witnesses' show the state of filth and disrepair of the décor before the restoration work began.

The techniques of mixing colours in Callet's time were of course very much influenced by what was thought at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to be those of antique times. That is why the highly polished finish of « stucco lustra » was used so extensively in the Villa Bartholoni.

Théo-Antoine Hermanès  
Director of the Ateliers Crephart

