

Palladio's grand original:

the **VILLA MALCONTENTA**

by John Russell; photographs by Lord Snowdon

THE MOST beautiful boat-ride in Europe has been for 400 years, and is still today, the run from Venice to Padua. The water-bus 'Burchiello,' which makes the trip in a leisurely seven to eight hours, could be filled a dozen times over; and the journey casts its spell even over those who care nothing for the landscape-background of Giorgione's paintings and will never go to the library to look up what Henri III of France, and what Goethe, and what the President de Brogues had to say about the pleasures of a day on the Brenta. It is a puddly, reed-strewn, goose-loud and almost stationary stream, with none of those intimations of the colossal which endear the Rhine and the Danube to their admirers. And in the surrounding landscape all is flat, silent and still.

This trance-like quality begins in the Venetian lagoon and is, if anything, intensified when the waters narrow and the boat inches its way into the Brenta canal. The "little world of life and movement" which Goethe detected on either bank of the Brenta is powered today by enormous factories and refineries only a mile or two distant. But the water's edge remains a place of mystery and contemplation. We wait for something astonishing to happen; and happen it does when the unpretentious little river shakes out of its green sleeve what many people would rank as the most influential, and some as the most beautiful, house in the world: the Villa Malcontenta. Palladio designed this in the 1550s at a time when the great families of Venice were out to make an earthly paradise in the undistinguished marshlands between Venice and the Euganean Hills. A great many of them got near to it—the run from Venice to Padua is strewn with their attempts—but no one got nearer than the Foscari, who commissioned the Villa Malcontenta from Palladio.

No country house quite like it had been seen before. Such ancestors as the design had were of an august, official sort: temples, for instance. Palladio's achievement was that he made the grand style relax without loss of dignity. Within a generation, observers were so taken with the Palladian style that they disdained Gothic altogether: the British Ambassador to Venice remarked that pointed arches, "both for the natural imbecility of the sharp angle itself, and likewise for their uncomeliness, ought to be *continued on page 7*



The owner of Malcontenta, Mr A. C. Landsberg in one of two magnificently dilapidated garden chairs which moulder among derelict plants, severed marble heads and fragments of unidentified masonry in a disused conservatory

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exiled from judicious eyes and left to their first inventors, the Goths or Lombards, amongst other relics of that barbarous age." A century or more later, country houses all over the civilised West were based on Palladio; and by the eve of the Industrial Revolution, when inhabited landscape reached its highest point of beauty and amenity, Palladianism was everywhere, from the Weald of Kent to the swamps of Louisiana and from the flatlands round what is now Leningrad to the plains of Hungary.

Malcontenta meanwhile had gone to the bad. The branch of the Foscari family for whom it was built petered out shortly after Waterloo, and the great house was by turns barracks and hospital, granary and magniloquent shed. The whole region decayed. The water's edge between Venice and Padua had once been famous throughout Europe as a place where life was easy, flexible, luxurious and gay. In summer, when Venice was hot and tiresome, the bowling-alleys by the Brenta were shaded with horn-



The main-floor bathroom (left) has a bath imported from England, with a lid which can be discreetly lowered over the bather. The back of the house (far left) is quite different from the grandly-porticoed front (page 4): more obviously domestic, it dominates the avenues of trees planted by the present owner. In the foreground are Mr and Mrs Landsberg

beam, and delicious food was served in a bower of willows. Each house, with its dependencies, was a world in miniature; and the crowned heads who transferred at Fusina into their flat-bottomed and gilded barges could count on royal amusements when the trip was over.

But when its present owner, Mr A. C. Landsberg, first came to Malcontenta, in 1925, the house was derelict. Farmyard animals had been free for generations to rootle and rut in and out of the ground-floor rooms. A blacksmith's shop was in full activity in the hall. Seagulls, bats, field-mice, lizards and white owls abounded. Grain was stored above, and hauled up and down through holes cut in the floor. Only one inner door was left. Most of the windows were blocked up. The frescoes had been white-washed over. Whole flights of stairs were missing. Someone was growing silkworms high overhead. There were holes in the roof. Old photographs show the great house as a disaffected Temple of the Muses, a blank-faced ruin gone quite to pot. To get it back into shape would take a poet, and a historian, and a man of quite exceptional determination.

Luckily Mr Landsberg was all three. A Brazilian citizen of European origin, he had been to school at Harrow; and after coming down from Cambridge, where he was a friend of, among others, Ronald Firbank, he lived a great deal in Paris. In 1923 Picasso drew him, for the frontispiece to his book of poems. Though not poor, continued on page 8



Supposed portrait (left) of 'La Malcontenta' herself; the unlucky member of the Foscari family kept prisoner in the house by way of punishment for her excesses in Venice. Her majestic stature may be explained by the use of the platform-soles of which a record (above) is kept in the Landsberg's scrapbook



Over a door (right) in the main saloon is one of the huge seated figures that hark back to Michelangelo's Sibyls in the Sistine Chapel. In other, smaller rooms the decoration (above) is arabesqued in a style that was to be adapted 200 years later by the Adam brothers; in another (below), with its elaborate make-believe architectural decoration, tall panels of musical instruments recall the role of music in Venetian civilisation

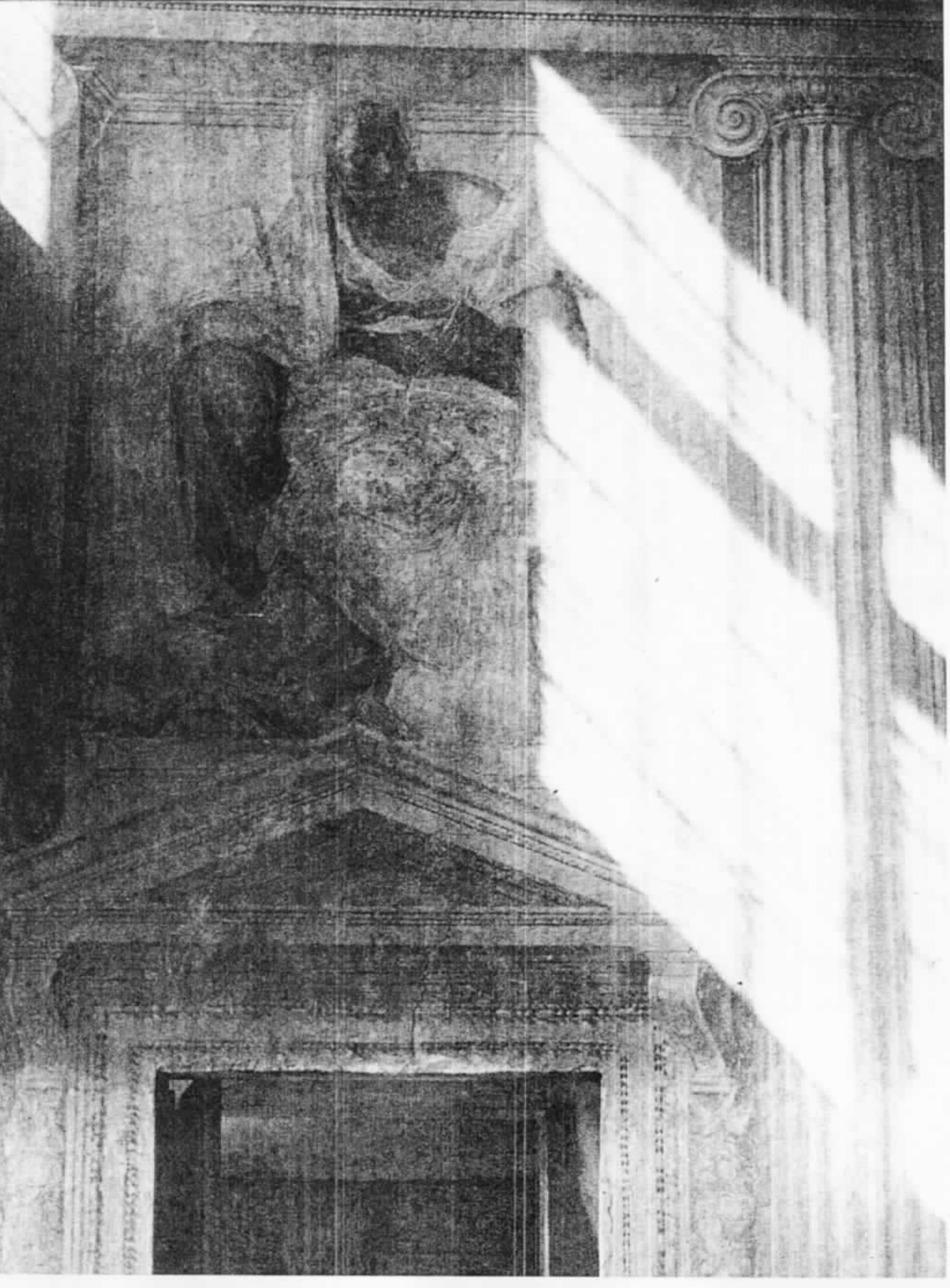
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he was certainly not rich in the sense that rich people use the word. But he had the gift of making people feel twice as alive, in his company, as they were anywhere else; and this was useful to him when, in the middle 1920s, he set about the restoration of Malcontenta.

Malcontenta proved all-demanding; by the time the owner had planted the trees which now tower above the house, and levelled and planted the garden, and opened up the windows, and patched and beeswaxed the *parimento Veneziano* floor, and furnished the house mostly with simple pieces made to his own design by the house carpenter, and generally got back to a first draft of Palladio's intentions, even his energies were spent.

After a year or two it began to get about that the old house was coming to life again. Visitors from England who knew what *continued on page 10*



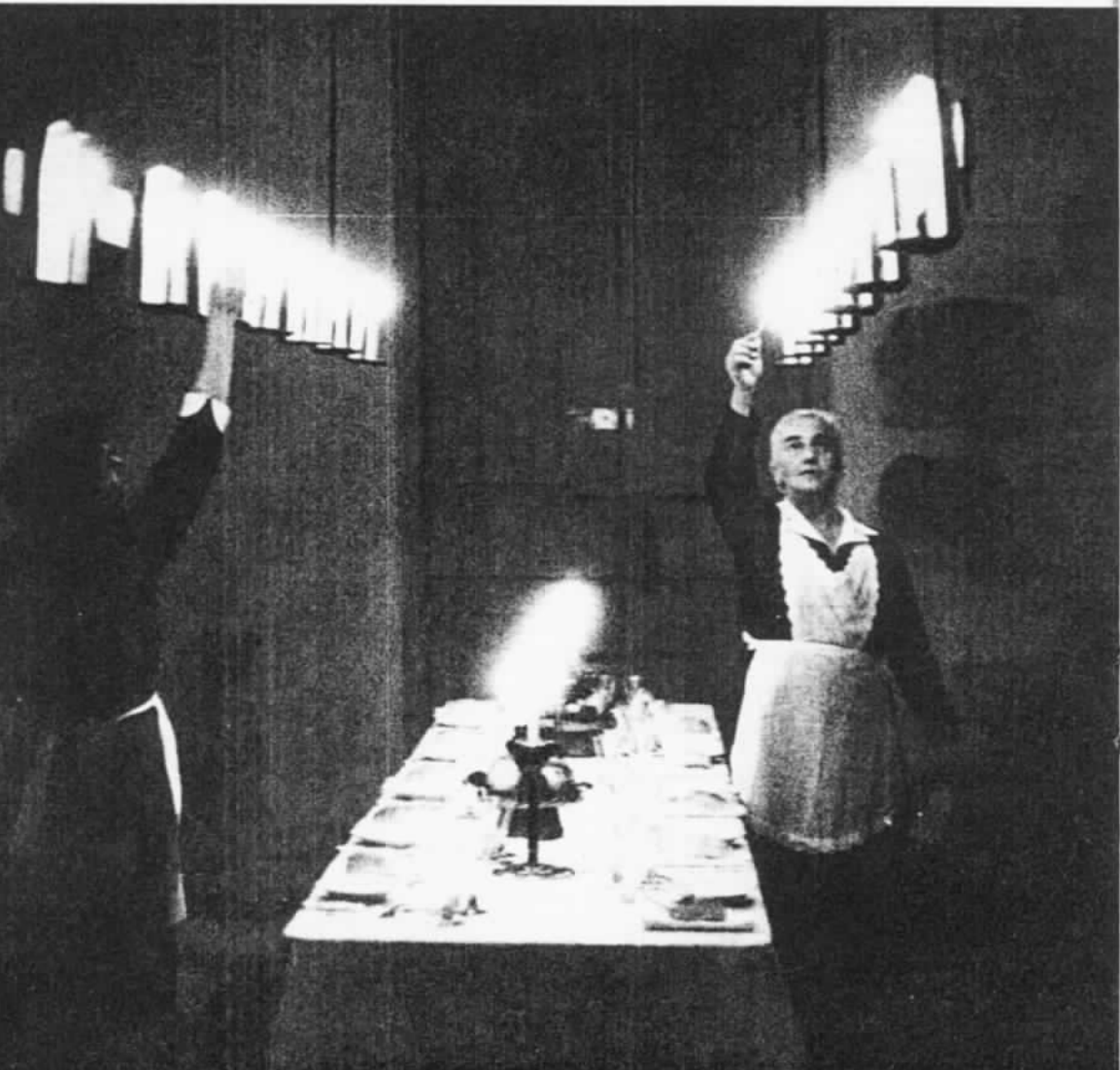




In the vaulted ground-floor hall (above), the majestic lantern and two standing figures represent one of the owner's rare and discerning additions to the original Palladian scheme. Leading off this hall is the dining-room (below) in which Maria, the housekeeper, supervises the countrified illuminations

Inigo Jones and William Kent and Robert Adam had done with 'the Palladian style' soon found at Malcontenta an altogether superior order of simplicity and lack of ostentation. Display and fuss have no part in it, and yet Palladio's grave calculations produced a house which is uniquely agreeable to live in. There are no dark corners in Malcontenta, no awkward, tedious corridors, no uniformities and repetitions; surprise is everywhere.

Surprise dominates, also, in the frescoes which were known to be somewhere under the whitewash. Year by year, a little more of these was uncovered by the owner and his friends. As room after room gave up its secrets, it was clear that there, too, no one had repeated himself. No contrast could be greater than that between the Battle of the Giants in one room, the naturalistic landscapes and arabesque decorations in another, and the life-size figure of 'La Malcontenta' herself in a third. A perfect democracy exists between the Michel-angelesque figures who are enthroned above the doorways and the lifesize figure at floor level elsewhere who so persuasively leans forward towards the visitor with a tray of drinks. For Malcontenta,



even at its grandest, is never out of touch with human realities. Palladio, unlike his later imitators, never seems to say: "This house is too grand for people like you to aspire to."

And Bertie Landsberg would never think of saying it, either. The visitors' book at Malcontenta reflects its owner's over-riding affection for his fellow human beings; the house is rare which, like this one, has received Le Corbusier and Winston Churchill, Bernard Berenson and Cole Porter, Stravinsky and Freya Stark, with the same enthusiasm. The book also honours the names of the bailiff, Antonio, and housekeeper, Maria, who between 1939 and 1945 outwitted one army after another to keep Malcontenta intact against its owner's return; but what it does not include, because it simply isn't big enough, are the countless unknown enthusiasts who have rung the bell and not been turned away.

Since Bertie Landsberg returned to Malcontenta in 1945 with his American bride, the former Miss Dorothea Watts, Malcontenta has had a mistress whose love of the house has matched her husband's. The nearby landscape, meanwhile, has changed as much as the house itself, though in a different direction. Towards Venice, enormous refineries produce, 24 hours a day, a spectacle as awesome as any to be found outside Cape Canaveral: the entangled pipelines, the naked jets of green and purple flame, the high wire fences go on for mile after mile. The whole area buzzes with full employment. Vespa, outboard motorboat and transistor radio ring out across the marshes. Everyone is busy, alert, well-dressed and polite. Several times a week, in the season, the 'Burchiello' does the classic trip from Venice to Padua; and as the overloaded excursionists approach Malcontenta, engines are stopped and a short eulogy of the house and its owner booms out over the loud-speaker.

Just occasionally the owner can, indeed, be glimpsed from the water in a characteristic dance of excitement over some new discovery. For the house, which kept so many of its mysteries intact, is yielding them up, one by one, to its owner's affectionate curiosity. For nearly 40 years, for instance, the authorship of the frescoes in the great cruciform hall which forms the main room of the house had been debated back and forth with hardly a rag of firm evidence. But, this last summer, a young Russian woman art-historian, Larissa Salmina, was able to connect the frescoes with a group of drawings by Zelotti which were taken to Russia more than a century ago by Prince Youssouppoff and which are now in the Hermitage in Leningrad.

Things of that sort can, of course, happen in museums, or in houses that are brought to a certain point of perfection and sealed off. But Malcontenta is not a house that has been brought creaking and protesting into the 20th century. It is what it always was: a place where something marvellous may happen at any time, an earthly paradise where nothing is out of date, a 'machine for living in' devised nearly four centuries before Le Corbusier patented that phrase, but never bettered for its purpose.

One of the Villa's most providential visitors this year was Miss Larissa Salmina, of the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad, who is seen (right) looking out of one of Palladio's indoor windows towards the frescoes whose authorship she was able to confirm from the evidence of drawings now in her charge

