

ELEONORA DI TOLEDO  
and the Creation  
of the Boboli Gardens

cover: Baccio Bandinelli, *She-Goat*, marble, 1553-54; Giovanni Fancelli, called Nanni di Stocco, *Capricorn, Goats, Putti, Basin*, marble, 1553-55 (basin, replica; original, facade, Pitti Palace), Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi, Giardino di Boboli, Grotticina di Madama

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# Bruce Edelstein

## ELEONORA DI TOLEDO

### and the Creation of the Boboli Gardens

  
FIRENZE  
MUSEI **s i l l a b e**

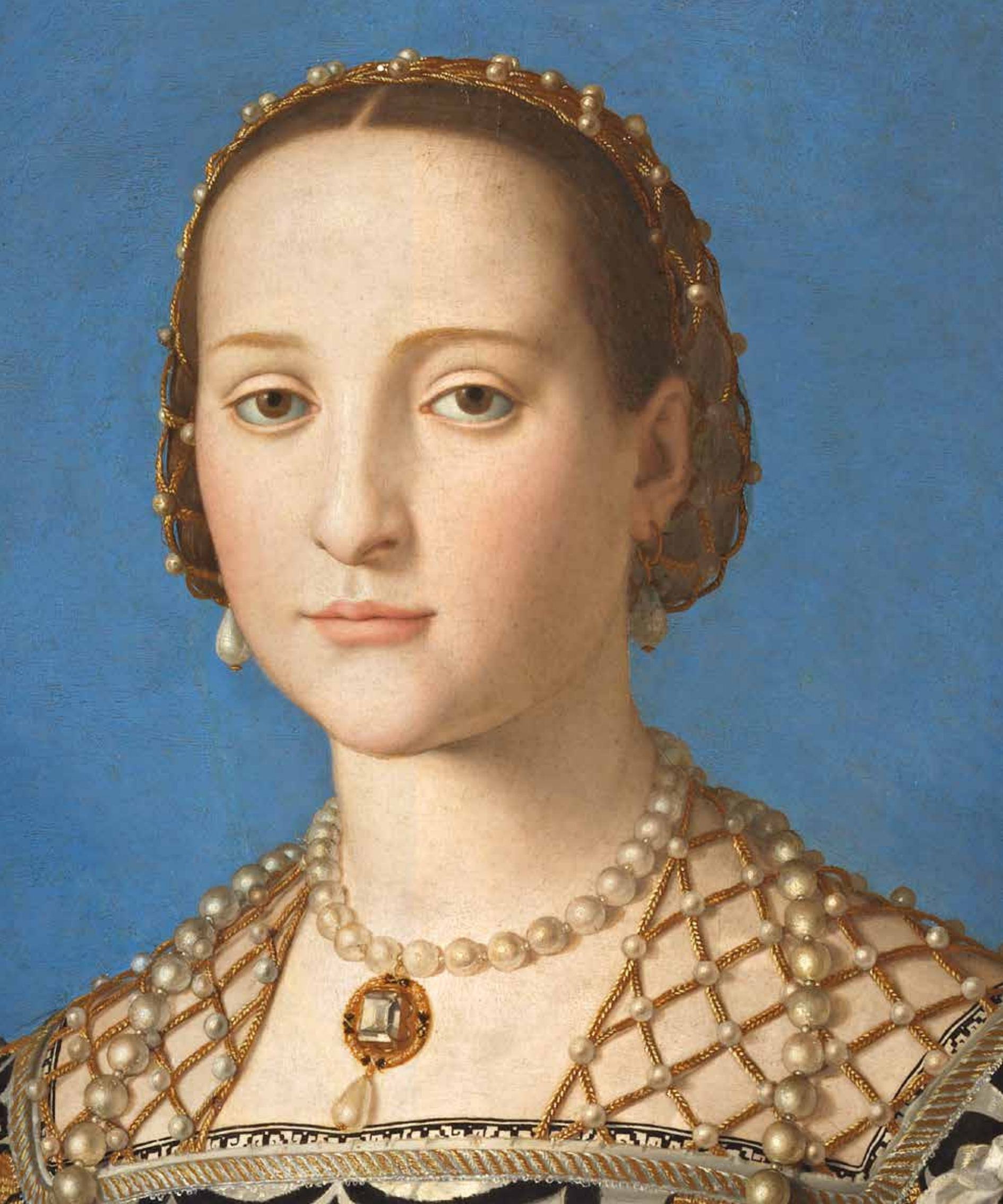
 LE GALLERIE  
DEGLI UFFIZI



*For my mother, Phyllis G. Edelstein,  
and in memory of my father, Richard A. Edelstein,  
who planted their garden together and tended it with love.*

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## A new morning light shining onto the Boboli Gardens

The Boboli Gardens – the English language rightly preserves the plural, which reflects its historical stratification and the various stages of its enlargement – is one of the rarest and most amazing examples of a sculpture garden with statues, fountains and grottoes that has come down to us from the Italian Renaissance (the other one being Bomarzo, given that Pratolino was almost completely razed to the ground). But having been admired by travelers – especially aristocrats on the *Grand Tour* – over the centuries, it also served as a model, inspiring the greatest princely gardens throughout Europe during the Early Modern period. While other gardens may exceed Boboli in acreage, usually arising from the design of a particular historic moment or even from the will of a single patron, such as Louis XIV's Versailles or Charles III's Caserta, the Boboli Gardens stand out for the plurality of their different parts, each of which bears a very distinct character. Nowhere else is it possible to wander through the centuries and experience the earliest grottoes from the middle of the sixteenth century, the garden of the Baroque Grand Dukes, those of the enlightened reign of Pietro Leopoldo and last, but not least, the English Garden included in the Upper Botanical Garden. Yet, very little attention has been given previously to Boboli's beginnings, and to its original patron, Eleonora di Toledo. In fact, it is commonly believed that Eleonora – who is presumed to have been born in Spain in 1522, arrived with her family in Naples at the age of twelve, married Cosimo de' Medici at seventeen, and would ultimately die in Pisa in 1562 – acquired the Pitti Palace as a new residence for the ever-more powerful family in February 1550, and with it, almost coincidentally, also came the Boboli Gardens. As Bruce Edelstein shows in the book you are about to read, it was actually the other way around: Eleonora did not purchase the palace with its garden, but rather the garden with its palace. From the author's erudite analysis – which is based on three decades of in-depth research, but at the same time has resulted in an enjoyable and engaging read – the Duchess's preeminent role as an artistic patron at the Medici court emerges more broadly for mid-sixteenth century Florence. Not only was her profile entirely distinct from her husband's, but moreover it has become very clear that she was the active manager of her business activities, which were not just carried out in her name, as earlier scholars had erroneously surmised. Today, Eleonora di Toledo may serve as a fabulous role model for female leaders in any field. Among her achievements, perhaps the most meaningful for the present day is her project to create an actual countryside, which included a working farm, within the city walls of Florence. Motivated by ideals, which the author traces back to Leon Battista Alberti, Virgil and Pliny – such as the healthy food, clean air, and physical exercise typical of the countryside – Eleonora di Toledo's project anticipates modern medical insights and ecological considerations, which are becoming more and more prevalent in contemporary urban planning and architecture, such as in Stefano Boeri's *Vertical Forest (Bosco Verticale)* in Milan (2009-2014). It may therefore be stated without any exaggeration that Bruce Edelstein's volume is being published just in time, not just in connection with the five hundredth anniversary of Eleonora's birth, but especially for her horticultural and landscaping ideals, which are eminently relevant to today's current affairs.

**Eike D. Schmidt**

Director General, The Uffizi Galleries



## Acknowledgments

It is my sincere hope that this work will be seen as a fitting homage to the legacy of Eleonora di Toledo in the five hundredth anniversary of the year in which she is presumed to have been born. I first began gathering material regarding Eleonora's patronage of the Boboli Gardens while researching my doctoral dissertation, some thirty years ago. The plan to write a book-length monograph on the topic was born ten years later. As with any project that has such a long gestation, the book that you now have before you is very different from the volume that I imagined then. During the decades that I developed this material, I received invaluable assistance from so many people, who have contributed in different ways to my research. I apologize in advance to anyone I may have forgotten to mention here.

Several institutions have been fundamental to my work and I will always be thankful for their hospitality and the professionalism of their staffs. First among these are the Gallerie degli Uffizi, who lovingly maintain the Boboli Gardens and preserve its rich cultural heritage. I consider it a great honor that this book is being published by the Uffizi and am especially grateful to the Director Eike D. Schmidt, Alessandra Griffo, and Fabrizio Paolucci for their support and assistance.

Some of the material that is now part of this book was written while I was as a fellow at the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies at Villa I Tatti. In his last year as director, Walter Kaiser was a most gracious host. Michael Rocke and the entire library staff were immensely helpful then and have remained so over the years. I was particularly fortunate that the cohort of scholars who were fellows during the same year included colleagues who already were or would become dear friends, and who have been generous with advice and assistance over the years, especially Cammy Brothers, Deanna Shemek, and Jonathan Nelson. My deepest thanks to the current director, Alina Payne, whose support of early modern scholarship is unflagging and whose enthusiasm for my research provided important encouragement during the completion of this volume.

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Like all scholars, I am a product of my education and am eternally grateful to my mentors. A special thank you to Howard Burns and Mirka Beneš, who have always been supportive of my work, as were James Ackerman and John Shearman, who are so greatly missed. Colleagues at New York University, both in Florence and New York, have also been generous with their time and suggestions, including Cristina Bellini, Virginia Cox, Matteo Duni, Rebecca Falkoff, Claudia Tarallo, and Mahnaz Yousefzadeh. Monica Shenouda scrupulously read my manuscript and offered invaluable advice that has made the text so much clearer and a more accurate reflection of my intentions than it would have been otherwise. At Sillabe, Laura Belforte devoted exceptional care to the design of the volume while Giulia Bastianelli provided outstanding editorial suggestions.

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My research on Eleonora di Toledo might never have progressed past its earliest phases if I had not received the continual support and encouragement of my dear friend, Roxana Pagés-Rangel. This book is also dedicated to her and to everyone who cherishes her memory.



## I. Introduction

### *With her own hands the proud lady planted*

This book is a study of Eleonora di Toledo as the principal patron of one of the most celebrated sites in Florence, Italy: the Boboli Gardens of the Pitti Palace. Duchess of Florence from 1539 to 1562, Eleonora is largely known today as the subject of a splendid portrait in the Uffizi by the Medici court artist Agnolo Bronzino (fig. 1). Enthroned, her posture suggesting the rigor of Spanish court etiquette, and accompanied by her second son, the duchess is as much an object in the painter's vision as her minutely depicted, luxurious brocade gown and the vast number of pearls that adorn her accessories. However, far from being a passive ornament to the court of Duke Cosimo I de' Medici, Eleonora di Toledo was her husband's most important collaborator, contributing in fundamental ways to the construction of his autocratic state and its artistic legacy. An examination of her most important work of artistic patronage, the Boboli Gardens, offers unique insights into the nature of her contributions both to Cosimo's projects and, more broadly, to the transformation of Florence that took place during his reign. Eleonora brought with her not only her wealth and intelligence but also her elite Spanish background and her experience of Naples.<sup>1</sup>

The gardens were from the outset a project to develop a vast estate within the very heart of Renaissance Florence. Thus, Boboli represents a pivotal moment in the history of the aristocratic palace, in which the traditional relationship between architecture and landscape in the urban setting was inverted: extensive, elaborate gardens now assumed the role of protagonist while the palace was initially relegated to a secondary role. Boboli remains today one of the city's most popular attractions for tourists, garden enthusiasts, and scholars. Yet few who currently visit the gardens realize how much their design was developed to respond to the specific needs of a powerful woman, a reflection of her special concerns for her own health and that of her eleven children, and her personal desire to enjoy the pleasures of life in the country while attending to matters of state in the capital of the duchy. A key element of this study focuses on Eleonora's Spanish origins and the development of her taste in viceregal Naples, prompting a reconsideration of Boboli in a larger context, beyond the traditional image of the project as part of a glorious continuum of Medici gardens. The complex was developed in a Mediterranean world dominated by the Spanish Habsburgs, where fierce rivalries

1. Agnolo Bronzino, *Eleonora di Toledo with Her Son Giovanni*, oil on panel, c. 1545, Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi, Galleria delle Statue e delle Pitture



for the attention and favor of the Holy Roman Emperor were often played out through art and architectural commissions that intentionally competed with each other to demonstrate the greater magnificence of their patrons.

### The Spanish Princess

Eleonora was born in Spain, probably in 1522, since her funeral epitaph and contemporary sources refer to her as having been age forty when she died on December 17, 1562.<sup>2</sup> She was thus about twelve years old when she arrived with her family in Naples in 1534, two years after her father, Pedro Álvarez de Toledo, had been sent by Charles V to serve as his viceroy there. She was possibly the youngest of the seven children born to Pedro and his wife, Maria Osorio Pimentel. Little over a year after her arrival, Naples was transformed temporarily into the principal social center for the imperial world when Charles V made his triumphal entry into the city following his military victory in Tunisia. The emperor's residence in Naples during the winter of 1535-36 brought numerous foreign visitors to the city to pay homage to him and to participate in the lavish festivities that were held in his honor. These included the sixteen-year-old Cosimo, who arrived as a page in the train of his cousin, Alessandro,

the first Duke of Florence, who had come to celebrate his betrothal to Charles's illegitimate daughter, Margaret of Austria. It is often stated that Cosimo and Eleonora saw each other at this time and that he fell in love with her. There is no evidence for this, however, and it is possible that he never had the opportunity to view his future bride, given the care that was exercised during the emperor's visit to limit the public appearance of noblewomen to avoid the possibility of scandalous incidents.

The assassination of Alessandro de' Medici just one year later, on January 6, 1537, made possible Cosimo's unlikely ascension to the ducal throne. Cosimo immediately began searching for an appropriate consort and numerous candidates were considered before Pedro de Toledo offered one of his daughters to the young duke, intending for him to wed Isabella, the elder of his two unmarried daughters. Cosimo's agents in Naples warned him against accepting this offer, since Isabella was "of an ugly age and her brain the scorn of Naples." The copious correspondence that survives documenting these negotiations makes clear that Cosimo had little knowledge of the viceroy's daughters from his own journey to Naples, confirming that his marriage to Eleonora was not a love match. On March 29, 1539, the two were wed by proxy in the Castel Nuovo. Over two months later, Eleonora embarked on a ship with a large entourage of Spanish courtiers, including her brother García, already a celebrated naval hero. Arriving in Pisa, she proceeded to the Medici villa at Poggio a Caiano where she prepared for her triumphal entry into the city of Florence on June 29. To welcome the new duchess, Florence was transformed through ephemeral decorations made by many artists who would later become regularly salaried employees of the court.

The marriage was remarkably felicitous and Cosimo, who had already sired an illegitimate daughter before his consort's arrival, was reputed to have remained faithful to Eleonora throughout her lifetime. The two would have eleven children together, eight of whom survived to maturity, while only four of these outlived their mother. Eleonora assumed the role of head of state several times during her reign when Cosimo was away attending to foreign affairs or during his illnesses. She was not loved by the Florentine people for her introduction of foreign fashions and court etiquette, which contributed to an image of the duchess as haughty. The memory of the horrific sack of Prato in 1512 by Spanish troops, followed by the devastating imperial siege of Florence in 1529, guaranteed that Florentines would be suspicious of her Iberian origins and connections to the Habsburg world. The creation of the Boboli Gardens, however, inspired admiration for her and was immediately recognized as a great success and an essential part of her legacy.

### The Acquisition of the Pitti Palace

In February 1550, Eleonora purchased the Pitti Palace and the adjacent property belonging to the heirs of the Pitti family.<sup>3</sup> Through continued acquisition of further property, Eleonora and her husband, Duke Cosimo I de' Medici, assembled the first nucleus of the Boboli Gardens.<sup>4</sup> Early descriptions did not fail to identify Eleonora as the initial patron of the complex.<sup>5</sup> Even the anonymous, anti-Medici, anti-Spanish, Savonarolan diarist, frequently identified as an unknown "Marucelli," identified the acquisition with Eleonora, although as an express desire of Cosimo's to reside in the palace.<sup>6</sup> Several of the poetic laments written by Medici courtiers following Eleonora's death identify her specifically as Bartolomeo Ammannati's patron at the Pitti Palace, confirming that contemporaries were fully aware that the project was under the aegis of the duchess.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Benedetto Varchi dedicated a sonnet to Ammannati on this occasion, extolling the virtues of: "Those green myrtles, those same laurels, Which with her own hands the proud Lady Planted [...] And her high palace, which for grandeur, And noble artifice by you, Phidias, and new Daedalus today surpasses all others."<sup>8</sup> Varchi thus celebrated Eleonora as single-handedly responsible for the metamorphosis of the Boboli hill into a magnificent verdant landscape and Ammannati for the transformation of the Pitti Palace into the grandest *reggia* in existence. While the poetic affirmation that the duchess planted the gardens herself is typical of sixteenth-century courtly hyperbole, the sonnet nonetheless offers powerful contemporary testimony that Eleonora was recognized by contemporaries as a shrewd patron.

The memory of Eleonora's role in creating the complex survived well into the early nineteenth century. In the first guidebook dedicated specifically to the gardens published in 1789, Francesco Maria Soldini was explicit in distinguishing Cosimo's possible interest in the site from Eleonora's real acquisition and development of it. Soldini's praise of Eleonora includes the astute observation that: "It would