



# GLOBAL GOODS AND THE COUNTRY HOUSE

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES, 1650–1800

EDITED BY JON STOBART



 **UCLPRESS**



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# XI

## The new worlds' gate

Gaia Bruno



**Figure OL.XI** Antonio Niccolini (?), the main entrance of La Floridiana, nineteenth century, pencil and charcoal. Naples, Certosa e Museo Nazionale di S. Martino

On the hill of Vomero in Naples there is a park famous from the beginning of nineteenth century for its collection of exotic plants from all around the world. Between 1816 and 1817, King Ferdinando I Borbone, restored on his throne after ten years of Napoleonic domination, bought the estate for his second wife, Lucia Migliaccio, Duchess of Florida. The villa was reorganised by the Tuscan architect Antonio Niccolini,<sup>1</sup> who was very active in Naples at the time, working on other important projects such as

the renovation of the opera theatre San Carlo. Initially employed as scenographer, Niccolini designed the building in neoclassical style. For the park, he looked to the English landscape garden, trying to combine two kinds of spaces: the first picturesque, where wild nature could bloom, accompanied by statues, mock ruins and benches; the second one with a more structured articulation, open to the breath-taking scenery of the gulf of Naples. He sought to create a dialogue with nature. The most distinctive feature of the park was its collection of exotic plants. The new owners, the king and the duchess, enriched the exotic collection with 150 new specimens. The main route to the house, for example, was lined by two avenues of *Robinia pseudoacacia*, a north American tree, while in the greenhouse pineapples were cultivated at least until 1825, when the duchess died.

In order to symbolise the exoticism of the park, Niccolini designed an iron gate surmounted by two gold pineapples to be put at the main entrance. Between the two exotic fruits, made of gilded wrought iron, stood the name of the villa: 'La Floridiana'. The gate, which still exists, is depicted in Niccolini's original sketch made with pencil and charcoal on paper (Figure OL.XI).<sup>2</sup> In the sketch, two agave plants – themselves natives of Central America and the Caribbean, and today replaced by two stone panthers – were placed beyond the pineapples. They have the optical function of making the exotic fruits appear bigger and more visible, an effect achieved by repeating their shapes.

According to some scholars, the pineapples on the gate had the purpose of wishing good luck,<sup>3</sup> but the meaning is actually more complicated. Indeed, the pineapple was a complex symbol of globalisation in the early modern world.<sup>4</sup> It was known in Europe from the conquest of the New World in the sixteenth century, one of the first references to the so-called Mexican Treasure coming in a collection of observations on South America's flora and fauna written by Francisco Hernández, the main focus of which was medical.<sup>5</sup> In the Italian compendium by Nardo Antonio Recchi, the pineapple is listed as a plant originally from Haiti with the *tolteca* name *Matzalti*, translated into Latin as *Pinea Indica*.<sup>6</sup> In this Renaissance context the fruit symbolised the power of the conquerors over the New World; for example, in the marriage ceremony of Eleonora de Toledo with Cosimo I Medici (1539), the bride was followed by a pineapple and a llama.<sup>7</sup> In the eighteenth century, the fruit became a gift to be exchanged in new practices of sociability. Like other lavish global goods, it was considered precious because of the difficulties of transportation from overseas and the unsuccessful efforts to acclimatise it in the European soils, at least until 1723, when a first specimen appeared in the botanical garden of Pisa.<sup>8</sup>

More than two centuries had passed from the first appearance of the fruit in Europe to the beginning of the nineteenth century when Niccolini chose it for the gate decoration. Yet pineapples were still considered the best symbol to depict a garden where exoticism was displayed as the highest expression of private luxury. Today, the plants of the park have changed, but the place keeps its original character. Trees come from Japan, the Americas and Australia, while the golden pineapples remain on the top of the gate, as unchanging tracks of the unchanged exotic connotation of the park.<sup>9</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Venditti, *Architettura Neoclassica a Napoli*, 235–320.
- 2 The sketch is the work of Niccolini, even if the lack of his original signature has caused some doubt in the attribution.
- 3 Giannetti et al., *Parco di Villa Floridiana*, 7.
- 4 The topic has been discussed in the conference *Power, Promise, Politics: The pineapple from Columbus to Del Monte*, Cambridge, UK, 20–21 February 2020.
- 5 Hernández, *Rerum medicarum novae Hispaniae thesaurus*.
- 6 Hernández, *Rerum medicarum novae Hispaniae thesaurus*, 313.
- 7 Groom, *Exotic Animals*, 52.
- 8 Maddaluno, ‘Box of fresh pineapples’.
- 9 A list of the exotic trees can be found in Giannetti et al., *Parco di villa Floridiana*, 7–10.

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