

The Art of Leisure at the Court of Ferrara in the Fifteenth Century: Social and Artistic Realities

Daria Churkina

Fifteenth-century Ferrara was home to one of the most splendid European Renaissance courts. It was during the reigns of the sons of Marquis Nicolo III d'Este, Leonello (1441–1450) [Fig. 1], Borso (1450–1471) [Fig. 2] and Ercole I (1471–1505) [Fig. 3], that the Ferrarese court began to develop its Renaissance artistic and intellectual interests. The older d'Este brothers, Leonello and Borso, were illegitimate, and they used a variety of development projects, both within Ferrara and in the surrounding marshes of the Po Valley, to establish their authority.¹ The brothers also embarked on an artistic and ceremonial program in order to enhance their own dynastic claims. Both the developmental and cultural aspects of Leonello and Borso's activities were manifested at the numerous suburban villas of the Este family, known as the *delizie*.

The earliest satellite residences of the Este rulers appeared in the late fourteenth century.² The Ferrarese court was based in the Palazzo di Corte (also called the Corte Vecchia) in the heart of the medieval city. In 1385 Nicolo II began the construction of Castello San Michele (or Castello Estense) near the Palazzo di Corte. Construction of the new fortress was originally motivated by civil unrest within the city as well as the threat of attack from outside, but this monumental stronghold also became a symbol of the Este family's power. However, apartments for members of the ruling dynasty did not appear in the castle until the last third of the fifteenth century, and the primary functions of the fortress remained protective and punitive; Castello San Michele was both a fortress and a prison. [Fig. 4]

It is, therefore, unsurprising that soon after beginning work on the castle, Alberto V, Nicolo II's brother and co-ruler, ordered the construction of several small alternative residences. Two of them, the hunting lodges ('*palazzine di caccia*'), Schifanoia and Belfiore, were located on the outskirts of Ferrara, in otherwise uninhabited areas. This pattern was continued by subsequent rulers of Ferrara, who built their own '*palazzi di villa*' in addition to renovating existing palaces. By the end of the fifteenth century Ferrara and its surroundings had a network of about twenty residential estates, whose amenities included lakes, gardens and hunting grounds.³ [Fig. 5] These suburban palaces, many of which retained medieval architectural features including battlements into the fifteenth century, marked the territorial jurisdiction of Ferrara in periods of political instability. [Fig. 6]

Nonetheless, the common historical name of these estates, *delizie*, meaning delight or pleasure, indicates that from the beginning these residences were intended to be sites of leisure and recreation ('*luoghi di delizie*'),⁴ and offer respite from urban life. Moreover, this term refers to the Garden of Delights (*Paradisus diliciarum*), a common theme in medieval and Renaissance culture. [Fig. 7] Further, the names of these palaces were related to their intended purpose; Belfiore, Belriguardo and Schifanoia mean, respectively, 'beautiful flower', 'beautiful view' and 'escape from boredom'. This opposition between city and countryside corresponds with the humanistic ideals of the period. Many of the humanists, beginning with Petrarch's treatise *De Vita Solitaria*

1 Franco Cazzola, Il sistema delle castalderie e la politica patrimoniale e territoriale estense (secoli XV–XVI), in: Francesco Ceccarelli – Marco Folin (eds.), *Delizie estensi. Architetture di villa nel Rinascimento italiano ed europeo*, Florence 2009, pp. 65–77.

2 Francesco Ceccarelli, Palazzi, castalderie e delizie. Forme degli insediamenti estensi nel Ferrarese tra Quattrocento e Cinquecento, in: *Gli Este a Ferrara. Il Castello per la città*, edited by Marco Borella, Cinisello Balsamo 2004, pp. 73–83.

3 Marco Folin, Le residenze di corte e il sistema delle delizie fra Medioevo ed età moderna, in: Ceccarelli – Folin, Firenze (see note 1), pp. 79–135.

4 Gianni Venturi, Delizia (e altro). Storia di un nome, di un equivoco, di una tradizione, in: *In parco del delta del Po, vol. 3: L'ambiente come laboratorio*, Ferrara 1990, pp. 128–135.

of 1346–1356 and Leon Battista Alberti's *De re aedificatoria* of 1452, and *Della famiglia* of 1441 describe the classical ideal of rural life and the phenomenon of the *villa suburbana*.⁵

In time, the network of Este villas became a fully fledged alternative to the urban residence; moving from one palace to another, the ruler and his court could be away from the capital for months at a time.⁶ Official receptions, court entertainments and ceremonies, theatrical performances, tournaments, and hunts all occurred at the *delizie*. There were also opportunities for private leisure of the type advocated by the period's authors. The magnificent interior decorations of the *delizie*, which were executed by Ferrara's foremost artists, were designed to demonstrate the prestige and power of the Este dynasty as a whole as well as the personal virtues of their patrons.

By examining three representative examples of these *delizie estensi*, the Belfiore, Belriguardo and Schifanoia palaces, this paper will explore the artistic variety of these representative programs. As it is not possible to reconstruct the original appearance of these palaces in their entirety, the focus of this study is the concept of the *delizia* as a residence rather than the formal characteristics of these monuments.

One of the earliest *delizie* was Belfiore, which was built in 1385. It was located one kilometre north of Ferrara on the same axis as the Castello Estense. [Fig. 8] In the late fifteenth century, the Belfiore complex was incorporated into the city of Ferrara as a result of a large-scale urban project ordered by Ercole I d'Este. The palace was badly damaged in the war with Venice in 1482, and in the seventeenth century it was completely demolished. However, contemporary accounts indicate that this palace, like other *delizie*, was surrounded by gardens, vineyards and menageries,⁷ and that frescoes illustrated court life, depicting the patron, Marquis Alberto, hunting while his courtiers danced in the garden.

In the mid-fifteenth century, Leonello d'Este renovated Belfiore, adapting the palace for winter residence.⁸ Among the new apartments, Leonello included a studiolo for his private studies. This room also functioned as a library and a repository for his most prized possessions. Similar chambers had existed in other late-medieval castles, but Leonello's studiolo was among the first to engage with new Renaissance concepts of the active and contemplative lives, the *vita activa* (or *vita civilis*, urban life) and *vita contemplativa* (the contemplative life of the villa). Only the ruler and specially selected guests had access to the studiolo, and it could be used either for small, informal meetings or solitary meditation. The Belfiore studiolo was decorated with painted panels depicting the nine muses (only six are preserved today) according to an iconographic program composed by the humanist Guarino da Verona. [Fig. 9] The muses symbolized the personal virtues of Leonello d'Este as both marquis and man: a humanist ruler, patron of the arts, and lover of classical literature. [Fig. 10] It is important to note that the new Renaissance themes did not contradict the existing late-medieval motifs. Rather, the syntheses between humanist values and Christian virtues embodied the dynastic continuity that the Este princes were eager to establish.

The decoration of the studiolo at Belfiore was completed after Leonello's death, under the rule of his brother Borso d'Este. Borso's twenty-year reign was marked by reconstruction of the old palaces and emergence of several new *delizie* in the neighbourhood of Ferrara. The names of two of these palaces, Bellombra and Benvignante, are mentioned in Borso's biography in the illustrated codex *Genealogia dei principi d'Este*.

The only surviving example of Borso's *delizia* projects is the Palazzo Schifanoia, close to the city walls, East of the city centre. Originally intended as a small hunting lodge, this residence was enlarged and decorated in 1465–1470 according to Borso's instructions. [Fig. 11] The central room on the piano nobile of the hunting lodge was adapted for formal receptions and balls. A loggia and external staircase, now lost, connected the great hall to the garden.⁹

5 Leon Battista Alberti, *De familia*: '...at the villa you can avoid the noise of the city, the tumults in the public square, the struggles in the Government Palace. At the villa you can hide from the crimes and wickedness of the many evil men who, in the city, are always before your eyes, fill your ears continuously with gossip, and go through the streets shrieking and bellowing like maddened, horrible beasts. How wonderful it is to be at the villa! No happiness can equal it!', in: *Humanism and the Urban World: Leon Battista Alberti and the Renaissance City*, edited by Caspar Pearson, University Park (Pennsylvania) 2011, p. 121.

6 Folini (see note 3), pp. 79–81.

7 Franco Cazzola, *L'orto di Belfiore, la villa, il barco: una campagna per diletto*, in: Alessandra Mottola Molino – Mauro Natale (eds.), *Le Muse e il Principe. Arte di corte nel Rinascimento padano. Saggi*, Modena 1991, pp. 203–212.

8 Ibidem, pp. 209–210.

9 Carla Di Francesco, *Schifanoia. Delizia, "Fabbrica", Palazzo, Museo*, in: Salvatore Settis – Walter Cupperi (eds.), *The Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara*,

The walls of this hall, called the Salone dei Mesi (Hall of the Months), were decorated with a fresco cycle depicting all twelve months and other astrological subjects. [Fig. 13] These works were executed by a number of artists, including Francesco del Cossa and Cosimo Tura, who had also worked on the decoration at Belfiore. At first glance, this three-tiered fresco cycle depicting the children of the planets, signs of the zodiac, and human activities for each month is a continuation of the late-medieval artistic tradition. Similar astrological and calendrical motifs are found in monumental decorations and book miniatures from the early fifteenth century, including the frescoes in the Torre Aquila in Castello del Buonconsiglio in Trent (c. 1400) and the *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* executed by Limbourg brothers (c. 1412–1416). However, the decorative program of the Salone was intended to glorify its patron as an ideal ruler. Various stories of aristocratic life in the lower part of the frescoes, including falconry or the reception of suppliants, reflect Borso's character, as his favourite activities, according to historical sources, were hunting and fishing, followed by politics.¹⁰ Indeed unlike his older brother, Borso was not a dedicated humanist, but his reign was characterized by political stability and a consequent flowering of the arts. Nonetheless, the nine Muses were also depicted in the Salone dei Mesi (in the *Triumph of Apollo* fresco). The nearby Sala delle Virtù (Hall of the Virtues) was decorated with allegorical stucco sculptures of virtues. Therefore, at the Palazzo Schifanoia, these late-medieval iconographic programs take on a new Renaissance meaning almost without formal changes. The ancient gods and signs of the zodiac symbolized celestial protection for the Marquis. The decoration of the Palazzo Schifanoia offers a Renaissance perspective of the world as a human-centric universe.

By the end of the fifteenth century, the architecture and decoration of the *delizie* were distinctly classical, as is evident in the description of one of the Este family's favourite residences, Belriguardo. Located fifteen kilometres south-east of Ferrara, this complex was begun in 1435 by Marquis Nicolo III d'Este, who tried to build his and Leonello's ideal classical villa. [Fig. 13] Subsequent rulers enlarged the palace, but the preserved structures do not present a complete picture of the former splendour of this *delizia*. From the treatise *De triumphis religionis* (1497) dedicated to Ercole I by the Bolognese humanist Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti,¹¹ we know that by the end of the fifteenth century the palace complex encompassed spacious peristyle courtyards, marble porticoes, gardens, and artificial canals for aquatic performances. [Fig. 14] Like many other Renaissance noble families, the Estes wanted to give their representative decorative programs a personal touch. Therefore, in addition to the more than twenty rooms designed for entertainments, music and dancing, Belriguardo also included the Sala delle Sibille (Hall of Sibyls) and the *Sala degli uomini famosi* (Hall of famous men). As has already been seen in the Palazzo Schifanoia, the decorative scheme glorified not only the Este family, but also the person of the primary patron, Duke Ercole I, who is depicted accompanied by his brother and courtiers. This theme continued in the series of the labours of Hercules, who was considered an ancestor of the Estes according to court mythology. Further, frescoes depicting Cupid and Psyche decorated a room overlooking the secret garden is one of the earliest Renaissance uses of this myth in monumental palace decoration. Here, a classically conceived image of divine love triumphant replaced the medieval tradition of courtly love.

Thus, the Ferrarese suburban villas developed with Renaissance social, architectural and artistic characteristics as part of the age's search for new ways to represent the city and its ruler. The variety of cultural and leisure activities at the palaces of Leonello, Borso, and Ercole I reflected the social and political needs as well as the individual artistic tastes of their patrons. However, the common thread connecting the iconographic and decorative schemes of each of the above mentioned palaces, as well as the entire system of the fifteenth century *delizie* is that they all, to a greater or lesser extent, presented the idea of life under the good governance of the Este family as a paradise.

Modena 2007, pp. 58–74.

10 Werner L. Gundersheimer, *Ferrara estense. Lo stile del potere* [1973], Modena 2005, p. 91.

11 *Ibidem*, pp. 176–180.



1. Antonio Pisanello, Portrait of Leonello d'Este, c. 1441, Accademia Carrara, Bergamo.

Photo: Public domain



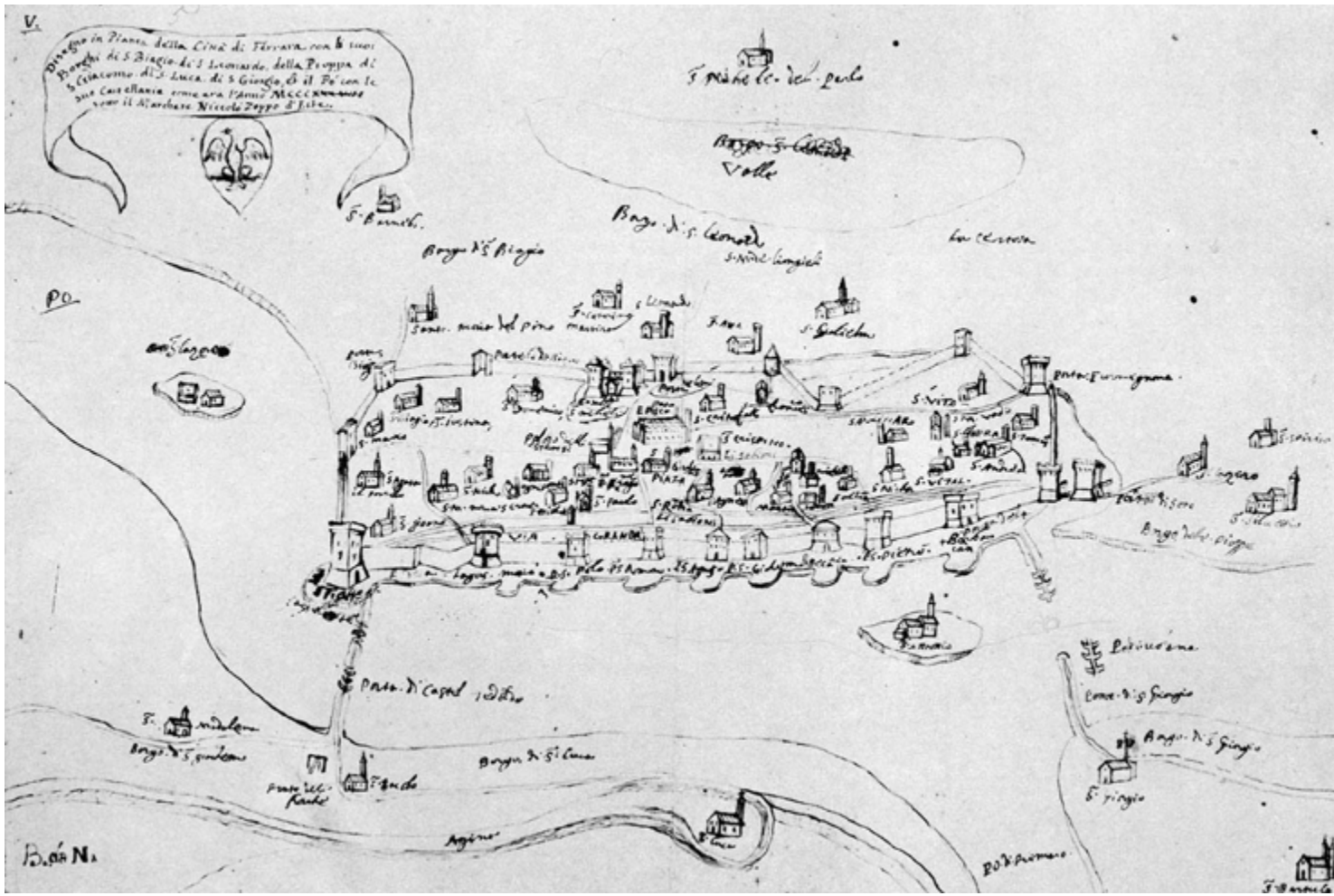
2. Baldassare d'Este, Portrait of Borso d'Este,
Castello Sforzesco, Milan.

Photo: Public domain



3. Dosso Dossi (?), Portrait of Ercole I d'Este, Modena, Galleria Estense.

Photo: Public domain



4. Bartolino da Novara, Plan of the City of Ferrara, 1385.

Photo: Istituto Italiano dei Castelli



5. The system of the 'delizie estensi' in the second half of the fifteenth century.

Source: S. Settis and W. Cupperi (eds.), *The Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara. Essays*, Modena 2007, p. 11

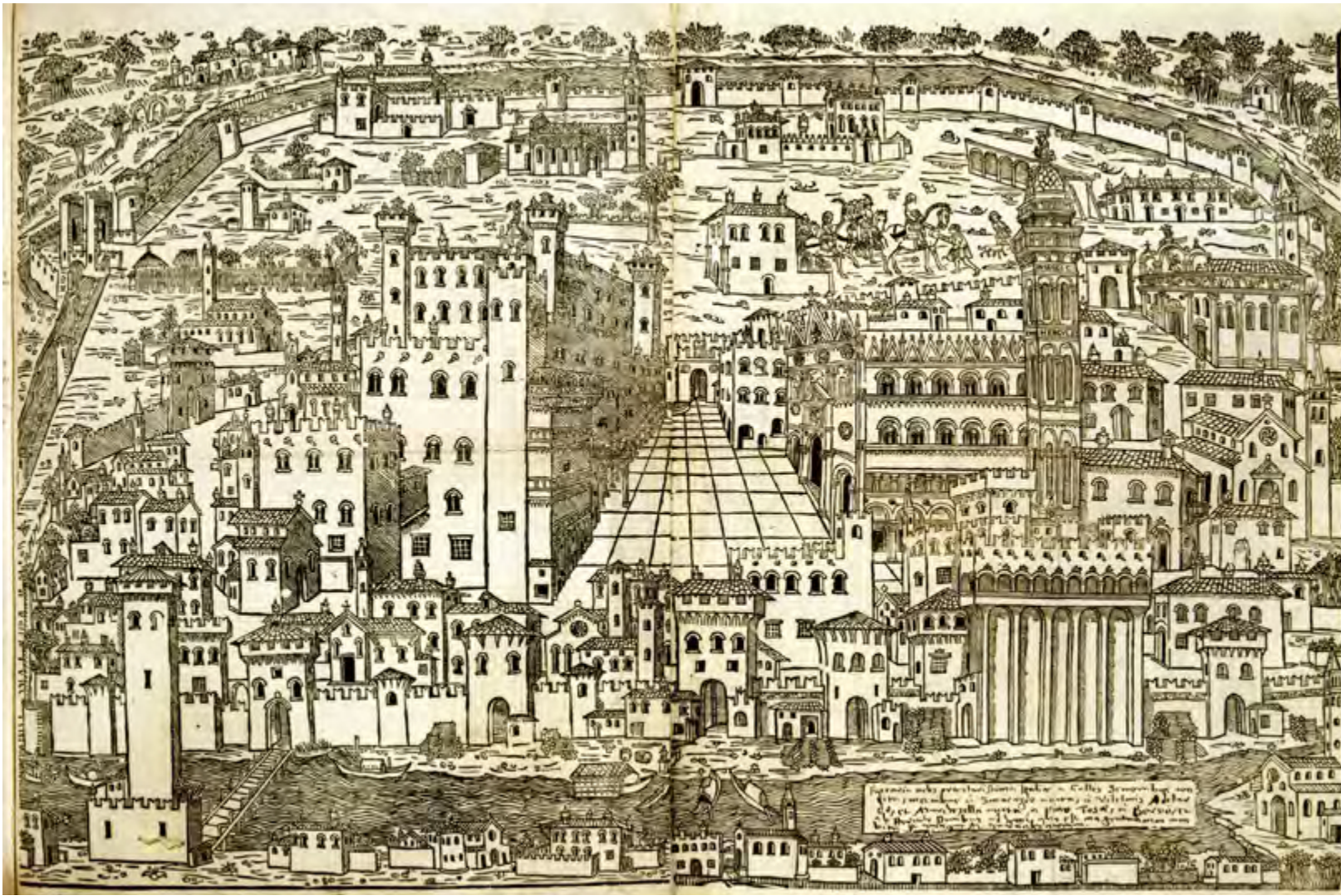


6. Delizia di Benvignante, 1464-1466.



7. Cristoforo de Predis (?), View of a Garden of Love, *Sphaerae coelestis et planetarum descriptio* (*De Sphaera*), fifteenth century,

Photo: Public domain



8. View of Ferrara, 1499–1505, Modena, Biblioteca Estense Universitaria.

Photo: Public domain



9. Second painter of the Studiolo Belfiore, The Belfiore Muse: Urania, c. 1450-1460, Pinacoteca Nazionale di Ferrara.

Photo: Public domain



10. Cosimo Tura, The Belfiore Muse: Calliope, 1458–1460, National Gallery, London.

Photo: Public domain

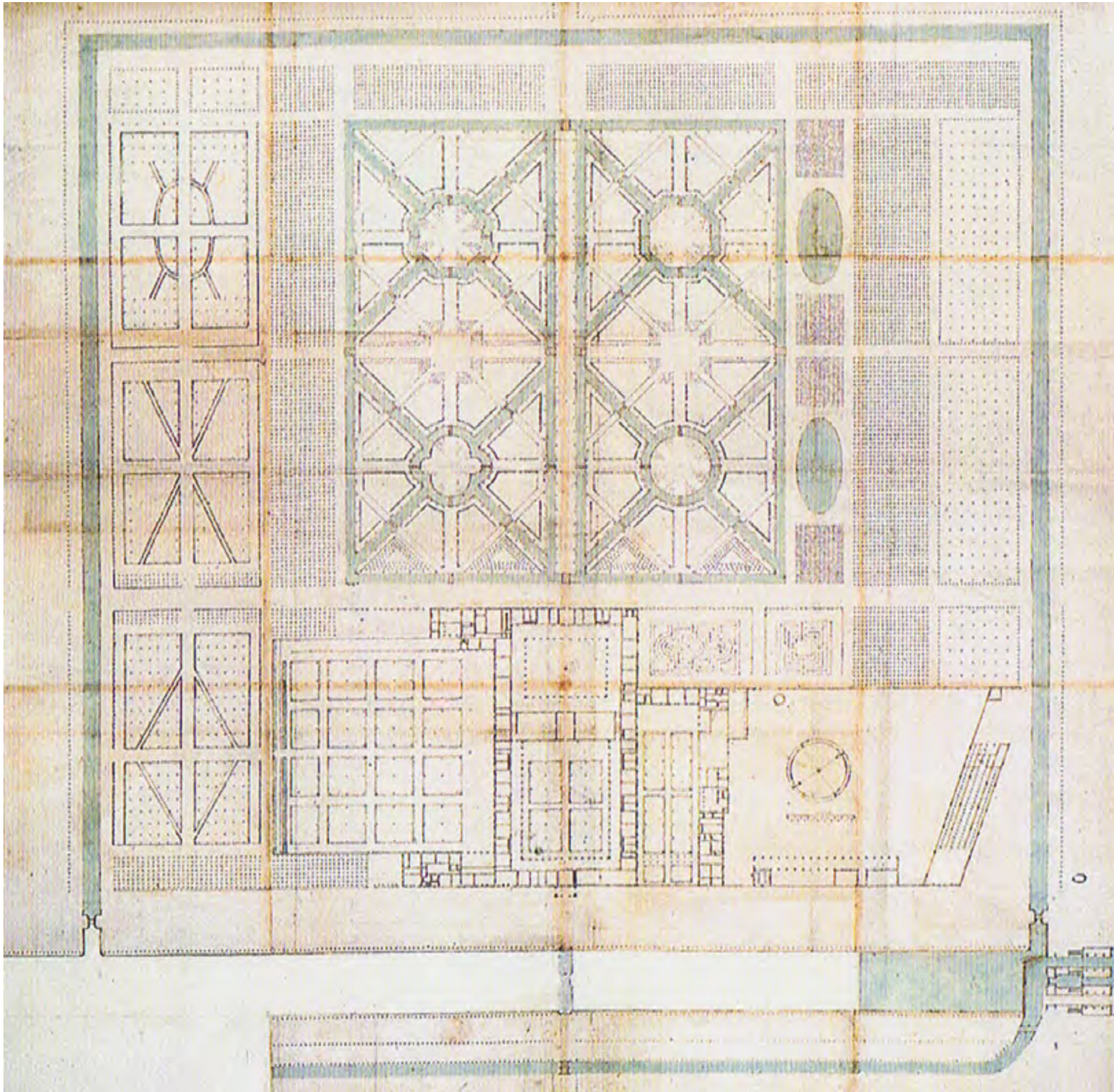


11. Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara, general view.



12. Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara, Hall of the Months, east wall (May, April, March) 1469-1470.

Photo: Public domain



13. Plan of Delizia di Belriguardo, Modena, Archivio di Stato, Mappario Estense, Fabbriche, 91/7.

Source: *Courts and Courtly Arts in Renaissance Italy: Art, Culture and Politics, 1395–1530*, edited by M. Folin, Woodbridge 2011, p. 26.



14. Delizia di Belriguardo, Entrance tower.