

WHO THEY WERE...

Alfred Strohl-Fern (1847-1927)



Caricature of Alfred Strohl-Fern by Nino Bertolotti

Alfred Guillaume Strohl was born into a wealthy and noble family in Saint-Marie-aux-Mines, in the Alsace region, but left his homeland after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, when Alsace became German. He went first to Paris, where he studied painting under Charles Gleyre. Strohl traveled throughout Europe and North Africa, adding the suffix "-Fern" ("far-away") to his name as a poignant reminder of his exile status. In 1879, while still a young man, Strohl settled in Rome. He acquired various pieces of land in what was once part of the Villa Giulia, between the Via Flaminia, the Villa Poniatowski and the Villa Borghese. These were unified and redesigned to create the Villa Strohl-Fern, where the artist built a Gothic Revival house and laid out eight hectares of Romantic gardens, with exotic trees and classical statuary.

Strohl-Fern was a painter, sculptor, poet and music-lover. On his tombstone he is described as "artiste, protecteur des artistes." In the early 1880s he began building studios at his villa, inviting artists, writers, and composers of many nationalities to live and work there. One of the first visitors was the German painter Arnold Böcklin. The American sculptor Albert Harnisch created an allegorical statue of "Justice" for a monument in Charleston, South Carolina, in his studio at the Villa Strohl-Fern. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke stayed at the Villa in 1904, and Russian painter Ilya Repin was an illustrious visitor in

1911. By this time, there were over one hundred studios on the estate. An English visitor described the painting studio of John William Godward in the winter of 1912-13: "[Godward] had one of the finest studios in the Villa Strohl-Fern grounds. It had a wonderful outlook, and among its decorations was a horse's skull locally supposed to be that of Strohl-Fern himself 'when young.' The likeness was remarkable."

By the second decade of the twentieth century, Strohl-Fern's colony had become a center for artists who looked beyond the academic tradition and embraced new artistic currents from across the Alps. Artists from the villa were active in the Secession exhibitions in Rome (1913-16), with the journal *Valori Plastici*, and with the *Novecento Italiano* in the 1920s. Among the artists who worked there were Cipriano Efisio Oppo, Francesco Trombadori, Carlo Socrate, Nino Bertolotti, and Carlo Levi. Women artists were welcome at the Villa. (One of them, the German painter and author Charlotte Popert, is also buried at the Non-Catholic Cemetery.)

When Strohl-Fern died, he left his Villa to the French government. Some of the studios continued to be occupied through the thirties and after World War II, though most fell into disrepair. Since 1957, the Villa Strohl-Fern has been the home of the Lycée Chateaubriand. Strohl-Fern's vision also lives on in the form of subsidies to artists administered by the *Fondation Gleyre* (Switzerland).

-- C. Huemer



"WHO THEY WERE" tells the story of a person who is buried in the Non-Catholic Cemetery. Suggestions and contributions for future issues are welcome.

International Ball Benefits the Cemetery

The Non-Catholic Cemetery was one of four charities benefiting from the proceeds of the International Ball, held on November 11, 2006, in Rome. Organized by Sara Brain, a Friend of the Cemetery, the black-tie event also benefited Spencer Dayman Meningitis UK, Zambia Orphans Appeal, and Samaritans

Onlus. 135 guests in evening dress enjoyed an elegant dinner and competed for prizes that had been donated by local shops and international travel venues. Flemming Stender of Denmark, representing the Assembly of Ambassadors, gave a brief address describing the Cemetery and urging participants to join the Friends. He

noted that the beautiful Palazzo Brancaccio, where the Ball was held, was originally built for Hickson Field, a wealthy American who is buried in the Cemetery, and his wife. (The Palazzo Field became the Palazzo Brancaccio after their daughter Elizabeth married Prince Salvatore Brancaccio in 1870.)