

# Maria Teresa Strozzi, an aristocrat and an intellectual

The letters by a member of the Roman branch of the powerful Florentine family in the 1700s, found in the Historical Archive of INA Assitalia, reveal an eclectic female personage, well-versed in politics and literature

by *Monica Micci*  
transcription of letters curated by *Simone Conversi*

*Six letters from the past, handwritten in black ink, tell us about the personal life of an important member of the Strozzi lineage, a noble Roman family, in the 18th century, guiding us through theatrical arias, chamber music and strolls in the gardens of the family villa, as well as revealing her thoughts on the international situation, war scenes and the travels of Philip V of Spain and his court. All these events come back to life in the letters written by Maria Teresa Strozzi to an unknown recipient (known only as 'Sandrino'), transcribed and analyzed by experts at the Historical Archive of INA Assitalia.*

The Archive acquired the letters when the Florentine Palazzo Strozzi, which had been owned by INA from 1937 to 1999, was sold to the State. All the documents and works that had been kept in the small Palazzo Strozzi museum were then sent to Rome to be conserved in the Archive of INA, a company that became part of the Generali Group in 2000. In the 1970s the company had collected manuscripts, books, written declarations and signed letters from the Strozzi family in bookshops and antiques markets that form a rare and precious collection. Detailed research and selection were carried out in collaboration with Professor Guido Pampaloni, director of the State Archive in Florence at that time.

Maria Teresa was the only heir to the estate and noble titles of the Strozzi family

in Rome and, like her father; she was also a registered member of the famous *Accademia dell'Arcadia* literary academy under the name of Celinda Caradria. A leading figure in the Roman intellectual circle, she was also an active patron and a muse for many artists. Several works were dedicated to the Princess of Forano, including the sonnets *Le rime piacevoli* by Giovan Battista Fagioli, the famous *Sonata d'intavolatura per organo e cimbalo* by Domenico Zipoli, and *Il compagno fedele* by librettist Arcangelo Spagna.

The peaceful atmosphere of the Termini garden – the area on the Viminale Hill in Rome where the Strozzi's 16th-century property was located – can be perceived in these letters. The Strozzi family garden was right next to the Terme di

Diocleziano ruins and was mentioned by the princess in a letter dated September 30, 1702, together her first child Philip:

*'A small garden in Termini where I can take my son Pippo out into the fresh air.'*

It was a particularly beautiful place, embellished with pergolas on columns, paths bordered by laurel hedges, fountains and hundreds of statues by a number of sculptors including Pietro Bernini, father of the famous Gian Lorenzo. There were also the vineyards and vegetable gardens purchased by the Strozzi family in 1619 at the price of nine thousand ecus.

In the letters we sense Maria Teresa's luxurious lifestyle and her curiosity and interest in the world surrounding her. This was a historical time filled with significant events. The letters refer most often to the conflicts caused by the War of the Spanish Succession (1702-1714), brought about by the death of Charles II of Spain in 1700, who left no heirs. Philip V, the nephew of Louis XIV of France, was named successor to Charles II, causing other states to fear a French-Spanish hegemony, even though there was a clause in the will forbidding his successor to unite the French and Spanish crowns. Worried that the French might take over the rich

Spanish Indies market, England began to prepare the anti-French alliance.

The letters reveal the concerns of a woman who was particularly interested in the historical events of her time, and show that she was also well informed about the war. The letters mention the Battle of Cadiz in Spain and the Battle of Landau in southern Germany, after the alliance between England and the Netherlands, as well as the Battle of Vigo between the English and French navies escorting Spanish commercial ships arriving from the Indies. In a letter dated September 30, 1702 she writes:

*'If we listen to the sad news you give us we must all feel defeated as the English and Dutch have already conquered Cadiz, Barcelona and all of Spain; Mantua and other problems have been put aside at this point as we are surrounded by Spaniards and Catalans. The capitulation of the city of Landau has saddened us a great deal.'*

The King's travels in Italy are cited in the correspondence, while the birthday feast held for the Queen Maria Luisa of Savoy is referred to in a letter dated September 30. The monarch's passage in the Royal Court of Genoa in 1702 with magnificent ceremonies, theatre and music is found in a letter dated November 18:

*'You cannot imagine how pleased I am to hear your news about the King's arrival in Genoa in your letter of November 18.'*

By studying these precious ancient documents, albeit limited to six letters, we learn about the interests and the sensitivity of a great female personality of the past, belonging to an influential aristocratic family, interested in politics, an intellectual with strong musical sensitivity, an academic, and as she herself wrote to her correspondent,

*'a very devoted and obliged servant and friend.'*

In a letter dated November 4, besides her worries about the outcome of those battles, the Princess of Forano criticizes the Duke of Medina, Sidonia, Grand Knight of Charles II and a prominent figure at the court of Philip V:

*'Were I the King of Spain, I would be very annoyed with the sternness of that Duke of Medina, Sidonia – he would even like to forbid laughter when one feels like it – and I feel compassion for the poor King; so please go on entertaining him as it is good for him.'*

*Maria Teresa Strozzi (1682-1748),  
the eldest daughter of Giovan Battista*

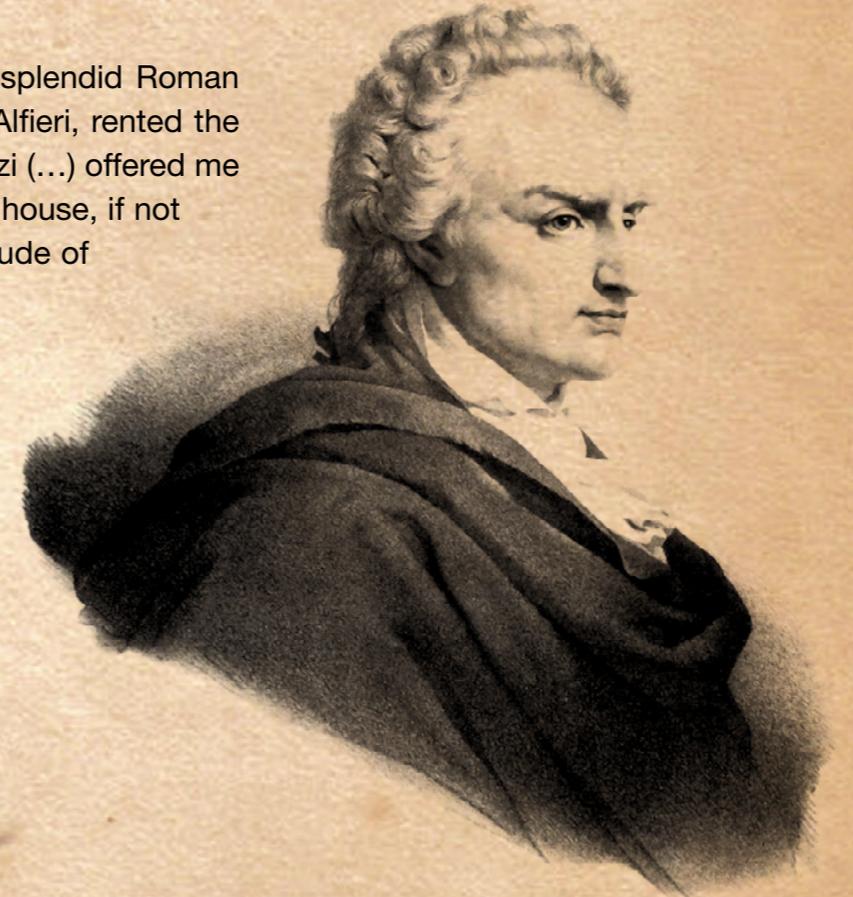
The Strozzi family is one of the most prestigious, ancient and wealthy dynasties of Florence, which made its fortune in banking from the 13th century, allowing its members to obtain important positions, honors and noble titles. The rivalry with the Medici family naturally forced some of the members of this noble Florentine lineage to seek new destinations over the years, leading them to settle in Rome. Leone, a very wealthy general at the service of the Church, was the first of the family to lay roots in Rome in the mid-1500s. Having no direct heirs at his death, he named Giovan Battista Strozzi (Maria Teresa's great-grandfather) from the Florence branch as his successor, who established himself in Rome in 1633 to continue the Roman branch of the family. Born on October 9, 1682, Maria Teresa was the daughter of Giovan Battista Strozzi, first Duke of Bagnolo in Naples and third Marquis of Florano in Sabina – a man with considerable literary and cultural interests and listed among the scholars of the Crusca and Arcadia academies – and of Ottavia di Scipioni Renzi, one of the most beautiful and fascinating patrician noblewomen of Rome and heiress of her own family. On the death of her parents, first-born Maria Teresa received a considerable inheritance including feudal titles: the marquisate of Forano and the dukedom of Bagnolo, and properties such as the family chapel in Sant'Andrea della Valle, several residences in central Rome, a castle and its large estate in Lunghezza, also near Rome, and Villa Strozzi in the Viminale, including the beautiful gardens described above and the museum. The museum had been created by her uncle Leone Strozzi (the most famous collector of his times), and was a great source of pride for the family. Her husband Lorenzo Francesco Strozzi (1674-1742), from the Florentine branch of the family, whom she married in 1699, managed the estate. Lorenzo Francesco was the one to elevate the feud of Forano to principedom in 1698 from which he took the title of Prince, which was also passed on to Maria Teresa. The marriage with Lorenzo Francesco produced seven children, only three of whom survived: Philip, Ottavia and Ferdinando Giuseppe. The youngest son continued the Strozzi family line and brought about its definitive return to Florence. Maria Teresa died on May 6, 1748, just a few years after her husband.

## The illustrious tenants of Villa Strozzi

Many people have lived in or were the guests of Villa Strozzi and its splendid Roman gardens over the centuries. The poet and Renaissance writer, Vittorio Alfieri, rented the villa for two years in October 1781 and wrote about his stay: 'Villa Strozzi (...) offered me a delightful refuge. I spent entire mornings studying without leaving the house, if not for an hour or two to ride in the immense uninhabited surrounding solitude of Rome, which inspired me to reflect, cry and write poetry<sup>1</sup>.'

International guests who resided in the Villa included Lady Elisabeth Berkeley, Caroline of Ansbach, who owned the villa from 1817 and invited Stendhal, the French writer (who named her in his *Promenades dans Rome* of the same year) in 1828 to stay at the palace. Thomas Bailey became the new owner of Villa Strozzi halfway through the 19th century; he rented the villa to the English writer Henry James who used it as his spiritual and creative retreat.

1. From *Vita di Vittorio Alfieri* scritta da esso, volume I, Florence, 1822.



Strozzi Alfieri 1781: con Dofa.



## The Strozzi family crest

According to a very rare manuscript from the 1600s, *Il Priorista fiorentino* by Francesco Segaloni, also belonging to the Strozzi fund at INA Assitalia Historical Archive, the Strozzi crest was created in color with three silver waxing half-moons on a red band and golden background. Many heraldry specialists say the moons represent the *strozze* – pendants of the yoke placed under the necks of oxen. This is an ancient Lombard word from which the Strozzi family name originated.