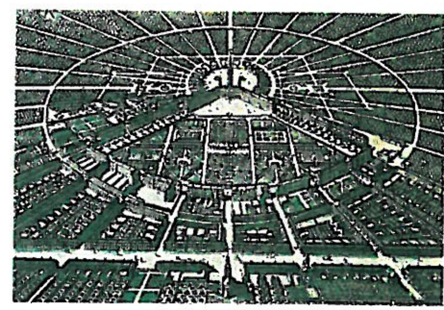
The age of Louis XIV set garden design on the path of revolutionary change. The scale and magnificence of the settings that the king demanded as a backdrop for his court became the models for all of Europe. The formal gardens of 17th-century France transformed the natural landscape into a balanced, controlled work of art, a metaphor for humanity's dominion over nature.

CHAPTER IV

FORMALITY TRIUMPHANT: THE CLASSIC FRENCH GARDEN

The "hermitage" André Le Nôtre designed at Marly (opposite) as a retreat for Louis XIV proved more costly than Versailles. Karlsruhe (right), in Germany, was originally the hunting lodge of Margrave Carl Wilhelm of Baden-Durlach.

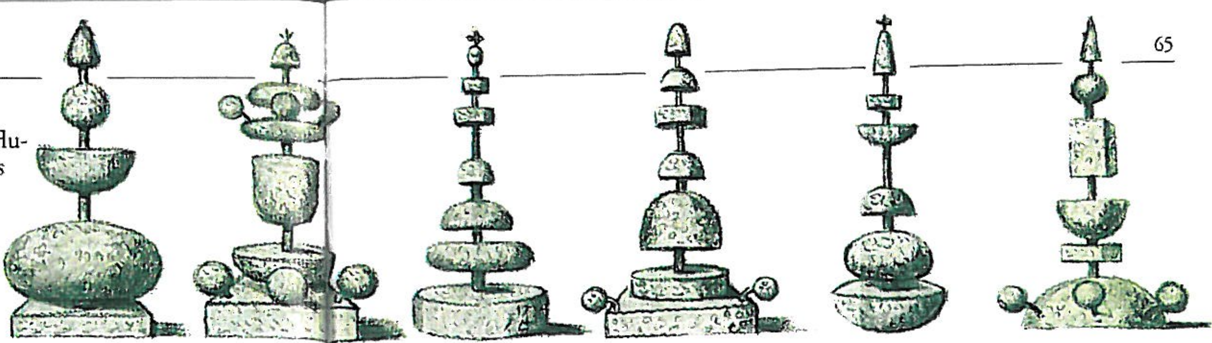


From Paradise on Earth: the Gardens of Western Europe.
Van Zuylen, Gabrielle. (1994)
New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.
pp. 62-79

The Union of Garden Art and Architecture

Political and social conditions have unquestionably influenced the history of garden-making. Enclosed gardens and walled parks, for example, were a response to turbulent times. But we must also factor in a period's architectural style, because architects were often responsible for designing not just buildings but the space around them: Witness Leon Battista Alberti's work in 15th-century Florence, Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola's Villa Lante, and Pirro Ligorio's Villa d'Este, to name but a few. The notion that one person should be in charge of conceiving and executing a project's overall design stemmed from the Vitruvian theory of beauty as a harmonious relation of all parts to a coherent whole.

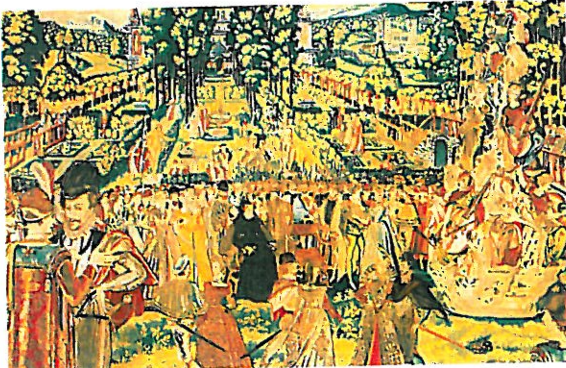
Alberti's pronouncements were considered as authoritative in France as they had been in Renaissance Italy. There, too, architecture had taken precedence over horticulture. The principle that the execution of a comprehensive design required a collaborative effort guided and orchestrated by the architect was established in France by Philibert de l'Orme while working for King Henry II's mistress, Diane de Poitiers, at the Chateau d'Anet (begun 1546). In the meantime, the king's wife, Catherine de Médicis, brought Italian influences to bear on French gardening practices.



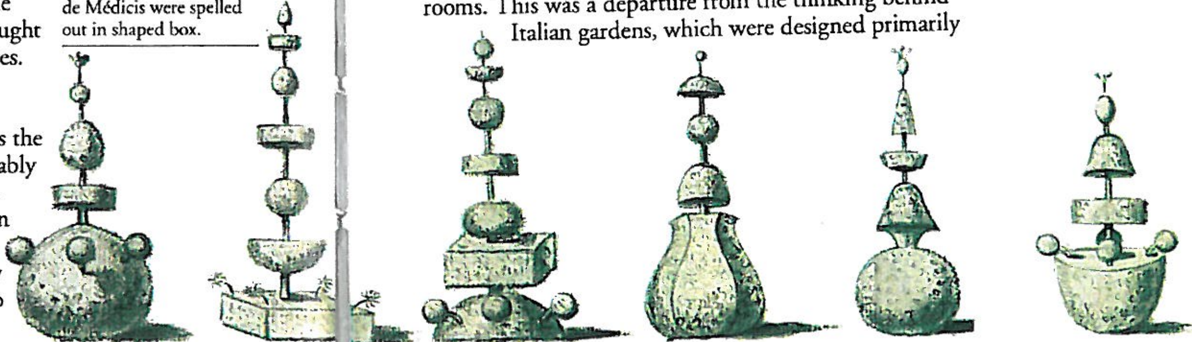
At Versailles, rows of yew or small trees trimmed into a variety of shapes were planted on both sides of the parterre along the Tapis Vert ("green carpet" or lawn) leading down to the Bassin d'Apollon. At Marly, the art of topiary (above and below) as an architectural ordering of nature reached new heights of perfection. This technique of training and clipping evergreens into whimsical subjects (in Italy) or geometric figures (in France) can be traced directly to the gardening practices of Virgil's Rome. At the Luxembourg gardens in Paris, the initials of Marie de Médicis were spelled out in shaped box.

Garden Embroidery: The *Parterre de Broderie*

The key to the new French style of formal garden was the ornamental parterre, or garden bed, which was invariably fashioned from box and completely subordinated to a building's plan and siting. While the parterre had been an important element of the Renaissance garden, planted in geometric forms, the French took it to new heights, elaborately shaping plantings in what came to be called *broderie*, for its resemblance to "embroidery." The style was also particularly well suited to the relatively flat expanses of the Loire valley and the environs of Paris. As extensions of architecture into the surrounding space, parterres were best appreciated from the *piano nobile*, a building's upper-floor formal reception rooms. This was a departure from the thinking behind Italian gardens, which were designed primarily



The Medici family of Florence was instrumental in introducing Italian garden design to France. The Tuileries gardens (left) were created for Henry II's wife, Catherine de Médicis (the figure in black), who also made major improvements at Fontainebleau (opposite left). Salomon de Brosse began the Luxembourg palace and gardens for Henry IV's wife, Marie de Médicis, who was homesick for the Pitti Palace and its Boboli gardens in Florence.



to be viewed from garden level and emphasized vertical, rather than horizontal elements. In French gardens geometric compartments with squares, ovals, circles, and volutes were regimented into flawlessly symmetrical patterns that bowed to the needs of an overall plan.

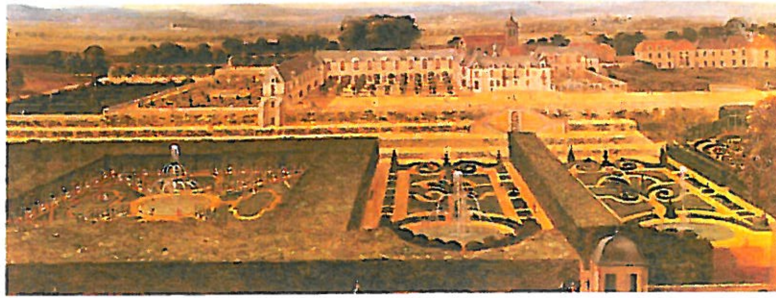
The whimsy and lightheartedness of the "vegetable gardener" (below) and "flower seller" (opposite below) contrast with the pervasive geometry usually associated with formal gardens during the reign of Louis XIV. To the left is an engraving from Claude Mollet's book of garden plans.

THEATRE
DES PLANS
ET IARDINAGES
CONTENANT
DES SECRETS ET DES INVENTIONS
incognuës à tous ceux qui jusqu'à present se sont meslez d'escrire sur cette matiere:
Avec vn Traicté d'Astrologie, propre pour toutes personnes, & particulierement pour ceux qui la culture des Iardins.

Nothing could be added or taken away. The colorful designs of English knot gardens and the verticality of Italianate gardens were banished and replaced throughout France by the classic balance and disciplined unity first described in Olivier de Serres's *Théâtre d'Agriculture* (1600).

The Emergence and Influence of Gardening Dynasties

Olivier de Serres's practical guide for laying out gardens included illustrations of parterres designed by royal gardener Claude Mollet. His father, Jacques Mollet, had made the first known *parterre de broderie* at Anet at the end of the 16th century after a design by Etienne du Pérac, architect to Diane de Poitiers' grandson, the duc d'Aumale. This earliest documented example of the symbiotic relationship between architect and head gardener—the first of many in garden history—is recounted in Claude Mollet's *Le Théâtre des Plans et Jardinages*, published posthumously in 1652. As he worked under his

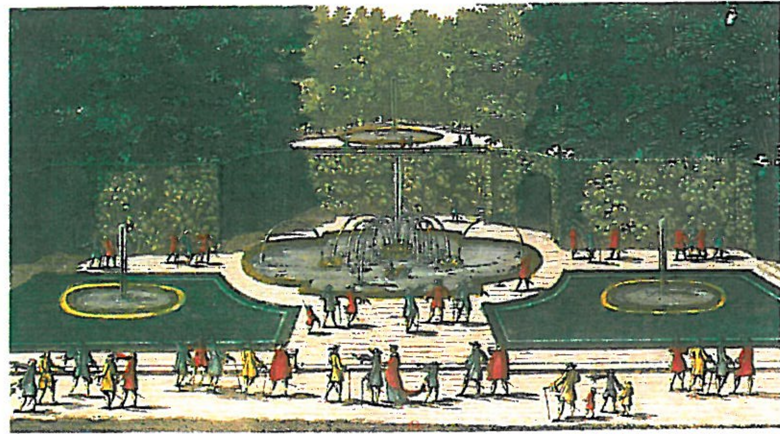


A number of Renaissance-inspired garden-design principles were embraced at the chateau of Conflans (above): water, decorative elements of stonework and sculpture, and an orderly grid of avenues and walks, all controlled by perspective.

father and du Pérac, young Claude assimilated the revolutionary concept that "an entire garden could not be other than a single compartment, divided up by the principal walks." Garden art stood at the threshold of genuine unity. Mollet's book, however, confined itself to practice and techniques; designing gardens still lay within the architect's sphere of authority. The outstanding figure of the following generation was Claude's son, the renowned André Mollet, who worked in England at St. James's Palace and Wimbledon House and in the Netherlands before Louis XIII (ruled 1610–43) appointed him *premier jardinier du roi* or first gardener to the king.

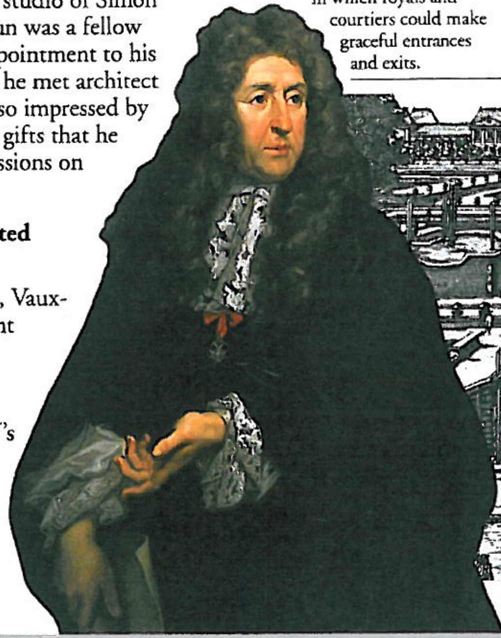
A Name of Distinction: Le Nôtre

The other prominent family of royal gardeners, the Le Nôtres, were, like the Mollets, associated with Catherine de Médicis' newly laid out Paris garden of the Tuileries. Pierre Le Nôtre was put in charge of the parterres nearest the palace and much of the trellis work. His son and successor, Jean lived in a house adjoining the Tuileries and raised his children there. His daughters married other master gardeners.



Jean's son André, whose expertise, accomplishments, and fame earned him great prestige in his own lifetime, remains to this day the most famous figure in world gardening history. Interested in painting as a young man, André Le Nôtre entered the studio of Simon Vouet, where Charles Le Brun was a fellow student. Shortly after his appointment to his father's post at the Tuileries, he met architect François Mansart, who was so impressed by the young man's remarkable gifts that he secured a number of commissions on his behalf.

Le Nôtre (below) conceived of Vaux (and later Versailles) as a setting for large outdoor garden fêtes, a vast theater in which royals and courtiers could make graceful entrances and exits.



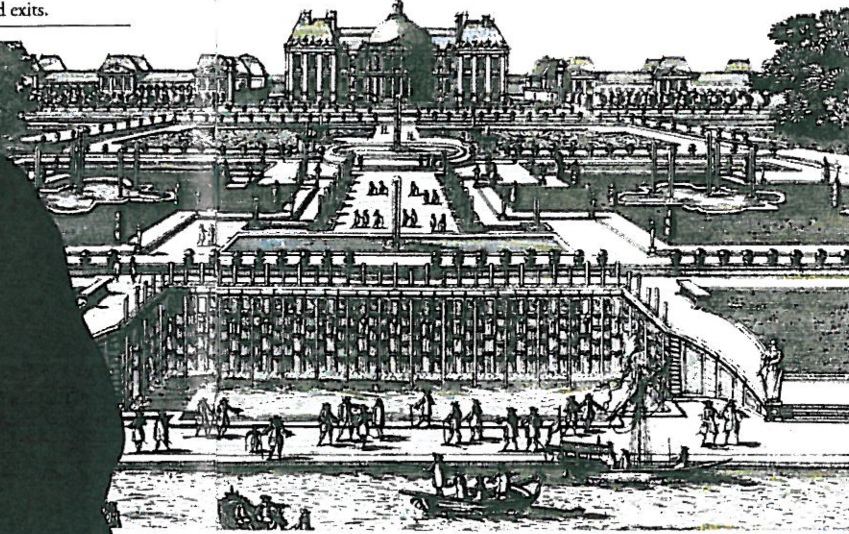
The Grandeur of an Ill-Fated Masterpiece

Le Nôtre's first great garden, Vaux-le-Vicomte, was a triumphant collaborative project with architect Louis Le Vau and painter Charles Le Brun. Nicolas Fouquet, Louis XIV's minister of finance and a man of extraordinary taste, brought together this accomplished trio to create for himself a country estate on a scale unparalleled at the time. The completed building and grounds were proudly shown to King Louis (ruled 1643–1715) and his court on 17 August 1661 during a celebration as dazzling as Vaux itself.

Fouquet's unabashed display of extravagance was bound to have tragic consequences. The minister's vanity and megalomania aroused young Louis's jealousy and suspicion. Three weeks later, on 5 September, Fouquet was arrested for treason and spent the rest of his life in prison. Vaux-le-Vicomte came to symbolize an unforgivable affront to royal authority, but it was also a prelude to Versailles—crowning achievement of the classical age of France.

A Gardener, Not an Architect, Had the Say at Vaux

As he laid out the grounds of Vaux-le-Vicomte, Le Nôtre's guiding principle must have been unity. The building is scaled to fit in with an overall composition; it neither dominates nor overwhelms the surrounding area. It is Le Nôtre's garden, not Le Vau's chateau, that creates an illusion of unbounded space. From the house a central axis leads the eye toward a seemingly limitless vista



From the dome of the chateau, the main axis of the garden at Vaux bisects a *parterre de broderie* and continues toward a centrally located fountain before intersecting an ornamental canal running perpendicular to it. It then bisects a second, surprisingly plain parterre with matching oval water basins and leads to a large square basin. At this point, just before the ground slopes up, Le Nôtre placed a slender water channel, a wall, and low, wide steps descending to the Grand Canal, another major cross-axis that stretches into the distance. On the far side of the canal stands the Grotto with its fountains, and a third transverse axis is implied by a terrace, facing the Grandes Cascades. The symmetry of the central axis at Vaux is broken by secondary east–west axes at right angles to it. The first descended in three stages to a water garden once focused on a water basin and the Fontaine de la Couronne (opposite above). The second, a walk crossing below the *parterre de broderie*, led on the west to the kitchen garden and on the east to a stairway of fountains known as the Grilles d'Eau.

Louis so loved his gardens at Versailles that he wrote a guide to them, *La Manière de Montrer les Jardins* (Manner of Seeing the Gardens), which maps out the route of the royal promenade. During this daily ritual, Louis conducted personal business while enjoying the grounds (above).

dominated by a colossal statue of Hercules. The majestic Grand Canal, a major cross axis, cannot be seen from the chateau; like the Grandes Cascades, it comes into view, dramatically, as one approaches it. One of the fountains spouts a dome of water that echoes the dome atop the chateau. Sunlight plays across shimmering expanses of still water that mirror the fitful skies overhead. Statues and fountains infuse the grandiose ensemble with a sense of heroic unity. This masterly balance of art and nature is, more than anything else, a visible expression of human dominion over the natural landscape, a distillation of 17th-century French rationalism.

Versailles: Hymn to the Glory of Louis XIV

Is it any wonder that the young king, still reeling with jealousy over the magnificence of Vaux, felt compelled to transform his father's little hunting lodge at Versailles into a palace that would reflect his own magnificence? He would turn Versailles into the new capital of his kingdom, the seat of the French government and the royal court. The feat of transforming a site described by the memoirist Duc de Saint-Simon as "the saddest and most barren of places, with no view, no water, and no woods" into a model for the whole of Europe would in itself demonstrate Louis's absolute authority. Fouquet's successor as minister of finance, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, warned Louis that a project of this magnitude would be prohibitively expensive. The king could not be swayed. The same three

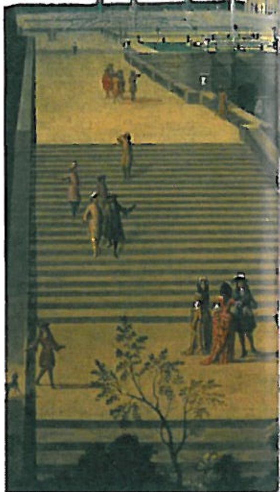
artisans who had worked for Fouquet were summoned to carry out this colossal undertaking. Louis went so far as to have countless pieces of sculpture and a thousand young orange trees moved from Vaux to Versailles.

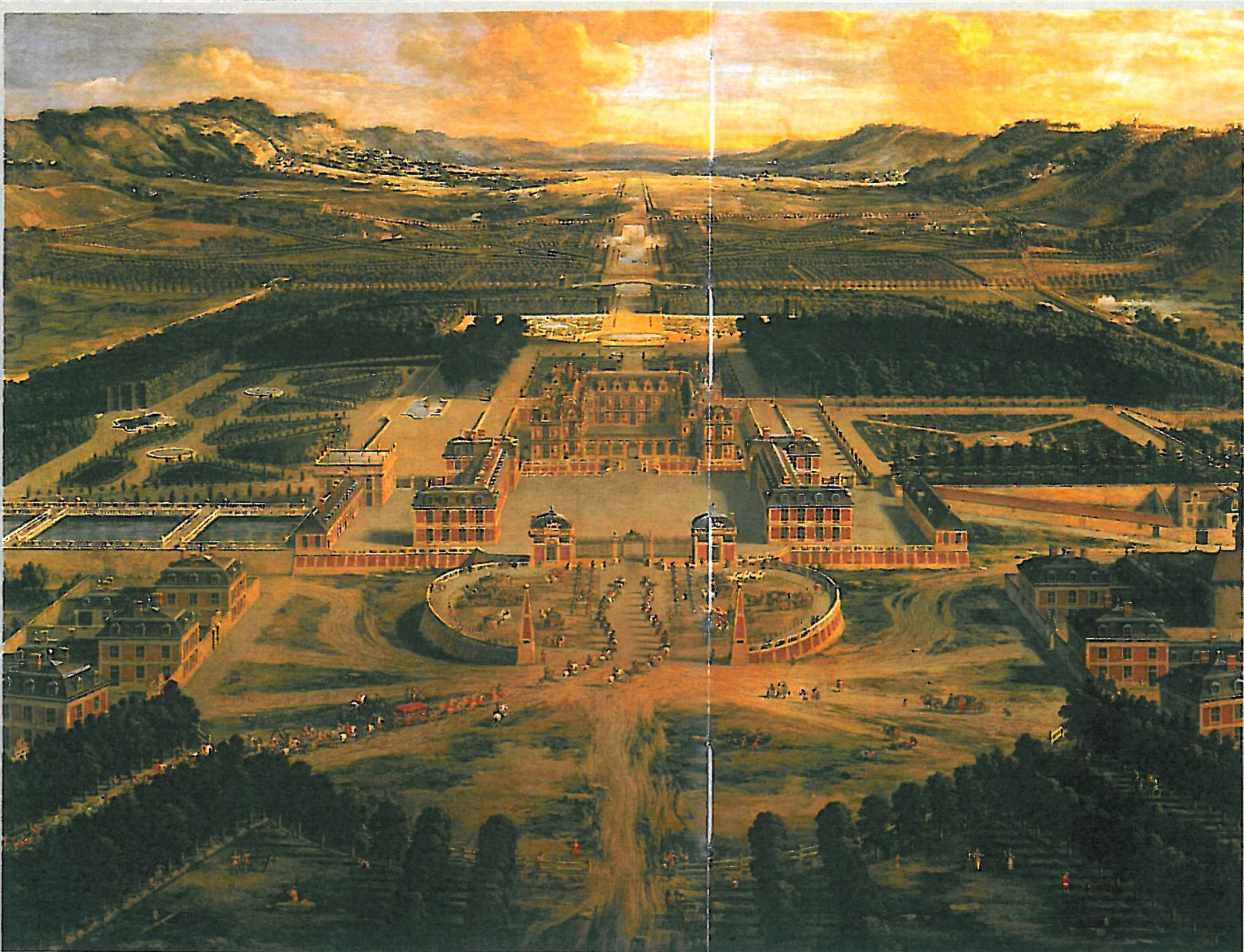
Le Brun was in charge of the sculptural program at Versailles from 1665 to 1683, but Le Nôtre was responsible for its "grand design." He respected the existing topography when possible (as when he made use of a natural hundred-foot drop from the Palace to the Grand Canal to create a series of terraces), but elsewhere radically altered the natural landscape (as when he hollowed out a vast amphitheater for the Parterre de Latone). Plant material was relentlessly clipped into an architecture of outdoor walls (*palissades*), rooms (*cabinets de verdure*), and stately avenues, or *allées*. The king thought so highly of Le Nôtre that at the age of sixty-two, he climbed into his three-wheeled chair of state and personally escorted his eighty-eight-year-old gardener—whom he had granted the rare privilege of a sedan chair—on a final tour of the grounds.

The Sun King

The king had chosen the sun as his emblem, and it was to provide the iconographic program for Le Nôtre's

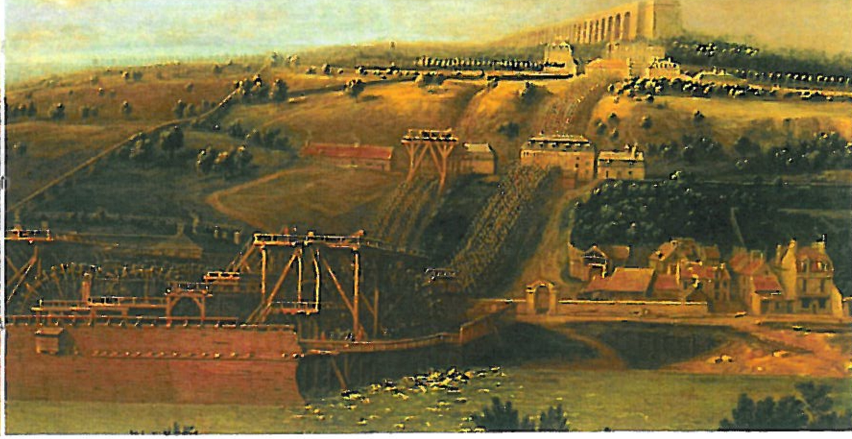
Le Nôtre laid out the main axes of Versailles to coincide with the points of the compass. The seemingly limitless vista from the windows of the Grande Galerie stretches toward the setting sun. To the south he opened a vista to the summer sun, across the terrace of the Orangerie (below) and on to the heights of Satory, where a monumental waterfall was to have been built.





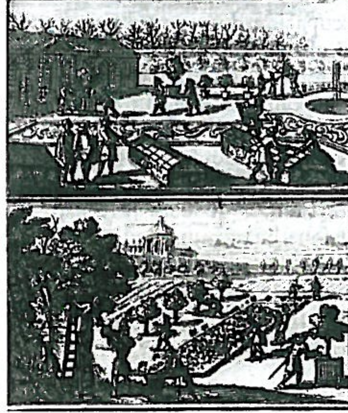
The rigorously organized splendor of Versailles testifies not only to the genius of Le Nôtre, but to Louis XIV's determination to triumph over the natural landscape of the region around Paris. Every garden or park is a complex of signs, but they defy comprehension unless we know something about their social context, the owner's or patron's temperament and compulsions, and prevailing attitudes towards nature. Versailles mirrors a period in French history during which the monarchy wielded absolute power over political, social, and artistic life. The humiliation the young king had suffered during La Fronde—a series of uprisings aimed at limiting royal authority—made him wary of both the nobility and Paris. Louis was twenty-three when Fouquet flaunted Vaux, prompting the king to move the royal residence to the inhospitable site of Versailles. If, as the reproachful Saint-Simon once put it, the king "rode rough-shod over nature," his motive was to demonstrate dominion over his residence, his court, and, in a wider sense, his kingdom. Versailles, the memoirist observed elsewhere, was a "political device" calculated to keep courtiers amused—and muzzled.

design. The main axes of the overall layout correspond to the points of the compass; the limitless vista from the windows of the Grande Galerie extends towards the setting sun. Everything refers in some way to the sun god Apollo, from the ornamental elements within the tall hedge walls of the *cabinets de verdure* to the sculptural and architectural features throughout the park. His sister Diana, goddess of the hunt, served as a mythological allusion to the Bourbons' passion for hunting. This cult of Apollo lent itself to countless variations on the theme of the passage of time, including the hours of the day, the months and seasons of the year, and the seven ages of man.



Horticulture Survived Despite Architecture

Advances in hydraulic engineering further strengthened the 17th-century French garden ideology that the natural landscape should be an extension of architecture. In light of this overwhelming emphasis on enforced geometry, horticulture seems to have been relegated to a secondary role. However, for all the boxwood parterres, all the *allées* lined with wall-like hornbeam hedges, all the neatly clipped trees and shrubbery, formal gardens were by no means flowerless. In fact, no matter how far Le Nôtre's many projects took him from Paris, it was his contractual duty to keep the garden of the Tuileries filled with flowers year round.

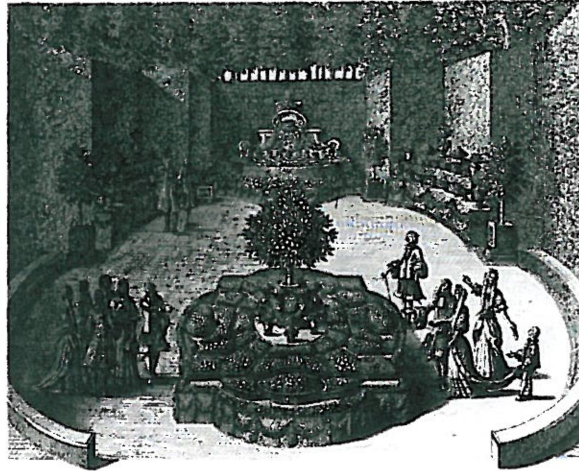


Practicality and pleasure: the royal kitchen garden, designed by la Quintinie (above), and a party in the maze at the chateau of Chantilly, Le Nôtre's favorite garden (right).

Botanical and Kitchen Gardens Fit for a King

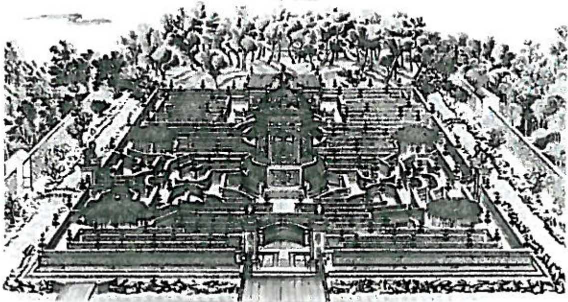
Louis was infatuated with all aspects of gardening, and Versailles would have been incomplete without an Edenesque allusion to nature's bounty. In 1670 he appointed lawyer, botanist, and author Jean-Baptiste de la Quintinie as *intendant pour les soins des jardins fruitiers et potagers* (keeper of fruit and vegetable gardens) and set him the task of designing a royal kitchen garden. The process of laying out, constructing, and planting the Potager du Roi lasted more than five years. Those cultivating the king's fruits and vegetables outside the palace were held to the same exacting standards imposed on craftsmen working within it.

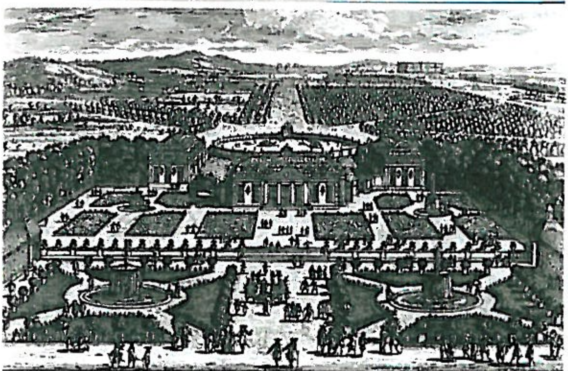
A discriminating collector of plants and trees, Louis XIV



The linchpin in Le Nôtre's grandiose scheme for Versailles as the king envisioned it was a plentiful supply of water. After a series of disastrous projects, work began on the Machine de Marly (above), a gigantic hydraulic engine on the Seine. River water was lifted from this pumping station at Bougival to the aqueduct of Marly and from there channeled to Versailles' fourteen hundred fountains. Even then, there was never sufficient pressure for all of them to operate at once, so *fontainier* Claude Denis had standing orders to limit displays to those that came into the king's view as he toured the grounds.

substantially enlarged the Jardin du Roi (renamed, after the French Revolution, the Jardin des Plantes) that Gui de la Brosse, physician to Louis XIII, had established in Paris in 1626. He personally sponsored plant-collecting expeditions that had instructions to bring back botanical specimens from the New World and the Far East for acclimatization in Paris. Exotic plants from abroad would later inundate Europe.



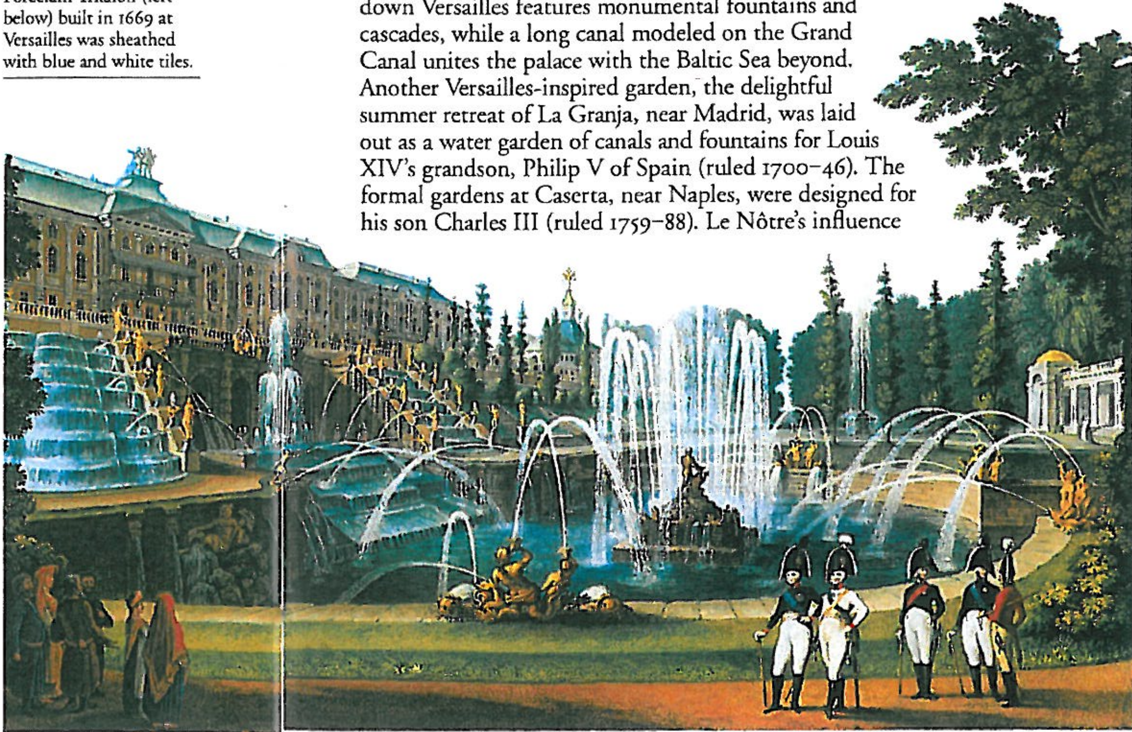


The park of the Chinese emperor Yuan Ming Yuan was enlarged and embellished by Emperor Qian Long, a garden enthusiast. In 1747, enthralled by Father Giuseppe Castiglione's paintings of European gardens, he asked French and Italian Jesuits in Peking to design a scaled-down Versailles for his summer residence (detail, left above). There was a reciprocal fashion for chinoiserie pavilions in Europe. The short-lived Porcelain Trianon (left below) built in 1669 at Versailles was sheathed with blue and white tiles.

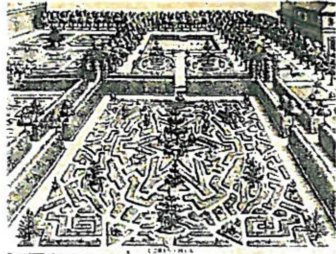
The Influence of Versailles

Versailles was too sprawling, too complex, and its symbolism too heavy-handed, but the French formal garden had scored an overwhelming victory just the same. Rulers throughout Europe and even beyond were intent on possessing a Versailles of their own. The model they emulated, however, could hardly be duplicated. More often than not, these translations of Versailles were quite different in scale and adapted to local topography, regional traditions, and their patron's temperament.

The spirit of the Sun King's creation permeates Blenheim Palace (England), which Sir John Vanbrugh began in 1705 and "intended as a monument of the Queen's glory." During a trip to France, Peter the Great of Russia (ruled 1672–1725) succumbed to Le Nôtre's design while a guest at the Grand Trianon and appointed the Frenchman Jean-Baptiste Le Blond "architect general" of his new capital, St. Petersburg. Le Blond laid out the gardens and park for the royal summer palace, Peterhof, before his premature death three years later. This scaled-down Versailles features monumental fountains and cascades, while a long canal modeled on the Grand Canal unites the palace with the Baltic Sea beyond. Another Versailles-inspired garden, the delightful summer retreat of La Granja, near Madrid, was laid out as a water garden of canals and fountains for Louis XIV's grandson, Philip V of Spain (ruled 1700–46). The formal gardens at Caserta, near Naples, were designed for his son Charles III (ruled 1759–88). Le Nôtre's influence



The French formal garden took the whole of Europe by storm: from Russia, Peter the Great's "Versailles on the Baltic," Peterhof (below), to Austria (sprawling Schonbrunn, Vienna) and Germany. Frenchmen helped design the extensive gardens of Nymphenburg and Schleissheim, outside Munich, as well as Schwetzingen.



reached all the way to America: Pierre L'Enfant's design for Washington, D.C. is based on the *patte d'oie* (goose's foot)—a series of radiating avenues that was used often in the gardens of Le Nôtre.

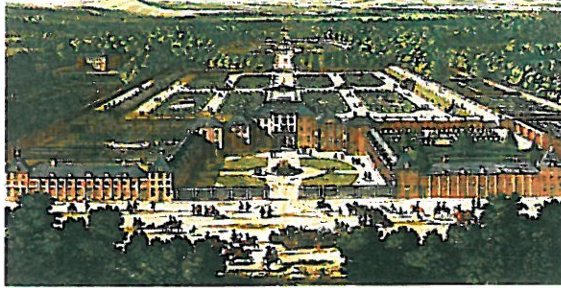
Hans Vredeman de Vries' *Hortorum Viridariorumque...* (1583, left) is a garden pattern book, including cutwork parterres, designed to display tulips and other flowers. Tulips (engraving below left) became enormously popular early in the 17th century.

The Italian Legacy

Although occasionally blended with "formal" French elements or vernacular features, the Italian garden tradition continued to influence Germany and the Netherlands until the 18th century. Northern Europe, particularly England, remained under the sway of the Dutch, who had taken the lead in horticultural research. (A Dutchman, William of Orange, had become King William III of England in 1689.) The Netherlands had its version of the Renaissance garden —the scholar Erasmus described one in *The Godly Feast* (1522)—but Christian symbolism prevailed over ungodly paganism. Renaissance gardens were followed by the Mannerist gardens so copiously pictured in the 16th-century pattern books of Hans Vredeman de Vries and exemplified by the gardens he laid out for Emperor Rudolph II in Prague. His chief contribution to garden art was the cutwork parterre, a type of bed specifically intended for the display of the rare, exotic, flowering plants that were the passion of his fellow Dutch compatriots.

Charles de L'Ecluse

Flemish humanist, physician, and botanist Charles de L'Ecluse was the first scientific horticulturist and served as superintendent of the Leiden Botanic Garden (established 1587). The exotic Middle Eastern bulbs and tubers he cultivated—hyacinths, irises, lilies, gladioli, sunflowers, and especially tulips—transformed northern European gardens. The Dutch were as adept at dealing in plants as they were at studying them. They exercised an international monopoly on onions, a virtual currency at the time, and uncharacteristically got caught up in the tulip craze, reaping fortunes overnight and losing them just as quickly when the market collapsed in 1634.



Daniel Marot designed the gardens of Het Loo in the Netherlands for William of Orange between 1686 and 1695, around the time the hunting lodge was remodeled into a royal palace. Thanks to a splendid restoration, visitors today can still appreciate this hybrid of Renaissance and Baroque influences that resulted in a composite of Dutch layout and French decorative features (left and below). The flower bed designs are in the Mannerist style pictured in the pattern books of Hans Vredeman de Vries.