wild nature not interesting
nature selected and arranged

Chapter VI

On the Embellishment of Gardens

Garden art has become known to us very late. Before the reign of Louis le Grand even the idea that a garden could have any other beauty than that of wild nature had not occurred to anyone. Trees, flowers, grass, and water were assembled within a great enclosure, but with so little taste and planning that nothing could have been more rustic and wild. Louis XIV was born, and hardly had the noble tastes of this lofty and sensitive mind become manifest than all arts felt the effect of his intense love for beauty. Garden art was created in France under his reign. Admirable compositions came to life under the pencil of the famous Le Nôtre in which all the beautiful things in nature, arranged in a new order and with fascinating harmony, presented the most delightful sights. Everybody was carried away by a novelty so full of genius and sentiment; it became a general ambition to substitute for dull orchards true gardens arranged with taste, adorned with grace and filled with all those delightful (*riant*) objects which until then had existed only in the poet's imagination. These changes were not brought about by tyranny of fashion, so common in France and often so dangerous. The sway of beauty alone, always invincible, can take credit for an invention the merit of which a thousand charms proclaim. Hence this multitude of enchanted places, of parterres and

groves, arranged with the help of the Graces, which make the surroundings of Paris superior to Paris itself.

Garden art is perhaps the only art that has not degenerated in France. We have improved on the ideas of Le Nôtre and have in this instance successfully made use of that talent which is the most characteristic of our nation, namely not so much to invent as to correct, refine, and improve foreign inventions. Every day our gardens take on a decor that is more and more delightful, true and natural; since the object of gardens is to provide new attractions for an inclination that makes us all seek the relaxing atmosphere of the countryside, the art designed to make the stay more and more agreeable will presumably be steadily improved.

We should never lose sight of the principle so necessary and so favorable to the progress of the art—that no art has yet reached the last degree of perfection, that there is much to correct and much to add to what we call masterpieces. The question is to know the faults in which they abound and to imagine what beauty they lack; that is the only way to work for true perfection.

In gardens, one should pay particular attention to places of a delightful and simple beauty; one must make use of all the fairness nature offers and embellish its creations by arranging them in a graceful and tender manner without ever taking away from them that simple and pastoral air which makes their charm so sweet. This is what pleases us in nature: (1) the shade of the woods, the green of the meadows, the murmur of the brooks; (2) pretty viewpoints, pleasant landscapes; (3) the happy extravagance (*bizarrerie*) of nature's arrangements and that beautiful carelessness (*beau négligé*) which bars from its adornment any appearance of studied affectation. The task is to combine all these favorable features in an arrangement which allows us to sense more keenly the contrasts and harmony yet does not efface the natural and graceful.

The gardens of Versailles have for a long time been accepted by us as one of the wonders of the world and still are so among foreigners. I say of these gardens what I have already said of the Château: masterpieces are met at every step. Puget, Girardon, and many others have by their inimitable works given so much splendor to the gardens that as long as there are lovers of beauty among men they will come from all parts of the world to feast their eyes on the sight of these marvels which raise the French genius to the level of the Greek and Roman genius. But apart from this, have these gardens something that offers an agreeable and delightful spectacle for mind and eye to enjoy? One will judge this by the critical examination I am going to make. If wealth of bronzes and marbles, if nature stifled and buried under such an exaggerated display of symmetry and pomp, if a strange, extraordinary, stiff, and bombastic style makes up the beauty of a garden, then Versailles deserves to be preferred to all others. But judged by our impressions what do we find when walking in these stately gardens? At first astonishment and admiration but soon sadness and boredom. What is the reason for this disturbing impression in a place where immense sums have been spent for its embellishment? This is what ought to be examined, and we shall then notice many faults which, by depriving a garden of the delightful and graceful, deprive it of its most essential beauty.

The first fault which strikes everybody is the situation of these gardens. This narrow valley, surrounded on all sides by barren mountains and gloomy forests, is a repulsive wilderness which can only result in a wild scene. Therefore, whatever the expense, it was absolutely impossible to make good this misshapen ground. Many things had to be done in defiance of nature, and the riches that have been lavished on this garden suit it as badly as curls and pompons suit an ugly face. There will never be pleasant gardens unless places already embellished by nature are chosen, delightful places

where the eye will fall on a landscape adorned with a thousand rustic charms and where comtemplation will give rise to those moments of sweet reverie which hold the soul in happy repose. Many of these beautiful situations exist around Paris, yet one had to search the woods for the loneliest and gloomiest to find that for Versailles.

[The gardens of Marly have a somewhat more advantageous position. In front of the kind of building called the Château there is a small opening which partly discloses the grand spectacle to be seen from the terrace of St. Germain. This advantage, modest though it is, removes at least from the narrow valley of Marly the severe unpleasantness of an habitation placed in the center of thick forests. Yet, this advantage does not by far suffice to render the situation of Marly as delightful as one could wish and as, in fact, it could be. This distant and limited vista presents a spectacle which, from the little seen, gives an idea of its extent and magnificence but which, far from causing satisfaction, only serves to arouse desire and regret. One would like to have access to the unrestrained enjoyment of such an enchanting sight and is annoyed about the various obstacles which block and restrict such a beautiful view. This impatience, this uneasiness which take possession of the soul make it almost insensitive to the alluring objects which embellish this charming valley. It was easy to leave nothing to be desired in such a beautiful spot. All it needed was to change the position of the Château a little by moving it forward on the slope of the mountain close to the river. From there one would have enjoyed an admirable view, broken and unimpeded, which would have been more satisfying than at St. Germain because it would not have been so steep; one could have extended sloping gardens to the right and left and would have found again at the rear this pleasant valley by which one is now unfortunately enclosed; it would have presented a most interesting diversity. It seems, however, that Louis le Grand was not very sensitive

to the attractions of beautiful situations. Versailles and Trianon prove that he did not make the effort to look for them while Marly almost proves that he preferred to avoid them. Regarding money spent, the gardens of St. Cloud are quite inferior to all those I have just mentioned but greatly surpass them by the advantage of their situation alone. The viewpoints are so artistically arranged and so happily varied that, wandering through the gardens, one passes from one delight to another, arrested at every step by the beautiful places encountered. The charm is so vivid and lasting that one leaves St. Cloud only with regret, firmly resolved to return there. At Meudon one was quite free to have gardens in a situation that would have brought about the same touching effects, but by an incomprehensible caprice things were so arranged that the beautiful view is at the side of the avenues and walks; in a place where nature offered by way of situation everything that could possibly be desired, one has managed to make the gardens almost as enclosed and wild as those of Versailles.]

The second fault of these gardens is the strict system of regularity. The grand manner of symmetry is not at all suitable for beautiful nature. There must, indeed, be selection, order and harmony but nothing which is too constricted and too formal. The *fer à cheval*, the parterres, avenues and groves are all done with a constraining accuracy very much removed from nature's pleasant carelessness and piquant *bizarrerie*. Art, far from being hidden, is evident everywhere and in every possible way, like one of those discourses, full of affectation, with every turn studied and every phrase rounded off, where all is measured by the square. This fault, still to be met with in most of our gardens, diminishes their enjoyment to such an extent that for pleasant promenades one has to leave these groves where art is too conspicuous and go and look for *la belle nature* amidst the open country adorned with artless naivete. Chinese taste in gardens is, I

think, preferable to our taste. The description of the emperor's countryhouse in the *Lettres édifiantes* indicates great naivete in the decoration of their gardens. The asymmetry they are fond of, the capricious way in which they design and lay out the bosquets, canals and everything surrounding these must, because of the rustic character, be all the more attractive. Nobody can resist the charm of this description; reading it one believes one is wandering in the midst of those imaginary gardens where fairies wave their magic wands yet, on reflection, realizes that everything there is just simple and natural. The better simplicity is understood, the more will truth and nature dominate our tastes. I wish the author of the pretty description had given us the actual plan of this delightful country seat which, no doubt, could serve us as a good model. By ingeniously fusing the Chinese conceptions with ours we would succeed in creating gardens to which nature with all its charm has returned again.

[*On even ground it is very difficult to draw up a plan for a garden in which regularity and formality are joined to that pleasant disorder of which nature is so fond. On uneven ground one has many more opportunities to vary things and display ingenious carelessness. When one is fortunate enough to be able to bring together within the same enclosure hollows, high ground, more or less steep slopes, some plains in the distance and several plateaus on the hills, then one has all the variations of nature in a condensed form and a wide field for imitating its playful eccentricities. When given the choice, the man of genius will always prefer the uneven to the even ground. On uneven ground, he will find a thousand ways to invent new spectacles, form enjoyable contrasts, produce delightful surprises, avoid any kind of monotony, place everywhere something which is singular and picturesque and retain the true and natural look of everything. On level ground, on the contrary, he must force his mind not to*

give in to insipid symmetry; he may well have his dreams, yet will be driven to follow convention and repeat himself endlessly. Those who want gardens on level ground only look, no doubt, for convenient promenades, but they do not know what visual charm and spiritual pleasure mean.]

A third fault of the gardens of Versailles is that one feels too much hemmed in. One goes into a garden to breathe fresh air and be at ease. Here, one always seems to be within four walls; everywhere there are masses of greenery which do not allow the eye to range freely far afield or the air to circulate. The *palissades de charmille* are real walls which because of their height and straight alignment turn an avenue into a boring street. The unpleasantness of these green walls was felt. Quite rightly one took a dislike to them and sought means by which to enjoy shade without losing the view and to escape the heat of the sun without being confined between two walls. In this one succeeded through planting trees with the trunks left free and unencumbered and the crowns joined together; they form the desired cover in a thousand different ways. Hence the charming *quinconces* which provide cool shade without obstructing the view and arcades and bowers that form a vault of greenery supported by as many columns as there are tree trunks. I do not mean that dense masses must be completely excluded; in nature many exist in forests. What I do mean is that these masses should be used sparingly since by themselves they have something dismal and wild about them. They should be used in the same way as shades are used in a painting to heighten the lights, and dissonances are used in music to underline the consonances; for there is harmony in everything. The gardens of Versailles are like the paintings of Caravaggio in which black predominates excessively or like modern music where the profusion of dissonances badly affects the senses.

A fourth fault of these gardens is the lack of bright fresh green and the arid appearance of it all. No visual sensation is

as sweet as a beautiful green. If one wants to let this sensation grow into exquisite pleasure, it only needs the green to be arranged in shades ranging from a very bright to a most delicate tone. All *broderies* in the parterres of Versailles are outlined by edges of box and filled with differently colored sand and rather indifferent flowers. Nothing is more dismal and less natural than these *broderies*. I prefer a simple meadow; there, at least, I find fresh green whereas in these parterres *en broderie* my eyes get tired through seeing almost nothing but sand and the very little green of some box which is too dull to give any pleasure. The only beautiful parterres are parterres *en gazon*; they can be made up either of simple compartments or of true *broderie* and, provided the grass selected is very fine and of a bright green, they will always look satisfactory. When I say *gazon en broderie*, this is what I mean by it: a design of *broderie* of different greens, two or three shades, in the same style as certain tapestries where only one color is used ranging from the deepest to the lightest shade. In this design, I should like the flowers to be arranged in clusters and to let the gardener decide not only on the right place for these flowers but also on the particular kind of flower suitable to give an exquisite brilliance to this carpet of green embroidery. To me such a parterre would be of perfect beauty because it would combine what is most agreeable in nature with the resources art has to embellish nature itself.

[*Until now one has not thought of anything better than to sand the promenades so as to walk there comfortably and without getting dirty. Yet sand is arid and its color unsightly. However fine its quality, it always is somewhat hard underfoot. The pleasure of the promenade demands something softer. Nature has produced nothing of this kind comparable to a fine lawn; it is a tender down, a soft rest for the foot. It has none of the inconvenience of ordinary grass, never shorn short enough to walk on it comfortably, and has a particular shade of green that is pleasing to the eye. A fine lawn is the*

softest rug, most suitable for garden walks. Only natural lawn is known, but could it not be made artificially? Some studies on the nature of the plants of which it is composed and of the ground on which it grows would be sufficient to enable art to imitate this little marvel of nature. The thing is certainly worth the trouble.]

In the bosquets of Versailles green is sometimes badly chosen and always badly arranged. The green of the yew tree is too gloomy and too dark. Formerly people were very fond of these pyramids of yew trees trimmed in a thousand bizarre shapes which look like the different pieces on a chess board. Good taste has done away with these ridiculous fancies, though there are still many remnants of them left in Versailles. The green of the bosquets is too uniform; there should be more variety and more order. Different trees have different shades of green. What can be more delightful, more graceful than a judicious blending of these shades producing a chiaroscuro almost as correct and as fascinating as in a beautiful painting? A gardener ought to be an excellent painter or, at least, have a good knowledge of that part of painting which has to do with complementary colors and with the different tones of the same color. He could then arrange the green so as to create surprise and enable us to enjoy unusual pleasure.

In the gardens of Versailles there is no water, and what is a garden without water? Only water can preserve the freshness of the garden, revive its beauty and give it soul and life. The murmur of running waters is good company in a solitary garden. Sitting by a fountain or a brook we can believe we watch the banter of nymphs and naiads when the ever-changing bubbling and cascading waters beguile and captivate us, speak to us and make us dream. What an amount of money has been spent to bring water to Versailles! The surrounding country has been requisitioned, the canals, the aqueducts and the Seine, raised by machines to the level of a

high mountain, have all been put into action at great cost to make good the water that was completely lacking. Having spent immense sums of money on this task, all one is able to do is to pour out, with the help of an endless number of every kind of jet, two or three times a year, dirty waters which gush miraculously into the air for just a few minutes and then vanish into different channels that feed the so-called canal and the basins (*eaux plates*). The rest of the time there is not a drop of running water to be seen, only dry fountains and basins half-filled with smelly water. [*It is true that during the summer months one frequently enjoys the spectacle of the so-called* petites eaux, *and it must be admitted that the great number of basins from which abundant water issues with great noise much enlivens the dull gardens of Versailles. But it is very unfortunate that funds are not sufficient to go to the same expense every day. One is reduced to showing off on Sundays and feast days; the rest of the week things look poor; there is no question of either* grandes *or* petites eaux. *One lives in the driest place in the universe.*]

It is infinitely better to have much less spectacular water displays but to enjoy them regularly. A pretty, lively stream which in one place flows through little pools, in another rushes down in waterfalls, and further on gushes into the air, on one side trickles through the rocks of a grotto and on the other frolics in little spurts and splashes, which, in short, takes on all sorts of forms and plays all sorts of games is preferable to all the short-lived miracles of Versailles.

The critical examination I have just made of this too stately and not at all delightful garden is sufficient to give at least a vague idea of the style that should be prevalent in the decoration of any kind of garden. If, first of all, one takes care to plant greenery, to vary and blend it, if one is not subjected to the restraint of having to follow too formal and too symmetrical a design, arranges viewpoints carefully, plans thickets and clearings intelligently, distributes water

over all parts of the garden and lets it run and gush forth with more or less force and abundance depending on the capacity of the source and, lastly, lays out the whole so well that there are open views, shade and freshness—then one will create truly delightful gardens.

There lives in Europe a great prince who through an exceptional run of good fortune and calamity has become famous. After a hard and troubled life providence has granted him a repose which he, a man of genius and taste, uses to advantage by devoting himself to every kind of attractive and ingenious invention. The arts are indebted to him not only for the protection he accords them, but also for enriching them by a thousand discoveries which extend the scope, vary the productions, heighten the enchantment and increase the resources of the arts. He himself gives artists the ideas, clears the way for them and presents opportunities to them with an enlightened understanding that enables even those of only moderate talent to create wonderful works. He is the first man in the world to visualize a project clearly and execute it economically and promptly. With a modest revenue he has increased his *maisons de plaisance* by a surprising number, filled them with delightful objects and adorned them with exquisite taste. There we admire the fertility of a genius who profits from everything, creates a thousand things out of nothing and adapts himself in a hundred different ways so as to offer constantly things which are new and unique and always delightful and graceful; there we see buildings of every shape which please less by rich materials than by novel design, elegant form and tasteful ornaments; there we find beauty that has the right blend of manliness and nobility with elegance and naiveté; there we walk in gardens where nature, infinitely varied, is at its best; there we see beautiful, quickly flowing waters rising as columns, plunging down in cascades, performing unique and charming displays; there we see cascades of water, halls with windows

all formed by curtains of water and dining rooms illuminated by great chandeliers of water; there, in short, we find a host of ingenious novelties and everywhere it is the delightful and graceful that prevails. Let our artists attend the school of this great prince and they will learn a thousand new ways with which to surprise us, please us and enchant us.

The End