

The Gardens of Versailles: Landscaping a Political Façade

Julie Crew

Throughout history, monarchs have consistently striven to leave a legacy for future generations. The Gardens of Versailles, King Louis XIV's legacy, were unparalleled by any garden in existence at the time. Constructed under the "Sun King," they were built and designed, not as a place of leisure and relaxation, but as a symbol of his political absolutism over man and nature. In addition, the historical use of the garden during Louis XIV's reign further proved that its sole intention was to secure the Sun King's appearance of power. Through analysis of the architecture and layout of the landscape it is clear to see that Louis XIV commissioned the creation of the Gardens to showcase the breadth and depth of his affluence.

Versailles, like Rome, was not built in a day. The Gardens had a humble beginning as a hunting lodge, originally founded in 1624 by the Louis XIV's father, Louis XIII.³² There were several key events and people that played a role in the construction and additions to the Gardens of Versailles, most notably Louis XIV, and his gardener André le Nôtre. André le Nôtre is primarily known for his work on Versailles. However, an earlier work of his, Vaux-le-Vicomte, may have influenced a number of features that are present in Versailles. Vaux-le-Vicomte, completed in 1661, was owned and financed by Nicolas Fouquet who was the treasurer to Louis XIV. Vaux-le-Vicomte may have been too lavish and extravagant because, at the unveiling, Louis XIV imprisoned his treasurer under the suspicion that he inappropriately spent French money meant for the government to finance his personal exhibition.³³ By imprisoning Fouquet, Louis XIV conveyed the message that owning extravagant property that rivaled or competed with his would not be tolerated. Vaux-le-Vicomte, however, seemed to have

³²Ian H. Thompson, *The Sun King's Garden: Louis XIV, André Le Nôtre, and the Creation of the Gardens of Versailles* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2006), xiii.

³³Charles Willard Moore and William J. Mitchell, *The Poetics of Gardens* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 198.

made a grand impression on Louis XIV; so much so that, after imprisoning Nicolas Fouquet, he hired André le Nôtre to oversee his own project, the Gardens of Versailles. Le Nôtre was a French landscaper and architect, while the Gardens of Versailles was not his only work, it is however his crowning achievement.



Fig. 1

A 1746 plan of Versailles

The Gardens of Versailles pushed the boundaries of landscaping and architecture, literally and figuratively. The entire grounds of the Gardens encompasses 37,065 acres, which includes the original hunting grounds procured by Louis XIII, and a forest to the north and south, equating to nearly forty-four times larger than Central Park in New York.³⁴ The immense scale of the property is designed for a king, with elements being incorporated into the design of the Gardens to emphasize the seemingly infinite space of the property. Le Nôtre created *Le Tapis Vert*, or “Green Carpet,” which is a long strip of lawn that acts as an optical illusion that renders the viewer to believe that the straightaway is never-ending. Louis XIV implemented this “never-ending” straightaway to symbolize his “never-ending” reach and power. While viewing the “Green Carpet,” visitors can see a fountain containing a chariot driven by Apollo. It is evident that Louis XIV was extremely influenced by Roman ideas and myths. Louis XIV esteemed himself as worldly, and by incorporating classical influences, cast himself as the

Fig. 1 *Plan de Versailles 1746* in Chandra Mukerji, “Space and Political Pedagogy at the Gardens of Versailles” *Public Culture*, 24 (2012).

³⁴ Thompson, *The Sun King's Garden*, 1.

“Sun King,” a reference to Apollo therefore making him equal to the gods they worshipped.

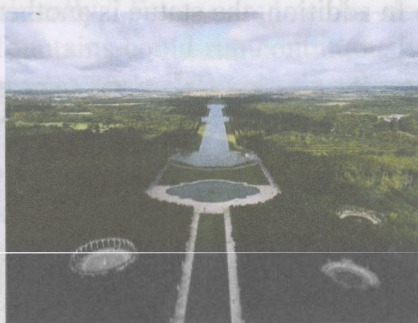


Fig. 2

Le Tapis Vert, “The Green Carpet”

Upon completion of the Gardens, Louis XIV wrote manuals that would be used for visitors to properly tour the Gardens as he saw fit. *Manière de montrer les jardins de Versailles*, the formal manual, needed multiple editions because the Sun King frequently updated the arranging of bosquets and other elements of the Gardens.³⁵ A bosquet is a formal arrangement of trees. The earlier editions had a simpler title of “How to view the garden of Versailles” whereas, after the tour for Mary of Modena (1689), the second wife of King James II of England, the itinerary was updated with a more elaborate title, “Order and Manner that the King wishes to be followed for showing the Garden and Fountains of the royal Chateau of Versailles.”³⁶ The use of these manuals was just one of the many ways that Louis XIV’s Gardens exuded his influence, power, and ego.

Throughout the Gardens of Versailles, Louis XIV used sculptures to express his power. *Bassin de l’Encelade*, a fountain where the Greek mythological giant Enceladus struggles to escape a rock formation, represents one of the most notable examples on the grounds. The origin behind the allusion of this fountain is that Enceladus once tried to rebel against the almighty and powerful Zeus, but failed, and as punishment,

Fig. 2 Aerial View of the Green Carpet and the Grand Canal available at <http://en.chateauversailles.fr/news/-events/exhibitions/André-le-notre-in-perspective/le-notre-in-perspective/the-gardens-of-André-le-notre-1>.

³⁵ Thompson, *The Sun King’s Garden*, 5.

³⁶ Robert W. Berger and Thomas F. Hedin, *Diplomatic Tours in the Gardens of Versailles under Louis XIV* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 58.

was buried underneath a mountain.³⁷ Louis XIV made it clear to his ruling nobility that, like Zeus, he would punish anyone who dared to consider rebellion. In addition, the statue is another clear sign of classical influences.



Fig. 3

Bassin de l'Encelade



Fig. 4

A closer view of the Apollo sculpture along the "Green Carpet."

In order for the Gardens to function properly, the architecture and design were a fundamental and necessary feature. With a vast amount of irrigation required, a plethora of water sources were constructed. At the time, the creation of such grandiose fountains, as well as the Grand Canal, were undoubtedly considered great feats of engineering. The necessity for water occupied so much of Louis XIV's time that even from a battlefield he would write to his architect, "You must arrange

³⁷ Thompson, *The Sun King's Garden*, 187.

Fig. 3 Versailles - Jardins du Château de Versailles - Bosquet de l'Encelade - Le bassin d'Encelade. Source: Wally Gobetz, available from Flickr: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/wallyg/1547021478>.

Fig. 4 Apollo Fountain, Jean-Baptiste Tuby, 1668-70, available at <http://www.radford.edu/rbaris/art216upd2012/Versailles.html>.

for the pumps of Versailles to function so well, especially those of the reservoir up above, that when I arrive they do not cause me dismay by breaking down continually.” Four years later he decided to update the pumps so that the fountains could run continuously as opposed to the previous twelve hour intervals.³⁸ By altering the course of the Eure River, Louis XIV exercised his power over nature once more. The Eure was a prominent geographical feature and by imposing upon it, Louis XIV displayed that he could control anything, even nature.³⁹

In the landscape and design of the Gardens, Louis XIV was able to display and allude to his power. The final measure to secure the influence obtained by the creation and expansion of the Gardens of Versailles involved hosting a variety of distinguished foreign dignitaries. With everything in place, Louis XIV would parade nobles around the grounds to remind them of who he was. The Gardens themselves acted simply as a venue for the Sun King to display his eminence. Historian Roann Barris notes this by saying:

The varied and staged constellation of dances, plays, and masquerades, and parties at Versailles made up a “politics of performance” that celebrated the monarchy, signified submission to absolutism, kept the nobility under surveillance, and used the royal residences and their gardens as sites for public display of power.⁴⁰

Louis XIV would often host events at Versailles to showcase the gardens and their wonderment. The list of dignified guests that Louis XIV hosted is endless ranging from Cardinal Flavio Chigi, a nephew of Pope Alexander VII, Mary of Modena, the future queen of England, as well as other dignitaries and ambassadors, including the ambassador

³⁸ Frederick Brown, “Reflections on Versailles,” *The Hudson Review*, 30 no. 3 (1977) 335–49, doi:10.2307/3850255. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3850255>. p. 37.

³⁹ Brown, “Reflections on Versailles,” 335–49, doi:10.2307/3850255. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3850255>. p. 37.

⁴⁰ Roann Barris, “The Constructivist Engaged Spectator: A Politics of Reception,” *Design Issues*, 15, no. 1 (1999): 31–48, doi: 10.2307/1511787.

of Siam.⁴¹ Through accommodating a diverse assortment of visitors, Louis XIV was able to acquire a greater span of political influence, and by evaluating the guest list, it is noticeable that Louis XIV, like Apollo pulling the sun across the skies of the world, maintained a global reach.

With a self-given sobriquet of "The Sun King," Louis XIV echoed his self-proclaimed supremacy and affluence with the development and construction of the Gardens of Versailles. With the gardens being overly ornate, rather than a simplistic outdoor retreat, the grounds proved to be a place for Louis XIV to secure his standing and display his grandeur to the entire world. Through the analysis of the architecture, layout, and historic use it is clear to see that the Gardens of Versailles were in fact an extravagant, though intricate, strategy to bring everyone's attention to the immense power, wealth, and self-admiration possessed by the "godlike" Louis XIV.

⁴¹ Berger and Hedin, *Diplomatic Tours*, 19-31.