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Glorious Gardens
The Galloping Gardener

by Cathy Nolan

French landscape designer Louis Benech is enthusiastic for gardens, for making them and talking about them, is boundless. Example: cated garden buffs from an association called Vivaces

ladies in cardigans and sensible shoes, was enthralled.

Dosan

nat e François Pinault, interior designer Jacques Grange, Monaco's

botanically challenged.

instigated tl1e get

spite ofhis distinctions-member of the Royal Horticultural Society,

or John Galliano uses fabrics and pleats and

monize them is vast.

The presentation was aimed at fellow garden fanatics, not the

The closest Benech came to such silliness was when François Pinault asked him to flower his huge new Jeff Koons sculpture, Split Rocker: "I didn't like the horses," he comments. "I thought it'd be better to work out how many pansies to put in the beast's underbelly. I talked him out of it." Benech continues. "It was very strange to see Jeff in his garden: a huge dressy 100-foot-tall garden י•the end Benech did the best he could to

Tulipe the cat, who lounges in solitary on the piles of project folders and plant catalogs while assistants-Benech leads a team of ten-toil on computers and telephones.

Nor does Benech get much chance to garden these days. He

"I wanted to be a forest engineer," says Benech. "In France, however, to qualify for the training, you have to be good at math and physics, and I was hopeless." To fulfill family expectations, young Louis studied law in the early 1980s at Nanterre University, but the very day he got his degree, he was calling around for gardening jobs. After a successful apprenticeship at the venerable Hillier nurseries in Hampshire, England, he returned to France to help serve Hillier's clients on the Continent. And by 1985, he was a real gardener on the Normandy estate of Bon-vivant British millionaire Leol Guinness, "I said I wanted the position so I could have fun-he immediately hired me. He was most fond of fast cars and horses, but he did love his garden," remembers Benech.

And Guiness valued Benech's blossoming horticultural skills. He Kent Louis to friends like Guy and Marie-Hélène de Rothschild, who passed on to other rating-class garden-lovers. All by chance, the young Benech met, but as his fashionable writer friend Natasha Fraser-Cavassoni points out, "Louis gets the Pinaults and Rochchids as clients because they're impressed by his knowledge and touched by his integrity. They know those are priceless qualities.

In 1990, Benech was "draggered," as he puts it, into partnership by fellow landscape artist Pascal Cribier for the international competition to renovate the Tuileries gardens. To Benech's surprise, they won, and there went 1992 to 1997: "I practically lived in the Tuileries. I was behind the excavators every day, making sure tree roots weren't damaged."

Though leaving little room for creativity, the project made his reputation as a leading landscaper and he set up his agency in Paris. "It is very rare to come up, "it's a love of Gardens. Gardens are the most important thing in my life. Without falling into indigestible evangelism, I think gardens are highly spiritual. They disconnect you from all the ugliness, the speed and the jostling of modern life. I've done gardens for hospitals and retirement homes, because there, I think it's vital. For an elderly person, maybe neglected by their family, if they can have the grace of seeing the sun through a beautiful leaf, the beginning of spring—it's wonderful."

Benech says, "I'm still having fun! You can cheat in gardens, but in the best sense of the word, so it's not a sin! Today we manipulate images with computers—in a garden, you can change perception by playing around with space and color. You can expand or shrink space with color. "Such "cheating" is an essential ingredient of French garden culture, he notes. André Le Nôtre, the horticultural hero of Versailles, "was a gardening genius because of his tricks—effects of distance, optical illusions. He had so much fantasy, but when people try to copy him, they retain only the rigidity and formality."

Yes to fantasy, but no to trendy gimmicks like garden gargoyles. The closest Benech came to such silliness was when François Pinault asked him to flower his huge new Jeff Koons sculpture, Split Rocker: "I didn't like the horses," he comments. "I thought it'd be better to work out how many pansies to put in the beast's underbelly. I talked him out of it." Benech continued. "It was very strange to see Jeff in his garden: a huge dressy 100-foot-tall garden

A private garden in Greece has brought Benech the most amusingly lately. "I worked with a lot of native plants, which had to be specially grown because no one sells them, but also with exotic ones, suited to the conditions. I hope it will be beautiful," he says. "Most important, it will eventually require no watering. "Green is vital, people need green, but we can use species that need minimum water," Benech insists. "Sustainability isn't just the current buzzword. It's the crucial issue of today."