



In Nature

## The Gardener of Versailles

André Le Nôtre's 17th-century masterpiece for Louis XIV has not been altered for centuries — until now. The renowned yet humble French landscape designer Louis Benech is reimagining the four-acre Water Theater, the Sun King's favorite grove.

BY DANA THOMAS PHOTOGRAPHS BY PHILIPPE CHANCEL PRODUCED BY GAY GASSMANN



THERE IS NO GARDEN IN THE WORLD more splendid and extravagant than that of Versailles. Designed by the French landscaper André Le Nôtre in 1661 for King Louis XIV, the nearly 2,000-acre park is a sharply architectural expanse of perspectives, parterres, fountains and groves that since its inception has defined what a French garden should be. It took 40 years to complete, and its design continued to evolve through the 19th century, when the palace first opened as a museum. Since then, the garden of Versailles has been an endeavor of maintenance and restoration, but not of creation.

That will change in the fall with the reopening of the new Water Theater grove, a long-dormant *bosquet* — a group of trees planted in an orderly arrangement — that once served as the king's outdoor stage and has been brought back to life by the renowned French landscape designer Louis Benech, along with the artist Jean-Michel Othoniel. This immense project — hundreds of trees and shrubs, pools and whimsical golden fountains on four

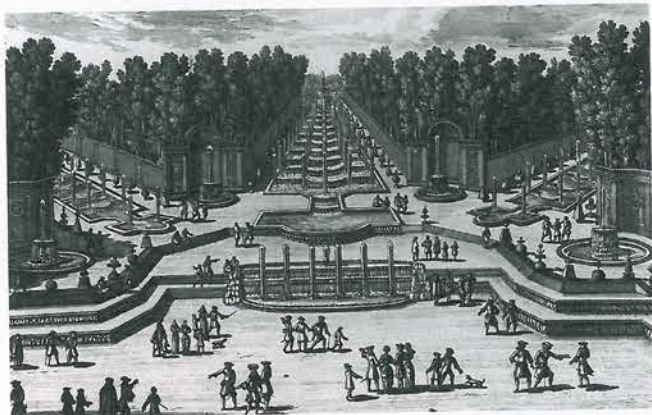
**MAN WITH A PLAN**  
Top: pictured in his Paris office, Louis Benech, who refers to himself simply as a gardener, won the competition to design Versailles's neglected Water Theater grove. Left: the Palace of Versailles with groves in the background.



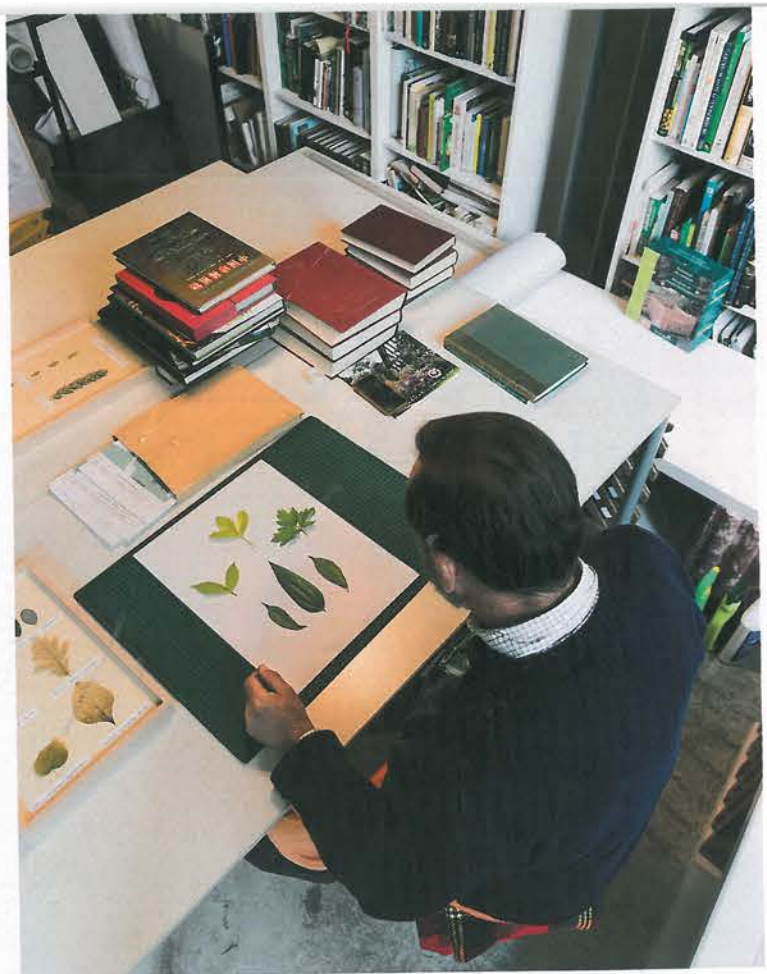
acres — is the first new construction in Versailles’s garden in centuries. “I have tried to nourish this grove in a contemporary way, the same way Le Nôtre did, and to stay very Versailles and Louis XIV,” Benech says. At the same time, he points out, “There is no more king. This *bosquet* is for the people” — meaning the six million tourists who visit Versailles annually — “and it will be open every day of the year.”

The magic of Versailles’s garden is how it unfurls bit by bit. “From the first steps, you don’t see that there is a fountain below. It’s only when you reach the edge of the terrace that you realize that it’s there,” Benech explains. “Then you see these three sections of white, green and blue” — the paths, the lawns and the canal — “and you start to dream. Because of the slope of the grass, you feel the water is going up to the sky. You have to let yourself be penetrated by the place.”

Its greatest mysteries were a series of 15 square-hedge enclosed *bosquets* (pronounced “boss-kay”), each with a different theme and role. The most elaborate was le bosquet du Théâtre d’Eau, or Water Theater grove, with three alleys, fountains, sculptures of the gods Mars, Jupiter and Pluto as children, three tiers of grass-covered seats and a stage. Though the king was involved with the



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design of the entire garden, as a lover of the performing arts — ballet as we know it today was born at Versailles — he was particularly partial to the Water Theater.

Sadly, after Louis XIV’s reign, the Water Theater was neglected, and in 1775, Louis XVI had it torn out and replaced with a simpler lawn known as the Round Green grove. In the 1990s, it was badly damaged by two major storms, and has since served as a parking and storage area.

In 2011, Versailles launched an international competition to select the landscaper to redesign the grove — an honor which, not surprisingly, was awarded to Benech. Benech has been France’s landscape designer of choice since 1990, when he won the competition to restore the Tuileries. Since then, the 57-year-old Frenchman who humbly refers to himself as “a gardener” has done the gardens for France’s presidential residence, foreign ministry and National Archives as well as for the homes of the French tycoon François Pinault, members of the de Rothschild family and his own partner, Christian Louboutin.

For this project, Benech changed his approach. “Usually I am a visual designer: I see what is working and not working and come up with solutions,” he says. “But this was such an immense assignment, with so much history, I decided to be more conceptual.” Benech studied Le Nôtre’s Versailles plans and saw that for his layout and plantings he had used multiples of the number three — “like the Holy Trinity,” the designer says — since Louis XIV was a ruler of divine right. In the gardener’s plan, Benech stuck close to this conceptual rule: There are three alleys and three round pools, 18 Irish yews, 90 live oaks. “I didn’t want to be exactly like Le Nôtre,” Benech says, “but there was a certain esotericism in what he did that I wanted to respect.” He also liked that Le Nôtre collaborated with

**A MASTER’S PROCESS** Clockwise from top left: an 18th-century engraving of the Water Theater grove that Benech is remaking; Benech arranges the leaves of the plants he will use for his design, chosen for being low maintenance and able to withstand high traffic; one of Benech’s watercolor garden plans.

ILLUSTRATION: COURTESY OF CHATEAU VERSAILLES/JIM MANAI



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artists to bring another dimension to the design.

He thought of Jean-Michel Othoniel, a French artist who creates sculptures with grapefruit-size colored Murano glass beads and is best known for his joyful Métro entrance at the Palais Royal in Paris. Benech went to see an Othoniel exhibition at the Pompidou Center and noted that children responded to it. This was important, he says, since Le Nôtre had created the Water Theater grove on the theme of childhood, and Benech wanted his design to appeal to all.

In Othoniel's own research, he found that the king loved to dance — so much so that he had the choreographer Raoul-Auger Feuillet come up with a sort of written shorthand instruction of baroque dances, published as the book “L’Art de Décrire la Danse” in 1701. Othoniel tracked down a copy at the Boston Public Library. Charmed by the swirling movement of the script — what he calls “filigree calligraphy” — he decided to use that as the basis of his sculptures. “It was a modern way to talk about Louis XIV,” Othoniel says.

For the work, titled “Les Belles Danses,” Othoniel excerpted three dances and recreated them in large glass

Othoniel excerpted three dances and recreated them in large glass beads of gold — a reference to the Sun King — strung together in happy swoops that conclude with shooting jets of water.

beads of gold — another reference to the Sun King — strung together in happy swoops that conclude with shooting jets of water. Othoniel believes the new Water Theater grove is “an optimistic view of gardens. Instead of being nostalgic, we are going forward, thinking modern ... yet there’s a notion of transmission — that we can cross centuries and have confidence in our voice to pass on ideas from generation to generation.” Just like Le Nôtre. ▣

**ART OF DANCE**  
Clockwise from top left: Jean-Michel Othoniel in his workshop at Versailles where his sculptures are being assembled; Othoniel used the drawings from the book “L’Art de Décrire la Danse,” in which Louis XIV’s choreographer sketched out dance steps, as the visual inspiration for his sculptures; Othoniel’s Paris studio with a maquette for the project in the foreground; one of his watercolors; a rendering of the grove with the Water Theater as it will look completed.



ILLUSTRATIONS FROM TOP: COURTESY OF JEAN-MICHEL OTHONIEL; COURTESY OF FABRICE MOIREAU