

V. 25.0 JANUARY / FEBRUARY 2005 \$3.95

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Versailles' Bosquet des Trois Fontaines.

## A Wood and Three Fountains

French and American efforts restore one of Louis IV's favorite gardens.

THE GROUNDS OF VERSAILLES reign as the greatest example of French classical garden design in the world. The stunning fountains, statuary, parterres, and allées – laid out in sublimely formal fashion – draw millions of visitors a year. But like a jeweled royal crown missing a few key gems, the palace's gardens, for all their seeming opulence, have never been completely restored to their original splendor. Among the lost horticultural bijoux was one of Louis IV's personal favorites, the Bosquet des Trois Fontaines.

Completed in 1679, the Bosquet – literally “the wood with three fountains” – was a technical marvel of its time, studded with hundreds of scintillating water jets amid intricate baroque rockwork and artfully clipped greenery. Over the course of 300 years, however, it had fallen into oblivion. What remained of it could hardly even be described as a ruin. It was simply an abandoned clearing of weeds and tall grass. “It was just a wasteland,” says Olivier de Rohan, president of the French charitable organization the Société des Amis de Versailles. Adds

hundred yards from the foot of the palace, the dig turned up the footprints of two of the original fountains, crumbled fragments of shell sculptures, and part of a ramp used by Louis XIV, who suffered from gout later in life and was transported about the garden in a wheelchair. The project also succeeded where earlier generations failed. “In the nineteenth century, the Bosquet was almost restored three different times, and each time it was stopped because of lack of financing,” says Christian

*I was initially underwhelmed by its sparseness: The Bosquet comprises three fountains and three cascades placed on three successive levels, surrounded by gravel, turf, topiary yews, and small boxwood hedges.*

Duvernois, a landscape architect and garden historian who is writing a book on the history of Versailles' gardens.

In April the Bosquet opens to the public. Last summer, though, I enjoyed a sneak peek at the garden during a week of charity events put on to raise the funds for the restoration project's completion. The unveiling ceremony

Florence Van der Kemp, who lived at Versailles from 1946 to 1980, when her husband Gerald was curator of the museum: “It was a part of the garden where nobody ever went. It was nothing.”

Now this forgotten garden – created by seventeenth-century master of design Andre Le Notre – has been restored to its former glory thanks to the efforts of a group of American benefactors. The cost: more than \$6 million, two-thirds of which was raised by the American Friends of Versailles, headed by Chicago interior designer and art historian Catharine Hamilton. The restoration required rigorous historical research, locating original sources for stone, and an archaeological dig. Just a few



Flowing fountains and (right) fund-raiser Hamilton.

included heavy doses of pomp and circumstance. At this event, guests gathered in the early evening just outside the Bosquet. Jacques Chirac's Republican Guard band regaled us with music while we waited for the gate to open. It was, of course, impossible to actually see inside the garden. One of 15 "greenery salons" at Versailles, the Bosquet is a garden room completely enclosed by two rows of tall hornbeam hedges.

"The idea of the bosquet is to be a surprise inside the forest, inside the wood," explains Duvernois. The bosquets were designed as intimate counterpoints to the grand perspectives of the rest of Versailles' landscape. They were also private gardens opened only at the king's behest.

Just a few hundred yards from the foot of the palace, the dig turned up the footprints of two of the original fountains, crumbled fragments of shell sculptures, and part of a ramp used by Louis XIV, who suffered from gout.

Louis XIV, the Sun King, threw parties and hosted music and theater performances in them. Many included impressive statuary and architectural follies, but the Bosquet des Trois Fontaines is unique. It has no statuary at all.

When we were at last let into the garden, I was initially underwhelmed by its sparseness. The Bosquet comprises three fountains and three cascades placed on three successive levels, surrounded by gravel, turf, topiary yews, and small boxwood hedges. The central features – the fountains – brandish grottolike elements: rocaille (artificial rockwork made of cement and rough stones), gloppy looking sandstone concretions (it's hard to see why this look was so prized in the seventeenth century), an enormous

seven-ton lead shell sculpture, and many smaller shells. While these details are lavish, the garden as a whole is unexpectedly minimalist. "It's just gravel and grass on the ground, sky above, hedges at the edge, and fountains," says Catharine Hamilton's husband, David, a philanthropist. "It's what I call 'pure garden art.'"

But the real art show had yet to commence; the waters were about to begin flowing. At 8:30 PM, a whistle was blown to order the fountains turned on, as had been done during the reign of Louis XIV. With the *Star Spangled Banner* and the



French national anthem *La Marseillaise* being sung all the while, suddenly the first jets of water burst forth from the top fountain and continued to spring up in succession down the length of the sloping garden. In the Bosquet, all of the water elements are connected hydraulically from top to bottom,

and the water picked up strength and power as it ran down the hill. By the time it reached the lowest level, the jets shot to their greatest height and the entire garden came alive with the play of water everywhere. It trickled. It sprayed. It arched. It

practically sung as a choir – trilling, pattering, gurgling, and showering in various places.

How was this delightful scene allowed to languish?

According to Duvernois, garden fashions simply changed. "People were building different gardens. There was a lack of interest," he says. Additionally, the bosquets were always meant to be hidden. "If you are walking through the main axis at Versailles, you can just miss them. You don't have any idea they are there." Perhaps because of that, they were also more apt to be forgotten. Fewer than 50 years after it was first built, the Bosquet de Trois Fontaines was already being neglected. By 1830 it had almost completely disappeared.

Enter the American Friends of Versailles. Founded by Hamilton just seven years ago, the group is dedicated to both helping restore Versailles and promoting French-American friendship. The Bosquet restoration is its first project, but the work ran longer than expected. It first stalled when the group realized that the garden plan they had was not the original but an early restoration plan. "So we went back to the Bibliothèque nationale and archival museums, found the original plans, and started again," recalls Hamilton. The decline of the dollar also slowed the group's progress. Hamilton had thrown two charity balls to raise funds, but it wasn't enough. It took a third ball to reach their goal – a highly publicized \$10,000-a-ticket

event held last June that drew more than 600 attendees.

Not a bad show of support considering the current state of affairs between France and the United States. "This came at a time when the French-American relationship was at something of a low ebb, but it just proved we can all work together for a great good," says Hamilton. When the Bosquet opens in April, it will be a part of the Grandes Eaux Musicales. Every Saturday and Sunday from spring through October, all of Versailles's 1,200 fountains flow and baroque music from the time of Louis XIV – who hosted Mozart at the palace – is played throughout the gardens.

— DEGEN PENER