

VILLAS AND GARDENS

IN EARLY MODERN ITALY
AND FRANCE



MIRKA BENEŠ AND DIANNE HARRIS

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江苏工业学院图书馆 藏 书 章



PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, VIC 3166, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cup.org

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First published 2001

Printed in the United States of America
Typeface Bembo 11/13.5 pt. System QuarkXpress® [MG]

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data Beneš, Mirka.

Villas and gardens in early modern Italy and France / Mirka Beneš, Dianne Harris.

p. cm. ISBN 0521782252

l. Gardens - Italy - History. 2. Gardens - France - History.

3. Architecture, Domestic - Italy - History. 4. Architecture, Domestic - France - History.

5. ltaly – Social life and customs. 6. France– Social life and customs.

I. Harris, Dianne Suzette. II. Title.

SB451.36.18 B46 2001 712'.6'045 - dc2l 00-063088

ISBN 0 521 78225 2 hardback

Note: Unless otherwise credited, all illustrations in Chapter 5 are after Elisabeth Blair MacDougall, "Venaria Reale: Ambition and Imitation in a Seventeenth-Century Villa,"

Fountains, Statues, and Flowers: Studies in Italian Gardens of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1994), 143–218.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Our thanks go first and foremost to those at Dumbarton Oaks who planned and hosted the round-table symposium of 1995 in honor of Elisabeth Blair Mac-Dougall: Prof. Angeliki Laiou, Department of History, Harvard University, and formerly Director of Dumbarton Oaks, and Prof. Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn, Universität Hannover, Germany, and formerly Director of Studies in Landscape Architecture. It is a great pleasure, as well, to thank our series editor, Prof. Norman Bryson, Director of the Slade School of Fine Art, London, for his support and enthusiasm and for his commitment to publishing this collection. It has been wonderful to work with him throughout. Special thanks also go to Dr. Beatrice Rehl, Fine Arts Editor at Cambridge University Press, New York, for her expert guidance, kindness, and patience. Profs. Marc Treib, University of California at Berkeley, and Tod Marder, Rutgers University, are most warmly thanked here for providing support to our grant applications for the project. We are grateful to Joyce de Vries for her meticulous assistance and to Michael Gnat for the great care he gave to the production of this volume. Finally, Margaret Fletcher, our editorial assistant for the submission of the manuscript, deserves our heartfelt thanks for her exquisitely high editorial standards, her dedication to seeing us through to the deadline, and her command of the talents that make the essays of twelve contributors into one book.

The Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, Chicago, generously gave funding for the illustrations and production of this collection, and it is especially thanked here. Funding for additional illustrations was provided by a grant from the University of Illinois Research Board, Urbana-Champaign Campus, and we are most grateful for their assistance with this project. The generosity of these two sources for the illustrations is particularly meaningful, as gardens and landscapes cannot be apprehended through one image each; many are required to give an adequate representation.

Finally, the editors wish to thank their families. Mirka Beneš thanks Francesco Passanti for spirited intellectual exchange and companionship. Dianne Harris thanks Lawrence and Madeleine Hamlin for their patience and support throughout this project.

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Introduction

A CENTURY OF HISTORICAL STUDY (1900-2000)

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This anthology originated in a small symposium held in February 1995 at Dumbarton Oaks, a research institute of Harvard University in Washington, D.C. The symposium honored Elisabeth Blair MacDougall, retiring Director of Studies in Landscape Architecture (1972–88) at Dumbarton Oaks, and the theme was Italian gardens from antiquity to the baroque period. Three of the contributors to this volume (Ehrlich, Harris, and Lazzaro) read papers, and I moderated. After the event, Dumbarton Oaks suggested a publication and generously consented to my eventual plan, in which Dianne Harris soon joined me, to develop a larger anthology of essays out of the symposium.

As comparative, intercultural studies in the history of western European gardens appeared to be a particularly fruitful avenue to pursue for the future of the field, I decided to structure the anthology as a collection of essays on the gardens and designed landscapes of both early modern Italy and France – that is, from about the mid-fifteenth century to the French Revolution.² For reasons discussed in the historiography below, I felt that it was an apt time to look at these two garden cultures, Italian and French, side by side and to take a methodological reading of the scholarly literature on these two historically related subjects of study, and that this might best be done by commissioning essays from the current generation of scholars, both younger ones and those whose work has reached full maturity – with the exception of one model from the preceding generation, in this case the work of Elisabeth B. MacDougall. The volume that resulted is thus essentially a commissioned anthology and not the acts of a symposium.

The scholarly formation of the authors spans a generation, some twenty-five years, from doctoral dissertations written in the mid-1970s to those produced just recently. All were trained in American universities, and as a scholarly group they come to the material from an Anglo-American perspective. Although, as editors, we would have preferred to have an international representation of the scholarship, in particular French scholarship on French gardens and Italian and German scholarship on Italian gardens, not only the technical complexities of translation

but also the historiographical wish to investigate the paths of an integral generation formed in the increasingly interdisciplinary culture of American universities of the 1980s and 1990s precluded the richer, international option.³

Of the eleven authors in our anthology, all except two were trained as historians of Italian and French art and architecture; the other two are a sociologist and a historian of early modern France. Nearly all focused on gardens from the start of their doctoral studies, and two of the authors teach history in graduate departments of professional landscape architecture. The measure of shared interdisciplinarity in all their approaches is apparent from the fact that, while the art/architectural historians in this volume study gardens with an intellectual framework as much structured by social and cultural concerns as artistic ones, the historian and the sociologist, like an increasing number of their peers, are keen to bring their particular scholarly training to study the artistic forms and culture of gardens, formerly the subjects of art history alone. A common language is the discipline of history, social and cultural above all.

This anthology concentrates on Italy and France, because these are the areas in which Renaissance and baroque gardens, primary products of European court culture, developed first and centrally, and because these are also the areas in which the most innovative scholarship on early modern European gardens, including their relationship to court culture, has been done in recent decades. A correspondingly rich arena of scholarship is only now developing for such gardens outside of Italy and France, while the new methodological (especially geographical) approaches to English gardens have concerned mainly the eighteenth-century land-scape gardens. In bringing together studies on the gardens of two court cultures, this book can further a methodological direction for the next phases of intercultural research on early modern Dutch, English, German, and Spanish gardens, as well as those of Ottoman Turkey, among others.⁴

In social-historical terms, this anthology focuses on elite society in the period from about 1550 to the French Revolution, the centuries when both architectural gardens and parks were considered to be requisite components of aristocratic life. The Italian and French gardens of the late fifteenth to early eighteenth centuries (a slightly different periodization from that of our anthology) have become canons of sorts in the literature, such that by "Italian gardens," one means Italian Renaissance and baroque gardens, and by "French gardens," similarly, those of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the scholarly literature as well as in common usage, later eighteenth-century French gardens of irregular style are usually treated as a separate development from the earlier so-called "formal" gardens. In this anthology, the more inclusive periodization refers to the historical and social phenomenon of early modern elites and princely courts, rather than stylistic categories such as formal-architectural and informal-irregular. Thus, throughout the essays, whether set in Italy or in France, relevant garden types across these centuries include both parks and architectural gardens.

Patrician society and the court – monarchical, princely, or papal – and the relations between urban aristocratic life in cities and its counterpart in suburbs