

H-France Review Vol. 9 (April 2009), No. 46

Robert W. Berger and Thomas F. Hedin, *Diplomatic Tours in the Gardens of Versailles under Louis XIV*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. viii + 171 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes and index. \$55 U.S. (Cl.) ISBN 978-08122-4107-5

Review by Linda Frey, University of Montana, and Marsha Frey, Kansas State University.

This very short book (seventy-three pages of text) will pique the interests of diplomatic historians, those interested in landscape gardening, and early modern European historians who gained insights from Peter Burke's work on the construction of a royal image and the relationship between the arts and power.^[1] Just as Louis and his advisers used architecture, plays, poetry, medals, and ritual to reflect his gloire, so too they did not hesitate to exploit the gardens of Versailles, especially the water spectacles, to underscore the king's power and magnificence. Just as the Byzantine rulers used the throne that rose in the air as visitors approached and whose surrounding mechanical lions and birds roared and sang out to overawe, so Louis relied on his palace and gardens. In medieval Byzantium the lions roared; in seventeenth-century France the fountains flowed—or at least ideally they did.

One of the perpetual problems with the fountains was the scarcity of water. In at least one recorded case the Danish ambassador had to return for the tour because a problem had arisen with the pipes. When the king paraded through his gardens (*la promenade du roi*) or official visitors enjoyed a very scripted, timed tour, gardeners signaled one another with an elaborate series of whistles, indicating when to turn one fountain off and the other on to ensure that the water kept flowing. Only some fountains, those nearest the palace, played nonstop when the king was in residence. When the king guided, the goal was to lead the visitors to think that the king's presence activated the water—as of course it did, but in a very orchestrated manner. The tours, dictated by the flow of the water, changed over time as the gardens evolved. In some very rare cases the king personally conducted the tour as he did twice for Mary of Modena. What was unique about Versailles was Louis' personal interest in the gardens. Official accounts of these tours emphasize not only Louis' patronage but also his role as sole creator just as they often attributed success in battle to Louis—both claims only for the credulous. Undoubtedly, the king did take a personal interest in the gardens and even drew up guides outlining the itinerary and specifying when visitors should pause and then move on (*Manière de montrer les jardins de Versailles*).

The justly celebrated André le Nôtre designed the original gardens in the 1660's and the diplomatic tours commenced shortly thereafter: the first in 1664 for Cardinal Flavio Chigi, the nephew of Pope Alexander VII and the last in 1704 for the Duke of Mantua and for Hadgi Mustafa Aga, the envoy of the Bey of Tripoli. Although the promenade for the Siamese ambassadors (1686) went on for four days, most diplomatic tours lasted less than a day.

Pleasure gardens were nothing new in the seventeenth century; they developed in the Renaissance to enhance the main residence. The gardens at Villa d'Este at Tivoli (begun in 1550) were justly famous and attracted visitors from all over Europe. French kings appropriated such designs but did not incorporate their gardens regularly into diplomatic itineraries until Louis XIV. For Louis and others as well water remained the "soul of the garden" (p.70). The

gardens became so celebrated that the Venetians gave Louis both gondolas and gondoliers for the lake. The gardens did change over time and at least in the view of Nicodemus Tessin the Younger, the Swedish architect who recorded his assessment in 1677 when he first visited the gardens and again in 1687, not for the better. By 1687 Jules Hardouin-Mansart, had destroyed some of Le Nôtre's finest accomplishments. Mansart relied on white and colored marble and bronze to replace the greenery, wood, and stone that Le Nôtre had employed so extensively. The authors argue that a new aesthetic now dominated the gardens. In Tessin's understated but nevertheless devastating indictment: "one must admire the expense more than the genius" (p. 52).

Anyone interested in perusing detailed itineraries of the tour, how visitors proceeded from *bosquet* to *bosquet*, will find it here. The book proceeds seriatim from one tour to the next and is dominated by the official, predictably laudatory, commentary, especially for the tour of the Siamese ambassadors. In the latter case, the Siamese records stored at their former capital, Ayutthaya, were destroyed by fire. Appendix A lists documented garden tours (1664-1685) and prints excerpted comments and appendix B reprints one of the tours. Schematic plans and illustrations of Versailles and its gardens enliven the text.

This book could be improved (but of course made even shorter) by eliminating or paraphrasing the extensive often lengthy quotations interspersed throughout. Only about forty-six pages of the book deal with diplomatic tours and those include the introduction and epilogue. Of the tours outlined, those of Nicolas Tessin the Younger in 1687 (twelve pages) were not for a diplomat but an architect from Sweden.

Nonetheless, scholars will find the insights from this book interesting, but not surprising. Unfortunately, no bibliography is appended and the authors seem to have consulted only a very narrow range of archival and printed sources; they did not look at many of the extensive works on diplomatic ceremonial or the construction of Versailles. The book would have been enriched had they looked, for example, at Ron Love's work on the Siamese embassy or the memoirs of Saint Simon who wittily and devastatingly indicted Versailles as "the saddest and most unattractive of places . . . so ruinous and in such bad taste" and candidly noted that "these artistic marvels of fountains" were constantly drying up.[2]

The authors, Robert Bergen, an independent scholar, and Thomas Hedin, a professor of art history, underscore that the use of the gardens for state and diplomatic visits ended with the death of the Sun King. The gardens, especially the crucial hydraulic system, deteriorated under Louis' two successors. It was not until 1801 when Cardinal Consalvi arrived to conclude the Concordat with Napoleon that the waters again ran. Today on certain days, the Grandes Eaux, tourists can enjoy a recreation of the fountain displays and gain some appreciation for the wonder such spectacles evoked in the seventeenth century.

NOTES

[1] Peter Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1992).

[2] Saint-Simon quoted in *The Century of Louis XIV*, edited by Orest and Patricia Ranum (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1972), pp. 88-90.

Marsha Frey
Kansas State University
mfrey@ksu.edu

Copyright © 2009 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172