

## Sowing to Scale in the *Parterre de Broderie*

SARAH GRANDIN

The *parterre de broderie*—a plane in which boxwood, sand, and flowers were arranged to imitate embroidery—became the central feature of French formal gardens in the first half of the seventeenth century. It delighted the viewer by enlarging a diminutive floral motif typically reserved for a courtier's cuff and transmuting it into greenery. Through this conceit, the *parterre* displayed human mastery over the landscape and the triumph of artifice over nature. Within the context of André Le Nôtre's colossal gardens for Louis XIV, however, the *parterre* suffered growing pains. Moored as it was to a minute referent, its scalability was limited. Though the king's first gardener, Le Nôtre, continued to design and employ *parterres*, he was critical of their legibility, reportedly claiming that the only people who enjoyed them were nursemaids, who would have seen them from an elevated, fixed point from within the château.<sup>1</sup> Viewed up close, the *parterre*'s ornament risked dissolution and distortion, its scrolls and flourishes engulfed by the very shrubbery from which they emerged. Le Nôtre's concern reflects the type of pressures placed on components of landscape architecture as they were made to adapt to larger properties during the reign of Louis XIV.<sup>2</sup> Movement from plan to planting and from paper to ground precipitated strain on available materials and techniques. The *parterre*'s troubled status is thus embroiled in two of the greatest challenges to the realization and maintenance of the Sun King's gardens: that of amassing discrete organisms and individual gestures into a harmonious whole, and that of accounting for the different scales at which these elements would be viewed.

Brought from Italy in the sixteenth century, ornamental *parterres* were naturalized in the French tradition, a transfer epitomized in the heavily “embroidered” gardens of Marie de Medici at the Luxembourg Palace.<sup>3</sup> Their designer, Jacques Boyceau de la Barauderie, wrote in his 1638 treatise that the disposition of an entire garden when viewed from on high should appear at a glance as a single *parterre*.<sup>4</sup> In a similar vein, the polymath Antoine-Joseph Dezallier d'Argenville claimed in his 1709 treatise that the gardener's task was to “sew” all components of a site together to make a coherent whole.<sup>5</sup> Depending on the size of the garden, the *parterre* could occupy the majority of the landscape's surface area, or be only one of many features assembled.

In light of Boyceau and Dezallier's statements, it seems that the *parterre*'s resemblance to embellished cloth served a practical purpose: to fill and unify the garden. Though the *parterre*

---

<sup>1</sup> Louis de Rouvroy Saint-Simon, *Mémoires de Saint-Simon*, ed. A. De Boislisle, vol. XV (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1897–1918), 471–473.

<sup>2</sup> Georges Farhat, “L'Optique de *Pourtraiture* au jardin en France (ca. 1550–1650): Transferts et invention entre perspective et jardin,” *De la peinture au jardin*, ed. Hervé Brunon and Denis Ribouillault (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2013), 117–149.

<sup>3</sup> Ada V. Segre, “De la flore ornementale à l'ornement horticole: Transferts de techniques et structures géométriques,” *André Le Nôtre, Fragments d'un paysage culturel: Institutions, arts, sciences et techniques* (Sceaux: Musée de l'Île de France, 2006), 188–203.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Boyceau de la Barauderie, *Traité du jardinage selon les raisons de la nature et de l'art* (Paris, 1638), 68.

<sup>5</sup> Antoine-Joseph Dezallier d'Argenville, *La théorie et la pratique du jardinage [...]* (Paris: J. Mariette, 1709), 121.

required skill to plant and some upkeep over time, it was a relatively efficient and economic way to decoratively occupy sizeable swaths of land.<sup>6</sup> Nature's finest ornament—flowers—were tiny, costly, fragile, and fickle by comparison, not to mention that their distinct perfumes and unique structures would have been lost in the vast expanse of bigger gardens.<sup>7</sup> Through its floral and vegetal motifs writ large, the *parterre* imitated not only embroidery, but also visually amplified the botanical specimens from which the fiber art drew inspiration and from which the garden itself was made. The organicity of the *parterre*'s stylized motifs, not to mention the contrivance of nature “re-presenting” itself, made it an ideal feature to border a château. The *parterre* served as a site of transition between the ordered rhythms of the interior and the exterior, in which natural elements were worked into architectonic submission. By enacting a shift in scale and material, the *parterre de broderie* announced, at once, the stylistic consistencies and practical ruptures between the royal apartments and terraced gardens. In its intermediate size and liminal location, the *parterre de broderie* hovered between the apprehensible finitude of flowers fixed in silk thread and the infinity evoked by Le Nôtre's manipulation of topography and sightlines.

At the same time, it is all too easy to harbor an outsized perception of the *parterre*'s particular importance or to presume its successful reception in the Sun King's gardens due to the way it was represented in prints and drawings. Its prominence in the most illustrious French formal gardens of the *grand siècle* has been magnified in two types of graphic representation: in plates depicting actual and suggested plans for garden design, and in pictorial prints by the likes of Israël Silvestre and the Pérelle family. In the first category of images, the proliferation of *parterre* plates resulted from the evolving status of the seventeenth-century gardener, who sought to professionalize and fashion himself as a practitioner of a liberal art. By theorizing their practices and publishing treatises full of illustrations, gardeners such as Boyceau and André and Claude I Mollet could present themselves as accomplished draftsmen equipped with a knowledge of geometry. In the second category, *parterres*' prime placement in the foreground of a disproportionate number of garden views resulted from the simple fact that they were often located nearest the château to improve their visibility.

Furthermore, the *parterre*'s apparent success in imitating embroidery is heightened by the graphic medium of print itself, which largely suppresses the boxwood's texture and volume in favor of those distinct contours to which the burin and etcher's needle are best suited. It has been suggested that in the particular context of Versailles and its satellites, the *parterre de broderie* stood as an allusion to the crown's commercial preeminence and sumptuary authority in the realm of luxurious textiles.<sup>8</sup> Yet this seamless semiotic transposition—between embroidery and its boxwood mimic—is tenuous given the mutability of the planted figures, not to mention the *parterre*'s employ beyond royal gardens before, during, and after the Sun King's reign.

Great pains were, in fact, taken to “draw” in the garden and make the *parterre* resemble embroidery. To achieve this fidelity, gardeners employed transfer methods common to the fiber and graphic arts alike. After squaring the original design, the gardener would lay out a grid of ropes

<sup>6</sup> Though there are some mentions of cleaning, raking, and trimming parterres throughout the archives of the Maison du Roi (the O-1 series held at the Archives nationales in Paris), the paucity of references suggests that a relatively modest effort was required to maintain them.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Hyde, *Cultivated Power: Flowers, Cultures, and Politics in the Reign of Louis XIV* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Chandra Mukerji, *Territorial Ambitions in the Gardens of Versailles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 124–135. Thierry Mariage, *L'univers de Le Nôtre: Les origines de l'aménagement du Territoire* (Bruxelles: P. Mardaga/ Architecture + Recherches, 1990), 77–81.

and pegs on his prepared terrain to scale up the pattern, section by section.<sup>9</sup> He would draw on the land with his super-sized stylus, and then place individual boxwood plants along these lines. In a way, this process is similar to that of the *parterre*'s homologue, embroidery: in both practices the grid—a tool that originated in the warp and weft of textiles itself—was the substrate or scaffold on and through which botanical motifs were translated and generated.<sup>10</sup> In their manufacture, both *parterres* and embroidery were objects of the accumulation of stitches or specimens ordered into a tight-knit image. And yet the scale of the *parterre*'s constitutive “pixels,” along with their capacity to grow and change in time, made the conditions of this operation of transfer quite different.

The lines and planes prescribed and recorded in prints and drawings were achieved in the garden of sand raked smooth, fastidiously sheared lawns, and rows of individual trees trimmed into rows. This move from what Darcy Grimaldo-Grigsby has called the “massless, timeless space of geometry” to the physical world required the coordination of labor and of natural resources.<sup>11</sup> Practitioners of geometry such as the engineer Alain Manesson-Mallet were aware of the challenges of applying theories and forms conceived of on paper to the ground, and of the “friction” inherent in such processes.<sup>12</sup> In Manesson-Mallet's 1702 treatise *La géométrie pratique*, the composition of illustrations—which consisted of a garden in the upper register and Euclidean figures below—exemplifies an ideal, that of the successful application of theory to the land. Le Nôtre's critique of the *parterre* as only enjoyable from the nursemaid's static vantage reveals an anxiety about the difficulty of “drawing” in the garden, of the disjunction between geometry's imagined planes and figures and their application in three dimensions. The whole's integrity was fragile once the synoptic view was lost and the organic, constituent parts became visible.

The notion that Versailles and other formal gardens were perfect “Cartesian” projections has been challenged in recent years, from Georges Farhat's analysis of Le Nôtre's engagement with issues of anamorphosis, to Patricia Falguières's exploration of the influence of Gassendian philosophy on seventeenth-century gardening.<sup>13</sup> Both authors take into account Le Nôtre's apparent awareness of the subjectivity of perspective and human limitation as complicating counterpoints to the “pathos of infinity.” More concretely, Farhat has called into question Charles Perrault's attribution of the Grand Canal's precise measurement to Picard's cutting-edge geodesic technology, an account the fallen administrator fabricated to valorize his camp's modern technical advances.<sup>14</sup> Perrault's position intentionally obscured the cumulative, human-scale gestures that

<sup>9</sup> Dezallier d'Argenville, 125–131.

<sup>10</sup> Carmen Bambach, *Drawing and Painting in the Italian Renaissance Workshop: Theory and Practice, 1300-1600* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 10–13; 28–32; 128–133.

<sup>11</sup> Darcy Grimaldo-Grigsby, “Geometry/Labor=Volume Mass?” *October*, vol. 106 (Autumn, 2003), 5.

<sup>12</sup> Glenn Adamson and Joshua G. Stein, “Imprints: Scale and the Maker's Trace,” *Scale*, ed. Jennifer L. Roberts (Chicago: Terra Foundation for American Art/University of Chicago Press), 32–35.

<sup>13</sup> Farhat, “Le Nôtre and the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns: Optics and Perspective, Visual Art and Instrumentation,” *André Le Nôtre in Perspective*, ed. Farhat and Patricia Bouchenot-Déchin (Paris: Hazan, 2013), 70–79. Patricia Falguières, “Philosophes au jardin: une promenade sceptique,” *André Le Nôtre: fragments d'un paysage culturel*, 130–151.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Perrault, *Mémoires de Charles Perrault, de l'Académie française, et premier commis des Bâtimens du roi* (Avignon, 1759), 167–168. Georges Farhat, “Optical Instrumenta[liza]tion and Modernity at Versailles: From Measuring the Earth to Leveling in French Seventeenth-Century Gardens,” *Technology and the Garden*, ed. Michael G. Lee and Kenneth I. Helphand (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2014), 25–52.

built the canal, which was most likely measured with the gardener's prosaic graphometer and with trusty chains unfurled end to end. Even in the Sun King's gardens, one of the most impressive feats of engineering was earned through the application of vernacular knowledge and through the use of devices limited in their extent. Though smooth and shimmering in its final appearance, the making of the canal was a piecemeal affair.

Like the potentially disincorporated figure of the *parterre*, such fragmented efforts posed a threat to the integrity of the garden if revealed. If gardens are a form of intense "place-making," of the forging of a concentrated "milieu" or a "midst," as John Dixon Hunt has defined them, then the gardens of Louis XIV initially evoke a place of supreme control, one overseen by a scrupulous foreman, the gardener king.<sup>15</sup> Within this ordered place, however, resided a latent tension between the notion of Louis XIV as the lone draftsman and the status conferred by his demonstrated ability to harness multiple hands and materials. Analyzing the visibility of preparation in the festivals hosted at Versailles, Louis Marin suggested that "dissimulation of an operation" was key to the perceived miraculous nature of its result.<sup>16</sup> Such a fiction is preserved in the Sun King's gardens if we position ourselves where we are told by official guides and images: from a lofty vantage, on a central axis, too far to perceive its working parts. Once we begin to wander the gardens, however, our scale of attention inherently changes, and we cannot help but become aware of the particulate: the trees, flowers, animals, and bodies of water groomed, clipped, and cajoled into rank. And it is from this ground-level perspective that the minutest detail—a drooping tulip, an errant weed, a sickly orange tree—has the potential to interrupt the illusion of the ideal ensemble.

---

<sup>15</sup> John Dixon Hunt, *Greater Perfections: the Practice of Garden Theory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 6.

<sup>16</sup> Louis Marin, *Portrait of the King*, trans. Martha Houle (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 196.