

POLITECNICO DI TORINO
SECOND SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE
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Honors theses

The French picturesque garden of the 18th century: analysis and sketch of project for the case of the Désert de Retz

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This thesis encompasses the phenomenon of the French picturesque garden in the second half of the 18th century, with a particular attention to the socio-cultural context, to the international influences, and to the relationships with the other fine Arts. The example of the Désert de Retz is then examined, a particularly interesting case due to both, its historical and documentary relevance, and its presently ambiguous and unresolved character, deeply impacted by centuries of transformations and dejection, and yet still powerfully evocative. The physical description of the Désert is followed by a commentary on the theme of the restoration of historical gardens and by a sketch of a project that aims to uncover and make legible the original meaning and atmosphere of the individual elements that constitute its physical and conceptual backdrop.

The renovation of the art of the garden in the second half of the 18th century meets a new need for a more direct and authentic relationship between Man and Nature, which was considered by the Sensualist philosophy as the primary source of knowledge, emotions, and feelings. In parallel to the definition in architecture of the theory of character, the literature develops the idea of a "talking" garden, capable to transmit precise feelings ranging from visual satisfaction to esthetic-sensory pleasure, inspired to the classical canons or to the more recent concept of sublime. A symbolic dimension is often associated to the garden's formal appearance, with the goal of spawning a large range of passions and moral reflexions in the spectator's mind. Similarly, in more mundane gardens, the ethical content is substituted by the will to awe and to amuse the onlooker. We can locate the main models that contribute to the character of the French picturesque in the irregular Chinese and English gardens, in the landscape paintings by Lorrain, Poussin, and Rosa from the 17th century, and in the classical and exotic architecture. Its principles and specifics are documented through the study of treaties and through a typological and thematic analysis of the most frequently used elements. The garden becomes a place of synthesis and experimentation, a *pays d'illusion* that mirrors the cultural interests and the collective imagination in the stylized forms of an ideal *nature choisie*, where art is omnipresent both physically and in the ability itself to look and "feel" the landscape.

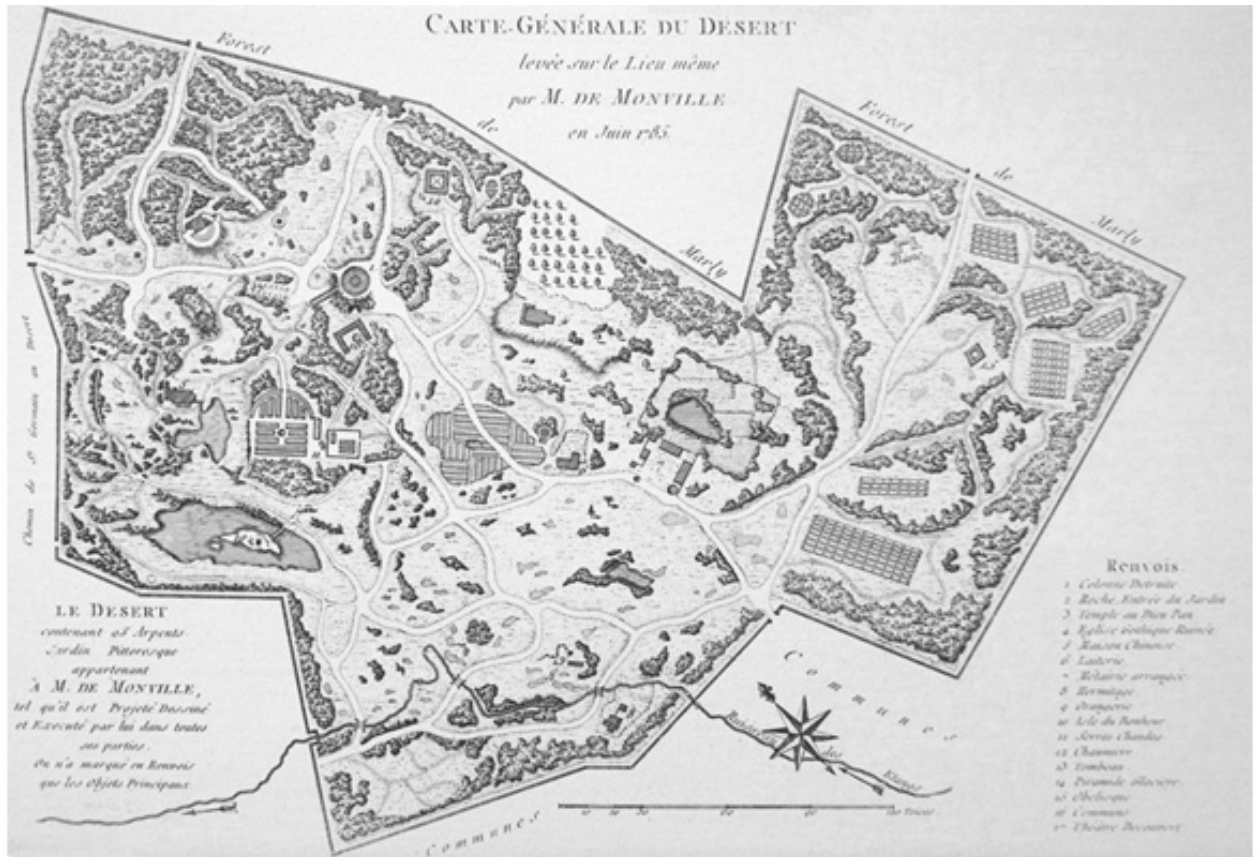
From the comparison with poetry, paintings, and theater several important similarities and reciprocal influences can be observed: the art of the garden employs themes, theories, methodologies, and expressive techniques that had previously been experimented by other disciplines; on the other hand, the garden reaches the dignity of an artistic and literary subject.

In the Désert de Retz (1776-1785) we can highlight the main themes of the picturesque as interpreted by its owner, Racine de Monville (classicism, exoticism, arcadia, *ruinismo*, passion for botanics, and physiocratic interest for agriculture). In spite of the degradation, the disappearance of several *fabriques*, and the substantial changes of the vegetal context, Retz still embodies the spirit of the picturesque garden, also thanks to the restoration process that began in the Seventies.

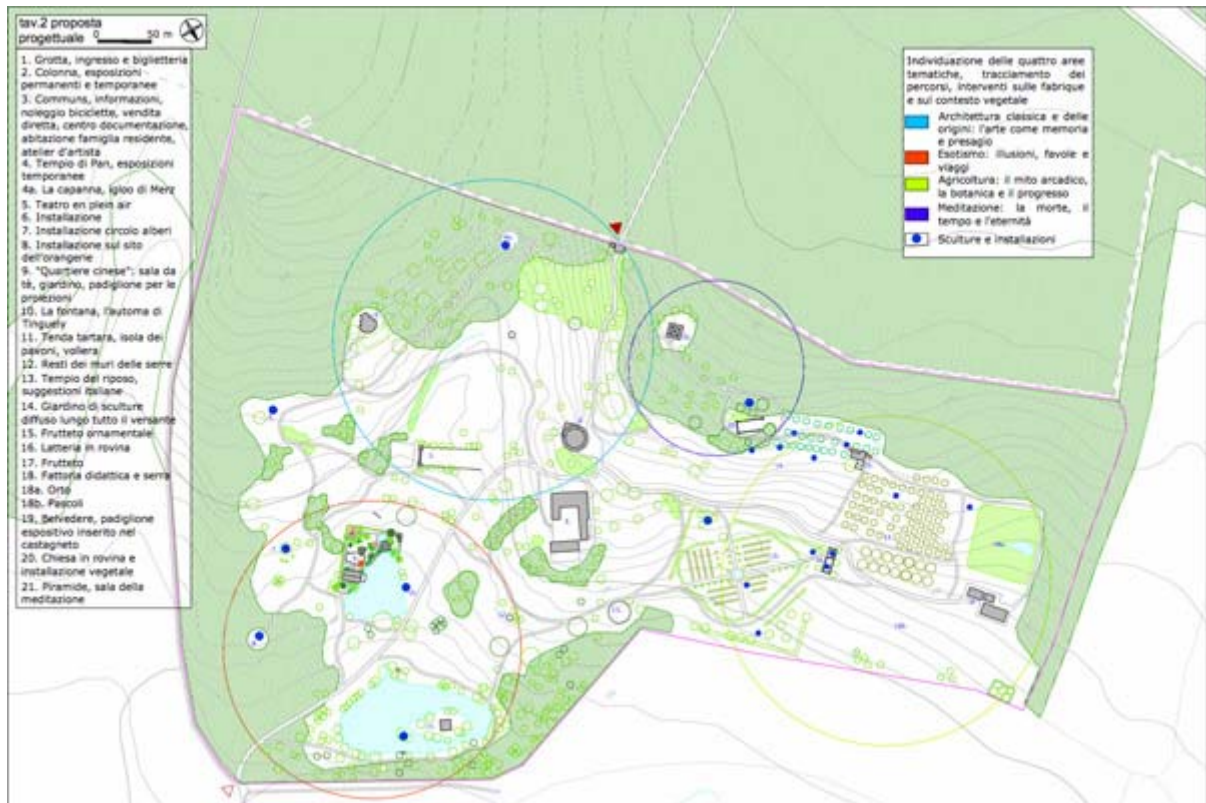


Louis Carrogis (Carmontelle), the Désert de Retz, view from the temple of Pan with the Column House, the open-air theatre and the ruined Gothic chapel, 1785. National Museum Stockholm

Our sketch of restoration project aims to return meaning and relevance to the surviving structures while preserving the historical stratifications, in order to insure the conservation of the garden and of its cultural role. Following the original logic of composition, the Désert can be divided into a number of subsequent scenes over a path that traverses four thematic areas: the analysis of the individual scenes allows to manage the complexity of a heterogeneous (though coherent) composition whose effectiveness depends on the assortment of its parts, and to suggest a broad range of proposals whose degree of definition spans from the simple hint to the full architectonic design.



Carte Générale du Désert, levée sur le lieu même par M. de Monville en juin 1785, cahier XIII, planche II. Georges Louis LE ROUGE, Détails de Nouveaux Jardins à la mode, Jardins anglo-chinois, 21 cahiers, Le Rouge, Paris 1776-1787



Project sketch, synthetic table of the interventions

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