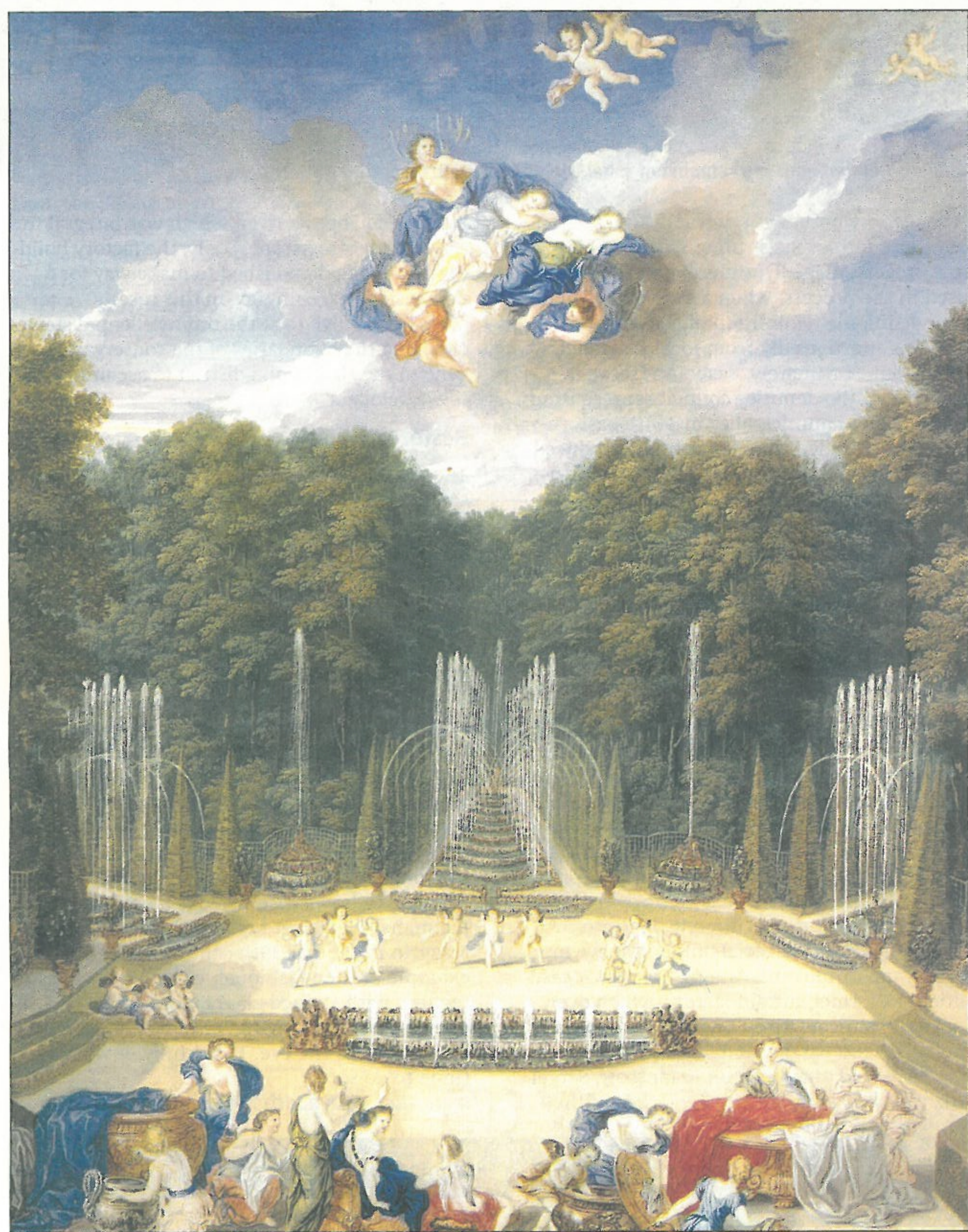


FEATURE

Restoration

Fountains dance again in Versailles's Théâtre d'Eau

Historic choreography inspired the design for a new take on the Water Theatre Grove. By Claudia Barbieri Childs



Clockwise from top: Jean Cotelle's *Vues du Théâtre d'Eau*, 1688; Jules Hardouin-Mansart, *Gilded Children Fountain*, 1609, and Louis Benech (left) and Jean-Michel Othoniel

The Théâtre d'Eau was once the most dramatic of the many groves in André Le Nôtre's extravagant gardens for the Palace of Versailles, an outdoor stage for court spectacles in which the "Sun King" Louis XIV himself often frolicked as a lead dancer. Created between 1671 and 1674, and demolished and grassed over by Louis XVI a century later in 1775, it was finally abandoned and closed to the public for more than a decade after the surrounding trees were uprooted in two storms in 1990 and 1999. Now, the opening of the restored Versailles Water Theatre Grove promises to be a memorable moment in next year's arts calendar; the woodland and lake feature in the palace gardens is due to open next September.

Created by the French landscape architect Louis Benech and the glass sculptor Jean-Michel Othoniel, and funded by the billionaire Korean inventor and landscape photographer Ahae, the grove will reimagine a space conceived by the 17th-century master gardener Le Nôtre and the painter Charles Le Brun for Louis XIV.

Rather than trying to recreate the lost original, Benech and Othoniel have designed a completely new space, but one that refers to its history in multiple ways. Their project was chosen from 140 contenders in a competition launched in 2011 by the former director of Versailles, Jean-Jacques Aillagon. It was selected "because it is in the direct lineage of the spirit of Le Nôtre and

Louis XIV – both in its landscape and vegetation as well as in the necessary presence of water and fountains," says Aillagon's successor, Catherine Pégard.

Versailles was built on marshland. Le Nôtre and Le Brun worked with Louis XIV, himself a keen gardener, for more than 40 years to turn the 2,000 acre park into a subtle landscape, mixing classical formalism with Italian Baroque. The garden was conceived as an extension of the palace, in which a succession of woodland groves masked clearings that played the role of hidden outdoor rooms, linked and crisscrossed by a geometrical network of paths,

"The fountains are placed where Louis XIV and his retinue danced"

terraces, ornamental lakes and ponds, flowerbeds and perspectives.

"The Water Theatre Grove, situated in the north of the garden, was originally the most spectacular of the many groves," Pégard says. "Le Nôtre expressed all his genius in the creation of the scenography of a theatre. Everything was grandiose and magnificent; a profusion of fountains, water effects, vegetation and sculptures."

Benech's overall design for the site incorporates the few remaining vestiges of the original masonry, while feed pipes for the new water

features will make use, where possible, of the original buried hydraulic systems, which are still in place.

The perspectives of Le Nôtre's layout will be marked by variously coloured species of trees, including beeches, holm oaks, Irish yews and Catalpas, which will be restricted in height to 17m so that the space remains a secret, invisible from the palace – part of Le Nôtre's original concept. Benech's plan transforms the stages where the king danced into two ornamental ponds, decorated by fountain sculptures to be created by Othoniel. These will have the distinction of being the first permanent sculptures to be placed in the palace gardens in three centuries, according to Pégard.

When Benech, one of France's leading contemporary garden designers, decided to tender for the restoration project, he knew he needed to work with an artist, he told *The Art Newspaper*, to capture the spirit of the original partnership between Le Nôtre and Le Brun. The childlike quality of Othoniel's brightly coloured glass ball sculptures immediately appealed to him, echoing the frolicking putti and cupids that once decorated the space, and the *Gilded Children Fountain* installed by Jules Hardouin-Mansart in 1709 on the western edge of the site – which is still there although it badly needs to be repaired.

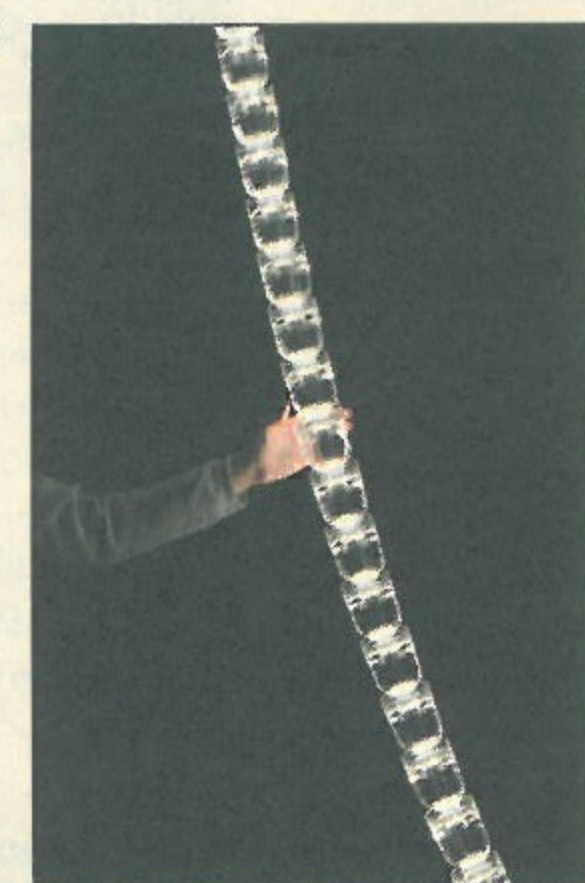
"I knew of Othoniel's sculpture at the entrance of the Palais Royal-Musée du Louvre metro station in Paris," Benech says, referring to *Le Kiosque des Noctambules* (the kiosk of the night

Loops of light

A new chandelier for the palace

The staircase in the grand Neo-Classical hall leading to the King's Grand Apartment in the Palace of Versailles has remained unfinished since its design in 1772 by Ange-Jacques Gabriel, the architect behind the Opéra Grand de Versailles, which was created to celebrate the marriage of the future Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette.

Although the staircase was essentially completed in the 1980s, it has lacked a grand decoration to match the extravagant effects elsewhere in the palace. But in 2011, Ronan & Erwan Bouroullec won a competition to design a permanent work of art over the staircase. Their 12m-high design, a loose illuminated chain featuring three looping forms made of Swarovski crystals and LED lights, was unveiled last month. *B.L.*



Fit for a king: Swarovski crystals and LED lights



Plan of the Théâtre d'Eau as depicted by landscape painter Jean Chaufourier in 1720 (above) and Benech and Othoniel's 21st-century interpretation

owls), the exuberant installation outside of the Comédie Française theatre that launched Othoniel's career as a high-profile public artist in 2000.

"I liked his childlike, festive, accessible quality," Benech adds. "He is not conceptual or provocative. He has a capacity to decorate and embellish things. There is a kind of sagesness in his expression. I chose him because of the representation of children in the early statuary of the grove." He says he asked Othoniel to create four sculptures, "each marked by a blue pearl", representing the blue floor of the original basin, pieces of which have been recovered by archaeologists in a preliminary excavation of the site.

Benech and Othoniel were the only duo of architect and sculptor to enter the competition, a factor that certainly played with the jury in their favour, Pégard says. Othoniel says he was attracted to the history of the space and accepted the invitation instantly. "I am not a historian, but a work of art is always linked to a story," he says, speaking in his Paris studio, surrounded by watercolour sketches of his project, a miniature model of his dancing fountains and samples of the golden Murano glass balls that he will use to create the body of each fountain – the largest of which is 18cm in diameter and weighs seven kilos.

"I have always been fascinated by gardens," Othoniel adds. "The intimate link of my works in gardens is also connected to the material I use. Glass recovers its mineral condition outside."

King as choreographer

The Sun King not only danced, he also choreographed. The royal steps were recorded in 1701 in a book by Raoul-Auger Feuillet. The author and choreographer used a dance notation system developed specially for the purpose. The king was also a theatrical practitioner of diplomacy, even writing a user manual, *The Way to Present the Gardens of Versailles*, in which he gave instructions on how the garden was to be shown to visiting ambassadors.

Othoniel says he borrowed both from the choreography book and the garden manual in his design for *Les Belles Danses*, the group of fountains that will be the centrepiece of the grove's revival. "After examining these two texts I thought that there was a strong connection between the garden and dance," he says. "I knew that once upon a time there were lots of parties, performances and ballets in the gardens: it seemed natural to me to place my sculptures on the water, as Benech's basins are a contemporary evocation of the grove's theatre stage." The fountains are placed where Louis XIV and his retinue danced and Othoniel wants to "prolong the gesture of the dance with jets of water coming out of the fountains – the water is a prolongation of the sculptures. And the pool is a superb mirrored pedestal for them."

In form, the designs of *The Entrance of Apollo*, *The Rigadoon of Peace* and *The Bourée of Achilles* – the individual sculptures that make up *Les Belles*

Gardener to the King and king of gardeners



No garden in the world is more famous than that of Versailles. This year, the Château has celebrated the 400th anniversary of the birth of its landscape architect, André Le Nôtre, with a series of events and exhibitions, including the current show "André Le Nôtre in Perspectives" (until 23 February 2014).

Le Nôtre (1613-1700) was born into a family of landscape architects and grew up in the Tuileries in Paris, where his father, Pierre, was the head gardener. Taking over from his father, André expanded their westward vista, paving the way for the Champs-Élysées. From a young age, he worked in the gardens of the nobility – his first major position was with Gaston d'Orléans, the uncle of Louis XIV. He would go on to work at Vaux-le-Vicomte, Fontainebleau, Chantilly, and Sceaux, among other estates in France, and he contributed designs for Charles II's plans for Greenwich Park in London.

Versailles, however, was his *magnum opus*, consuming the best part of 40 years of his life. He worked with existing elements of the garden, but completely transformed them, collaborating with, and matching the ambition of, Louis Le Vau, the king's chief architect, who was vastly expanding the palace. Le Nôtre enlarged the terraces and created the groves which provided the shade and flair next to the light and formal order of the parterres, which he lengthened and refined.

Central to his brilliance was his training in other disciplines – his studies in perspective and anamorphosis techniques from optical geometry are crucial factors in the Versailles gardens' remarkable vistas and shifting scale. B.L.

Danses – are directly inspired by Feuillet's choreographical notations. Abstract arabesques in Othoniel's trademark strings of Murano glass beading, sinuously interlaced, evoke the steps of the dance, and the body in movement.

The lacy calligraphy also echoes Le Nôtre's embroidery-like parterres (in turn inspired by the decoration on his sovereign's clothes) while, to achieve an illusion of perspective (Le Nôtre was renowned for his *trompe l'oeil* effects), the beading of the fountains will be carefully graduated. "I am in a dialogue with Le Nôtre and Le Brun, striving to fit into a historical continuum," Othoniel says.

A big celebration in September will mark the project's completion, for which Othoniel says he wants to put on one of Louis XIV's Baroque ballets at the Opéra Royal de Versailles. Yet, if Louis XIV's presence dominates the project, Othoniel says it is ultimately Louis XVI who made it all possible by destroying the grove in the 18th century. "It is thanks to Louis XVI's intervention that we can intervene today," he says. "If it hadn't been destroyed, this opportunity would never have arisen. It's interesting how history opens doors for the future."



Chris Pyle
Carl Hammer Gallery



The new grove as imagined by Benech and Othoniel, with the Murano-glass sculpture in the middle



23-26 JANUARY 2014

METROPOLITAN PAVILION
125 W 18TH NYC
OPENING NIGHT PREVIEW
JANUARY 22

METROSHOWNYC.COM

INTRODUCING METRO CURATES
35 GALLERIES | 35 VIEWPOINTS