

BOOK REVIEW

Ian Thompson

The Sun King's Garden: Louis XIV, André Le Nôtre and the Creation of the Gardens of Versailles

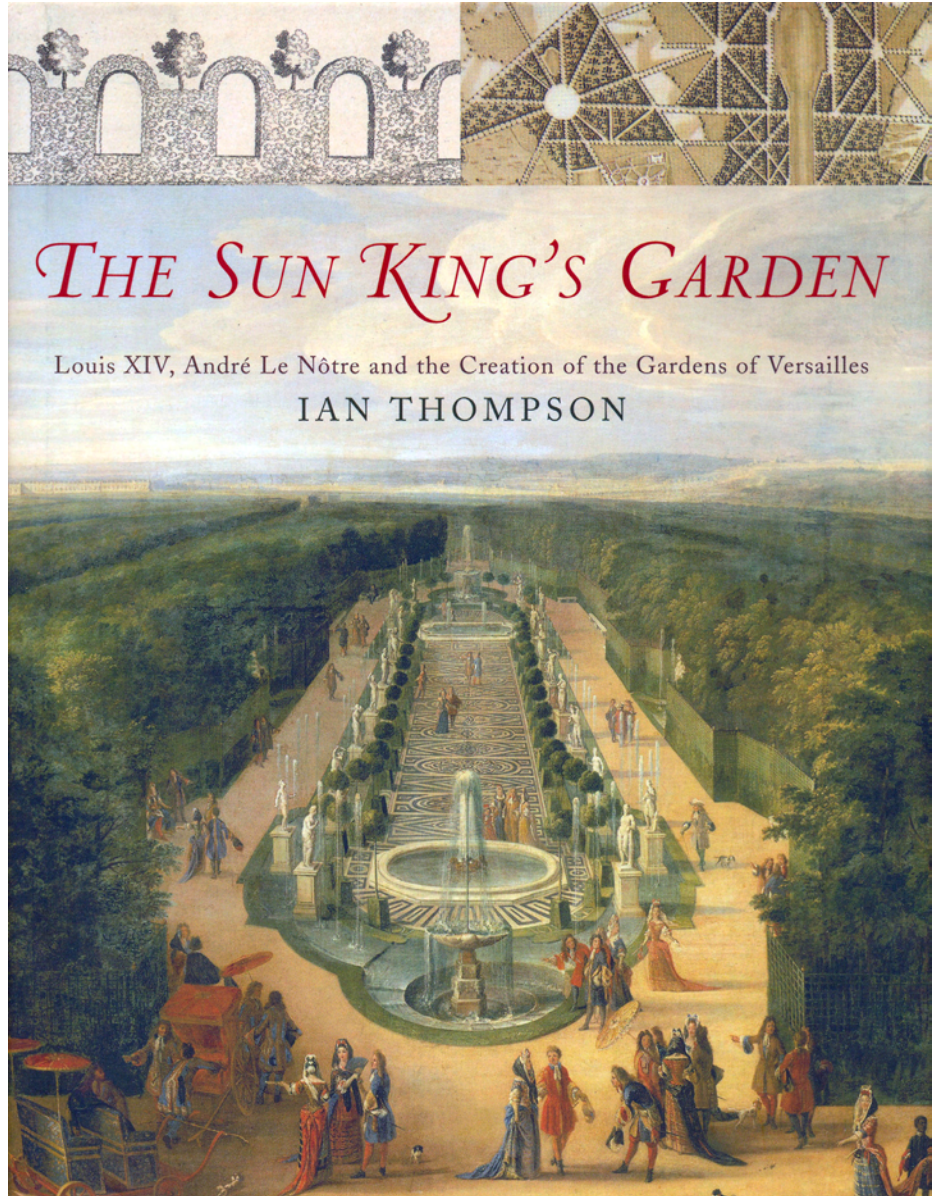
London: Bloomsbury, 2006, xiv-370 pp., b.&w. and color illus., endnotes, bibliography, £ 12

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Ian Thompson, a landscape architect, has written this book on Versailles for a general public, but he also intends to appeal to those with an academic interest in the subject. On the whole, *The Sun King's Garden* is a good account of the progress of the works at Versailles and Trianon, their main protagonists, and the technical challenges (levelling, hydraulic engineering, optics) brought about by their unprecedented change of scale. The huge costs of these works—financially, politically, and in human lives—are well observed. Thompson provides details of foreign policy and society during Louis XIV's reign, although not without some misinterpretations (for instance, regarding Molière). Various pertinent and interesting remarks come to the fore. He mentions issues under debate about the site's history (such as the authorship of the parterre d'eau), unfortunately lacking in detail. Some misconceptions are perpetuated, such as Louis XIV taking over the Vaux team for his personal benefit, although most of them had long been working in the service of the king. Thompson states that Versailles would be "true to the Cartesian spirit of the times" while Le Nôtre would be "heir to Descartes' rationalism": such an affirmation, important for a seventeenth-century cultural history, should be better supported by arguments.

One might expect assessment of Le Nôtre's achievements as seen through the eyes of a landscape architect to be among the book's strengths. Thompson offers interesting insights from this perspective, but not enough. To assume (as Michael Brix had done in 2004) that at Vaux-le-Vicomte "the château's façade and dome are perfectly mirrored in the Carré d'eau, an effect that must have required the careful calculation of distances, levels and angles of reflection" needs to be demonstrated. Nor should Thompson assert without evidence that Le Nôtre was "no great plantsman."

The book traverses rather summarily the history of Versailles from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, concluding with the influence of Versailles, an issue in



itself which is dealt with too superficially. Discussing the critical reception of Le Nôtre and Versailles among British landscape architects from the eighteenth century on, for example, would definitely have been a more original and useful contribution.

The selection and layout of the book's many illustrations is problematic. The text never refers directly to the images, which are unnumbered and often inserted far from the text passages they illustrate. As far as gardens are concerned, these images are not very different from those that can be found in the publication of Pierre-André Lablaude (1998). Far too many plates are borrowed from Dezallier d'Argenville (1709). They are not relevant to the topic, whereas, on the other hand, no drawings by Le Nôtre for Versailles are included at all, despite their immediate pertinence for the subject. The sole document bearing Le Nôtre's handwriting to be seen in this book (namely the Greenwich garden plan) does not appear before page 274. Though drawings by Le Nôtre and his collaborators are regrettably scarce, ten or so of them are connected with Versailles and Trianon. Their absence here is all the more regrettable since most of them can be found in Franklin H. Hazlehurst's monograph (1980).

Similarly, the book's scholarly apparatus leaves something to be desired. As endnotes are not marked in the main text, the reader is unable to know which passages are supplemented with further references. Moreover, the select bibliography is not relevant enough. Instead of quoting Érik Orsenna's biographical novel, one would have expected to find (at least in the endnotes) Gerold Weber's monograph (1985), in which Versailles is dealt with in depth, as well as the studies by Gérard Sabatier (1999) and Vincent Maroteaux (2000).

A pleasant read, this book will certainly meet the expectations of the general public at which it aims. It will nevertheless leave readers with a more academic interest somewhat unsatisfied as it offers little in the way of references, nor does it reveal anything new about these mythical garden history icons: Le Nôtre and Versailles.

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Carlo Maratta, Portrait of André Le Nôtre, 1687.
Château de Versailles.
Photograph: Réunion des musées nationaux, from
Thompson, p. 26.



Plan of the gardens of the Queen's House, Greenwich.
Attributed to André Le Nôtre by Ernest de Ganay (most of
the annotations are in the landscape architect's hand).
Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France.
Photograph: Réunion des musées nationaux, from
Thompson, p. 274.

