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Laura Carnevali

# **The Park and the Royal Palace of Caserta**

The Eolo Fountain and the throne room





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## The Park of Reggia di Caserta

### 1.1. The garden during time

The idea of garden or public area has certainly not been ignored in ancient times and through the ages, passing between moments of splendour and darkness, symptomatic condition of a high level of civilization, social peace and economic well-being.

Over the centuries, the garden has always been associated with the idea of peace, spirituality and solace: man, staying there, finds himself, reflects and meditates. Traditionally created for the enjoyment of sovereigns, popes, wealthy people, gardens reflect their nature, which allow the mind moving away from the oppression of the busy everyday life. These short notes summarize its history and evolution.

The garden, according to the most ancient descriptions of both Chinese and Egyptian art which have been handed down to us by Herodotus, is symmetrical and its design follows a regular pattern; even in the Bible, Salomone's garden is described according to a strictly geometric form « a square with basins, water games, aviaries and cultivated plants and bounded by a high mural ». Also the Persian gardens, according to the tradition mentioned by Plinio, Senofonte and Plutarco, presented strictly geometric shapes.

During the development of the Roman Empire these concepts were applied, for example, in the public gardens desired by Pompeo and Cesare, as well as the sumptuous gardens of Lucullo with terraces superimposed, waterfalls and pools. But Tacito reports that in Nerone's period the luxury of marble, water games, sculptures, is replaced by a different taste of the garden which enhances simple subjects such as ponds, car-

pets of grass, woods, motifs on which in later centuries will be based the so-called “landscape garden” or “English garden”. During the long medieval period<sup>1</sup> the garden — although partially ignored — presented three formal connotations: the village garden, the monastery garden and the castle one. It regains importance in the Renaissance, especially in relation to the grand and rich patrician villas. In this period luxurious gardens were created both in palaces and in suburban villas. The characteristics of the architectural landscape of the “Italian garden” were just codified during the Renaissance, reflecting the humanistic thought of the man in the centre of the universe, with the mission of ruling nature and bringing order in its chaos. The Renaissance garden is one of the most important expressions of the architecture of this period, so leading artists such as Raffaello<sup>2</sup>, Bramante, Tribolo<sup>3</sup>, Pirro Logorio, dedicated themselves to the design of complex systems for their clients. They contained successions of terraces, steps, ramps, fountains, in which the decorative elements created elementary geometric shapes set in a space according to a geometric-prospective vision with architectural meaning.

Starting from this century, in fact, both at building, urban and territorial level, a perspective regularity was constantly investigated, a symmetry

1. The news about the character and the diffusion of the gardens comes out mainly from literary sources. They date back to the Carolingian period some fundamental documents to reconstruct the formal and functional characteristics of the gardens of the time (this is the first plan of the Benedictine abbey of St. Gallo in Switzerland) drawn up by abbot Haito de Reichenau. Among the literary forms that describe the medieval garden in its most evolved form are: the Proem of the third day of the Decameron by G. Boccaccio, the treatise on agriculture *De Ruralia Comodorum*. This latter presents a complex articulation with a fountain in the centre, divided by avenues covered with pergolas; according to a geometric rule it deals with the *pomario*, the *viridario*, small buildings, fishpond, maze, etc.

2. An elegant example of the Renaissance expression of suburban villas is Villa Madama, designed by Raffaello in 1519 for Giulio de Medici, then Clemente VII. Only a small part of the initial project in which Antonio da Sangallo il Giovane collaborated has been realized. The building rises in a steep ground that is regularly arranged in terraces, creating a particularly suggestive surrounding.

3. The Boboli garden (in the heart of Florence) is considered one of the best examples of the “Italian garden” whose project was entrusted to Nicolò Pericoli called the Tribolo but, after his death, many architects took over the direction of the works — while respecting the layout conceived by the Tribolo — who worked on both the villa and the garden.



clearly in contrast with the typically medieval random irregularity. The Renaissance garden was affected by this trend; often its development was axial, plans were adopted with simple geometric patterns, regular and symmetrical, in which the elements that composed it were arranged according to perspective criteria<sup>4</sup>. The concept of symmetry was so deeply rooted in Renaissance artists that, often, they modified classic artefact during their representation (drawing it even in an unreal configuration) to make it coherent with the incongruous principles of symmetry<sup>5</sup>. Francesco di Giorgio Martini also considered gardening compositions in his *Treatises on Architecture, Engineering and Military Art* saying: « the composer has to reduce the composition to a few species of perfect figure, such as circular, square etc... »<sup>6</sup>.

The garden, according to the Renaissance concept, resulted from the organization of elements perfectly related to the architecture to which it was connected, resulting in a single ambient where the environment and the built elements harmoniously coexisted in an ideal combination. In this period the natural space was enriched with new architectural forms, the natural differences in height of the ground were softened by degrading terraces. The same trees were regularized by cutting their branches and transforming them to geometric shapes (such as prisms, cones, pyramids) through the gardening technique which reflected the tradition of ancient topiary art<sup>7</sup> (whose origin probably dates to the first century B.C.). This one will have a leading role in the Italian Renaissance garden<sup>8</sup>. In the Renaissance garden, therefore, an architectural morphology can be recognized, showing from the ideological point of view the ability of man (the artist) in taming nature. The idea is reflected in one of the peculiar conceptions of this historical period: the strong and victorious man on the forces of nature<sup>9</sup>.

4. Cfr. A. MANIGUO CALCAGNO, *Architettura del paesaggio*, Bologna, 1982, pp. 70–73.

5. Cfr. M. DOCCI, D. MAESTRI, *Il Rilevamento architettonico. Storia, metodi e disegno*, Roma–Bari, 1992, p. 54.

6. Cfr. F. DI GIORGIO MARTINI, *Trattati di Architettura, Ingegneria e arte militare*, a cura di C. MALTESE, Milano, 1967, p. 71.

7. Latin derivation term “*topiarum*” alludes to the art made by gardeners in reducing into geometric shapes or bizarre shrubs and plants with small leaves and evergreens.

8. Cfr. F. FARELLO, *Architettura dei giardini*, Roma, 1967, pp. 27–28.

9. Cfr. L. VAGNETTI, *L'architetto nella storia d'occidente*, Firenze, 1973, p. 424.

The regular patterns of the Renaissance break up in the Baroque age in which the garden, while maintaining the matrix of the “Italian garden”, changes both from the plan and ornament point of view. In fact, it takes on a greater presence: it presents a more articulated and complex structure, it grows in its dimensions and its shapes become less rigid with circular, elliptical and diagonal paths. The axial approach, ruled by geometric principles, is not abandoned and the unevenness of the ground is resolved through scenic connections. The development of perspective science, codified in the Renaissance period, led to the application of illusionistic effects to achieve an apparent expansion of space with respect to reality, as in painting and architecture, even in the structure of the landscape and garden. The natural elements, reduced from topiary art to simple and regular volumes and, to a certain extent, so naturalized, survive but natural or pseudo-natural tree groups are increasingly combined with them. The naturalism expressed by the artificial caves, the nymphaea, the large fountains characterizes the garden and the seventeenth-century park, leading to an evolution of the concept that will be confirmed throughout the Baroque period.

This evolution had new impetus by the French landscape school, especially by the landscape architect André Le Nôtre<sup>10</sup> (1613–1700), one of the most brilliant designers of all time who created in Versailles (which was the capital of the kingdom until 1789, when the revolution forced Luigi XVI and the royal family to return to Paris) between 1664 and 1668 what can be called the prototype of the French gardens in the royal residence of the French court. The wide surface of this garden, coming out from the Italian structure and shape but changing proportions, is embellished by sumptuous water features, fountains and monuments, representing a harmonious completion of the castle. *Lenotrian* compositional principles are essentiality and breadth, so Le Nôtre designs its parks both to be seen from the palace and, above all, to be populated by people. The new principles soon spread outside France and, therefore, also in Italy, where the

10. André Le Nôtre, expert in botany, architecture and painting, is certainly the creator of the most accomplished manifestations of the “French garden” of the 17th century and reached its maximum expression under the reign of Luigi XIV. In designing its gardens Nôtre takes its cue from “Italian gardens” while softening their geometry; the ground is modelled, the views multiply and the natural element takes precedence over the architecture.

rich inventiveness of the Baroque blended with the *Lenotrian* landscape concept, manifesting itself in the various regions according to the environmental characteristics and the relations with European culture. In this context is

located the large square and the Park of the Palace of Caserta, which is one of the major achievements of the mid-eighteenth century and represent — at European level — a wonderful example of the art of gardens of the eighteenth century.

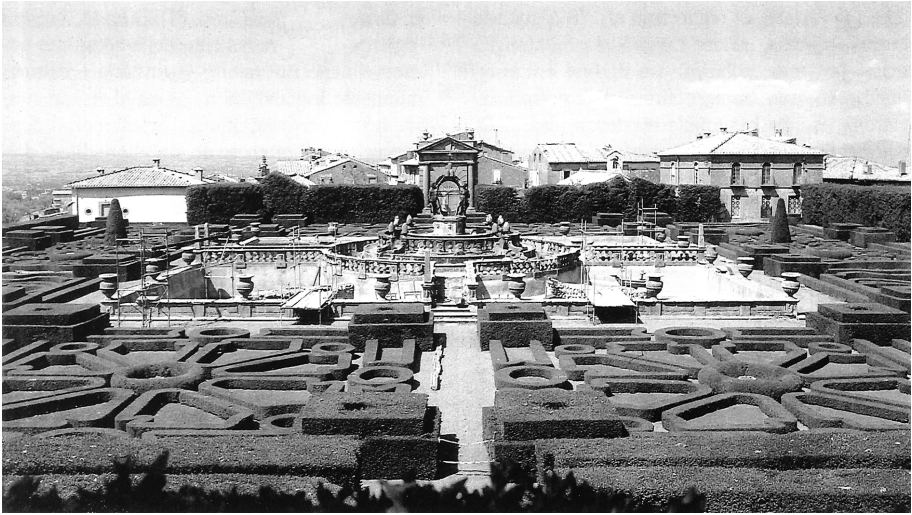
## 1.2. The Royal Park of Caserta

The new royal settlement was created on the initiative of King Carlo di Borbone, who had a new idea of city for the court, ministries and institutions of justice and culture. It was far from the sea but at the same time not too far from the city of Naples, with the dual objective of obtaining a better defence against water and alleviating the demographic pressure, particularly acute in the capital in those years<sup>11</sup>. The desire of King Carlo became a proposal when he entrusted the project of the palace first to Mario Gioffredo and then to Luigi Vanvitelli<sup>12</sup>. It was a very challenging project that Vanvitelli designed from different point of view, as a town planner, architect, engineer careful to the hydraulics problems and, finally, as set designer, facing all the technical and organizational aspects of the new construction.

Luigi Vanvitelli was used to studying the space, both as nature and as an architectural organism in a relationship of mutual coexistence, thanks to his long apprenticeship with his father Gaspare. For this reason, from 1750 to 1752 he drew up the project for the palace and the city of Caserta, inspired by the great European residences. He took the sumptuousness of Versailles as his reference model, although he was aware that it was based on sixteenth and seventeenth century models (such as Villa d'Este in Ti-

11. Cfr. C. CUNDARI, G.M. JACOBITTI, *Il Rilievo del Palazzo Reale di Caserta. Ricerche per una metodologia di rilievo integrato*, in « Quaderni del Dipartimento di Rappresentazione e Rilievo », Sapienza – Università di Roma, serie Studi e Ricerche, nn. 1, 2, 1988, p. 3.

12. Cfr. C. ROBOTTI, *I disegni di Mario Gioffredo architetto napoletano*, in C. ROBOTTI, F. STARACE, *Disegno di architetture. L'antico, i giardini, il paesaggio*, Lecce, 1993.



**Figure 1.** Villa Lante in Bagnaia. Fountain of the square.

voli, Villa Aldobrandini in Frascati, Villa Lante in Bagnaia) (Fig. 1). Luigi Vanvitelli's project concerned the real whole settlement, providing for the construction of a large park and the canalization of the water necessary to ensure the water supply to such a large building.

Luigi Vanvitelli presented different drawings of the palace to King Carlo in 1751; in January 1752 he followed the laying of the first stone<sup>13</sup>. In their final version, they were placed in precious specially-made gilded frames, coming from Rome and exhibited in a room of the Old Palace in Caserta set up for the occasion<sup>14</sup>.

Vanvitelli, designing the palace and the park, showed all his ability to deal with different themes in an appropriate manner, framing his drawing production in the best tradition of city illustrators, despite his distinct position of designer rather than surveyor. When he died (in 1773) the building was built up to the cornice level and the park had just begun.

13. Cfr. L. VANVITELLI, *La Dichiarazione dei Disegni del Reale Palazzo di Caserta alle Sacre Reali Maestà di Carlo Re delle due Sicilie e di Gerus. Infante di Spagna Duca di Parma e di Piacenza. Gran Principe ereditario di Toscana e di Malia Amalia di Sassonia Regina*, Napoli, MDCCLVI, p. III.

14. Cfr. *Le lettere di Luigi Vanvitelli della Biblioteca Palatina di Caserta*, a cura di F. STRAZZULLO, Galatina, 1967, vol. I, pp. 71–73.

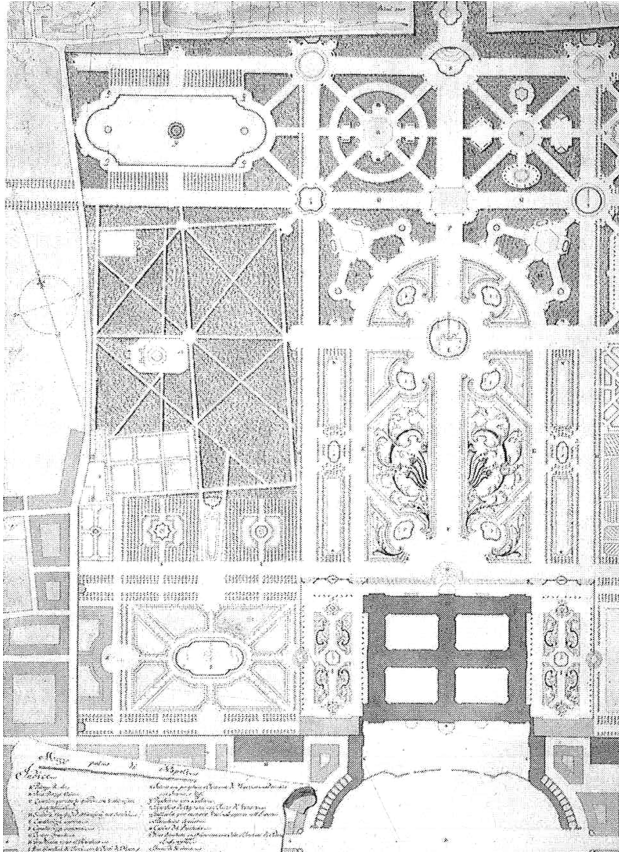
He was succeeded by his son Carlo who carried out the work of the palace also regarding the interior decoration; he dedicated himself to the arrangement of the park, to the construction of the fountains and some secondary buildings, also making various changes to his father's project.

### 1.3. The Park represented in the drawings of L. Vanvitelli's Declaration

*The Declaration of the Drawings of the Royal Palace of Caserta to the Holy Royal Majesty of Charles King of the two Sicilies... and Maria Amalia of Saxony* is composed of fourteen illustrations engraved in copper by C. Nolli, R. Pozzi and N. D'Orazi; they are a considerable example of architectural, engineering and naturalistic themes representation, very diversified topics which are rarely coexistent in the activity and experience of the same artist. In the following paragraphs only the three engravings relative to the park, two of which illustrate the palace and the park in a bird's eye from opposite points of view (table XIII and table XIV) while a third is referred to a detailed ichnographic drawing (table I), will be discussed. A critical reading to highlight their anomalies, their differences, the correspondence between them and their realization will be faced.

The table I of the *Declaration* (Fig. 2), represents the general plan of the palace and the first part of the park<sup>15</sup>; there is also a representation of the same plan realized by Vanvitelli with mixed technique. This plan — which will be called *plan B* — was compared during the study with another similar plan of the palace and the garden called *plan A* (Fig. 3) drawn up by the same author. Although the two plans may appear similar at a glance, they differ in many elements. Their layout is almost identical and remains unchanged even in the subsequent construction; the Renaissance axis of the only path that inseparably connects the palace, garden and landscape (which at the same time is also the axis of symmetry in Vanvitelli's composition) gradually rises between the palace and the hill of Monte Briano from which the water would flow, which, channelled in a succession of basins, reaches the flat area of the gardens. The author in both plans takes into consideration the vast area available and organizes the large composition that begins with the long avenue that starts from the large ellipti-

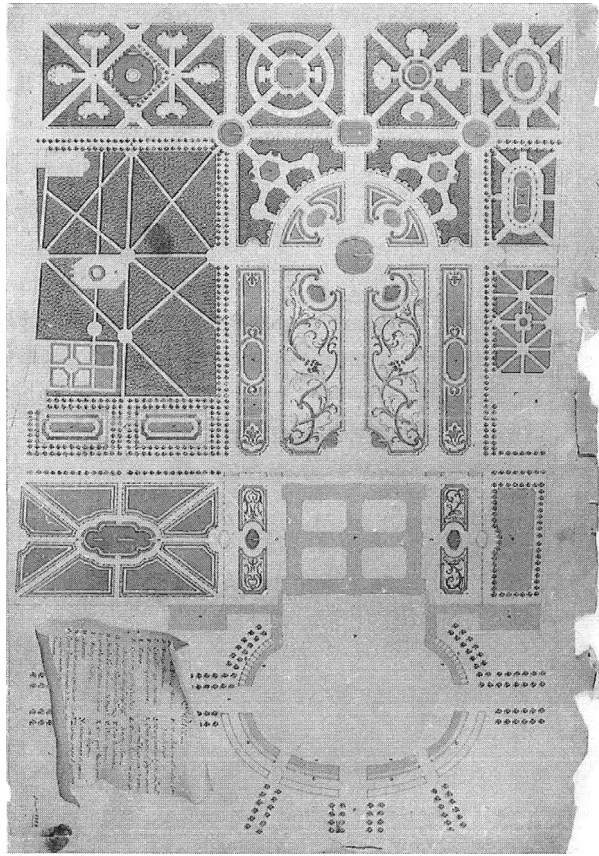
15. Cfr. C. MARINELLI, *L'esercizio del Disegno. I Vanvitelli*, Roma, 1991, p. 120.



**Figure 2.** Table I of Luigi Vanvitelli's *Declaration*, Naples 1765. General plan (B) of the Palace and the first part of the Park; drawing by L. Vanvitelli, engraving by C. Nolli.

cal square (which has justified over time the reference to Bernini's model of Piazza S. Pietro and that of Piazza del Popolo in Rome) and leads to Naples. The avenue (today "Carlo III"), defined as *Vanvitellian axis with telescope*<sup>16</sup>, allows two perfectly symmetrical views towards the infinite: north-south to south-north direction, very important especially in terms of urban planning, as it becomes the axis connecting the cities of Caserta and Naples.

16. Cfr. D.A. LANNELLO, *Il vialone Carlo III nella soria di Caserta*, Curti (Ce), 1993, pp. 9-10.



**Figure 3.** General plan (A) of the Palace and Park in a drawing prior to the *Declaration* (Archive of the Soprintendenza dei Beni Culturali di Caserta).

In *plan (A)*, the huge *Vanvitellian* axe from Naples which enters in the large elliptical square and the avenue orthogonal to it (longitudinal axis of the ellipse), appear flanked by a double row of elms; the other two planned avenues, modelled on the trident example of Piazza del Popolo in Rome, are flanked by a single row of elms. The elliptical square, which is cut off in north–south direction to connect to the royal palace, appears surrounded by buildings devoted to *the Guards and Militia with the official’s homes*. The *Neighbourhoods* (lodgings) take place along the entire elliptical perimeter, interrupting at the entrances placed along the largest diameter (east–west axis), along the smallest diameter (hereinaf-