

The Water Theatre grove at Versailles

The rebirth of a lost grove

A little more than four centuries after the birth of André Le Nôtre, the famous Water Theatre grove designed by Louis XIV's gardener has come back to life with the opening of a new garden. This is the first time that a grove at Versailles is home to a contemporary creation. It can be visited all year round.

The Water Theatre grove was long the site of sumptuous parties given by Louis XIV, for whom André Le Nôtre designed gardens worthy of the Palace of Versailles. Created by the famous gardener between 1671 and 1674, it contained fountains, a stage, seating in the greenery and sculptures of children playing with animals. Transformed several times over the centuries – Louis XVI had grass planted to replace the pool – the Water Theatre grove was destroyed by the great storm of 1999 and was closed to the public.

After an international competition launched in 2011, the grove was redesigned by landscape architect Louis Benech, who kept the lines of the original square and the idea of an open-air theatre. He also wanted to put water at the centre of all viewpoints and imagined two pools. To create the fountains, he worked with sculptor Jean-Michel Othoniel, whose magical world evokes childhood – a theme that was at the heart of the lost grove.

Made up of 1,751 glass beads gilded with gold leaf, these monumental sculptures with arabesque designs were inspired by the King's ballets so as to insert delicate movement into the landscape.

For the vegetation, we will have to wait another ten years or so to see the definitive face of this contemporary grove – the time it takes for a tree to grow.

CHILDREN'S GAME BOOKLET

...Wander around the walkways, enjoy the different viewpoints and imagine how this grove has changed with this little game booklet!

Discover the Water Theatre grove

1 On the little island you can see as you come into the clearing, there is a tall tree standing proud – a yew, one of the very few left standing after the storm, probably the grandson of a tree planted by Le Nôtre. Twenty-one other yews of a different variety have been planted in this grove. They are golden yews.

Look at these leaves and circle the one that is from a yew.



2 Admire the fountains. The sculptor Jean-Michel Othoniel loves beads. You may have already seen one of his works – he's the one who created the Palais-Royal Métro station in Paris. This is the first time he has designed fountain sculptures. Their rounded shapes imitate the writing used in Louis XIV's day for noting dance steps. The gold evokes the Sun King and the blue is a reminder of the vestiges of the old fountains found during the excavation work.

What are these fountain sculptures called?

- Le Manège de verre (The Glass Menagerie)
- Les Belles Danses (The Beautiful Dances)
- Le Collier de perles (The Pearl Necklace)

3 The fountain engineers still work by hand at Versailles. They have been using the same gestures for three hundred years, sometimes handed down from father to son for several generations. Thirteen of them manage nearly 40 km of piping and adjust the water jets for 50 fountains. They use antique tools that no longer exist and have had to be reproduced at the Estate's workshops. Here, for this modern project, the hydraulic system is mainly run by computer.

What do we call the instrument used to open the valves in the other groves of the gardens of Versailles?

- Lyre wrench
- Monkey wrench
- Torque wrench



For the Water Theatre, even the wrenches had to be reinvented. All's well that ends well – they have a 'T' shape, 'T' as in Theatre!

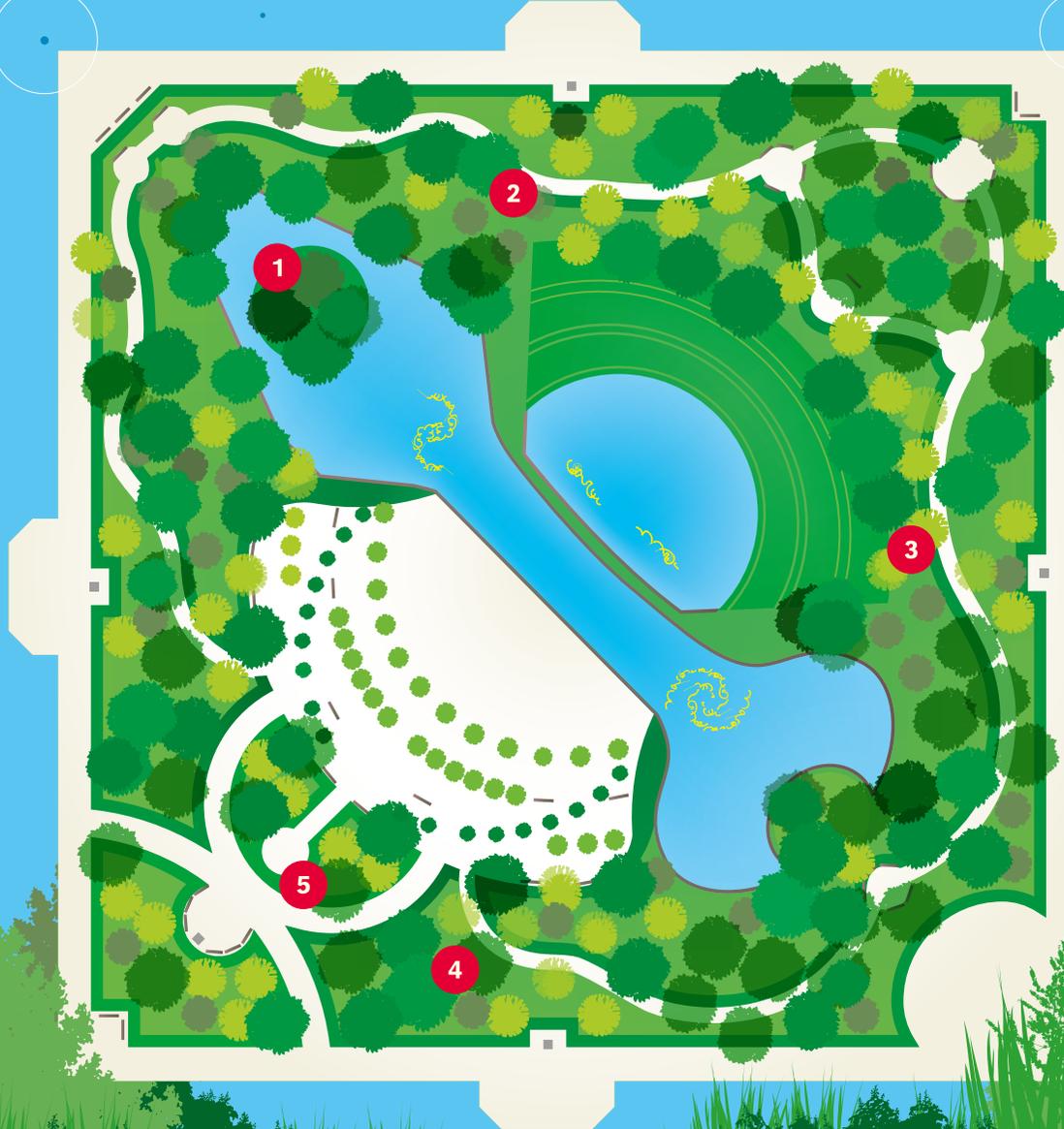
4 Under this access door lies a service room where huge water filters are housed. If the water is not filtered, moss and deposits could quickly form, keeping "Les Belles Danses" from operating properly. And, more importantly, they could lose their splendour. Othoniel's work is the only one that runs automatically. Fish do all the work in the other fountains.

How high do you think the water jets in "Les Belles Danses" shoot up?

- As high as a zebra (1.5 m)
- As high as a giraffe (4.5 m)
- As long as a tiger (2.3 m)

5 This little walkway gives a view over the Water Theatre. Look at the drawing of the walkways. When designing the grove, Louis Benech created a symmetrical effect, but actually the drawing is not symmetrical.

Draw the grove's line or lines of symmetry and find the differences on each side.



Answers:
1 - This one is a yew
2 - Les Belles Danses
3 - Lyre wrench
4 - 4.5 metres