Perelle's *Veües des plus beaux endroits de Versailles:* How the Engravings contribute

by
William Roberts

Reproductions of Perelle engravings are found in many books about Versailles, yet there is no general monograph on the artist, and very few articles excepting in art and biographical dictionaries. Among these latter, contradictions, repetitions and misquotings abound. The only authoritative source is a section of the 18th c. manuscript *Abecedario*, by P.-J. Mariette, which is held at the Cabinet des Estampes.[1]

In fact there were three artists bearing (and signing) the same family name: Gabriel the father (1604?-77) and his two sons, Adam (1640-) and Nicolas (1631-), both of whom died in the same year 1695. Since they often worked together on the same copper plate but usually signed their work with the last name only, one of the problems with their engravings is attribution. A number of authorities point out the quasi-impossibility of distinguishing between them in this latter case; even Mariette does not specify individual authorship of the Versailles prints. Yet the Perelles have been credited with producing more than 795 landscape plates. An art dealer has put their situation succinctly: "The history of their plates given by Le Blanc is so incomplete and inaccurate as to be useless" (Craddock & Bernard, 1977).

Gabriel Perelle had studied with Daniel Rabel, the best-known drawing teacher of the 1620's and the illustrator of d'Urfé's *l'Astrée*. His first known work dates from 1638, so he could have done early Versailles illustrations. In order to recognize his contribution, engravings signed "Perelle" need to be matched up with the known state of the grounds at a particular time. The date of Gabriel's death (1677), five years before the King's formal installation at Versailles, removes his authorship from the renderings of constructions known to have been undertaken later. His son Nicolas, a favorite disciple of Simon Vouet, became more a painter than an engraver. This leaves the younger brother Adam as the more

likely author of many engravings of the gardens under Louis XIV. He was named *graveur du roi*, and gave lessons to the nobility. Among his pupils were the Duc de Bourbon, grandson of le Grand Condé, and the engraver Pierre Aveline the Elder, according to Mariette. Because of the problems in attribution, traditional practice has often been simply to refer to a collective singular artist "Perelle."

Perelle prints depicting the Versailles palace and gardens are found separately, and also trimmed and mounted in made-up volumes (*recueils factices*). My research has concentrated on their collected presentation in differing oblong folio editions of 225-250 pages, which are preserved as rare books in certain libraries here and abroad. These were published by N. Poilly, Nicolas Langlois, and Jean Mariette; in 1766 Charles Jombert re-edited them, with commentaries. So far I have been able to examine 18 of these books in 13 different collections.

The Langlois volumes seem to be organized around the same pattern: introduced by various title pages, they usually present a first section on Paris, of some 70-75 plates, and sometimes include a second title page. Then comes another internal, beribboned sectional *Environs de Paris,* under which Versailles is subsumed and this often after its own introductory page: *Veuës des plus beaux endroits de Versailles.* A third section, on the provinces (*Belles Maisons de France* inside a grotto decoration) precedes a final series of 15-18 views covering Rome and its environs. The architectural background of the t.p.'s varies, and the same plates do not occur in every volume, nor necessarily in the same order.

The circumstances of Perelle's publications are a subject for further study. Maxime Préaud, the 17th c. Conservateur at the Réserve of the Cabinet des Estampes, has cautioned that engravings are an extremely complicated subject, requiring very prudent conclusions. Hence I will present only some of the problems that one can encounter, and illustrate briefly how the engravings of Perelle and others can enrich our vision of what the changing gardens have looked like.

P. J. Mariette notes that Perelle soon recognized his talent for landscape and topography rather than for drawing the human figure. This might explain why he seems not to have been interested in details of the important Apollo Fountain, but more in its key place in the monumental East-West vista. His earliest view straight down over the **canal** (B9417) seems to show a very early- or pre-Latona Fountain (1666), with no peasants or frogs on the edge of the pool, dating perhaps from even before the Marsy statue (1668-70).2 There is no Tapis Vert, and unaccountably no Apollo (once called Swan) Fountain. The canal is very rudimentary, with no widened turnabout, although the cross branches (1671) are sketched in. Perelle's 18th c. editor confirms that such is a "View of the Garden as it appeared in former times" (Jombert 20): it was probably a necessary re-working on the spot, from c. 1671, to accomodate recent changes. Apparently dissatisfied with these versions, Perelle works to produce improved ones and perfunctorily includes an Apollo group (installed in 1671), still set in a *rondelle* pool (B9641). The canal's turnabout is rectangular at this point, and one of the large ships brought here in 1669 is surrounded by a little fleet.

As if officially commissioned to do an even better job, Perelle engraved one of his best known, most monumental works (Ve15, 125). A quadrilobate rectangular pool is now clearly drawn, and the midday sun casts a shadow on the Allée Royale, apparently still not yet furnished with its grassy center (1680). Half-moons open the canal's cross branches. There is much human activity: strollers, cavaliers, the royal carriage (note the fleurs-de-lys on the door panel, and probably the Royal Personnage highlighted in the window). The "étonnante flotille" is larger, including le Grand Vaisseau with its miniature bronze cannon, and la Grande Galère (the scaled-down model of the Royal Warship "La Reale," brought in from Marseilles. He depicts also "la longuerame," and to the left "la grande gondole," one of two presented by the Republic of Venice in 1674, as well as other boats representative of the time.

In a different vein, one example of the possible public use of engravings is the recent restoration project of Marsy's **l'Encelade** Fountain (1675-76). In a mythological context it represents the unhappy fate of a would-be rebel against higher authority. This

political message had already been featured in the Romanelli frescoes of the Galerie Mazarine (1646-47), now part of the B.N. Recently, in 1995 at a cost of six million francs and with the help of 17th c. engravings and other documents, this *bosquet* has been spectacularly upgraded since the repair job of 1956. Excepting for Perelle's recording of a decagon format (Ve15, 107)**,** the official modern description could be referring to his print: after an angled path leading to a surprising entry, "The octagonal form is defined by a curtain of low pruned yoke-elm hedges growing against a tall trellis. In turn a gravelled lane, also laid out in octagonal form, defines a grassy bank of three steps. A second concentric gravelled lane surrounds a circular pool from which rises a lead statue of Enceladus buried beneath boulders."[3]

In order to be scrupulously authentic, the restorers worked according to traditional methods: hence the peripheral trellis tunnel is made of chestnut lathes painted green, and strongly wired together over a metal frame. In it rectangular and semi-circular niches contain benches of the same form and are opened inward. Eight triumphal arches mark openings that give access to the the central pool, and are decorated with architectural elements (cornices, capitals, keystones, volute consoles), and with brightly gilded copper vases containing carefully clipped yew trees. Deriving apparently from the painting by Jean Cotelle (Gaxotte 260), the restoration maintains a strictly octagonal form throughout, as in the map by Le Pautre. This contrasts with Perelle's probably earlier projection of a *décagone*. [4] This concept is further accentuated by the rebuilding of eight (and not Perelle's ten) smaller rustic fountains in what one might call the "néo-rocaille" style; the originals had been demolished in 1706-07. Naturally the piping and water works all had to be renewed also.

By the 1760's the *palissade* and satellite fountains were gone, but from the defeated giant's mouth a powerful jet shot 78 feet upward, with a number of other jets spouting out from the rocks that cover him. Jombert (20) at that time especially appreciated "la simplicité, l'agréable murmure des eaux et l'air de fraîcheur qu'on y respire." In his *Manière de visiter*, Louis XIV had advised his

guests to take only a "demy-tour" there, just enough to look around and then pass on to other sites (Hoog 72). But on the days when "les Grandes Eaux" perform, the modern visitors linger and wander back and forth through this three-dimensional reconstruction of an engraved vision, reluctant to leave. (Unfortunately, as might be expected, this grove is usually locked up and inaccessible).

Renderings of the *bosquet* of **Les Trois Fontaines** (1677-79) illustrate other problems with the print medium: for example, when there are different versions of the same subject. In both of Adam Perelle's first views, landscape, people, and even the birds seem to look exactly the same. The difference is with "la grosse gerbe" (sheaf) in the foreground (B10415): it rose up to 26 feet, according to Piganiol de la Force. Nicodème Tessin (165) had reported it in 1687 as being "la plus grosse qui se soit jamais faitte." By c. 1740 Jacques Rigaud describes this "prodigieuse gerbe d'eau" as being composed of 140 separate jets (B10416). Nonetheless for up-to-date accuracy Perelle apparently had to revise, hence to either blot out or add on to his copper plate an extra tall single jet (NL 17). Further documentation may help us to determine which is its earlier state.

Louis XIV apparently took personal credit for the invention of this bosquet. Not surprisingly then that, for the Queen of England's visit in July 1689, he ordered ices to be distributed here at the top of the hill. He prescribed that his visitors should enter the oblique pathway at this point, then work their way down to examine each of the other levels. To accomodate the natural incline of the site, Le Nôtre had placed the three fountains in line one above the other, centered in pools of different geometric form. From below, two more Perelle engravings record what seem to be early forms of this composition. The legends indicate a hesitancy in the nomenclature: *bassins* vs *fontaines*, yet both appear to be in the same hand (B10404). Eight animal figures, apparently hunting dogs, border the octagon pool and spout small arcs of water. In another view (B10408) these have been replaced by potted shrubs and a hedge border, but the pots have been removed from the staircases. A pair of tall latticework pavillons appears. In both, the

eight vertical water jets are the same, and at the upper fountain they are of uniform height, with no single jet dominating.

Apparently earlier than Perelle--if he is accurate--Aveline presents an elaborate marble octagonal border around a circular fountain that is supported by volutes, and with no jets in the pool (B10405). The second basin is not square, but is a *boulingrin*. Above this is a central staircase between cascades leading to the top level. In his second print (B10410) the marble border is replaced by grass, ten jets form modest arcs in the pool, and the round fountain is two-tiered, as are the wide cascades surrounding the first stairway. The top level is now reached by twin stairs with a large cascade in between. Another Aveline print (B10407) depicts the round fountain as supported by nude figures. An engraving by Israel Silvestre dated "1684" records walls of latticework spaced by pyramidal-shaped yews, instead of the potted trees (Baré 388; Walton 32). The walls are set on an encircling turf base. Now in the octagon fountain eight powerful jets shoot straight upward, while eight others spring from the center to form high arches which fall back within the pool's border.

This would seem to be a later change. It is borne out by comparison with two views of the same site done by Jean Cotelle in c. 1693. The painter retains the water show in the foreground (Gaxotte 265), as well as the grassy border, turf benches, and lattice work up the sides, but the yew trees are now cone-shaped. The high single jet over the great top *gerbe* does appear--and thus the painting would seem to confirm that Perelle's second version (NL17) is the later engraving. At the first cross-axis there is now a single set of steps in the middle (instead of Perelle's three), with the cascades of rockwork widened. In another, oblique view (Gaxotte 264) the painter deliberately breaks our spell and reveals how close the huge chateau, the end of this magical garden world, really is. He documents the restoration of a *berceau d'eau* (water cradle), nostalgically recalling the fountain of the same name which was originally here in the 1660's. The water could drop by gravity feed from the round top basin over the rippling cascades to the square pool, then over more cascades and underground to the

triple octagon. Cotelle also illustrates here how in his time it could run melodiously down rocky channels on walls at the sides. Piganiol observes in 1700 that, of all the groves, this is now *"le moins orné, &* cependant celui de tous qui doit le plus à l'art...Ses beautés, quoique toutes champêtres et naturelles, ne laissent pas de plaire beaucoup, *&* ses Fontaines par leur murmure *&* par leurs nappes d'eau, charment également les yeux et les oreilles."

In 1714 a certain N. Girard, *Fontainier du Roy***,** engraved a new on-site view (B10417). He stressed the vertical aspect of the waterworks in the octagon, and the total number of jets (180)--"très surprenant par la force de l'eau qui fait un grand bruit en sortant, et très agréable à la vuë, par leur mélange et la situation du terrain." His text specifies what Silvestre and Cotelle had shown, and that the eight jets rose to 50 feet in height. By this time the trellisses were gone, replaced by tall clipped hedges. In 1740 Jacques Rigaud retained the versions of the past half century (B10415), noting again that the octagon jets were 50 feet high--whereas for Piganiol these "lances" were 76 feet in height. He repeats from Girard that at the square fountain six jets form a *voûte en berceau* from one side to the other (Girard had called it a "pavillon"), that the paired cascades decorated in rockwork are fed by six *bouillons,* and that at the top 140 jets form a "prodigious *gerbe* of water"--all of which contrives to make "un effet surprenant." Thus our earlier chronology: seems now confirmed: the Aveline engravings turn out to be the earlier views, before Perelle and right after or during completion in 1677-79. The various changes in decor would somewhat temper the description given by Simone Hoog (p. 94): "this grove, devoid of sculptural decoration."

Louis XIV's itinerary for visiting the bosquets beyond the esplanade of the château began with the deliberately confusing Labyrinth. After a number of surprises it arrived at the **Arc de Triomphe** (plans B10365, B10366), where he called particular attention to "la diversité des fontaines, jets, nappes et des cuves des figures (statuary basins), et les différents effets d'eau." In 1687 the Swedish architect Tessin (166) found there "une magnificence sans pareille", not only for the symbolism, but for the richness of the marbles, the gildings and the omnipresent water effects. At the turn of

the 17th century Piganiol also left an enthusiastic detailed description of this area, that today is just an overgrown storage park for the "Sound and Light" machinery.

So as if for some spectacular theatrical scene, the engraver Aveline set out, also in 1687, to portray the lower level of this politically important grove (B10373). Between the two entry paths, surrounded by high trellisses and in a chariot atop a large flowing basin, was the gilded lead figure "La France Triomphante" by J.-B. Tuby (1682-83). In another print Aveline entitled it "Le Char de Triomphe de Palasse" (B10372). The white marble fountain, once "d'une beauté surprenante," apparently still exists. Prints and drawings portray the main figure as Pallas Athena, with her military attributes, lance, and shield (B10377, B10389, B10390). The two captive slaves, by Tuby and Coyzevox, lean against a lion and an eagle spouting water (read Spain and the Empire). These and the Royal arms, the *fleurdelysé* mantle, and the dying multi-headed hydra on the lower step--all represent recent French history: they symbolize the dissolution of the Triple Alliance, which ended the War of Devolution in 1668. [At about the same time Charles Le Brun was painting a more dramatic allegory of this event, over the North archway in the new Hall of Mirrors].

In the wings of this outdoor stage decor a pair of large red and white marble consoles supported allegorical statues of "la Victoire" and "la Gloire," or as Tessin understood it "la Magnificence" and "la Renommée." A Winged "Victory" (B10378) stood on a globe bearing three fleurs-de-lys, over flags, trophies and other symbols of power. She held a palm branch in one hand, and a laurel crown in the other. From the shell basin at her feet (or, alternatively, from below) a tall jet of water passed up through the crown, then fell back into the large catch basin made of white and black Egyptian marble. Similarly, "La Gloire" (B10379) on a starry globe clasped a pyramid and held a crown over attributes of various nations, with the ornementation all in gilded lead. The engravings by Thomassin indicate concave marble bases, *coquillages*, scrolls, masks, and tomb-like forms. There are obvious major discrepan-

cies between the prints and Cotelle's oil painting and gouache of this same scene (Gaxotte 265, Hoog 50).

At the top of the hill was the Arch itself (1677-84), "a tour de force of sculpture, architecture, and hydraulics" (Hazlehurst 116). Perelle's engraving of it occurs in many of his published volumes (Ve15, 105). "Un des plus surprenans ouvrages de ce palais enchanté," and built of gilded wrought iron, it was modelled by Le Nôtre after Le Brun's Porte St. Antoine, the new city gate adjacent to the Bastille. Water jets sprang precisely from seven shell-shaped bowls on either side of the central top one, and flowed down through others in the form of *nappes* to the large catch basin below (B10394). Like an altar to French nationalism, the grillwork dazzling in the morning sun had elegant marble steps leading up to the three portal fountains. In the pediment above (B10383), fleurs-de-lys on a shield echoed those atop the open obelisks on each side, which were set on Languedoc marble bases. Jombert, long after Piganiol, still found these water pyramids (B10391) to be "lustres de vermeil doré": by means of interior pipes, water falling from each crossbar apparently shone like glistening sheets of rock crystal. Between these four pylons, a pair of eight-tiered marble buffets, like side altars in a church, highlighted the arch; from every set-back shelf poured a wide sheet of water (B10388). They were themselves flanked by two white marble *scabellons* holding jet basins. Even the contours of each little marble basin "méritent d'estre bien exactement observés," advised the architect Tessin. Close analysis of these documents suggests that the author of a recent guidebook may have misread Piganiol's text, and thus confused the *buffets d'eau* with the Victory and Glory Fountains at the other end).[5]

Linking the two parts of this bosquet, "jadis l'un de plus somptueux de Versailles," are the parallel *goulettes*, or small canals cut into tablets of white marble. Interrupted periodically by drops in the sloping terrain, these "2 bassins en plan incliné" (Rigaud) formed little cascades. Tessin noted them as "deux pentes de marbre fort bien imaginées," calling attention especially to the grotesque *mascarons* spouting water, which he sketched. Adam Perelle seems to have done only this view of l'Arc, after its completion

in 1684. Curiously, however, several of his title page engravings place the three fleurs-de-lys in a pedimental position similar to that on the Arc, and seem to draw other motifs from the Garden groves.

Half a century later, Jacques Rigaud's engraving shows the ensemble flourishing and the waters gushing seemingly as usual (B10375)--only the trellisses and the visitors' costumes had changed. But the Arc eventually rusted away and both it and the adjacent Trois Fontaines were destroyed in 1775. Some original fragments still exist in storage, and in 1991 the Mitterand government entrusted J.-P. Babelon with the recreation of these two parallel groves.[6]

In summary, engravings may often provide the only means for us to visualize what former topography looked like at different times, and they can enhance the pertinence of other documentation. They permit more accurate reconstructions, physical, verbal, and mental. But Félibien in 1703 ignores such problems as he stresses the particular advantages of this art. He cites an example: since the Ancients did not know how to do engravings, the memory of so many of their works has been lost; whereas prints now preserve for the most distant peoples and for posterity both the history and the exemplary monuments of a period. Anticipating Victor Hugo's comparison of the printed book vs. the stone temple, Félibien (243) would say to the painter whose great advantage is color: "par le moyen de plusieurs estampes, qui se tirent d'une seule planche, l'on perpétue, & l'on multiplie presque à l'infini un tableau qui demeurerait unique, & qui ne pourroit subsister qu'un certain nombre d'années."

Northwestern University

NOTES

[1] Mariette, P.-J., *Notes manuscrites*, tome VI "Perelle.'" B.N.E. Réserve; [Rouleau R068206-78]. What passes as a Catalogue remains in MS. form, but the biographical notice was printed in *Abecedario* , ed. Chennevières & Montaiglon (Archives de l'art fran-

çais VIII). Paris, Dumoulin, 1857-58, IV, 100-08. Further details on the Perelles are given by rare book dealers, library catalogs, etc.

[2] Plate references (Ve15 and those beginning with B) refer to holdings in the B.N.E; "NL" represents pagination of the Newberry Library copy.

[3] Descriptive panel, Versailles gardens.

[4] 21 Cotelle paintings of the gardens hang in the Gallery of the Grand Trianon, and most are reproduced in color in Gaxotte, 260-69. For Le Pautre's map see Hazlehurst 112.

[5] Hoog 72; 95.

[6] *The Economist*, April 20, 1991, p. 94.

WORKS CITED OR CONSULTED

Avel, Noëlle. "Les Perelle graveurs de paysage du XVIIe siècle." *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire de l'Art français* (1972), pp. 145-53 (illustr.).

Bénézit, Emmanuel. *Dictionnaire critique et documentaire des peintres,* etc.. Paris, 1976, VIII, 216-17.

Bryan's Dictionary of Painters and Engravers. London, 1918-19; 2nd ed., II, 271-72.

Coutil, Léon. *Les artistes vernonnais du XVIIe siècle*. Evreux: Paul Hérissey, 1913, pp. 1-11 (bibliography).

Félibien, Jean-François, *Description de Versailles*. Paris, 1703.

Gaxotte, Pierre. *Louis XIV.* Paris: Flammarion, 1974.

Hazlehurst, Hamilton F. *Gardens of Illusion: The Genius of André Le Nôtre.* Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 1980.

Hoog, Simone, Chief Curator, National. Museum of Versailles (M.N.V.). *Louis XIV, Manière de montrer les jardins de Versailles*. Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux,

1982; English ed., *The Way to Present the Gardens of Versailles, by Louis XIV*. ibid., 1992.

Jal. *Dictionnaire critique de biographie et d'histoire*. 2nd ed., 1872, 957-59.

Jombert, Charles Antoine, ed. *Les Delices de Versailles et des Maisons Royales,* Paris, 1766, 218/ 222 pl.

Le Blanc, Ch. *Manuel de l'amateur d'estampes*. Paris: E. Bouillon, 1888, III, 167-69.

Michaud. *Biographie universelle ancienne et moderne.* Paris, 1854-65, XXXII, 463.

Nagler, G.K. *Neues Allgemeines Künstler Lexikon*. Leipzig, 1924; 1841 ed., XI, 100-02.

Perelle. *Veües des belles maisons de France.* Paris: N. Langlois, s.d. In folio, oblong.

Piganiol de la Force, Jean Aymar. *Nouvelle Description des châteaux de Versailles et de Marly...*1701, 1ère ed. [B.N.]. (*Privilège* 1/10/1701). [8e ed., vol.II, Paris 1751]

Tessin, Nicodème. "Relation de sa visite...à Versailles en 1687," ed. Pierre Francastel. In *Revue de l'histoire de Versailles et de Seine et Oise* (1926), pp. 149-67.

Thieme-Becker. *Künstlerlexikon.* XXVI, 401-02.

Walton, Guy, *Louis XIV's Versaillles*. Chicago UP, 1986.