

Vaux-le-Vicomte

Maincy, France

Photographs by Alan Ward 2023

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

Early illustrations of French gardens from the seventeenth century were predominantly aerial perspectives, that tended to make these landscapes appear rather flat, extending outward vast distances along a central axis. When considered as a single broad gesture, the gardens of both Vaux-le-Vicomte and Versailles, are composed of mostly taut horizontal planes.* However, when walking through these landscapes, the experience of the topography is quite pronounced. Andre Le Notre, the designer of both gardens, precisely manipulated the grades to make changing sight lines of what you see, and what you don't see - by varying the elevations with sloping walks, steps and walls. In addition to these vertical adjustments along the route, Le Notre narrowed or widened the linear space, defined by its vegetative frame, to enhance or diminish the perception of distance when seen in perspective. This is most apparent in views of the garden looking toward the south (10,15), compared to those toward the north (42,43).

The central axis at Vaux-le-Vicomte begins to the north and extends south to a forecourt, through the entry gate (1), the chateau (4), and 900m to the Statue of Hercules (25). When walking along the axis, south from the chateau and adjacent to broad parterres, the grades are gently sloping at only one to two percent, which is perceived as flat (14,23). Then upon reaching a cross-axis, at about 400m from the chateau, Le Notre positioned a *rond d'eau* (round water) and *Petits Canaux* (small canals), followed by steps which descend about 1.5m (12,15,16).

Further south, there is a more dramatic change in grade with a vertical drop of almost 4m at a major transverse axis, centered on the Grand Canal. The entire route from the chateau to the Grand Canal is at a higher elevation, obscuring the view of the canal (10,21). On approach, the eye is first directed toward large sculptural figures of horses rising up (27). The viewer is then quite surprised - arriving at the upper level of the south-facing *Les Cascades* (27), a wall over 80m long with water falling almost 4m into a basin, and a broad overview of the 875m-long Grand Canal (25,27). The route then descends over sloping terrain and steps down to the level of the canal, where there is a view back up to the sculpture of the horses against the sky (30).

The sequence of photographs corresponds to the path moving through the garden, beginning at the entrance on axis from the north (1), walking around the moat and chateau (7,8), to then return to the central axis south toward the Grand Canal – with the terrain descending 20m from the entry gate to level of the canal. The concluding views are north, and back to the chateau from a higher elevation near the Statue of Hercules (42). The views were selected to describe the design and the varying elevations in Le Notre's constructed topography, as well as the optical effects of perspective. To identify the location of a view and the change of grade, the location of each photograph is indicated on a 1934 plan, and the approximate elevation of each view is identified in the List of Illustrations.

List of Photographs

1. View east to entrance of the *Cour des Bornes* +71.0
2. View south on the west side of the *Cour des Bornes* +70.9
3. View north to entrance gate in the *Cour des Bornes* +68.8
4. View south to Château +69.9
5. View west to entrance to *Cour des Communs* +68.8
6. View west in the *Cour des Communs* +68.8
7. View southeast of *fossé* and château +66.4
8. View north of *Parterre Ouest, fossé, Cour des Communs* +64.5
9. View northeast of *Parterre Ouest* +64.1
10. View south to *Parterre de Broderie* from second landing +66.1
11. View west on cross axis to sculpture *La Taureau* +64.2
12. View north on cross axis near *rond d'eau* +60.1
13. View northwest on cross axis near *grilles d'eau* +60.1
14. View east of steps on cross axis at *grilles d'eau* +60.1
15. View south of *rond d'eau* +60.1
16. View west of *petits canaux* +58.6
17. View northwest, just south of cross axis +58.4
18. View northwest, near *Bassins des Tritons* +58.2
19. View south to château with *Bassin des Tritons* +58.1
20. View north over *Bassin des Tritons* +58.1
21. View south to *Bassin de la Gerbe* and *Statue d'Hercule* +58.1
22. View north from first landing to Confessional +58.8
23. View north at top of steps to Confessional +63.8
24. View west of allée at Confessional +63.9
25. View from Confessional to *Les Grottes* and Grand Canal +63.8
26. View north of steps +56.6
27. View west of *Les Cascades* +56.0
28. View south of Grand Canal, *Les Grottes, Statue d'Hercule* +56.5
29. View north of steps adjacent to *Les Cascades* +52.3
30. View northwest of *Les Cascades* +52.3
31. View west on north side of Grand Canal +51.8
32. View west at *La Poêle* (frying pan) +52.5
33. View north of trees along Grand Canal +52.4
34. View north of watercourse connecting to Grand Canal +51.9
35. View north on first landing near *Les Grottes* +52.5
36. View north of *Les Cascades* and château +51.5
37. View south of steps at *Les Grottes* +52.8
38. View southwest on steps of Neptune sculpture at *Les Grottes* +54.7
39. View north of central basin in Grand Canal +62.8
40. View northwest of *Bassin de la Gerbe* +65
41. View south of *Statue d'Hercule* +70
42. View north of *Statue d'Hercule* +75.5
43. View to château just north of *Statue d'Hercule* +75.0
44. View north in allée flanking the *Statue d'Hercule* +74.5
45. View north over *Bassin de la Gerbe* +70.0
46. View north above east side of *Les Grottes* +62.9

Note: Elevations at the locations of photographs are approximate and based on a 2021 Plan Topographique at 1:1000
The camera image is at a height approximately 1.75 M above the grade shown





























































































Notes

* The idea of flatness in the garden has both historical and contemporary significance. I recall attending a lecture on French gardens years ago by the prominent historian Vincent Scully, who described in a very animated way, the idea that the flatness of these gardens stretching toward the horizon was expressing the power of the French nobility in the landscape. My first design studio in landscape architecture was taught by Peter Walker, who was inspired by French Gardens, as well as Minimalism in contemporary art. He identified a connection between the two in "A Personal Approach to Design," in his *Process Architecture* monograph. He included a photograph of himself seated on the steps of Vaux-le-Vicomte, viewing south along the axis over the parterres, and offered this observation:

In fact, was there not a direct link between the Baroque gardens and the minimalist gallery art of the 60s?...So my students and I began to study the current landscape architects, both artistically and historically. And we began to explore the horizontal plane: its flatness and its manipulation.

A later monograph by Peter Walker was titled *Peter Walker: Experiments in Gesture, Seriality and Flatness*.

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