Drottningholm

Lovön, Stockholm, Sweden

Location: island of Lovön on Lake Mälaren, about 5 miles (8 km) west of Stockholm city center

The name Drottningholm (literally “Queen’s Island”) originated in the 16th century after the property, then known as Torvesund, was acquired by the crown and John III had a stone castle built. Built between 1680 and 1700 for the dowager queen, Hedvig Eleonora, the palace and several plans for the garden were designed by Nicodemus Tessin the Elder.

The overall design of the garden, which represents an evolution of over 300 years, is mostly the work of Tessin’s son, the architect and garden designer Nicodemus Tessin (called the Younger), who was educated in France, where he went to Versailles and met Le Nôtre, whose style he intended to introduce into Sweden. Tessin was Le Nôtre’s foremost non-French pupil. His plan for the garden was adopted in 1681, and in the 1690s he collaborated with Johan Hårleman, a royal gardener.

The castle was erected on a raised terrace reached by a magnificent staircase, whose axis extended into the parterre with its landmark Hercules Fountain, followed by a sequence of eight basins forming a kind of parterre d’eau. The spreading allées, parterres, and fountains are reminiscent of Versailles. The garden (800 by 180 meters [875 by 197 yd.]) is entirely enclosed by a double avenue of limes, and there is a water parterre situated on a lower level between a parterre de broderie (now grass) and bosquets.

Next to the park is the rococo chinoiserie built between 1753 and 1769. It is a small Chinese pagoda or tower with attendant buildings that followed the mid-18th-century custom of having chinoiserie in gardens. One visitor, Sir Nathaniel William Wraxall (Cursory Remarks Made in a Tour through Some of the Northern Parts of Europe [1775]), noted:

In the gardens [at Drottningholm] the queen dowager has lately built a little palace of pleasure, in a semi-circular form, composed of several compartments fitted up in that taste which we usually call the Chinese; though, unless a few Mandarins and Vases of China form this style, of which we know

Engraving of Drottningholm from Suecia Antiqua et Hodierna, 1692
Photo by Bengt Mellander, courtesy of Lund University Library
scarce anything, it may just as well be called an
European structure, where whimsy and caprice
form the predominant character, and spread a gro-
tesque air through the whole.

In 1777 the Swedish government purchased the palace
as a royal residence. This small palace, with its attendant
buildings, has its own park created in a freer style, as
well as an English park landscaped by Gustav III and
Fredrik Magnus Piper that was completed in 1781. The
year before, the king commissioned Piper to redesign a
substantial section of the gardens in the less formal
English park style and proposed a design for the rear-
rangement of the baroque parterres. This was vetoed by
Gustav, himself an amateur garden designer, who
admired classicism from his travels in Italy. From his
observations in Italy, he was inspired to imitate in his
landscape designs “at Drottningholm a number of
things I have seen.” On one trip to Rome (1783) the king
wrote the governor of Drottningholm that he saw “a
thousand pieces which I could sketch for my garden but
which I am sure to forget unless I draw them.” At the
end of the 1760s, while still crown prince, Gustav drew
a rather clumsy copy of Tessin the Younger’s design for
the area north of the parterre. For the trees Gustav imagined
“planting elms as being a tree which prospers with us
and grows to quite a considerable height.” In the
western part of the garden, Piper was allowed to lay out
a large-scale landscape with several lakes and an island,
first conceived as Diana’s Isle. After the king’s death the
architect converted it into a circular memorial hill sur-
mounted by a granite pedestal, Monument Island, the
central point of the pleasure ground and a delightful
vista from the formal garden, although archival records
indicate that it was never finished as Piper intended.
Many of his original details for the gardens are found in
the “List of completed plans and designs and those in
course of preparation for the Royal Pleasure Grounds”
(1796) and a “Draft of General Plan of the Grounds of
the Park at Drottningholm with Improvements” (1797).

At Drottningholm the water canals that Piper
designed were approximately 16 meters (17 yd.) wide,
three or four times the width of other canals. This was
usual in canals in Sweden; their main function was
mazy and obstructive in a country with 96,000 natural
lakes, but they were considered essential to an English-
style landscape. This is seen in Monument Island, which
cannot be reached directly from any of the places from
which it may be seen—the Gothic Tower, the formal
garden, or the palace—and there is usually more than
one bridge to cross. It is difficult to see the water’s shape
or direction, and there is very little sense of river. How-
ever, Piper used the lawn to distinctive advantage at
Drottningholm, where lawns were made in woods. It
first required the removal or turfing over of rocks in
worn areas, such as the north end of the formal garden
by the statue of Castor and Pollux, where the rock can
be seen wearing its way back through the turf.

The large open area forming the parterre section
resulted from extensive blasting and infill operations.
The last of the small rock that had formerly stuck up in
the same place and could not be shifted with gunpow-
der from the arsenal was concealed with an elegant
backdrop of cascades, an outstanding example of a
compensatory measure to bring the rocky Swedish land-
scape into line with French landscaping fashion.

The water parterre was restored in 1961, but the gar-
den as a whole has been under continuous restoration.
The palace and its gardens are open to the public from
May to September each year.

Synopsis

1661 Drottningholm purchased by Dowager
Queen Hedvig Eleonora

1662 Nicodemus Tessin the Elder commissioned
to work on the palace

1664-67 Parterre garden laid out by Nicodemus
Tessin the Elder

1681 Plan adopted for gardens by Nicodemus
Tessin the Younger

1744 Palace given as wedding present to Lovisa
Ulrika of Prussia

1753-69 Small palace and attendant buildings
built

1777 Drottningholm Palace and its grounds
purchased by the Swedish government

1780 Fredrik Piper appointed artistic
supervisor

1781 English-style park completed

1796 “List of completed plans and designs and
those in course of preparation for the
Royal Pleasure Grounds” drawn up by
Piper

1797 Piper submits “Draft of General Plan of the
Grounds of the Park at Drottningholm
with Improvements”

Further Reading

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From Nicodemus Tessin the Younger to Fredrik
Dubrovnik Renaissance Gardens

Dubrovnik area, Croatia

Location: Area surrounding Dubrovnik at Adriatic east coast, southern part of Croatia

The Mediterranean part of Croatia is known in the field of garden history for the Renaissance gardens of southern Dalmatia, especially in the area around Dubrovnik. Dubrovnik (the Croatian name) or Ragusa (the Roman name) was first mentioned about 667 as a new medieval settlement, and it existed as a free town and state from 1358 to 1808. Dubrovnik was most famous and powerful during the 15th and 16th centuries. It was the main seaborne trade center for the Balkans and the mediator between the Balkans, Italy, and other Mediterranean states. The oldest descriptive town plans of Dubrovnik are from 1272 and 1296, meaning that the planned development of the town and the surrounding area had been deeply rooted and accepted in Dubrovnik centuries before the Renaissance.

The landed gentry and the rich plebeians of Dubrovnik began to build villas outside the walls of the city (at the mainland stretching from Cavtat to Orašac) and on the islands (Koločep, Lopud, and Šipan), and the whole area was named Astarea (boundaries were made in 1366). Each villa formed a complex that included a garden and the surrounding landscape.

Although Renaissance villas and gardens were built all over the Dalmatian area, their number is insignificant in comparison with those in the Dubrovnik area. The best known are the Hanibal Lucić Villa in Hvar, the Petar Hektorović fortified villa, Tvrdalj, in Stari Grad on Hvar Island, the Foretić Villa in Korčula, and the Jerolim Kavanjin Villa in Sutivan on Brač Island.

The Dubrovnik Renaissance garden was a specific type within European garden art during the Renaissance. It was not a copy of the Italian Renaissance garden but rather the result of a fusion of Italian Renaissance ideas with the specific historical, cultural, social, and natural characteristics of the Dubrovnik area.

The medieval experience of building domestic and monastic gardens preceded the Renaissance gardens of Dubrovnik. The main idea behind the Dubrovnik Renaissance garden arose from the unity of country life and agriculture. The villas and gardens of Dubrovnik were for both agricultural use and pleasure. About 300 villas standing in lush gardens with fountains are known to have existed, and some 70 gardens are still preserved today. Of these, some 20 have remained virtually unchanged. The majority of villas with gardens were built during the 16th century, appearing at the same time as the villa gardens in Italy.

The Dubrovnik Renaissance garden is an architectural garden: it is constructed of stone; plants are secondary, and the ground plan is geometrical, mostly rectangular. A geometrical layout is more accurate on the gentle slopes than on the steep ones. An axial and symmetrical composition is not always the rule as in Italian gardens. The villa and the architectural elements of the garden give shape to an architecturally and functionally complete composition. The Renaissance garden of Dubrovnik is rather small, about 5,000 square meters (5,980 sq. yd.), for two main reasons: bad natural conditions (stony land and lack of water and soil) and limited space (small territory and numerous properties).

The Dubrovnik Renaissance garden has several specific elements: inscriptions on the stone entrance, paths, the vine pergola, the terrace, garden furniture, and water in the garden. Latin inscriptions on the stone entrances or on the monuments in the garden confirm the cultural value of the gardens. The vine pergola is a traditional part of the Dubrovnik garden from ancient times through the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and it remains an important architectural element of the garden today. The pergola integrates villa and garden and enables the interior of the house to include the garden itself. The garden is divided by paths covered with pergolas into a few rectangular or square compartments. The paths through the geometrical network of the garden follow its ground plan precisely.

The garden terrace has also been a traditional architectural element of the Dubrovnik garden from ancient
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