The Gardens of André Le Nôtre

A third-generation garden architect, André Le Nôtre (1613-1700) established his reputation—and virtually invented what became known as the French Classic garden—when he designed the landscape at Vaux-le-Vicomte for Nicolas Fouquet, the Minister of Finance to King Louis XIV. Defining space with allées, parterres, canals, and clipped hedges, the garden demonstrated perfect order on a vast, godly scale. Its creation required that two rivers be rerouted and three villages razed, and 18,000 workers toiled for five years on the construction, completed in 1661. Vaux-le-Vicomte did more than impress Louis XIV, the Sun King—it incited his jealousy. Louis imprisoned Fouquet for the rest of his life and usurped the gardens, and Le Nôtre, for himself.

Le Nôtre subsequently created several masterpieces for the King, including the gardens at the Palace of Versailles, which drew on the legend of Apollo and were considered by many to be his greatest work. Like Vaux-le-Vicomte, it too worked off a main axis and derived from Cartesian geometries. For over three decades, Le Nôtre designed and re-designed Versailles as Louis XIV grew tired of each vista. The garden architect also landscaped Marly, the King’s private residence, where he retreated with a smaller retinue for escape. The intimacy of Marly’s gardens included many private garden rooms.

Other Le Nôtre gardens included in Kenna’s exhibition at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art include Chantilly, with its focus on an epic equestrian statue of Anne de Montmorency rather than the mansion; Saint-Germain-en-Laye, Louis’ primary residence prior to Versailles, with its magnificent views of Paris; Les Tuileries, in the center of Paris, which required that the Le Nôtre family home be destroyed to create one of its promenades; Saint-Cloud; Sceaux; and Courances.