



FIG. I

TITLE-PAGE TO VALLET'S LE JARDIN DU ROY. PARIS, 1608. IN THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART.

EMBROIDERY AND BOTANY

by

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“And because the breath of flowers is far sweeter in the air (where it comes and goes, like the warbling of music) than in the hand, therefore nothing is more fit for that delight than to know what be the flowers and plants that do best perfume the air.”

THE combined efforts of a king's gardener and a king's embroiderer produced a delightful flower book in 1608 called *Le Jardin Du Roy*. Behind its publication there is a curious story of the impetus given by embroidery to the development of botany and gardening in France.

Along the streets of many European cities grow locust trees which Linneaus named *Robinia pseudacacia* or, “Robinia” in honour of a family of botanists who lived in Paris in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Jean Robin (1550-1629) was the younger and more celebrated of two brothers who devoted themselves to the cultivation of plants. About 1585 he was made *arboriste* and *simpliciste* to the King (Henry III). Botanical gardens had already been established in Padua, Bologna, and Pisa, and Richer de Belleval had started one in Montpellier when, in 1597, the Faculté de Médecine directed Robin to organize a similar one in Paris. In the catalogue he made for them a few years later Robin listed more than 1,300 native and foreign plants that he had brought together.¹ His son, Vespasien (1579-1662), journeyed to Spain and the African coast for rare plants, and it was he who brought from North America the locust or false acacia, the only one of our trees that has been extensively cultivated in Europe.

¹ Catalogue stirpium tam indigenarum quam exoticarum quae Lutetiae coluntur. Paris, 1601.



FIG. 2

PORTRAIT OF PIERRE VALLET. IN LE JARDIN DU ROY.



FIG. 3
PORTRAIT OF JEAN ROBIN. IN LE JARDIN DU ROY.

While the Robins travelled and laboured to provide study material for medical students, as well as herbs and simples for the poor, Pierre Vallet (c. 1575-[?]), designer and engraver, attached to the royal household as "Brodeur ordinaire du Roy" created designs to be worked in coloured silks and wool, silver and gold, by the ladies of the court. Embroidery came into general use in France under Catherine de Medicis. In convents, at the court, in chateaux, and ateliers, the borrowed patterns of the Italian Renaissance took on a French flavour and were executed by needles as expert as the Italian. When Henry IV settled the court in Paris, embroidery had become "une véritable passion." Natural representations of flowers instead of the conventional forms were demanded for brocades, silks, and embroidery. Vallet turned to his friend, Robin, for inspiration and help. The King gave his enthusiastic and generous support to their plan to grow in the garden between the Louvre and St. Germain l'Auxerrois native and exotic plants to be used as motifs for embroidery. So it came about that tropical blooms flourished far away from home under royal patronage in Paris.

In order to bring their garden to the designers and botanists who were unable to come to it, Robin and Vallet made a selection of their plants for publication. Vallet drew and etched them on seventy-five plates to which were added a title-page, a dedication to the Queen (Marie de Medicis) dated 30 November 1608, and several pages of letter-press. Robin tells in Latin of his travels and gives short descriptions of several of the plants and bulbs which his son brought home from a trip to Spain and Guinea in 1603. The exchange of compliments between the collaborators, the sonnets, quatrains, and anagrams which laud their abilities are written in the contemporary "style alambiqué," the combination of over-refinement and erudition compounded of high-sounding phrases, classical references, and mythology, and a generous sprinkling of Greek. The gardens, compared to the "parterres of Hesperides" and the "orchards of Alcinoüs," are grown under the "dome of the Queen's glory," and the Queen herself is eulogized by "la fleur de toutes les Roynes . . . divine fleur de Florence, qui, unie avec les lys de France par arrest du Ciel a produit des fleurons de paix et de béatitude."

Between the figures of Ceres and Pomona surmounting the tympanum of the architectural border on the title-page (Fig. I.) is the crown of France above the monogram of the King and Queen. On the right is the figure of Mathieu Lobel, doctor and botanist of King James I of England, and on the left, that of Charles de L'Écluse (Clusius), the



FIG. 4

ETCHING BY VALLET. IN LE JARDIN DU ROY.



FIG. 5

ETCHING BY VALLET. IN LE JARDIN DU ROY.

Arras botanist who taught at the medical school in Montpellier, travelled and studied in Spain, in England, and Germany, directed the gardens of Maximilian II at Vienna, and ended his career as professor of botany at the University of Leyden. Tranchau (loc. cit.) has translated the four lines of Latin between the columns:

“C'est ici un perpétuel printemps;
Ce sont des fleurs dont rien ne flétrira les fraîches
et variées couleurs. Ici Flore a un ravissant jardin
qui charme les regards des dieux et des déesses.”

Vallet was a very able draughtsman who made charming book illustrations, plates of mythological and classical subjects, and an engraved plan of Paris after François Quesnel. His portraits of himself (Fig. 2) and Robin (Fig. 3) are undoubtedly excellent likenesses. Tranchau translates the Latin under his portrait as “Il n'a qu'a vouloir, et tous ceux qui s'adonnent aux arts protégés de Minerve, il les surpasse par l'habilité de la main et par le génie,” and the distich under Robin's, “Toutes les espèces de plantes que produit le jardin des Hespérides et le monde entier, cet homme les connaît mieux que nul autre.” Another edition of the book appeared in 1623 with the title changed to read Louis XIII instead of Henri IV, another in 1638, and still another in 1650 with the title “Hortus Regius” It is only in the first edition, however, that Robin's portrait appears and the Latin text about his travels.

There were important developments in the art of gardening under Henry IV due, in a large measure, to the king's keen interest in his gardens at St. Germain-en-Laye, Fontainebleau, at Monceaux, and Blois. Olivier de Serres' *Théâtre D'Agriculture*, published in 1600, exerted tremendous influence upon agriculture in France. In the sixth chapter devoted to gardening De Serres lists the herbs and flowering plants to be used for the borders and beds of the parterres which became an outstanding feature of the French garden. Du Pérac, architect at Fontainebleau, and the King's own gardener, Claude Mollet, were great exponents of the parterre and they laid them out as a single, or integral, design divided by wide paths. As in embroidery, the geometric patterns for the flower beds changed to the undulating curves of arabesques which were given the name of “compartiments de broderie.” For the variety of low plants that was needed, designers of the parterre could turn to the garden of Robin and Vallet where they might see how high wall-flowers would

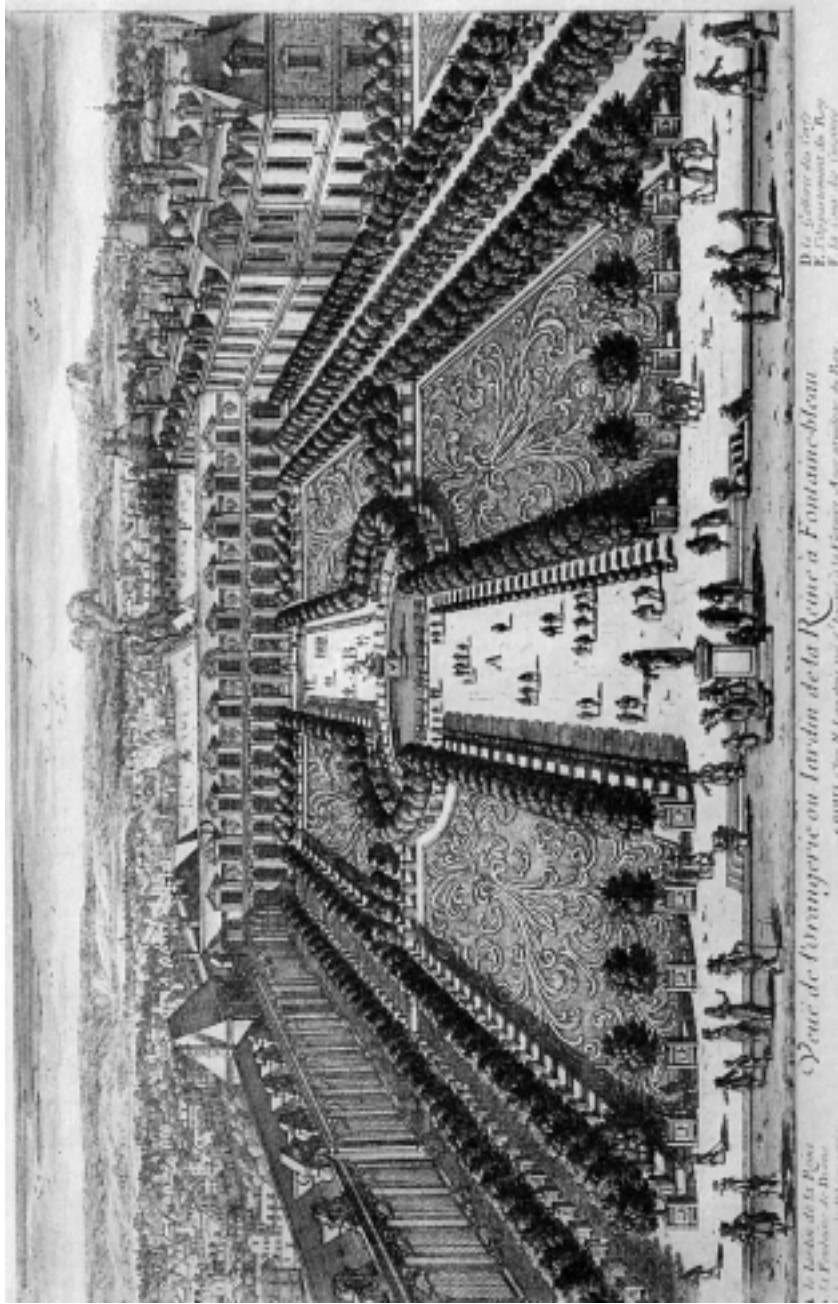


FIG. 6

THE PARTERRE AT FONTAINEBLEAU ALTERED AND ENLARGED BY HENRY IV AND CONVERTED INTO AN ORANGERY BY LOUIS XIV. FROM AN ENGRAVING BY PERELLE.

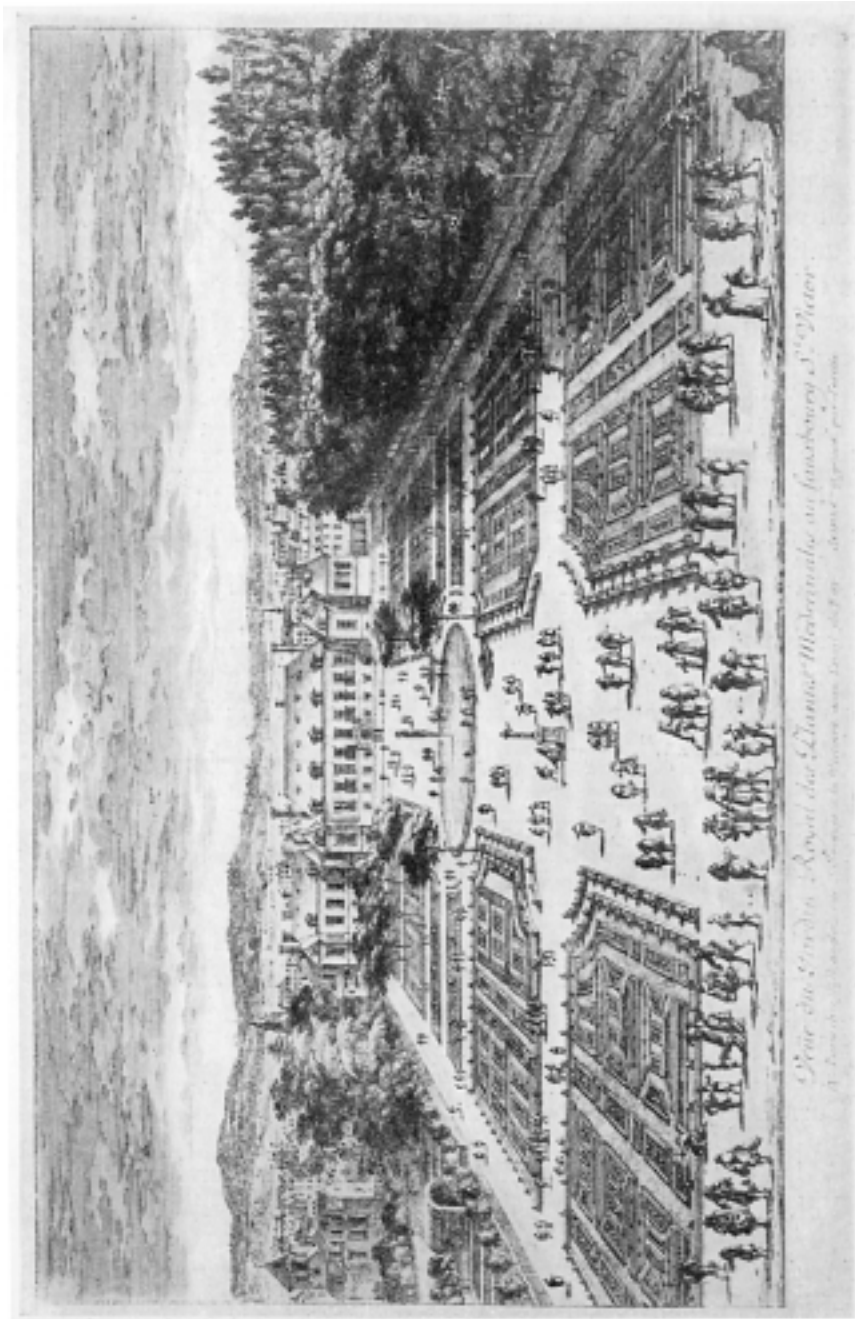


FIG. 7
VIEW OF THE PRESENT JARDIN DES PLANTES DURING TIME OF LOUIS XIV. FROM AN ENGRAVING
BY PERELLE.

grow, how lavender, thyme, mint, and marjoram combined for edging beds filled with violets, pinks, lilies-of-the-valley, the tuberose from Languedoc, and the unfamiliar, more exotic flowers that Robin popularized in France.

Botany took long strides in the seventeenth century. Tournefort, the French botanist, examined more than 10,000 plants in order to make his classification of trees and herbs which was the basis of botany instruction in France until Linnaeus published his system in 1734. Of greater significance at this moment, however, is the foundation of the present Jardin Des Plantes, for its origin was inspired by Robin's garden. In 1626, Guy de la Brosse and Hérouard, physicians to the royal household, were so impressed by what Robin had accomplished they petitioned the King to take over Robin's garden as the nucleus of a botanical garden to be established and maintained by the Crown. The Faculté de Médecine considered the proposition an assumption of their prerogatives. Against their violent objections to a royal garden of medicinal herbs, the King, by letters patent dated May 1635, assumed control over a house and twenty-four "arpents" of land in the Place Maubert, Faubourg St. Victor which La Brosse had selected as the site of the new "Jardin Royal." Jean Robin had died, but Vespasien transferred his plants and became one of the instructors under La Brosse who was the director. Among the trees he planted the "Robinia."

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