

Baroque gardens in Poland

# Shaping Nature



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Anna Oleńska's studies  
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**Once embellishing nearly every magnate mansion, Baroque gardens are hard to find in their original form in contemporary Poland. Yet the principles by which such gardens were constructed can be experienced thanks to thorough post-war reconstructions in Białystok and Wilanów**

Baroque garden design is stereotypically associated with French gardens of the Louis XIV era, dominated by an imposed geometric arrangement: more with carefully, evenly trimmed branches than with lush vegetation. In a word, with a style subject to the laws of art, not those of nature, a style reflecting the rational, Newtonian order. Yet the framework of these regular layouts, governed by the principles of number, strict predictability, and rigid structure, did incorporate nature itself in various ways: in the form of rich, diverse vegetative cover, by annexing

fragments of the existing landscape into the garden periphery, through vistas that opened up to the wider natural surroundings, or via the nature-related themes present in decorative garden sculpture. Such gardens also sometimes encompassed enclaves of wild, untamed nature.

## French gardens in Poland

The end of the 17th century and especially the first half of the next century were a time of exceptional popularity for manor gardens. High society in Europe at large, including in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, were then highly fascinated with French garden models.

When considering historical gardens, one should be aware of the short life-span of their "living material." Their time of splendor usually came to an end when their owners passed away. Maintaining lavish and large-scale landscaping arrangements required painstaking daily care and entailed considerable expense. For example, although boxwood hedges, widely planted along the rim of a *parterre* flowerbed pattern, do live for quite a long time, after a decade and a half they become very overgrown and need to be replaced.

In contemporary Poland it would thus be fruitless to seek unchanged remains of the magnificent geometric gardens that once filled Warsaw during the construction "boom" in the second quarter of the 18th century, embellishing the royal residences and nearly every magnate mansion. They simply ceased to exist, giving way to new fashions. Most gave way to the landscape garden, when the Enlightenment-age conviction that baroque styles evidenced bad taste overcame the cities. Indeed, not a single baroque garden in Poland has survived in regular form, all of them having been transformed during the 19th century. Those which we view in "baroque" form today are most frequently the consequence of post-war reconstruction projects or work carried out in the past few years (such as the gardens in Białystok and Wilanów).

The gardens at the Palace of Versailles represent the quintessential case of baroque landscaping, dating back to the late 17th century



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Jerzy Gumowski/Agencja Gazeta

### “Green” architecture

The stereotype of baroque gardens pointed out in the introduction was the work of later, 18th-century advocates of the English style of garden-keeping, which contrasted regular garden grounds to the “landscape” gardens they promoted, developed along painterly models, so as to conceal all the traces of the human hand intervening in nature. In their view, architectural rules imposed with a pair of shears did unwarranted violence to nature. Sometimes they ridiculed the unnatural, stereometric shapes of the evergreen bushes found in all such gardens. Yet the trimming of bushes into regular solid shapes had never assumed grotesque proportions on the European continent: yew trees or boxwood hedges were indeed very widely trimmed into cone-shapes, but only situated as vertical accents of parterres or flowerbeds. This balanced composition of parterres is likewise evident in old prints portraying Polish gardens – such as the garden of Hetman Jan Klemens Branicki at the palace in Białystok, known as the “Polish Versailles” in view of its magnificence and adherence to French models.

Manor gardens were undoubtedly shaped by the fact that they were designed by architects. Gardens were thus treated as an extension of architecture, or “green” architecture. Individual garden elements were even

given architectural names: a “salon” being an arrangement of parterres running along a palace’s axis, “chambers” and “cabinets” being the interiors of bosquets.

Each garden therefore encompasses two dimensions: one conceptual, the other experiential. The first of these was inherent in the design project, as executed on paper. The elaborate, curling array of low parterres, the arrangement and proportion of sections set on various elevations (for example, the composition of terraces or bosquets) were frequently only fully visible from the windows of the main *piano nobile*, the main story in the palace overlooking the garden. Here, vegetation did not play a great role. Only walking around the garden and experiencing it turned this situation around, offering contact with garden elements via all the senses. The ostensibly dry and formal baroque garden structure provided a comprehensive experience: the shimmering of multicolored flowers in the parterres, floral aromas wafting from latticework structures wreathed in blooming vines, the murmuring of fountain waters and the leaves of bosquet trees.

### Tuberose in Wilanów

Types of vegetation kept their allegorical meanings in baroque gardens. The strong-scented flowers of Louis XIV – his favorites being hyacinths, lilies, and tuberose – sym-

**The baroque gardens at King Jan III Sobieski's Wilanów Palace in Warsaw are laid out on a wide terrace running along the rear elevation**

The garden of Hetman Jan Klemens Branicki at the palace in Białystok, known as the „Polish Versailles” in view of its magnificence and adherence to French models, is an example of successful reconstruction project carried out since 1998



Białystok City Hall Archives

bologically took part, simply by unleashing their aroma, in singing the eternal and omnipresent praises of the king. The Mediterranean herbs popularly planted in flowerbed parterres also referred to the virtues of the garden's owner. Such was indeed the case at Wilanów, for example, where the garden laid out on a wide terrace along the rear elevation of King Jan III Sobieski's palace-villa consisted of four such quarters, planted with such herbs as lavender and rosemary, expressing the *splendor nominis* of the royal couple. The colors of the flowers planted in the Wilanów garden were also not without significance, dominated by reds and yellows, signifying majesty and power. Finally, gardens were widely decorated with evergreen plants, evoking a time of eternal spring, universal happiness, and a Golden Age.

The very design of the parterres helped stimulate interest in the flowers they housed. Passageways running through the flowerbeds from along the brim opened up access from all directions towards the center, enabling one to admire the beauty and scent of the flowers from close up. At the Białystok garden, eight parterre quarters were planted with imported exotic plants (such as tulips). The hetman imported not just flowers, but also citrus bushes. As many as three greenhouses were constructed at the Białystok mansion to house them in winter.

### The “Third Nature”

Theorists of architecture – the field within which the art of garden design remained firmly planted at least until the 18th century – had great difficulty in answering this funda-

mental question: What sort of metamorphosis of nature did a manor garden constitute?

They were aware of the distinct quality and essence of manor gardens, as opposed to the natural world on the one hand, and to the cultural products of human endeavors on the other. Gardens constituted sovereign worlds, where the pursuit of sensual and intellectual pleasures prevailed over the notion of utility. A certain resolution of this conundrum was to be found in the concept offered by two Italian humanists from the mid-16th century, Bartolomeo Taegio and Jacobo Monfadio, who envisioned gardens as representing a “third nature” – a domain where the natural world joins and intermingles with art. This dynamic, conceptual interpretation of the landscape as a triad of “different” natures would remain strong over the subsequent two centuries. The bird's-eye views of mansion grounds which became popular in the 18th century differentiated between the domains of the natural world, the garden grounds, and the rural or urban landscape. The baroque garden was indeed *supposed* to differ from its environs, which also meant from the surrounding native landscape and vegetation. This is shown very clearly by the printed accounts left behind by garden visitors, including in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, where the magnate residence gardens of the mid-18th century were described as true “enchanted islands” amidst the ordinariness, untidiness, and even filth of their surroundings...

### A symbol of hubris

Numerous trees were planted in the vast grounds of baroque gardens. Close scrutiny

of baroque garden plans shows that a large portion was usually taken up by *bosquets*, which were thickly wooded quarters, whose geometrically delineated lanes were kept trimmed yet whose interiors were filled by trees frequently in a freely-growing array. In Poland, *bosquets* were most frequently planted with native species, such as linden and hornbeam trees. Certain remains of planted *bosquets* are preserved at the gardens in Białystok, Choroszcz, Nieborów, and Wilanów. Some of them still bear signs of having been trimmed to shape.

In their interior, *bosquets* concealed quiet, shaded nooks conducive to intimate meetings and lonely contemplation, shielded from the rest of the garden by a mass of vegetation and accessible only via labyrinth pathways. They also offered respite from the monumentality and regularity of the garden layout as a whole. It was these quarters of the garden that housed the embryos of "wild" nature as incorporated into the garden grounds. Le Nôtre, designer of the Versailles gardens, left the natural course of a stream running through one of the *bosquets*, known as *Bosquet des Sources*. In numerous prints depicting Versailles, the *bosquets* of the small park are shown in a picturesque fashion, countering the myth of overwhelming regularity and geometrization. This shows that they were more like "little woods" (*bois*), i.e. *bosquets* with untrimmed tree crowns and a free arrangement.

### The Branicki garden in Białystok

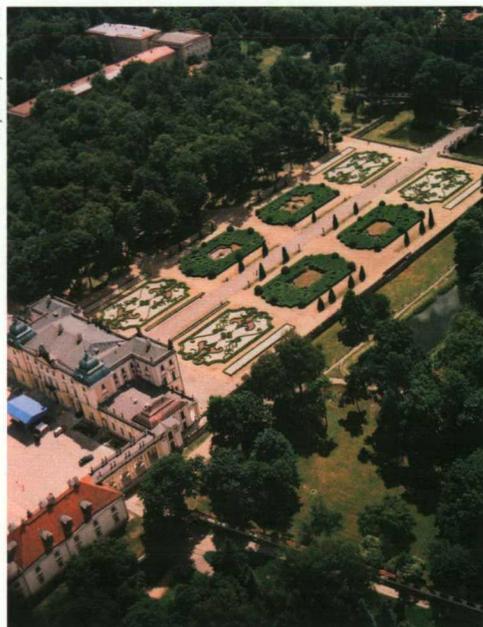
The new garden esthetic that emerged beginning in the latter half of the 16th century took an interest in living matter. Nature ceased to be something disorganized, a medium that only needed to be tidied up, and began to be a point of interest in itself as an object of study and metamorphosis. Solitary retreats to the manor garden were something conducive to intellectual effort, stimulated by the "natural" environment. In the 17th century, naturalness became the other side of artifice, equally important and appealing. Following the recommendations of Italian guidebooks, larger wooded regions left in their natural state, known as *salvatico*, soon began to be included into the compositional arrangement of garden grounds. They were used for taking longer and freer strolls, fre-

quently also for observing animals. An excellent example of this was to be found at the garden in Białystok, which appears to be comprised of two portions arranged on two levels of elevation. The higher portion, closer to the palace, situated on a terrace surrounded by a canal on two sides and by the wall of a *bosquet* on the third, constituted a symmetrically composed parterre. Here numerous sculptures were gathered, precisely modeled after figures at Versailles and Marly, which additionally stressed the fact that this fragment of the garden was dominated by the laws of art. The portion beyond the canal was a thick park of deciduous trees regulated by a system of pathways, giving way to a vast deerpark. A similar solution was followed in the composition of residences of the villa or *maisons de plaisance* type (such as Choroszcz), as well as other great provincial magnate residences, such as Prince Michał Czartoryski's Wólczyn estate, or the Mniszech family's Laszki Murowane estate. ■

#### Further reading:

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- Szafrańska M. (1994). Garden and forest - Naturalistic wilderness within 17th-century garden design [in Polish]. In: *Sztuka XVII wieku w Polsce*. Stowarzyszenie Historyków Sztuki i Arx Regia, Warsaw.

Białystok City Hall Archives



The Branicki garden shows how the gardens of the baroque epoch were treated as an extension of architecture, with geometrically delineated and trimmed lanes