

6. Francesco Bettini and the Pedagogy of Garden Design in Late Eighteenth-Century France

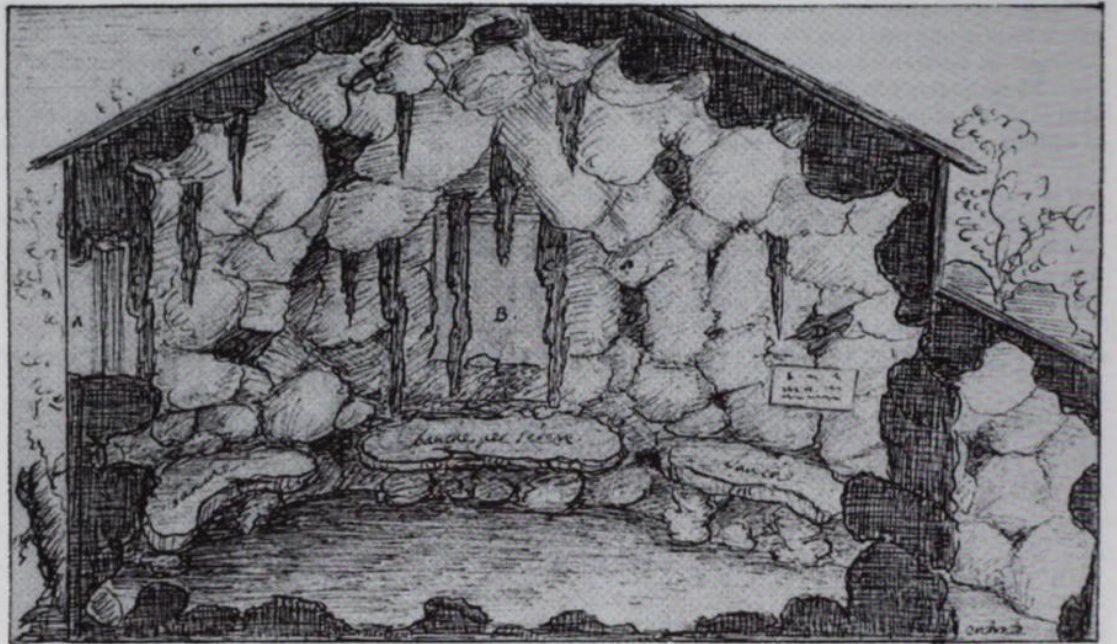
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Francesco Bettini (ca. 1737–ca. 1815) was an unlikely yet important champion of irregular garden design in eighteenth-century France. A native of northern Italy, he spent twelve years of his middle age working abroad. While in Paris between 1778 and 1784, he immersed himself in the study of garden design, visiting dozens of recently developed sites and recording in sketches what he found there. Many of those drawings were eventually reproduced in the so-called *Détail des nouveaux jardins à la mode*, a monumental series of prints which contained an important visual record of developments in French garden design in the 1770s and 1780s.¹ Bettini also produced original designs, four of which were included in the *Détail*.² Beneath one of those, the publisher of the series, the cartographer Georges-Louis Le Rouge, added a note in which he called Bettini “truly full of genius.”³ As that remark proves, Bettini’s work was esteemed by one of the chief arbiters of French taste in garden design. Even more, his drawings and original designs were thought worthy by Le Rouge to represent the state of that art in France.

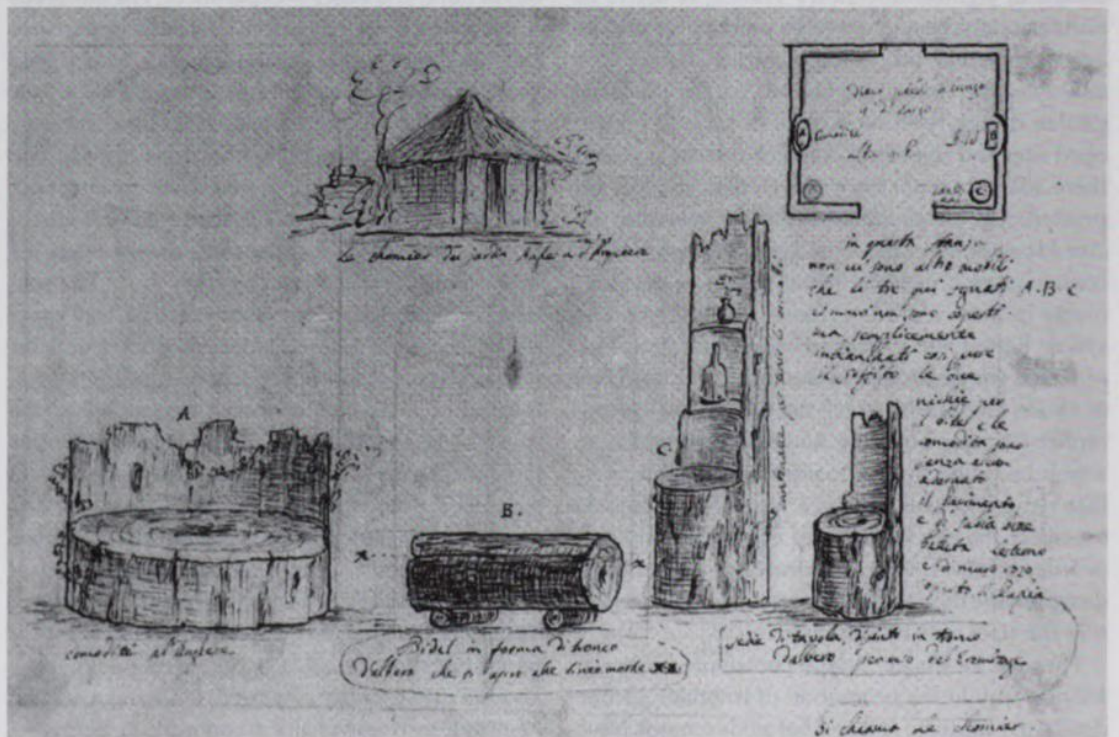
Through Le Rouge, Bettini contributed in a significant way to the promotion of irregular garden design in France. In spite of that achievement, however, he was virtually ignored by historians until the mid-1970s, when Minna Heimbürger-Ravalli began to publish a series of scholarly texts concerning his life and work.⁴ Drawing upon manuscripts and sketchbooks preserved in the Archivio Doria-Pamphilj, Rome, Ravalli portrayed Bettini as

an exemplary Enlightenment dilettante. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine a character more curious of mind and eager to experiment. The hundreds of surviving drawings in Bettini’s hand depict subjects as diverse as a section through an artificial grotto; designs for rustic furniture; a view of the moon as seen through a telescope; sign language charts; Chinese characters; four drawings of a volcanic area before, during, and after an eruption; and—perhaps most peculiar of all—three stages of a rhinoceros erection ostensibly drawn from life in the Menagerie at Versailles (figs. 1–4).⁵ The contents of Bettini’s albums show that he was especially interested in mechanical devices; problems of translation, particularly between semiotic systems; and a host of concerns pertaining to the social and economic life of the Veneto (for example, table decoration, management of canals, gold). As frontispieces to two volumes of his sketches, Bettini drew self-portraits, in one of which he appears writing or sketching at a table with attributes of the arts and sciences displayed about him (fig. 5). Tacked to the wall next to Bettini are two sheets of paper, one showing a design for an irregular garden and the other, partly obscured, showing a section or elevation of a mechanical contraption, perhaps a pump. In the second frontispiece, Bettini is shown harvesting like fruits various attributes of music, drawing, reading, and writing (fig. 6).

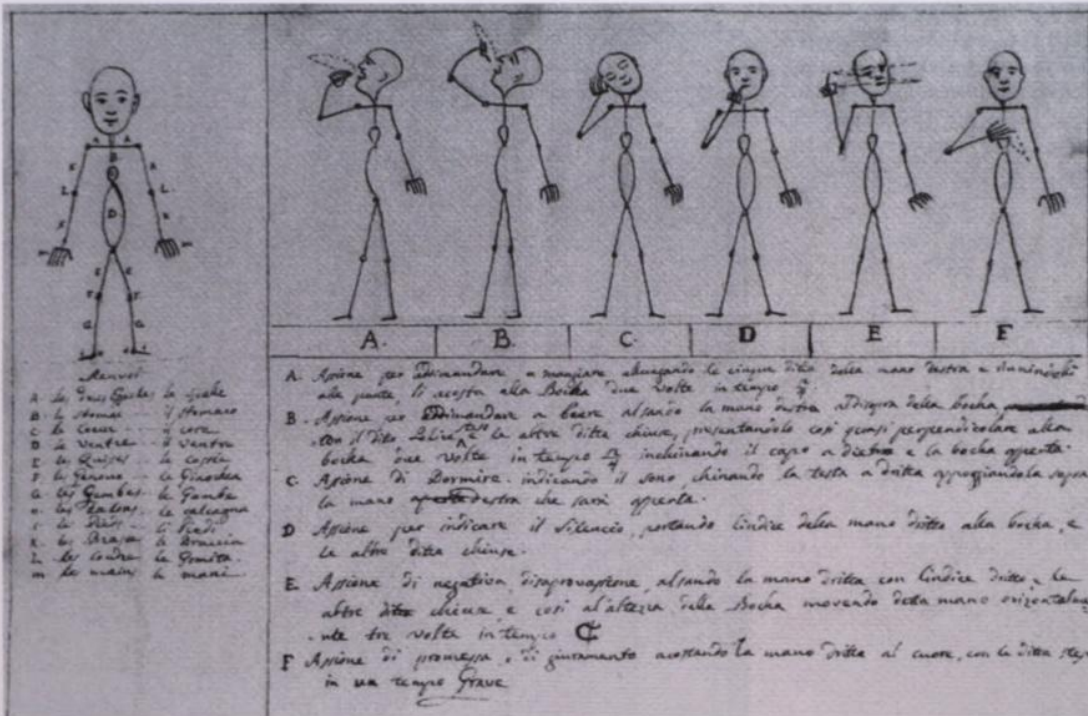
The broad range of Bettini’s interests suggested to Ravalli that he lacked an ability to focus and was thereby prevented from distinguishing himself in



1. Francesco Bettini, Section of an artificial grotto. Archivio Doria-Pamphilj, Rome, *Caos o Farraggine*, vol. 2, fol. 222.



2. Francesco Bettini, Designs for rustic furniture. Archivio Doria-Pamphilj, Rome, *Caos o Farraggine*, vol. 2, fol. 219.

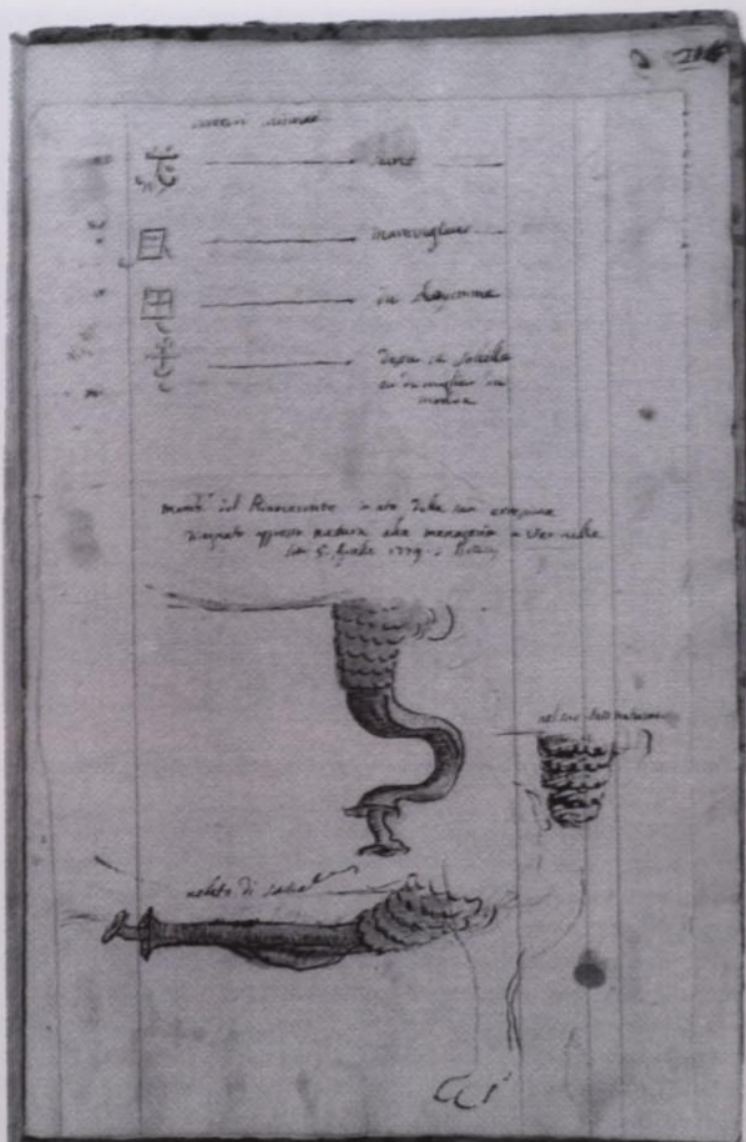


3. Francesco Bettini, Sign language chart. Archivio Doria-Pamphilj, Rome, *Caos o Farraggine*, vol. 1, fol. 16.

any one discipline. She noted that “without doubt, he was very loquacious. But as often occurs with people who talk too much, he had difficulty coordinating his own thoughts and concentrating on one thing at a time. His incongruent way of reasoning even manifested itself in his artistic work, in which he avoided concentrating on one specific field and choosing a determined artistic direction.”⁶ Ravalli believed that Bettini was “not inclined to get to the bottom of things in tackling a problem.”⁷ That criticism echoed Bettini’s own claims about himself: “I had the disgrace of being of poor health, poor memory, and little patience, such that I never settled on a single thing. I took a fancy to wanting to learn that which I saw others doing. I began the undertaking but, in the middle, I abandoned it. Thus I remained still imperfect in my operations.”⁸ In taking Bettini’s dubious remarks at face value, however, Ravalli seriously underestimated his intelligence and misunderstood the significance of his work. She supposed, for example, that he enjoyed the practical aspect of garden design without interest in, or ability to understand, its theoretical dimension: “He [i.e., Bettini] is not a theorist of architecture like Chambers, who expounds scientifically, nor a professor of philosophy like Hirschfeld, so precise and circumspect, nor the refined

poet and writer Pindemonte, in treating this topic of current interest, but a professional gardener, a garden designer who passionately defends his own trade and struggles to rouse the interest of his fellow countrymen to a subject which, for him, became a true and proper passion.”⁹ Bettini was certainly passionate about garden design, and professionalism was one of his chief concerns, but Ravalli’s interpretation of his intellectual disposition, repeated in subsequent scholarship, is contradicted by evidence that he had significant interests in the history and theory of garden design. In the late 1790s, he prepared several drafts of a treatise on garden design which, unfortunately, was never published. Besides their original content, those writings are filled with ideas lifted from contemporary theoretical texts, including crucial works like Thomas Whately’s *Observations on Modern Gardening* (London, 1770; French edition, 1771) and C. C. L. Hirschfeld’s *Théorie de l’art des jardins* (1779–85). Furthermore, Bettini’s most important work as a designer, the so-called Agronomic and Anglo-Chinese Garden (also called the “Garden of Four Principal Characters”) (1780), was conceived with theoretical questions in mind and was shaped by speculations on the historical origins of irregular design (fig. 7). That application of theory to prac-

4. Francesco Bettini, Chinese characters (top) and three phases of a rhinoceros erection drawn at the Menagerie at Versailles on 5 April 1779. Archivio Doria-Pamphilj, Rome, *Caos o Farraggine*, vol. 1, fol. 218.

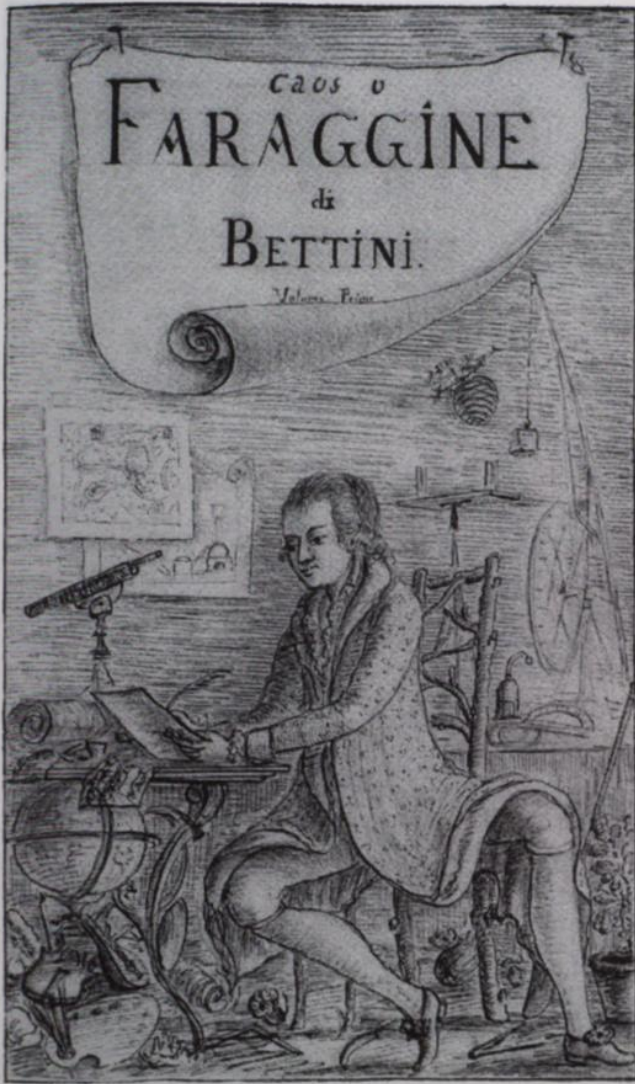


tice had roots in Bettini's own career as a student of garden design, the course of which offers valuable insights into how Bettini's approach was formulated and, more broadly, how the discipline was understood in late eighteenth-century France.

Bettini's accomplishments could hardly have been predicted from his unusual background. Born around 1737 in Maderno, a village on the west shore of the Lago di Garda, he spent the first half of his life migrating about the Veneto. While he was still a child, his family moved northeast to Rovereto, where his father continued his work as a manufacturer and merchant of paper.¹⁰ The father was soon after charged with contraband trading, however, and so the family moved again, in 1746, this time to the fortress town of Palmanova on the east frontier

of the Venetian territory. There Francesco's father opened a coffeehouse and billiards hall, two potentially lucrative businesses in a fairly dull military town. In the meanwhile, young Francesco studied violin and hunting horn and eventually found employment as a musician in the military court of Luigi Pisano, the general of the city. That commitment was soon interrupted, however, after one of Pisano's valets told Bettini that he would easily find work in Venice if he could learn how to make wigs and comb hair. Following that cue, Bettini served an apprenticeship with a local wigmaker and then moved to Venice, where he worked for a year before taking a post as a valet to a young nobleman, Lunardo Foscari di S. Pantaleo.

About a year later, Bettini's career took an im-



5. Francesco Bettini, Self-portrait. Archivio Doria-Pamphilj, Rome, *Caos o Farraggine* [modernizing Bettini's spelling], vol. 1, frontispiece.

portant turn when he accepted a new position as a personal assistant to Giovanni Mocenigo, an ambitious scion of the contemporary ducal family of Venice.¹¹ For the next fifteen years, Bettini accompanied Mocenigo through political assignments in Udine and Verona and thereby gained firsthand experience in the three disciplines that eventually became staple preoccupations of his professional life: civil engineering, the coordination of entertainments, and garden design. In his journal, Bettini emphasized various feats of civil engineering that he performed for Mocenigo. For example, in Udine, Mocenigo's seat as lieutenant of the Venetian Republic in Friuli, Bettini supervised local engineers in the rebuilding of an old Roman road. At one of Mocenigo's properties outside of Legnago, near the Adige River, Bettini showed how a swamp could

be drained and then carried out the work with great success. Bettini also concerned himself with the orchestration of social events. In Udine, he assisted Mocenigo by organizing festivals, stewarding, and providing musical entertainment at meals and social gatherings. In Verona, where Mocenigo was installed as *podestà* and general in 1770, Bettini organized a banquet in honor of local notables which Mocenigo hosted during the annual gnocchi festival.¹² At Carnival time, he accompanied the star of the opera with his hunting horn. Bettini also wrote plays for the Mocenigo family in which he himself often played a leading role, an activity very much like that performed by Carmontelle for the Orléans family in France.

Bettini's first known foray into garden design took place around 1771, when he developed a

6. Francesco Bettini, Self-portrait. Archivio Doria-Pamphilj, Rome, *Caos o Farraggine*, vol. 2, frontispiece.

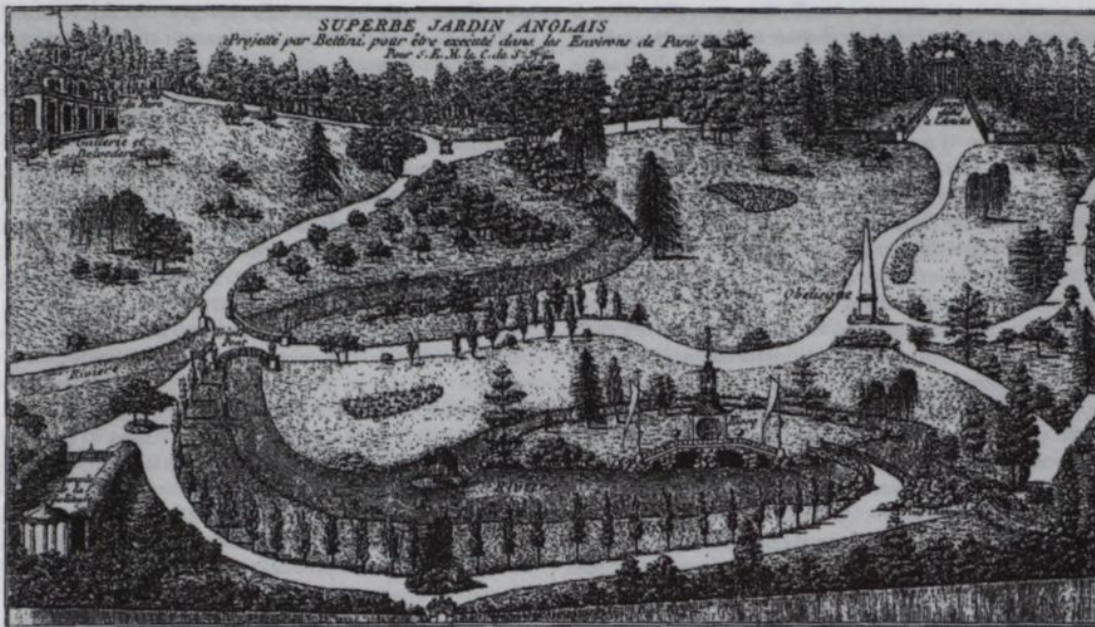


scheme for a property belonging to Mocenigo at Abano Terme, south of Padua. The property evidently included a house and stable but lacked a garden. According to Bettini's account, his proposal was accepted by Mocenigo immediately. Unfortunately, however, no evidence of the project is known to survive except for a manuscript plan of the labyrinth preserved in Rome (fig. 8).¹³ Bettini indicates that the garden also included a green theater, an amphitheater for dances, and a citrus grove.

In 1772 Mocenigo was named ambassador of Venice to France, and, on 15 October of that year, he and Bettini left for Paris. There and at Versailles, both men circulated freely within aristocratic circles and participated in court diversions, including royal hunts at Fontainebleau. Bettini also

made a point of learning all he could about the French lifestyle. In Paris, for example, he enjoyed studying the "arts of the table" (i.e., the arrangement of table settings and decorations) and worked in that capacity for several Parisian families. Given Bettini's freedom to circulate at Versailles and the interest in garden design he had already manifested in Italy, it seems likely that he would also have sought out Antoine Richard, *jardinier-botaniste* at the Petit Trianon since 1767.

Bettini enjoyed life in France so much that he decided to abandon his post with Mocenigo when the ambassador was recalled to Italy in 1774 following the coronation of Louis XVI. In the wake of the departure, Bettini began to frequent various academies of science and art and devoted him-



17. Francesco Bettini, Design for a "Superbe Jardin Anglais." Le Rouge, *Détail*, cahier XX (1788), pl. 1.

French preoccupation with the plan as a format of design persisted across the shift from regular to irregular paradigms. Finally, Bettini's writings and his design for the "Agronomic and Anglo-Chinese Garden" epitomize contemporary uncertainty concerning the historical and conceptual provenance of irregular design. Unable to resolve that uncertainty by himself and unwilling to adopt one hypothesis for the sake of argument, Bettini embraced a syncretic approach which represented the general state of contemporary theory perhaps better than any other design of the period and which anticipated the pedagogical eclecticism of French garden design in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Notes

The author gratefully acknowledges the generous permission of S. E. Donna Orietta Doria-Pamphilj to consult and reproduce documents in the Archivio Doria-Pamphilj, Rome. Many thanks are also given to Cinzia Ammannato and Mirka Beneš for their assistance at the archive, to Paul Miller for his hospitality in Rome, to Polly Rubin for countless useful suggestions, and to the Department of History of Art, Yale University, for an Alumni Grant used to support research in Rome.

1. See Georges-Louis Le Rouge, *Détail des nouveaux jardins à la mode*, 21 vols. (Paris: ca. 1775–ca. 1788). The series

is known variously as *Détail des nouveaux jardins à la mode* and *Jardins anglo-chinois*. The first title comes from a heading that appeared on plate 1 of the first installment. Later installments had different headings, however, most of which included the phrase *jardins anglo-chinois*, hence the alternative title.

2. See Le Rouge, *Détail*, cahier XII (1784), pl. 1: "Projet d'un Jardin Anglo-Français-Chinois"; pl. 14: "Labyrinthe d'Abano au Prince Mocenigo" and "Projet d'un Labyrinthe par Bettini"; cahier XX (1788), pl. 4: "Superbe Jardin Anglais Projeté par Bettini pour être exécuté dans les Environs de Paris Pour S. E. M. le C. de S."

3. *Ibid.*, cahier XX (1788), pl. 4: "On peut dire que Bettini est réellement plein de Génie."

4. See Minna Heimbürger-Ravalli, "Francesco Bettini e l'introduzione del giardino romantico a Roma," in *Studia romana in honorem Petri Krarup* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1976), 213–25; *idem*, "Progetti e lavori di Francesco Bettini per il parco di villa Belrespiro," *Studi romani* 25 (1977): 27–37; *idem*, "Décors de fêtes françaises par l'italien Francesco Bettini," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 91 (1978): 83–92; *idem*, "Un décorateur de fêtes italien en France et son projet pour le feu d'artifice de Paris en 1782 à l'occasion de la naissance du Dauphin," *ibid.*, 95 (1980): 1–4; *idem*, *Disegni di giardini e opere minori di un artista del '700, Francesco Bettini* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1981). See also Ravalli, "La genesi del giardino della regina Maria Carolina a Caserta," *Antologia di belle arti* 13 (1980): 38–40.

5. Francesco Bettini, *Caos o Faraggine* [sic], Archivio Doria-Pamphilj, Rome, vol. 2: 222, 2: 219, 2: 166, 1: 16, 2: 335–36, 3: 108–10; 1: 218.

6. Ravalli, *Disegni*, 164: "è fuor di dubbio che fosse molto loquace. Ma come spesso avviene con le persone che parlano troppo, gli riusciva difficile coordinare i pro-

pri pensieri e concentrarsi su di una cosa alla volta. Il suo modo incongruente di ragionare si manifestava anche nella sua attività artistica nella quale evitava di concentrarsi su di un campo specifico e di scegliere un indirizzo artistico determinato."

7. *Ibid.*, 167: "Francesco Bettini non era incline di andare a fondo nell'affrontare un problema."

8. Francesco Bettini, "Viaggi et' Aventure di Francesco Bettini," Archivio Doria-Pamphilj, Archiviolo 343, interno (int.) 12: "Ebbi la disgrazia di essere di una salute debole, di poca memoria, e di poca pazienza, cosicché non mi fissai mai in una sol cosa. minvogliava facilmente di voler imparare ciò che vedea fare agl'altri, cominciava l'impresa, ma alla metà labandonava. così rimasi ancora imperfeto nelle mie operazioni."

9. Ravalli, *Disegni*, 65: "Non è un teorico dell'architettura come Chambers, che disserta scientificamente, né un professore di filosofia come Hirschfeld, così preciso e ponderato, né il raffinato poeta e scrittore Pindemonte a trattare questo argomento di attualità, ma un giardiniere professionista, un compositore di giardini che difende appassionatamente il proprio mestiere e lotta per risvegliare l'interesse dei connazionali a una materia che per lui è diventata una passione vera e propria." See also Ravalli, *Disegni*, 61-66.

10. For this and the following biographical information, including that on subsequent pages, unless otherwise cited, see Bettini, "Viaggi et' Aventure," Archivio Doria-Pamphilj, Rome, Archiviolo 343, int. 12, and Ravalli, *Disegni*, chap. 1: "La vita e le avventure di Francesco Bettini," 1-16. Ravalli's account is based strictly on Bettini's own memoirs.

11. Alvise IV Mocenigo (1710-78) was doge of Venice from 1763 until his death.

12. The "venerdì gnoccolare" is held each year in Verona during the Carnival.

13. Bettini, "Viaggi et' Aventure," fol. 73; Ravalli, *Disegni*, 45-46. Bettini's manuscript plan of the labyrinth is preserved in Bettini, *Caos*, vol. 1: 74bis-75: "Lamberinto eseguito a Albano [sic] nel Giardino contiguo a la Casa di Campagna di S. E.za H.la: G:ni Mocenigo. l'anno 1771 par F. Bettini." In 1784 Le Rouge published the plan of the labyrinth. See Le Rouge, *Détail*, cahier XII (1784), pl. 14 (detail).

14. See Francesco Bettini, Ms. 143, Archivio Doria Pamphilj, Rome, fol. 26r-26v.

15. Bettini, Ms. 143, fol. 26r: "io consiglierei tuti quelli che ano la fortuna di possedere de la terra di fare di tuta la sua tenuta un giardino all'inglese."

16. See, for example, Thomas Blaikie, *Diary of a Scotch Gardener at the French Court at the End of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Francis Birrell (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1931), 20 September 1777: "This place [i.e., Maisons] is finely situated upon the banks of the River and might be made beautiful but there ideas seems so contracted that they only showed a piece of ground about 4 or 5 acres which they said they wanted to make an English garden of. I told them that was not what was meant by English gardens, that the whole ground round the house ought to correspond else they never could think of having anything beautiful but this they had no idea of. Mr Belanger who had been in England understood beter than the others but he told me to have patience and to do as well as we could untill they saw something."

17. Bettini, Ms. 143, fol. 26r: "mi par che il lettore mi voglia rimpoverare che sono un pazzo che il mio cosiglio non sarà eseguito che dalli pazzi parche mi dirà! e quando averò tuti li miei beni in giardino! dove andeno a coglier la Biada!, il Fieno, il Vino et i legumi! non non e tropo absurda!"

18. *Ibid.*: "e ben dissi io voi avette il sito che conviene, per far un bellissimo giardino all'inglese, basta che voi sacrificiate 30. Luigi ed io ve lo fo nella vostra tenuta senza che voi perdiate un soldo d'intrata."

19. For this and the following, see *ibid.*, fols. 26r-26v: "tanti raggioni gli adessi [?] che l'amico mi lassio la libertà daggire nel crudo inverno diedi mano all'opera con una dozzina di [b]iavi lavoratori e comincia per tornar il canale nel modo che sta nel quatratto B.B.B.B. e formai un isola nella quale lassia la casa delli paesani la quale la converti in stalla e lisola che la lassai a erba li servia di pascolo senza aver bisogno di muro per chiuder, laqua li isolava."

20. *Ibid.*, fol. 26v: "E vero che lamico perdetto molti frutti il primo ano che nel 1776 che lo feci e nel 1777. la raccolta de frutti non fu si abbondante ma nel 1778. il total della raccolta e si procurò una dilizia che tuti li vicini dimandano il permesso per andarvi a passeggiare."

21. *Ibid.*: "nel 1780. sopra una somita fece fare un tempio, in legno coloritto a finti marmi che fa un bel effetto oltre che ofre un azilo grazioso, e una vista della bella guardate il sito C."

22. *Ibid.*: "così l'amico si trova contento a gendo, che non andava alla sua campagna che parche gl'interessi suoi lo portava una non restava quasi mai a dormire ora si passa de messi interri."

23. *Ibid.*: "ora dimando a voi, sono egli proggetti da pazzo? proggetti rovinosi senza utilità?"

24. See Bettini, *Caos*, 1: 80: "Eseguito a Londra da Bettini 1777."

25. Bettini, "Viaggi et' Aventure," 232; Ravalli, *Disegni*, 47-48: "Inoltrandomi poi ogni passo trovai delli quadri che mi piacevano, mi diletavano ma non sapevo ne pur la ragione, poiché a primo aspetto mi preparavo per farne la critica, ma più che mi inoltravo in quei belli boschetti e che da pertuto vi trovavo qualche bella decorazione o di marmo o di stucco, mi andava sempre più piacendo, che finalmente ne venni fanatico a grado che non mi sarei mai partito da quel sito magico."

26. *Ibid.*, fols. 252-53: "per imparare a comporli [i.e., giardini all'inglese] parlai con il Giardiniere della Regina Mons.r Richard, e li dimandai come avrei a fare per imparare a comporeere [sic] d' Giardini. Egli [i.e., Richard] mi sugierò in primo loco che bisognava sapere la Botanica, 2.d la coltura degl'alberi e piante Esotiche, terzo che era nessesario sapere misurare [i.e., to survey land] livelare le aqui, saper disegnare [i.e., to draw; Bettini used the verb "comporre" (to compose) to mean "to design"] e in fine studiare gl'autori e filosofi che parlano di tal materia etc."

27. *Ibid.*, fol. 318. Ravalli's indication that Bettini studied with Gabriel Thouin is incorrect. Bettini identified his instructor as "Toin l'éné," a clear reference to André. (See Yvonne Letouzey, *Le Jardin des Plantes à la croisée des chemins avec André Thouin (1747-1824)* [Paris: Editions du Muséum, 1989].) Ravalli also suggested that Bettini studied botany with the comte de Buffon (1707-88), director of the Jardin du Roi since 1739, but this is doubtful. In his memoirs, Bettini noted that "monsieur de