XI. Beginnings in France

As the fifteenth was the century of Florentine awakening in landscape architecture and the sixteenth the century of the Roman villa, so the seventeenth was France’s great century. It was the era of Le Nôtre—of Versailles and Louis XIV and French ascendency in Europe. Of course it did not burst unheralded upon the scene; a century and a half of slow development went before it as, toward the end of the fifteenth century, France emerged bit by bit from the Hundred Years’ War with England and the general turmoil of the Middle Ages.

The continuation of warfare, both external and internal, over so long a span—and until such a late date in comparison with progress of the Renaissance in Florence—left its mark on French developments for some time to come. Medieval forms were retained in general use; the country house remained a battlemented castle with a moat around it; not until well into the sixteenth century was there much extension of life into a placid landscape beyond the defensive perimeter, and even then it developed hesitantly, almost clumsily. Long after the influence of the Italian Renaissance had begun to be felt, certain distinctively French characteristics persisted: the moat, no doubt for reasons of appearance even when no longer needed for defense; bastion-like corner towers, usually cylindrical, with pointed “candle-snuffer” tops; steeply pitched roofs with high dormers. Then, strangely enough in an atmosphere still tinged by medieval ruggedness, French ornamentation moved toward delicacy of detail rather than toward the strong-muscled forms of Italian prototypes.

The influence that the Italian Renaissance had on France came about through a fact, or perhaps one should say quirk, of history. By 1477 Louis XI, of the House of Valois, had at last achieved peace with England and
enough dominance over rival nobles to form a solid basis for an absolute French monarchy. His son Charles VIII, succeeding him in 1483, soon felt strong enough to press the family's dynastic claims to the Kingdom of Naples and in 1495 conducted a swift Italian campaign. By strict military interpretation, Charles won the war in Italy, but the more important fact is that Italy won his heart.

By his own admission Charles VIII fell headlong in love with Italy and felt that an entire new world had been opened to him. On his return to France he brought a massive quantity of Italian works of art and more than a score of Italian artists and artisans. Among the latter was Pasello da Mercogliano, a Neapolitan priest who was also a skilled gardener. Especially enamored of the gardens he had visited in Italy, Charles brought Pasello to the family's favorite château, at Amboise on the south bank of the Loire, in the hope of improving the place so as to make it comparable with what he had seen on his southern expedition.

Amboise, however, a tightly walled medieval fortress on a rocky height above the river, offered little scope; and Pasello was no Bramante, though they were contemporaries. All that resulted at Amboise from these efforts in Charles's brief remaining lifetime was a small garden, probably of typical medieval pattern, close to the castle graveyard. Charles died unexpectedly in 1498 and was succeeded by a second cousin, the Duke of Orléans, who assumed the crown as Louis XII. The new monarch continued the efforts to improve Amboise, added a whole new wing, and somewhat elaborated the surroundings of the garden (Fig. 114), but his chief interest lay some twenty miles up the Loire in the château of Blois, his birthplace on the north bank of the Loire. The property—indeed, the entire county of Blois—was obtained by the House of Orléans late in the 1300s; it gained importance when Louis moved the French court from Amboise to Blois. To the older portions of the château he added the wing in brick and stone that now bears

114. Amboise, perched high above the River Loire, shows the timid early garden development begun by Pasello da Mercogliano for Charles VIII in the 1490s.
115. Blois: the layout of gardens begun here under Louis XII early in the sixteenth century was more elaborate but still almost medieval in its lack of organization.

his name and has a modern equestrian statue of him in a niche over the main portal.

Of more relevance here is the fact that he brought Pasello da Mercogliano from Amboise to Blois to begin ample but clumsy gardens. Though practically nothing remains of them today, one can at least glimpse what they may have been, thanks to the engravings published many years later (1579) by Androuet du Cerceau in his Les Plus Excellents Bastiments de France (Fig. 115). Looking at Du Cerceau’s engravings—and he did views not only of Amboise and Blois but of most of the important works of the sixteenth century in France—one can readily see that here again, much like the case in Italy, a long and at times labored climb was being made from almost childlike medieval beginnings toward the skillfulness and sophistication of a well-developed understanding of design.

Because of its relatively late date, the Du Cerceau view of Blois naturally included additions made by Francis I, the cousin and son-in-law who succeeded Louis XII in 1515. There are the handsome Francis I wing and spiral staircase and the gardens toward which the wing faces: three separate levels, supported by high retaining walls and reached by a covered bridge from the château across a moat-like depression through which a street of the town runs today. The lower of these terraces were no doubt done by Pasello for Louis XII; the rest came with Francis I and later. The three garden levels are well organized, according to the engraving, in unimaginative checkerboard patterns of a medieval sort, with adjacent treillage and galleries; but the levels
are not in any recognizable visual way related to each other, and the whole garden area is quite detached from the château.

The gardens at Blois, in short, appear to have given little promise of the strong spatial structure that would one day be regarded as typically French. Indeed, a similar obtuseness in outdoor design seems to have characterized the entire period of Francis I, despite his lively interest in the arts and the richness of the architectural developments during his thirty-two-year reign. Of course the precise detail of the many places created or begun by order of Francis I cannot be certain because none remains today in its original form; most were enlarged under Henri II, the son who succeeded him in 1547, or by later monarchs. But, on the whole, modifications of this kind do not tend to change the basic spirit of the early work as evidenced in Du Cerceau’s views. Moreover, the question here is not of precise detail, but rather of overall spatial structure—or of its relative absence from French landscape architectural works of the first half of the sixteenth century.

The massive, moated château of Chambord, for example, started by Francis in about 1519 as a hunting lodge (incredible as this may seem for such an establishment) is widely known as a fabulous collection of towers, chimneys, pinnacles, and high dormers. But aside from its hunting preserve, a forested park many miles in extent, there is no evidence of outdoor development either by Francis I or by Henri II and those who followed. One encounters references to the cutting of long straight swaths through the forest in various directions, with great circular clearings, or ronds-points, at crossings from which groups of these allées radiated. The arrangement—which did become a custom at some time, if not actually at Chambord or as early as Francis I—was meant to provide a big open space where the ladies of the court could gather in comfort, with all the viands and trappings of the usual elaborate picnic, while their gallants hunted boar or stag in the forest. As riders pursuing their quarry crossed one or more of the radiating allées, the ladies could observe them and utter the expected exclamations of praise and wonder. Thus came into being, reputedly at least, what was one of the most unique devices of typical French landscape architecture.

The present château of Chenonceaux (Fig. 116), that most fanciful creation perched crosswise in the River Cher southeast of Amboise, was started on older foundations by the financier Thomas Bohier in about 1515, then came into the possession of Francis I in 1523. He continued the rebuilding, but most of the subsequent changes were made after 1547 by Diane de Poitiers, Henri II’s mistress, or as late as 1559 by Catherine dei Medici, his widow. Here as at Blois there is in fact a garden, a sizeable rectangular plinth lifted on sturdy walls rising from the river on the near bank, wholly detached from the château. The garden has no doubt been treated in various geometric patterns from its earliest days, but it still has no strong connection to any overall scheme. Aside from this garden, a straight tree-lined avenue of ap-
116. Fanciful Chenonceaux, in the River Cher, eventually had gardens, but they were somewhat disjointed and detached from the château.

proach, and a square arrival terrace, Chenonceaux has no clearly developed outdoor areas.

Francis I also began, at Fontainebleau, the rather haphazard grouping of buildings that was enlarged and added to by his successors to reach the ultimate size and complexity of today’s palace. From an engraving by Du Cerceau it is difficult to ascertain just which of the somewhat random gardens were done for Francis, but it is not at all difficult to see that throughout the sixteenth century the château’s grounds developed little more schematic sense than a patchwork quilt.

In the closing years of the reign of Francis I, and during that of Henri II, the arts of France moved forward significantly. Francis called into service from Italy such known masters as Serlio and Primaticcio; from among the French a few able designers began to emerge, and more contact with Italian experience gradually brought a much stronger sense of design, including first of all the firm connection between indoors and outdoors that had been lacking.