The Désert de Retz Revisited

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Fig. 1 Louis de Carmontelle (1717–1806), Désert de Retz: The Column House and the Temple of Pan. Pen and brown ink, brown wash, on paper, 35.4 x 50.3 cm. Nationalmuseum, NMH A 37/1974 (recto).
It was an idea, at once sublime and picturesque, well suited to a man approaching fifty and blasé about most of what life had to offer. François Racine Monville was in a position to indulge in such eccentric conceits. A very wealthy man, he owned two private palaces in Paris, designed for him by Étienne-Louis Boullée (1728–1799), as well as a barony outside the capital, gifted to him by his maternal grandfather. The files of the secret police record that Monsieur de Monville was a dandy and a libertine with few equals. He was rumoured to have been the lover of both Madame du Barry and the actress-singer Sophie Arnould, though it was hardly for his amorous adventures that he was famous, but for his artistic interests. Monville was regarded as one of France’s foremost harpists, was a close friend of Gluck’s, and composed both chamber music and opéra comique. He was also a dedicated “gardening lord” and architect.

Several historians have previously credited either Boullée or Hubert Robert (1733–1808) with the design of the column in the Désert de Retz. Today, all the evidence suggests that it was Monville’s own idea, and that he also did the drawings. Inside this extraordinary building, rooms of the most varying shapes, spread over four storeys, were arranged around a spiral staircase. Some were oval or circular, some square or rectangular, all to offer the greatest possible variation in the occupant’s perception of space. The lower two floors housed the actual living quarters, while the top two, with their studios and laboratories, were devoted to favourite pastimes such as architecture and science. How did Monville solve the problem of lighting in a “house” that had four floors, but only three with windows? The answer was as simple as it was ingenious. By making the cracks in the ashlar-patterned stucco wider at suitable points, he was able to admit sufficient light for the attic storey (Fig. 2).

Monsieur de Monville was pretty much alone in his original conception of a dwelling that was at once a monument and a belvedere. It is hard to image anything further removed from the palatial abode of a gentleman. Clearly, Gustav III was impressed by what he saw. Armfelt’s entry in his diary is brief, but unequivocal: “M. Monville showed us what money and good taste can achieve with the wildest of Nature.” How had the king got to know the eccentric creator of the Désert? Presumably, Monville had been introduced to him by the Duke of Chartres, later known as Philippe Égalité (1747–1793). A member of the duke’s inner circle, Monville had designed the famous Winter Garden in the Parc Monceau, a curious hybrid of greenhouse and grotto. The latter part appears to have served as a meeting room for the duke’s private Masonic lodge, St Jean de Chartres de l’Orient de Monceau. On a visit to the Parc Monceau on 22 June 1784, Gustav had been fascinated by the Winter Garden in particular. And when he now asked Monville for a plan of the Désert de Retz, he also requested one of the Parc Monceau building.

**Fig. 2** François Racine de Monville (1734–1797), Désert de Retz: The Column. Planche VII. Pen and black ink, grey wash, on paper, 60.2 x 47 cm. Nationalmuseum, NMH Z 12/1958 (recto).
There is of course an explanation for the Swedish king’s keen interest in Monville’s various creations. At the time, he was in the process of extending and reshaping his own landscape gardens at Drottningholm and Haga, as well as pursuing a host of architectural projects. Besides the two plans already mentioned, therefore, he asked especially for numerous drawings of the two most important buildings in the Désert, the Chinese House (Fig. 3) and the Column House. Not until the following March (of 1785) were the drawings ready to be sent to Stockholm. The reason for the delay was probably that some of them may have been used as a basis for Georges Le Rouge’s (1712–1780/90) famous illustrated work Jardins Anglo-Chinois à la mode, the thirteenth volume of which was devoted to the Désert.

The first person to publish any of the Désert de Retz drawings was Osvald Sirén (1879–1966), in his celebrated China and the Gardens of Europe (1950). Sirén, though, knew only of the elevations of the Chinese House and the Column House, held at the Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts and the Nationalmuseum. He had no knowledge of the drawings in the Royal Library, nor of how any of these drawings, the only preserved originals, had
found their way to Sweden. That question I was able to shed light on in an article in the Gazette des Beaux-Arts in 1986. With the recent discovery of the large general plan of the Désert de Retz, the most impressive of the items Monville sent to Gustav III, a clearer picture emerges of what the king in fact received. How this plan ended up in a fourth institution, the Nordiska museet in Stockholm, has yet to be elucidated, however, as has the exact provenance history of the other three parts of Monville’s gift (Fig. 4).

True to the dramatic character of his park, Monville provided his plan of the Désert with a no less theatrical setting. A winged genius of art or architecture holds out a torch to illuminate the plan, which is attached to a large swathe of drapery. Framing it is an altar or a kind of proscenium, with pilastered sides. These are hung with views from the park, illusionistically rendered as framed paintings. To the left, in order, are the Chinese House, the Grotto Entrance, the Temple of Pan, the Open-Air Theatre and the Tomb. To the right are corresponding views of the Chinese-style Orangery, the Pyramid or Ice House, the Hermitage, the Dairy and the Temple of Repose. The general plan itself is no ordinary drawing, but combines several architectural genres. Buildings, garden ornaments and plantings are represented now in plan, now in elevation. Equally often, an isometric projection is used. The result combines grandeur with the naïve. Together with the plans of the Column House and the Chinese House, this magnificently conceived presentation drawing was a most lavish gift to Gustav III. The dimensions are impressive. The rolled plan in its entirety measures 1.5 by 2.25 metres, and is executed on numerous sheets of paper glued together, probably

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Fig. 4 François Racine de Monville (1734–1797), Désert de Retz: General Plan. Pen and black ink, grey wash, watercolour, 150 x 225 cm. Nordiska museet, Stockholm, NMA 0073202.
from the Dutch firm of D[irk] & C[ornelius] Blauw. Mounted on green silk, it is attached at one end to a turned, black-painted map rod, with two large silk ribbons at the other to hang it on a wall.

With the rediscovery of this spectacular plan, part of Monville’s first gift to Gustav III in 1785, we can see more clearly how the Désert de Retz evolved. For the first time, for instance, we know what a number of buildings, not depicted in Le Rouge’s engraved volume, looked or were intended to look like, among them the Hermitage and the Dairy. In his accompanying letter to the king, Monville also provides an explanation: “J’ai rendu le plan general tel qu’il est projeté, et j’y ai joint des changements qui n’étoient pas encore faits, quand Votre Majesté a bien voulu honorer le Désert de sa présence.”

Among the features of the park that had evidently not assumed their final character when the Swedish king visited was an obelisk which Monville has placed by the Grotto Entrance. On Le Rouge’s plan, this ornament has disappeared, but another obelisk, on an open lawn near the kitchen garden, is retained. In the northern part of the park, we find a further example, the Tomb, which Monville locates on a small island, while Le Rouge has it nestling in a small clump of trees at the edge of a field. Another interesting difference is the Island of Happiness, where Monville’s plan gives no indication of the tent recorded by Le Rouge. Given Gustav III’s own fondness for tent-like buildings, this could be an addition inspired by his visit. A further detail close to the Island of Happiness is a small sculpture, placed against a green background to conceal a corner of the garden wall; this is found on the plan sent to the Swedish king, but not on Le Rouge’s. Conversely, the Temple of Repose does not appear on Monville’s plan, though it is depicted in one of the framed “paintings”. This could be because this backdrop-like building had not been constructed when the plan was sent. All these discrepancies show that the park had yet to find its definitive shape, and that Monville was constantly refashioning and extending his project. The general plan which he sent to Gustav, therefore, was not a record of what had actually been created, but a mix of features, both existing and envisaged. This is also confirmed by the king’s letter of thanks: “Connaissant par moi-même la beauté du local et le bon goût qui règne dans les embellissements déjà achevés, j’ai bien aise d’avoir une idée de ceux qui restent à faire pouvoir d’autant mieux juger de l’ensemble de ce beau [superbe] Jardin.”

On the large general plan, Monsieur de Monville proudly declares that he alone is responsible for the buildings and plantings. Whether this means that he actually did all the drawings, including the plan itself, we cannot be sure. His handwriting appears on the floor plans of the Column House, indicating the functions of the rooms, but that of course does not prove that he also prepared the drawings. A comparison of the general plan

François Racine de Monville (1734–1797), Désert de Retz: General Plan. Pen and black ink, grey wash, watercolour, 150 x 225 cm. Nordiska museet, Stockholm, NMA 0073202 (Fig. 4, detail).
with the drawings of the Column House and the Chinese House confirms that they are all by the same hand. The same thing, interestingly, is true of the only separate view of the park that has been preserved.\textsuperscript{14} The latter has traditionally been ascribed to Louis Carrogis de Carmontelle (1717–1806), but in the light of what we now know that attribution seems less likely. As an artist, Carmontelle worked in the Rococo tradition, while the author of the Désert de Retz drawings is an out-and-out Neoclassicist. Perhaps we should, after all, credit Monville with the ability to have produced them. Studying the general plan in particular, we notice a certain naivety in the rendering of the vegetation and the perspectives of buildings that seems to betray a gardening lord. The grandiose tone of the composition, like the unbridled expressiveness of the drapery, points in the same direction. Behind Monville’s gift, therefore, we sense a large measure of self-aggrandisement. The Swedish ambassador in Paris, Erik Magnus Staël von Holstein, evidently felt that a handsome present was called for in return, and asked a friend at court to see to it that its value came to at least five to six thousand livres.\textsuperscript{15} Monville accordingly received a gold box bearing the monogram of Gustav III in diamonds. This was accompanied by a courteous letter, although it seems that the Swedish king decided at the last minute to tone down much of the praise it had originally contained. In the draft, the superlatives have been consistently deleted. Although Gustav was clearly keen to temper any expectations, his reply prompted a new consignment of drawings from Monville – a further set of views of the park and two plans – in September of the same year. Of this material, all that can now be found is the above-mentioned view (previously attributed to Carmontelle), showing the Column House as seen from the Temple of Pan.\textsuperscript{16}

A broken column was hardly a fitting residence for a Swedish king. What seems above all to have captured Gustav III’s imagination was the original room plan.\textsuperscript{17} In a number of drafts, he experimented with a pair of compasses, fitting oval, square and rectangular rooms into a circular building with a columned façade. This would be the embryo of the great Haga Palace, later designed by Louis Jean Desprez (1743–1804). We are nonetheless indebted to Gustav for his interest in one of the most imaginative and visionary garden creations of the period. Without that interest, few clues would now remain – with all of Monville’s own drawings swept away by the French Revolution – as to how the Désert de Retz was originally conceived.

\textbf{Notes:}
\begin{itemize}
\item 3. Regarding M. de Monville as a composer, see Magnus Olausson, "Freemasonry, Occultism and the Picturesque Garden the End of the Eighteenth Century", in \textit{Art History} 1985, vol. 8, no. 4, p. 428, n. 9.
\item 5. Diary of Baron Gustaf Mauritz Armfelt, 14 July 1784, Helsinki, National Archives, Åminne papers. The entire diary has been published by Rainer Knaps, \textit{Resan till Italien: Gustaf Mauritz Armfetls resedagbok 1783–84}, Stockholm, 1997.
\item 6. Olausson 1985, p. 417.
\item 8. Ibid., pp. 181–182.
\item 9. Ibid., p. 189, n. 10.
\item 10. Archive of the Nordiska museet. The general plan of the Désert de Retz still lacks an inventory number.
\item 11. Letter from M. de Monville to Gustav III, n.d. [March 1785], Stockholm, National Archives, Skrivelser till Konungen, Gustaf III.
\item 12. Letter from Gustav III to M. de Monville in rough draft, n.d. [May 1785], Stockholm, National Archives, Kabinettet för Utrikes Brevväxling, Bi 1:785, vol. 5.
\item 13. Cf Choppin de Janvry 1970.
\item 15. Letter from Erik Magnus Staël von Holstein to Nils Rosén von Rosenstein, dated Paris 28 March 1785, Uppsala University Library, Ms F 890r.
\item 17. Ibid., p. 186.
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