

Gardens of the Castles at Freÿr on the Meuse

Freÿr castle, park and surroundings are classified as a monument and a site on the list of Exceptional Heritage Estates in Wallonia and they are also on the tentative list of UNESCO's World Heritage.

The path to follow is indicated in bold letters

Take care walking on the stairs and near the ponds and walls

Parents, please see that your children do not throw gravel in the ponds or touch the statues

Our association thanks heartily Mr. Graham Keen, from Brussels, for the translation of this text from French into English.

THE CREATORS OF THE GARDENS

In the middle of 18th century, following the death of Charles-Albert de Beaufort-Spontin and his wife Marie de Glymes, their brothers, Guillaume (William) and Philippe (Philip), successively became guardians of their orphaned nephews and so started converting Freÿr and its gardens into a summer residence. Guillaume, the older brother, was head canon at Namur cathedral and his younger brother, Philippe, was an encyclopedist and member of a lodge.

You will see the gardens that they developed, which provide a remarkable degree of unity in spite of the different concepts of the two brothers.

At that time on either side of the house there was an enclosed Renaissance garden with boxwood embroidery round the central pond. These two gardens were replaced by six others :

Guillaume undertook to redesign the two Renaissance gardens into :

1. a garden with hedges upstream (towards France), which was converted into an esplanade in 1970
2. a garden for reflection (towards Dinant) – the flowers that were added in 19th century were removed to restore the Cartesian rigor of the original design.

After the death of Guillaume (1766) Philippe added the following items above the supporting walls enclosing the lower part of the gardens :

3. upstream, a kitchen garden, which in 1960 was transformed into a plantation,
4. downstream, an intimate garden consisting of small labyrinths with hedges forming alleys – the height of the interiors was reduced in 1970 and, crossing it vertically, there is now
5. a French style garden that can be seen from the pavilion (called the Frédéric Hall).
6. and a romantic garden (now disappeared) on the slopes of the Meuse, situated at the end of the alley of beech trees beyond the contemplative garden.

THE MEDITATIVE GARDEN (1)

Guillaume made a sober rearrangement of the Renaissance garden, adding seven new ponds and lime trees in a staggered formation to create a whole, with the water, greenery and the gravel providing a harmony following the multitude of axes parallel and perpendicular to the river.

Three parts stand out parallel to the Meuse, where the religious nature of Guillaume is apparent:

- the four « Lilliput » ponds (so called by Victor Hugo), whose murmuring encourages you to spend a moment to yourself
- the lime trees, whose shade and alignment, in the shape of an Andalousian mosque, induces one to meditate.
- and the two large ponds surrounded by scented orange trees, where the light reflects on the water and leads you to contemplate.

The Renaissance flower bed was closed at the beginning of 18th century when the orangeries were built.

In order to hide them and give visual depth and perspective Guillaume :

- planted the lime trees (2) in the middle ;
 - which reduced the view along the main axis
 - and created with the lime leaves an undergrowth that was orderly and transparent due to its raised position (like on piles).
- and moved the orange trees, which previously stood to attention in front of the orangeries, along the main axis.

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Perpendicular to the Meuse there are two flower beds separated by the main axis.

These beds are special in the sense that

- where you might expect to find flower beds you find ponds ;
- the succession of a flat part (near the castle), a high part (the lime trees) and another flat part (near the orangeries) provide two open areas that contrast with the enclosed nature of the lime trees ;
- the flat part near the castle has a more complex design than the one in front of the orangeries.

This meets the criteria of simplification as one moves away from the castle.

Follow the main axis as far as the round pond.

THE RENAISSANCE POND (3)

Whilst looking towards the pavilion hide the dome from view with one hand and you will discover "Freÿr in Isle de France" (the Paris region) and then do the opposite, hiding the building, and you will discover "Freÿr on the river Elbe".

The cascade flows into two scallop shells above Neptune who is surrounded by dolphins.

A swan about to take off crowns the whole. This work by Maria Bruno-Kaminska and sponsored by Daimler-Chrysler replaces the original one stolen in 1960.

Turning towards the Meuse you will discover the "ah-ah", the view of nature that is less strict.

This type of opening was introduced by the English in their Cartesian gardens that were imported from France in 18th century as a reaction to the high degree of domestication of nature in their gardens.

The unexpected discovery of this view made people gasp in surprise.

THE ORANGE TREES (4) AND THE ORANGERIES (5)

Orange trees were bought at the beginning of 18th century from the court of Lorraine (Lunéville) but there are only thirty left, some of them being nearly 350 years old. They enabled Freÿr to be saved during the period of the Terror (1794).

They are pruned like large bonsais, reminding us of their Far-Eastern origins. For more details see the page in the appendix.

The orangeries are particularly beautiful and are the oldest in the Low Countries, continuing their original use : protecting the orange trees from the winter frost. In summer these buildings are available for more present-day functions : concerts, weddings, meetings or exhibitions.

The photos in the orangery along the Meuse show how the way of bringing the trees in and taking them out changed since the 1940-45 war and how the cord hanging from the vaults was used for repotting.

An anecdote :

In 1976 our last gardener left. My mother then took on the task of looking after the orange trees, following the advice left by her grandmother : " in summer a bucket of water per tree and per day shall you give; in winter one per month shall suffice. "

After treating them that way for a year the leaves started turning yellow : after two years there were few leaves left and one tree was lost the following winter. So she went to Versailles to seek advice. When the gardener heard her story he burst out laughing: " that's a really funny Belgian story. Madam, it's warmer here and rains less and we only water them once a week ! " On her return home she realized that the afore-mentioned relation was well aware of her gardeners' lack of zeal so had prescribed one bucket a day to be sure they got one a week, not thinking her grand-daughter would follow her advice to the letter !

For more details see the note about the orange trees.

The alley of beech trees starts from the orangeries going north and ends near the slopes of the Meuse, where there was a romantic garden (end 18th century) in the middle of grottoes. In one of them the water table can be found, whose water is carried by an underground canal and fills the ponds by gravity.

Take the staircase (6), which follows the orangery, from which there is a superb view of the valley.

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THE INTIMATE GARDENS (7 to 9)

After the death of Guillaume his younger brother, Philippe enlarged the gardens in the style of his time. They were laid out on the slopes of the Meuse, creating eight intimate labyrinths, whose 6 km-long hedges represent the geometric shapes and colors of a pack of cards.

The intimate nature is now less pronounced since the height of the hedges was reduced on the inside of the labyrinths (to reduce the cost of maintenance). You will see two clubs, a diamond, a spade, a heart, a circle, an octagon, a star and some squares and triangles.

The labyrinths are based on axes that are vertical to the flower bed and complete them by two new axes parallel to the river, whilst diagonal axes are aligned with fountains. Contrary to the gardens of 17th century, where the axes gave the impression of infinite distance, these axes made in 18th century were closed.

Note that the parts of the upper garden (wooded, open, wooded) fit like pieces of a jig-saw puzzle in the parts of the lower garden (open, wooded, open).

Move up to the pavilion closing the vertical axis.

THE FRENCH GARDEN (10)

Look at the view towards the Meuse. In the middle of the intimate gardens Philippe created something special : along the vertical axis (the short row of terraces perpendicular to the Meuse) he designed at the end of 18th century a garden that was worthy of Le Nôtre, who died in 1700, stretching less than 200 meters.

Philippe made use of the slope to make your eye leap over the river and take the whole valley into view, thus highlighting the quadrilogy of Freÿr : a wild site bordered by cliffs, with a river in the middle and with a historic dwelling set among terraced gardens.

The Le Nôtre look is created by the addition of the large central pond and a space between the hornbeam hedges that is wider than the lime hedges.

This results in the following (if we do a little geometry)

- the triangle surrounding the two ponds leads your eye to the near bank of the Meuse,
- the straight lines at a tangent to the hornbeam and lime hedges move your eye on to the far bank where the straight lines meet,
- these two tricks lead you to include in your view the river and the banks that dominate it (CQFD).

You will also observe that the distance between the Renaissance pond and the staircase is hidden, whilst the distance between the staircase and the large pond is partly hidden by the bump in the lawn. This makes the impression of length of the vertical axis even longer.

From here you can also see how the garden becomes more simplified as you move away from the Meuse :

- gravel and staircase in the lower part
- lawn and slope in the upper part

THE FRÉDÉRIC HALL PAVILION (11)

This wonder, which completes the view perpendicular to the Meuse, is a jewel that reveals the eclectic refinement of the Century of Light. It was built by Philippe in 1775 for his nephew, Frédéric, the first duke of Beaufort-Spontin and was the central point of an illuminated ball given in 1785 in honor of the Archduchess Marie-Christine, the Governor of the Netherlands. The interior, with its stuccoes by the two Italian Moretti brothers, is in the purest Louis XVI style. It is crowned by a dome with a Viennese look (Karlskirche), whose lightness contrasts with the heavy exterior.

The central room contains :

- opposite the entrance door : hunting subjects held in the mouth of a lion, reminding us that Freya, the Germanic goddess of hunting, was the sister of Freÿr,
- above the entrance door : a lion poking its tongue out to fight off the evil spirits.
- On either side : old men who have taken such a long rejuvenating bath that they have not only recovered faces with baby's skin but have gone back in time to the point that their legs are changed into fishes' tails.
- Above the side doors : towards Dinant, on the occasion of the completion of the pavilion, two Puttis are enjoying a drink. Towards France the same Putti are staggering but have enough strength to sign their works (Moretti fecit: the Moretti brothers made this).

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- In the dome: the 3 Beaufort-Spontin scallops on an imitation sky background.

The room downstream towards Dinant represents :

- above the door : an effigy of Diana (the Latin equivalent of Freya) below the features of the Empress Marie-Thérèse, and on the perimeter of the ceiling (in the corners) : the 4 seasons or the 4 ages of life.
- and a presentation of the dwellings with which Freÿr is twinned: Amersoyen (Netherlands) , Oron le Châtel (Vaud, Switzerland), Modave (Belgium) , La Roche-Courbon (France), Luxemburg Castles Association, Marksburg (Germany), Eggenberg (Graz, Austria), La Rotonda (Vicenza, Italy) : the last 3 are on Unesco's World Heritage list.

The room upstream towards Hastière depicts Philippe's links with his century.

- 1 in the corners of the ceiling he shows his encyclopedic interests by portraying the four continents, as they were known at the time :
 - Africa, limited to black Africa (neither the Maghreb, nor Egypt),
 - Asia reduced to just Turkey (turban),
 - A pretentious Europe with an artificial hair piece with structures that remind one of its technological advance,
 - America with a childish portrayal of wild indian with feathers, not yet corrupted by civilization (as J.-J. Rousseau said),
- 2 above the fireplace an idyllic landscape reminiscent of Rousseau's paradise : Arcadia.
- 3 above the door the two philosophical trains of thought can be seen, with the pavilion (before the railway was laid in 1860) representing encyclopedic thought and the countryside in the background representing the return to nature.
- 4 on the pier of the fireplace : masonic symbols of the flame of freedom threatened by the forces of obscurantism (the snakes)
- 5 around the ceiling : the garland of ivy (not vine) reminds us that Philippe was a member of a non-alcoholic lodge.

Return to the horizontal axis passing the large pond, which leads you to **(12 to 14)**

THE GREEN DOME

In the center of the covered alley, called the cradle because of its shape like an old cot placed upside down. On the left you will see the tower of the former dovecote of the farm in 17th century, and on the right the massive structure of the 18th century barn. Beyond the columns were the former 18th century kitchen garden, converted into an ash plantation: from the balcony one can enjoy a spectacular view of the rocks more than one hundred meters high with a sheer drop to the Meuse.

Go down the cradle **(15)** to the reception ; when you cross the main courtyard be sure to visit the old laundry room (to the left of the toilets). The items there include the large stone basin for rinsing the clothes, the cauldron for heating the water, an enormous item of furniture from the old kitchen, which floated during the floods (the height of the main floods : 1.70 meters in 1890, 1.86 meters in 1925, 0.85 meters in 1993 and 1.50 meters in 1995), different documents and photos about Freÿr.

CONCLUSION

We hope this overview will have helped you to discover the enchanting beauty of this location. We appreciate your visit because it encourages both the family, which dates back more than 20 generations, and the voluntary helpers, who devote themselves to maintaining this exceptional part of our heritage.

If you have time we recommend you to visit the two vantage points overlooking the valley on the other side of the river, situated on the Dinant-Beauraing road between Anseremme and Falmignoul. They are very impressive !

The website www.freyr.be contains plenty of additional information.

Kindly return this text to the reception. THANK YOU and have a SAFE JOURNEY.

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APPENDIX: The Orange trees at Freÿr, a unique species

The trees, which are close to 350 years old, are the oldest orange trees in cases in Europe (2005 Icomos Conference in Bamberg). Almost as exceptional are the cases built according to the original 18th century technique and shape, made of wood with iron fittings.

Winter time

The trees spend winter in the orangeries at the first sign of frost and are transferred back into the gardens on 1st May.

On the pictures inside the orangeries along the Meuse you will see how the transportation of the trees changed over the centuries: first on a wooden cart from the 18th century until the Second World War, then on an iron cart and now on pallets on a tractor.

During the winter the earth and leaves are treated 3 times against parasites. In the 19th century coke stoves were installed to maintain at least 8 degrees centigrade. Today a simpler system is used: electric heaters are turned on when it gets very cold. Each tree receives a bucket of water every month.

In the summer months

Once the trees are back in the garden they are pruned and given fertilizer in the form of manure and mineral salts, whilst the leaves are sprayed with vegetable oil. The soil is covered with shoots from the hedge cuttings. This helps to keep the earth damp and prevents weeds from growing. The shoots are removed when the trees are brought in for winter.

At the end of June the blossoms start appearing. There are fewer of them than in the past. Indeed in 1993 and 1995 the water of the Meuse rose 1.50 meters and was polluted with chemicals used in intensive agriculture and washed away by the rain. Those chemicals modified the metabolism of the trees: the leaves became dominant at the expense of the fruit.

Watering depends on the weather and the period of the year. When the sap rises (till the end of July) and when the weather is cold or wet, one to two buckets per week and per tree are enough, depending on the volume of the foliage. When the weather is very hot they are given one or two buckets every day. After July watering becomes progressively less frequent.

From 15th August the most protruding shoots are pruned. Most of the buds are removed to avoid exhausting the trees.

Repotting

This is done when a case is changed or when the fertilizers and mineral salts no longer compensate for the poor quality of the earth.

In the first case the tree is raised by a rope that is attached to the ceiling of the orangery and tied to the tree trunk.

Then a 10 cm layer of earth is removed from the four sides. The tree is lowered into its new case, whose base has been previously covered with broken bricks to ease draining after watering.

Finally the 4 sides are filled up again with packed earth. The mix of arable earth, heather earth, and compost from hedge cuttings has been replaced by rhododendron earth, following the advice of the Arboretum at Meise.

In the second case the four sides are merely removed, then the same operations explained above are carried out.

Improvements made to the cases

In the new cases the Region of Wallonia has recently added semi-porous membranes next to the lateral inner panels and has also replaced the wooden bases with metal grids. This should stop the wood from rotting and hence increase its life expectancy.

Orange blossoms

Up to 1950 they were picked by Louise de Laubespin, then in her nineties. She complained that her companion in her seventies could not hold the ladder properly any more: "Poor Maria is getting old".

Tea, sweets and a fermented beverage, a kind of orange beer, were produced with the hundreds of blossoms from each tree.

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