

## The thirties style in gardens - the gardens of Roger Lardat

### FROM PORTE DE BAGNOLET (20TH) TO TROCADERO (16TH)

To an even greater extent than Art Deco in the 1920s, the style of the 1930s borrowed part of its geometrical, simple language from the Modernist movement in architecture and from Cubism in painting. But what is even more significant in the decorative arts of the Thirties is the fusion of expressive means: an armchair resembles a skyscraper as much as it does a jewel. Architecture and sculpture, which had turned their backs on each other in the 1920s, now became intimately linked, taking a lesson from Art Nouveau at the start of the century. But forget naturalism, this was the era of the “stylised”. The clearest demonstration of this fusion can be found in the Museum of Arts Océaniques at Porte Dorée, with the gigantic bas-reliefs on its façade, and the Tokyo Palace. But this kind of monumental relief can also be found in Kellermann Park, the Square Saint Lambert and Trocadero. But this was also the time of Mediterranean-inspired gardens. After the vogue for French-style gardens, with their great alignments of trees and their carefully shaped flowerbeds and that for English-style parks, parks and small public gardens were given terraces and steps and the spaces were laid out around small, modern-style buildings.

Roger Lardat (1897 – 1951) was employed by the Esplanades and Plantations Service, Parks and Gardens Division; he was accepted as an architect-surveyor in the 1929 competition. For the City he created several small gardens and public buildings (schools, Trocadero Aquarium, Montsouris weather station, Coubertin stadium, etc.), whilst continuing a private career as Chief Architect of civil Buildings and National Palaces.

### Jean-Claude Nicolas Forestier

It was at the instigation of Jean Claude Nicolas Forestier (1861 – 1930), who spent his entire career with the City of Paris, that a new way of thinking was introduced into the design of parks and gardens. Firstly, his style showed an in-depth knowledge of vegetation and its behaviour in different environments, particularly in a modern city. Furthermore, Forestier brought back from his trips to Arab-Andalusian countries ideas and a language unknown until then, creating heavily structured gardens with complex hydraulics and a sophisticated botanic structure. He extended his thought processes, gradually developing a theory which he set out in his work *Grandes villes et systèmes de parcs* (Great Cities and Park Systems). It reveals an informed urban planner who proposed managing free spaces on a city or even greater scale. He thus designed parks and gardens as a succession of locations where people could enjoy being but which as a whole formed a vast urban esplanade. People often delight in quoting what became his credo, “I am a real city man. I like fresh air and gardens”. But although he shared with hygiene specialists the desire to make city life healthier, he distanced himself from the conclusions which the modern movement and its supporters such as Le Corbusier drew from their analyses. Avant-gardism was definitely not his style, as he described himself as a “moderate modernist”. He became friends with Henri Prost, who in 1929 created a development plan for the Paris region and who was also in favour of airy and sensibly modern urban development. Having proved himself brilliantly in Paris with the rose garden and then the Présentateur Garden in Bagatelle, Forestier made a lasting impression on his colleagues and the entire Esplanades and Plantations Service.



(20th) Avenue de la Porte de Bagnole, Boulevard Mortier

### Square Séverine

Created in 1933 on the former bastion guarding the Porte de Bagnole, the Square Séverine is a new example of the urban development of the Thiers fortifications. It is possible to see in it the expression of the division of land between green spaces and social housing. Its hilly geography made it preferable to create a Square here, whose succession of terraces is dictated by the pronounced slope. But it is also possible to observe the homogeneity of the brick and concrete construction between the garden and the buildings which surround it, as well as their identical style and decor. Lardat, faithful to the precepts of Forestier, provided a project which was the opposite of the naturalist landscape gardens of the previous period: the architect played an essential role in the composition, with a rigorously designed fence and buildings located at key points in the layout of the space. The open-air theatre, with its underground wings, occupies the centre of the square. The steps giving access to each level are accompanied by low walls which define the flower beds. Fountain milestones punctuate the esplanade, recalling the preoccupation with hygiene which underpinned urban development at that time. But perhaps the most remarkable fact is the attention paid to the details, such as the walls at the back of the theatre

stage, with their alternating rows of bricks and lines of concrete, which are no longer simply architecture, but contain an element of sculpture and undoubtedly form a real decor, dependent from and complementary to that of the neighbouring buildings.



(20th) Rue Sorbier, rue de la Bidassoa

### Square Sorbier

This Square has sometimes been attributed to Léon Azéma, then Director of Construction for the City and co-creator of the Chaillot Palace. However, the archives show that the building was in fact created by Roger Lardat. It was a new challenge for our architect, as it required him to set out a garden above the route of the inner ring road and include six ventilation chimneys coming from the tunnel. This then was one of the first examples of a “rooftop garden”. Lardat achieved a real tour de force here, marking out a wide median alleyway punctuated with ventilation chutes which were transformed into brick columns, conserving the trees and the relief of the upper part of the former railway trench. The structure ends in an enclosure framed by two small modernist buildings placed beside a high façade which creates a kind of nymph temple which adorns the base. The fountain is also the work of Lardat, who once again shows the close link between architecture and sculpture during the Thirties. As in the Square Séverine, and five years later, here the architect puts his name to a true urban decor, a synthesis of the arts of the city.



(16th) Place du Trocadéro and Place du 11 novembre, Avenue de New York

### Trocadéro Gardens

The vast amphitheatre left by operation of the Chaillot quarry provided a majestic site for major events in Paris. The 1878 Universal Exhibition had taken place on this site. The Trocadéro Palace had been built there, in a vaguely Moorish style. The surrounding gardens, designed by Alphand, like this palace, survived until 1937. An aquarium, which was remarkable for its circular design, had also been installed there. But this old palace, designed as a temporary building, was threatened with ruin and more importantly, was no longer fashionable. A competition was organised and won by the Boileau-Carlu-Azéma team. The architect Roger-Henri Expert was entrusted with the project for a series of fountains and basins. Jacques Greber was appointed chief architect for the exhibition. France’s African possessions at the time had been used as experiments for a new architecture tinged with modernism but also local culture, often inspired by Andalusia. Thus, the Varsovie fountain, which replaced an Italian-style water step, seems to be a Europeanised embellishment of the Alhambra Gardens: sophisticated water features, the omnipresence of stone and sculptures, managed by large geometrical panels. The whole work certainly had a certain grandeur.

When the Exposition ended, Roger Lardat, a City architect, was entrusted with developing the new gardens. He had to make this majestic work which was Expert’s fountain fit in with its environment. It was not an easy task, as the pavilions had left the ground desolate: the land was at different levels and the construction to the north meant that it was impossible to join up with the roads. He eventually opted for a minimalist solution which consisted of repeating the main elements of Alphand’s project. However, the fountain had caused the route of the roads to be modified to form the crow’s foot of the Avenue des Nations Unies. The ascendancy of the gardens found a greater unity whilst losing its major alignments. Through the trees, Lardat traced long, sinuous alleyways which were subject to the demands of the land in a landscaped garden which made the most of the arches resulting from the demolition of the Tuileries, which had been placed there in 1883. He positioned pleasantly shaded areas of greenery there. Having demonstrated his ability to be a worthy successor to Alphand, he regained his true personality to construct several porticos of greenery and the pavilion of the chair attendant; he also created the aquarium, based on a design inspired by a fish skeleton, which he adorned with a beautiful entrance combining classicism and modernism, with shafts of truncated columns and an undulating façade covered in washed gravel. Several remarkable works were placed in the park, such as the tribute to The Admiral of Grasse by Marcel Landowski, a highly original structure presenting the hero of the American War of Independence in the round in front of a huge allegorical relief showing gunners in their positions.



Throughout the capital, the Department of Cultural Affairs of the City of Paris maintains some six hundred commemorative monuments and statues which form part of the municipal heritage. These works, most of which date from the beginning of the Third Republic, are the result of an active policy of artistic commissions intended to decorate the squares and streets, in accordance with the wishes of the elected officials of Paris. They include some of the masterpieces of French sculpture: The Fountain of the Four Continents by Carpeaux and The Triumph of the Republic by Dalou.

The 20th century was for a long time more cautious in this respect, but over the last twenty years or so, the City of Paris has revived the tradition of commissioning public art. In 2004, it set up the Art Committee in the City, a consultative committee of elected officials and experts to provide an opinion on policy in this area. Together with this Committee, the City of Paris commissioned 35 permanent or temporary public works between 2004 and 2008.

From Exercise Tower by Wang Du (Paris 17th) to the Dance of the Emerging Fountain by Chen Zhen (Paris 13th) and the Forest of Candelabras by the Berlin collective Inges Idee (Paris 19th), all these works can be discovered throughout Paris.

