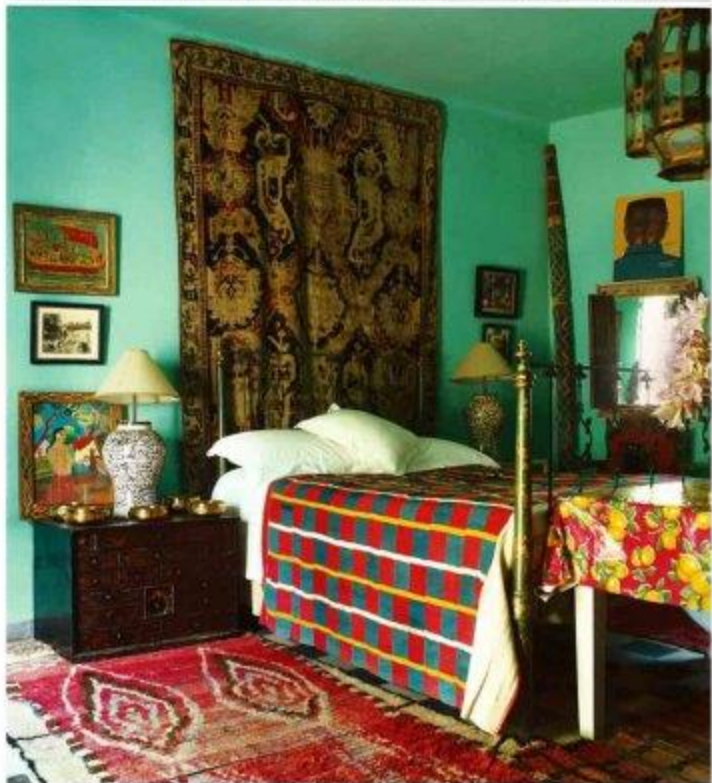


OCTOBER 2014 USA \$9.50 CAN \$9.95

THE WORLD OF INTERIORS





For Queen & Country

Three designs of garden bench would have been familiar to Marie-Antoinette as she strolled the landscaped pleasure park of Versailles. Faithfully reproduced, they are now available for your own rural idyll. Valérie Lapierre sits in on court life en plein air. Photography: Bill Batten >

Top: François Boucher painted Madame de Pompadour, one of Louis XV's favourite mistresses, by a bench in the garden of her château at Bellevue in 1759. She points a fan at her dog, Inès, and poses in front of a statue entitled *Friendship Consoling Love*. Right: the most sophisticated of the benches, with tracery and sculpted decoration, stands before the rear elevation of the Petit Trianon



antennae





ON 26 DECEMBER 1999, the Petit Trianon woke up in disarray. Its little English garden, designed for Marie-Antoinette at the far end of the park of the Palace of Versailles, had been devastated by the storm that had swept across Europe. A decision was taken to carry out a radical restoration of the garden, returning it to the state that Marie-Antoinette would have last known it in its heyday in 1789, restoring the pathways to their original layout and replicating the details of the outdoor furniture found around each and every bend. This resulted in the renovation of the wooden benches that the queen used to rest on in her beloved garden.

The Petit Trianon, a cube-shaped mini-palace whose sleek lines lie nearly three kilometres from the main palace, was built by Ange-Jacques Gabriel in the 1760s as a setting for the illicit love affairs of Louis XV. In 1774, the newly crowned Louis XVI offered it to his young queen, Marie-Antoinette, who was delighted to have her own private

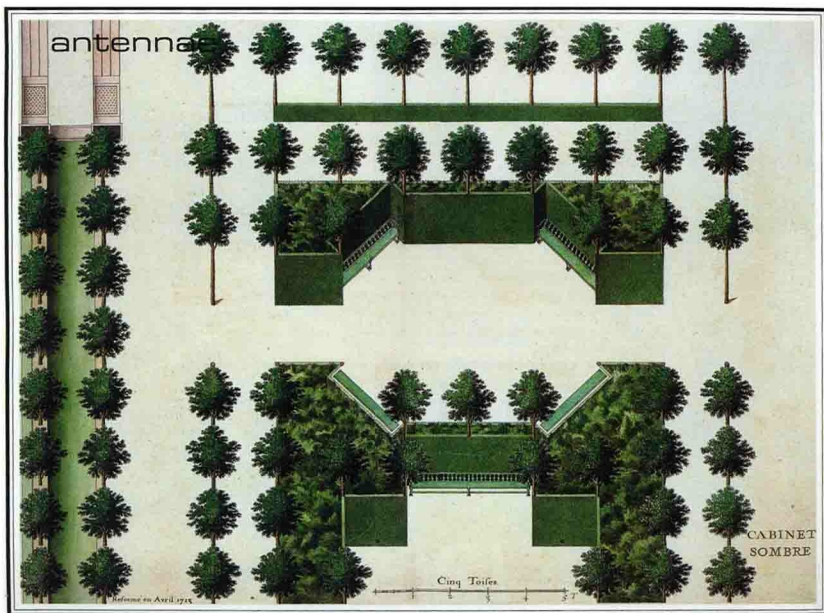
domain where she could live an informal life, surrounded by friends of her choosing and free from the etiquette of the court.

While she barely touched the interior decoration of Gabriel's building, Marie-Antoinette set about transforming the garden with enthusiasm – never mind if it meant moving the most important botanical collection in Europe. There was a vogue for English-style landscape gardens and, always at the forefront of fashion, the queen wanted one of her own. Unlike the French

formal garden, whose symmetry was considered tiresome, the English landscape garden was designed to imitate the wildness of nature and to produce elements of surprise with picturesque viewpoints. The garden was composed by architect Richard Mique, with the aid of the Comte de Caraman and Hubert Robert, the landscape painter who specialised in ruins. At great cost, and according to the whims of Marie-Antoinette, they built a Chinese merry-go-round, a theatre, a fake rock, an artificial grotto, a hill, an island, a number of▷



Top: the three styles of reproduction wooden bench range from relatively rustic to refined. Here, the intermediate model, with turned legs and a back balusters, stands in front of the French Pavilion, the folly built by Ange-Jacques Gabriel in 1750 and used by Louis XV and Madame de Pompadour as a games and music room. Above: a semicircular bench offers a view of the grounds of the Château de Marly, built in the 1680



follies, a Temple of Love and, later, an artificial hamlet inspired by one she had seen at the Prince of Condé's home in Chantilly.

Aside from a few marble benches around the Salon Frais and the French Pavilion, two small buildings designed by Gabriel under Louis XV, the view is dotted with wooden benches used since the 17th century at Versailles and other royal or aristocratic gardens. Built in fairly stout sections to make them stable, they were painted green to blend in with the vegetation and came in three more or less elaborate versions. These traditional benches are something of a surprise in a setting devised for Marie-Antoinette, given her love of complex and exuberant furniture such as that seen at the Petit Trianon (Wol Oct 2006), and it is remarkable that she did not have these made to match her taste. Was she fond of their familiarity? Did their rustic appearance match the rural simplicity that this follower of the fashionable ideas of Rousseau sought at Trianon?

Mique and his staff carefully chose the models of benches and their arrangement, and the restoration was done according to

the original plans. The more refined ones, with tracery on their backs and sculpted decoration, sit at the foot of the Petit Trianon, where Marie-Antoinette lived, as well as in front of the Belvedere, a small, richly decorated octagonal pavilion standing on a hill, where she held sumptuous parties and contemplated her domain.

The gardeners wanted to distinguish these benches from the others by painting them in the colours reserved for the queen: green with white mouldings or white with red mouldings. The benches on the pathways of the garden, with its carefully devised disorder of plants, are in the intermediate style, with turned legs and balusters on the back; they are often placed under the shade of a tree and each one offers a charming view.

At the far end of the estate is the faux rustic, Norman-style hamlet with its artificially dilapidated little houses, where Marie-Antoinette and her friends caused a scandal by pretending to be milkmaids, wearing light dresses and letting their hair fly loose. The star turn is the Maison de la Reine, designed on the principle of the shell cottage at >



Top: Louis XIV, who sought entertainment away from Versailles with a selected elite, used the Château de Marly for parties and play. The archive drawings show that the benches here were the same as those at Versailles. Above: in the 1760s, Jean-Baptiste Charpentier painted the illegitimate grandson of Louis XIV, the Duc de Penthièvre, and his daughter Louise Marie Adélaïde de Bourbon, in his garden on a bench with balusters



Rambouillet (Vol March 2008). A humble exterior belies an interior of extraordinary luxury: crystal chandeliers, silks and furniture by Georges Jacob and Jean-Henri Riesener, the finest cabinetmakers, express a chic countryside style and splendour. Outside, the benches are based on the plainest model, with straight moulded bars. Their simplicity matches the 'rural' environment.

Redesigned from details in the archives by Pierre-André Lablaude, the architect in charge of the restoration of Versailles since 1990, these same benches have recently been reproduced by Jardins du Roi Soleil, a company set up by Jean-François Jiquel, a wrought-iron craftsman born during the war in an old stable a hundred metres from the palace. Jiquel has worked at Versailles for 50 years, restoring bronzes and ironwork and also supplying the famous orange-tree planters designed by Le Nôtre in the 17th century, and improved in the 19th, which he reproduces identically in oak and cast iron. In 1992, he set up Jardins du Roi Soleil to market the

planters throughout the world. Now retired, he remains an expert in palace and general garden conservation. He is also a consultant for the firm that he established, sold in 2011 to the Fort Royal group, a promoter of traditional crafts that has gone from the status of supplier to that of palace partner. Today the company offers new products such as these benches, made in the traditional manner in the three models of the Petit Trianon: the most sophisticated is the 'Marie-Antoinette'; the simplest, the 'Trianon'; and in between is the 'Duc de Penthièvre', the

model with baluster-shaped backs, named after a painting by Jean-Baptiste Charpentier which pictures the duke sitting on a similar seat. Sadly, there is no image of Marie-Antoinette sitting on the wooden benches of her favourite garden, but her shadow hovers over the place, and it is not unusual for a visitor to claim to see her ghost in a white dress at a turn in the path ■

Benches cost from £3,545 approx each. For more information, ring 00 33 1 43 44 44 31, or visit jardinsduroisoleil.com



Top: the simplest model of bench, with straight moulded bars along the seat and back, was found on most pathways of royal and aristocratic gardens from the 17th century onwards. Above: among the playful outdoor activities designed to entertain Louis XIV and his guests in the gardens of the Château de Marly was an *carapalotte*, a large multi-person swing flanked by two semicircular benches for spectators.