Nymphs Bathing in the King’s Garden: La Granja de San Ildefonso and Caserta

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Nymphs fit perfectly into a palace garden of the early modern age. As minor female nature deities they are typically associated with a particular location or landform.1 Regarded as divine spirits who animate nature, they dwell in mountainous regions and in forests by lakes and streams. Often they are part of the retinue of a god, such as Dionysus, Mercury or Pan, or a goddess, generally the huntress Diana. Since the sixteenth century at the latest, nymphs have belonged to gardens’ inventory: nymphs were traditionally connected to the *locus amoenus*, especially with artificial and natural springs and streams, rivers and fountains.

This paper deals with the role of the nymph in the royal garden of the eighteenth century. It focuses primarily on nymphs in a narrative context: on nymphs bathing. These bathing nymphs mostly appear accompanied by Diana, as, for example, depicted in the famous painting by Titian.2


Two important examples from the eighteenth century show the goddess of the hunt accompanied by bathing nymphs in a royal garden: the Baths of Diana in La Granja de San Ildefonso near Segovia, around 80 kilometres northwest of Madrid, Spain [Fig. 11.1], and Diana with her nymphs in the Reggia di Caserta near Naples, Italy [Fig. 11.2]. The representation of Diana with her nymphs as a monumental garden sculpture was an entirely new concept even though the solitary figure of Diana was, of course, often displayed in a garden context before.\(^3\) This paper will focus on three categories: location and tradition, movement and space, and finally the element of water.

Both sculpture groups, in La Granja and Caserta, are part of a large-scale palace and garden project that must be regarded with close reference to the palace and garden of Versailles, not only because Versailles is often mentioned as a model for big palaces in Europe in the eighteenth century, but also because the site’s connection with the French King Louis XIV was of great importance in dynastic and iconological terms. The royal commissioner of

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