

THE MAN WHO SCULPTS TREES

Topiary has been popular in French gardens for centuries, but Provençal artist Marc Nucera has developed a freeform style that shuns primness in favour of something more exciting and expressive. LOUISA JONES visits him on his home turf

MARC NUCERA prunes trees. Within his short lifetime to date, this young man's experiences have echoed those of a whole region—Provence, the place where he was born and bred.

Beginning with farming, learning the age-old skills that help fruit trees bear more and live longer, he evolved first towards ornamental gardening, then towards subtle forms of Land Art. Today, he's a leader among Mediterranean designers in a region famous for its intimate intermingling of wild nature, hilly pasture and farmland—landscapes that have attracted both the British artist Andy Goldsworthy and the late poet Ian Hamilton Finlay. Like them,

Mr Nucera has a deep feeling for the agricultural heritage of Provence, which has shaped the land for centuries. The Provençal vernacular never made any distinction between beauty and utility and, now that the land is being put to new uses (such as gardens), a new beauty has emerged.

As a student at agricultural college, Mr Nucera learned that neglected fruit trees produce too much wood, some of which dies back, preventing the circulation of light and air, and creating ideal conditions for

(Right) Mr Nucera favours box, laurustinus, juniper and holm oak. (Below) All grow wild locally. Box plants in pots become miniature landscapes, associated with wood and stone









disease. He began practising his trade in commercial olive orchards, and, in 1995, won a prestigious prize for his effective but sensitive dialogue with his subjects.

From the start, Mr Nucera felt that productive trees must be happy, and that happy trees are beautiful. His aim, as he evolved towards 'landscape pruning', was always to sense, respect and enhance the dynamics of each individual.

At this point, fate put him in touch with two great masters of Mediterranean landscape art: the legendary Nicole de Vésian, whose home at La Louve, near Avignon, has inspired gardeners worldwide, and her pupil at that time, Alain David Idoux, sculptor of landscape. These two trained Mr Nucera for many of his most formative years; now that both are deceased, he takes their art in new directions. Other Provençal land artists transform drystone walls and terracing, incorporate whitewashed tree trunks and field patterns into formal design, or take inspiration from the rugged garrigue landscapes with their rich harvest of wildflowers and bulbs to develop drought-tolerant plantings. But Mr Nucera is true to his first love: wood.

In gardens, his goal is to 'give trees and shrubs the best conditions for natural

At former orchard Le Terrain (The Field), the artist (*below*) is able to experiment freely with wood and stone. In one of his projects, he has turned plane trees discarded for road works into original garden furniture (*left and below*)

growth, working with them in the landscape'. Context counts, and so does history; for example, he transforms neglected cypress hedging once used as windbreaks for market gardeners into elegant fretwork curtains. He encourages clients who have just purchased old farms to keep vestiges of the land's past uses. With living specimens, he works to reveal hidden harmony not only now, but in the future. But even dead trees, worked and polished

'Unlike many other Provençal land artists, Marc Nucera has remained true to his first love: wood'

by a talented hand, can be full of expression: 'Death gives life, in nature, in the garden, a cycle in which each part has its beauty.' He works on all scales, from

broad plains with mountain views to the pots of his own courtyard garden. Only the potted miniature landscapes need care. His favourite trees—almonds, olives, junipers, stone pines, holm oak—thrive in dry, stony, alkaline soil and require little feeding or watering.

An artist in constant evolution, Mr Nucera wanted room to experiment. Luckily, his family had a former orchard, complete with cypress windbreaks, on the edge of town and this has become Le Terrain (The Field). Here, he experiments with different types of pruning: ground-hugging compact shapes; open, airy patterns or 'cloud layering', a technique inspired by traditional Japanese models.

At Le Terrain, Mr Nucera imagines various combinations of wood and stone, which he assembles in symbolic geometries: circles, squares, rectangles, diamonds, spirals. Here, he can also indulge his sense ➤





of humour: a rusty bicycle has two blocks of wood instead of wheels, and two polished trunks have become the torsos of Venus and Adonis. It's here that he first began working on the giant wooden 'Pebbles', which are now strung out like necklaces through the fields of several distinguished local gardens.

Mr Nucera works with the wood of plane trees, using the giant trunks of trees that have been cut down when roads are widened nearby. From them, he also carves furniture, whole sets of armchairs, stools

and tables. But here, too, he preserves the memory of the tree, as each set could, theoretically, be reassembled like a puzzle into the shape of the original trunk. On Le Terrain, Mr Nucera first invented his famous 'Walkers', upside-down forking tree trunks on stilts, that, assembled in rough grass, project a strangely dynamic presence. And it is here, in his field, that he sometimes has the leisure to enjoy the wild fauna and flora that share his land, and that he now enriches, thanks to gardener friends,

with self-sowing *Euphorbia myrsinites* or wild aster. In summers, when his village house gets too hot, he loves to sleep outdoors in this field, which is also his refuge. But Le Terrain is also an outdoor gallery and meeting ground for his artist friends. His first creation here was a huge stone circle, large enough in which to display smaller creations, or to offer a friendly aperitif.

Weathered wood, rock and stone, rusty iron long buried in earth, all these bear witness to passing time. Growth and decay



To experiment with dynamic, evolving forms, Mr Nucera uses trees and shrubs—living and dead—in semi-wild settings that now bind to earth, now reflect in water, now reach for the sky. A sculpted cypress hedge is joined by *Pittosporum tobira*, box, lonicera and other foliage (left); upended oak trunks become lively ‘walkers’ in natural meadowland (above); cypress hedging becomes clouds (above right), and plane-tree wood spirals into new life (right), or provides original paving (below). Each creation has its own strong personality



are linked to the dynamic energies of every place, where the ever-changing balance between elements counts more than the focus on one central construction. Whatever the project, Mr Nucera begins by observing and reflecting before taking any action.

Trees pruned with a view to future development need return visits, sometimes over years. All this takes time. Perched ambiguously between the status of a gardener, a designer who now creates

whole gardens, and a land artist, he must deal with clients who don't always understand his goals. But those who do understand feel privileged to work with someone whose art is his whole life. Today, they include royalty, as well as many of the leading landscape architects working in the region, happy to boast of a Nucera as part of their creations.

Mr Nucera is also frequently invited to help with restoration projects involving the rehabilitation of listed trees. But he's

never happier than when tinkering at Le Terrain, getting the feel of a new tree trunk, still growing or discarded and destined to be given new life in his hands. With the arrival of evening, still caught in the day's magic, he often writes poems to his beloved trees.

Louisa Jones, author of numerous books on gardens in France, organises an annual tour of Provençal gardens each April. For more information, visit www.gardeninprovence.com
Photographs: Clive Nichols.