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A senior masterpiece

LaLouve, Bonnieux, Provence, France

It's never too late to make a garden, finds Louisa Jones, as she explores the fabled and highly influential garden created by one of France's leaders of fashion in her twilight years

Photographs by XXXXXXXXXXXX

THE property called La Louve sits on three small, dry-stone terraces below a medieval hill town in Provence. Since it has come to people's notice over the past two decades, numerous commentators have been moved to write about it. Sir Roy Strong noted: 'It is not often that I bestow the word masterpiece on a garden, but that is an accurate description of this creation by the great French garden designer Nicole de Vésian, who died in 1996.' Its impact only increases with each year, and designers from New

England to New Zealand report that their clients bring them pictures of La Louve for inspiration. Garden designer and writer Tania Compton expressed the feelings of many when she wrote: 'Before visiting La Louve, I'd never been to a garden that fills one with equal measures of excitement and repose, or that seems to spring so naturally from the earth beneath it, and also keeps you aware of the art, labour and love that has created it.'

Incredibly, this masterpiece was made in only 10 years by a woman who was 70 when

she began. Part Provençal, part Welsh and very Parisian, Mme de Vésian had been a highly successful designer in fashion. She liked to credit her experiences as a young mother feeding and clothing two small children in the Second World War with stimulating her creativity. She never stopped making new from old, and once ➤

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sewed up an evening dress out of old jute sacks found in a nursery. From the 1950s on, she became known as ‘the career-girl countess’, dividing her time between Paris, New York and Italy. Aged 60, she began to work exclusively for Hermès, where Christian Lacroix was once her admiring assistant. On reaching 70, she went to earth in Provence.

What makes her garden so special? First of all, she has captured the essence of place to a rare degree. Above La Louve, medieval streets alternate dark passages and broad panoramas out onto a patchwork of orchards and vineyards. Across the valley from the garden, a wooded hillside nestles close. The shapes, colours and textures of the garden’s small terraces distil these surroundings in a perfect balance between house, garden and landscape.

During the house refurbishments, Mme de Vésian had windows cut to frame views, organising interiors, garden and hillside as part of the same flow from the cobblestone passage that leads to her door, through an entrance hall lined with the same river pebbles that led out to the kitchen terrace. Her materials are all simple, rustic, rough; dry-stone walls, weathered wood, the same evergreen plants that grow nearby—box, rosemary, cypress, *Viburnum tinus*, arbutus. Not forgetting the silvers—lavender, dorycnium, teucrium, santolina. This property, named after the last wolf killed locally in 1957, is also a perfect blending of the clipped and the wild. It is a landscape garden in a most unusual sense; the local

The feel of things

This is a deeply sensuous garden. Mme de Vésian’s colours were naturally muted, but she enjoyed occasional bright splashes such as the foliage of a stag-horn sumach (*below?*) in autumn, or the surprise of self-sown flowers such as hollyhocks, borage and poppies. Most of the plants have leaves you want to touch, and scents that southern evenings release on the wind. She once said: ‘I am so attached to textures—very few people *feel* gardens.’



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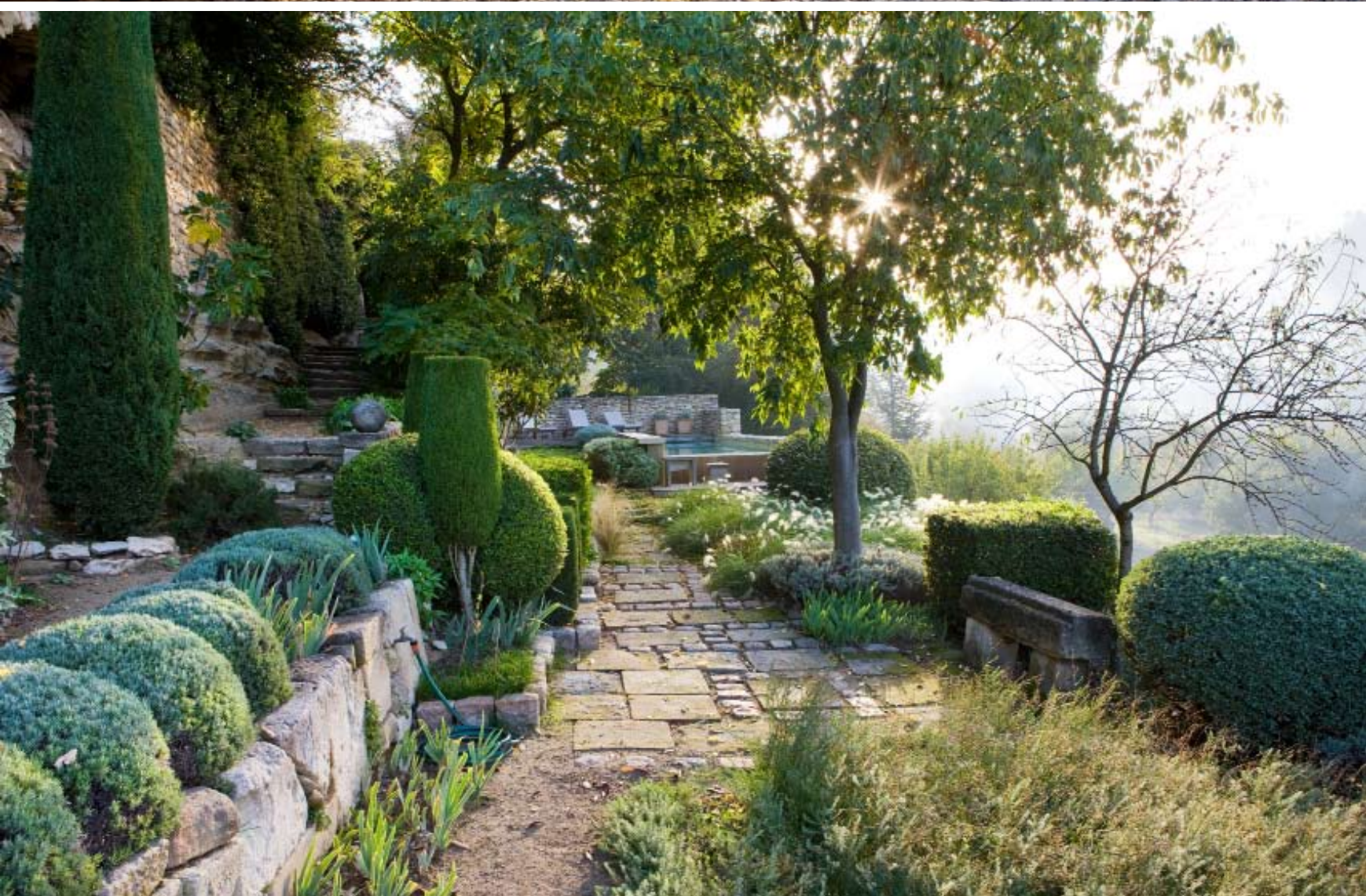
vernacular inspires it, and imbues it like a perfume—the lavender essence that was this fashion leader’s only scent in her last years.

The south-east facing house overlooks two main spaces of about 5,380sq ft each, east and west, connected by a narrow strip in front. On the eastern or ‘kitchen’ terrace, a juniper and two fir trees had already managed to root themselves in cracks of the rock which lies only inches deep. Mme de Vésian wove foliage tapestries with the local Mediterranean sub-shrub species, which are used to these drastic conditions. They are clipped into mounds and waves—dark foliage against pale, luminescent limestone.

Thanks to the steep incline of the land and its terracing, the dynamic patterns of plants, stone mulches and pebble paths can be seen from above, below, across or within. Mme de Vésian didn’t plant in architectural blocks and lines, however. Each individual plant keeps its own personality, even as part of a group, as she was more inspired by the natural mounding of wind-swept scrubland than by the formal clipping favoured in France’s historic parks. One visitor likened these assemblages to clusters of guests at a cocktail party, all having a good time. Mme de Vésian herself wrote: ‘Don’t hesitate to cut and trim—all plants love to know they are being cared for and they happily grow back.’ Later on, she developed the terrace below as a miniature lavender field, where she simply clipped every second plant in each row, to reveal alternating mounds and fountain shapes in grey and blue.

Steps carved in the rock and shored up by stone walling link the terraces. There’s little water here—no fountains or rills and just one small dipping pool—but the southern light can be almost liquid. It’s a garden >

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for year-round, day-to-day living and she appreciated it especially in winter.

In Mme de Vésian's last years, La Louve was much admired by Japanese visitors. When she died, aged 80, she was designing a new house, a Japanese-inspired garden—and her wheelchair. She had just sold La Louve to American art dealer Judith Pillsbury, who fully appreciates its art. Although she can't live there year round, Mrs Pillsbury has kept it alive and growing, and obtained for it the national label *Jardin remarquable*. Her friend, and renowned American designer, Garrett

Finney, has helped her add a very discreet swimming pool on a new strip of land at the bottom of the garden. Mr Finney admires Mme de Vésian's gift for 'capturing the larger landscape as part of the garden, creating endless vistas with limited grounds, integrating the exceptional within the vernacular'.

Mrs Pillsbury has had to make small changes—so many of the garden's plants, like lavenders, are short lived. She has added pots, extended the plant palette and the colour range; indeed, she has made the garden her own. Today, she concludes:

'When you describe the garden, it sounds very cold and formal, but what's delightful is this *Alice in Wonderland* quality. She had a sense of form and variety and allowed things to be different. I think she would have been happy that the garden is now recognised as a work of art.'

La Louve, Chemin Saint Gervais, 84480 Bonnieux, France. Visits to the garden can be made by advance booking with Judith Pillsbury [Email? Louisa TBC] or through the Office de Tourisme de Bonnieux, 7, Place Carnot 84480 Bonnieux (00 33 4 90 75 91 90)