

Carved 'pebbles' at
Mas de Michel

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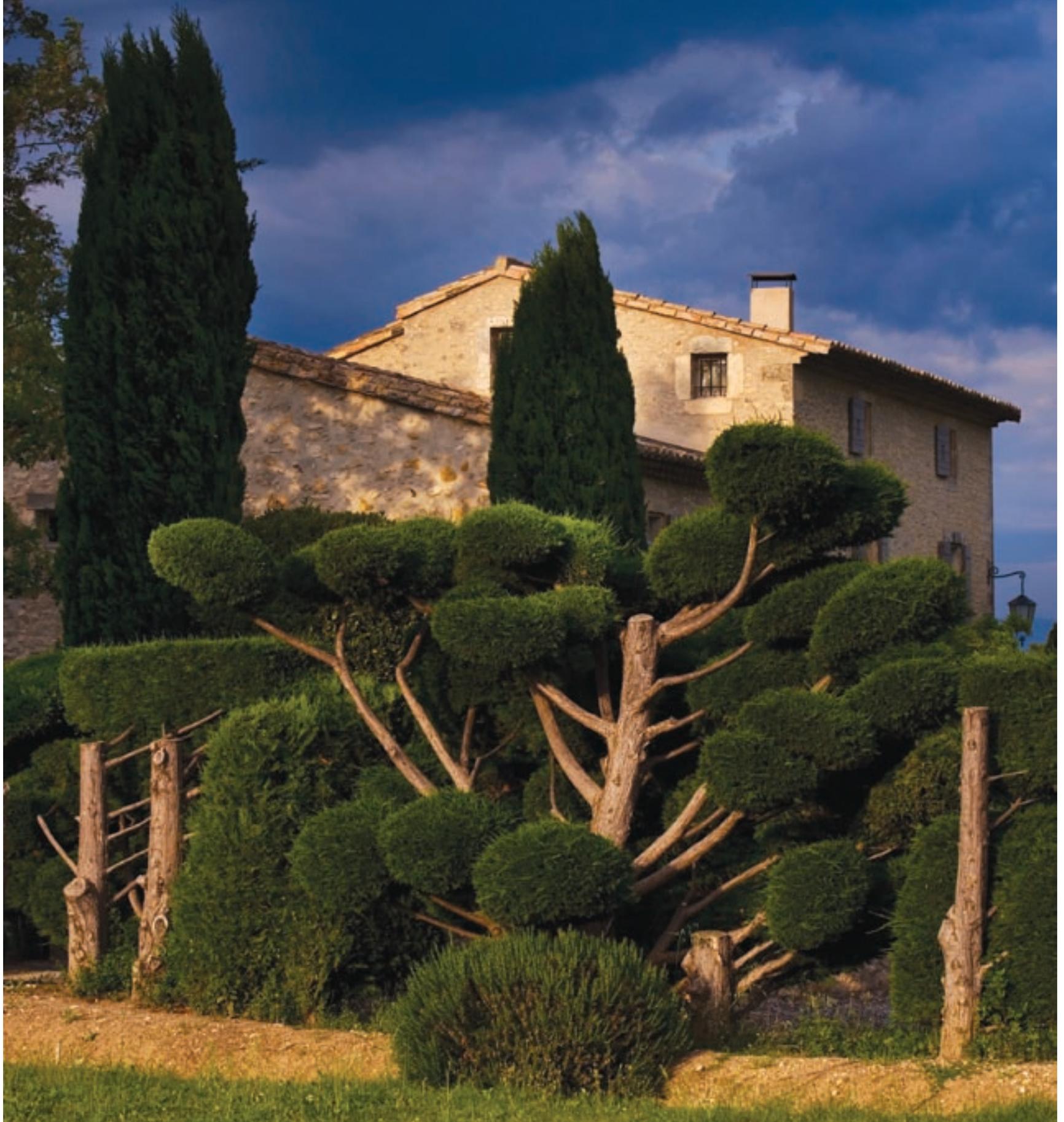
CARVING OUT THE LANDSCAPE

The first full garden design by
Provençal sculptor, Marc Nucera,
is an eye-opening experience ➔



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His living sculptures are planned to evolve over many years, which means continuing care once a commission is completed





Left: The hills of the Alpilles range in Provence provide a dramatic backdrop to the garden

Far left: The remnants of a hedge near the farmhouse become part windbreak and part living sculpture

Some 10 years ago, in a gallery in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, a British painter couldn't help but admire a massive armchair carved from the trunk of a plane tree. She and her husband were restoring a farmstead, the Mas de Michel, in the nearby countryside and wanted it for the garden. "You'll have to meet the artist," she was told. "If he likes you, he'll sell it to you. Otherwise, you're out of luck!" Thus began a long collaboration between this couple and sculptor, Marc Nucera, which led, eventually, to his designing their entire property. Famous already for his landscape pruning, Nucera undertook his first complete garden project with the Mas de Michel.

Nucera trained as a tree pruner, specialising at first in the rehabilitation of old olive orchards. His father was a furniture maker who once won a prestigious national competition for woodworking. In 1995, Marc, or Marco as he is known in his village, became a prize winner in his own right for the beauty and subtlety of his craftsmanship. In those years he was already working in private gardens under the guidance of two leading figures in Provence: Nicole de Vésian and her protégé at the time, land artist, Alain David Idoux. Vésian's garden, La Louve, at her former home in Bonnieux, now appears in all major international anthologies, and Idoux's Mas de Benoît is also fast becoming an icon.

Both Vésian and Idoux passed away in the late 1990s, but

Nucera has continued their work with their blessing, extending craft into art. While Vésian liked tapestry effects and Idoux planned large-scale landscapes, Nucera's focus is mainly trees in their settings. He likes almonds, olives, stone and Aleppo pines, planes, holm oaks and the remnants of cypress hedging often found on farmsteads now converted into holiday homes.

At first he sculpted only living trees, refusing to separate the specimen from its context, composing symbolic harmonies of stone, wood and foliage in space. Later, he began recycling the many plane trees cut down when roads are widened, turning them into furniture. He sees this as giving them new life, especially since his chairs and tables can always, in theory at least, be reassembled back into the form of the trunk.

He often now sculpts dead trees, either still in the ground, or standing as sculpture near their place of origin. There are several examples at the Mas de Michel.

This farmstead, facing south as is always the case in this country, sits on ten acres of almond and olive orchards among open fields, at the foot of a dramatic range of hills, the Alpilles, part of the larger Luberon range. Former owners had dotted the site with gardenesque accents – a purple plum, a magnolia, a *Tamarix*, and so on. Marc worked to bring out the rustic, rural character of the ancient place, accentuating its major sight lines. First, the 



➤ serpentine line of a deep irrigation ditch was extended beyond a grove of evergreen oaks, pruned to reveal picturesque trunks. The curve was further marked with a cobblestone river under low clipped shrubs, then extended by a row of large wooden ‘pebbles’ leading the eye to the silver ridge beyond. The entrance to the property was moved north so that this serpentine feature accompanies visitors around the house to the main garden, revealing the mountain view only gradually.

Elsewhere, a Leyland cypress windbreak, useful enough to be kept, became a fretwork sculpture behind a fountain. Two majestic Aleppo pines were cleared of superfluous shrubbery to provide shade for a whole set of carved furniture. A mature plane tree became a weeping canopy after weights were used to train it. It now forms a deliciously cool ‘tent’ near the swimming pool.

The Mas de Michel is a good example of the kind of soft minimalism that characterises Provençal landscape art today. The plant palate is limited and local, making the most of Mediterranean broadleaf evergreens that can be clipped, such as *Viburnum tinus*, evergreen oaks, box, laurel, rosemary and *Cistus*.

Nucera’s work experiments with balance, density, angles of vision from near and far, open and closed spaces, dynamic movement, changing light and weather patterns. Often single trees serve as pivots for intersecting lines in a general composition. From Alain David Idoux, Marc learned how to turn agricultural geometries into large-scale compositions. From Nicole de Vésian, he learned to bring out texture in stone, wood and foliage – always rough, tactile materials you’re meant to touch and smell as well as see – using weathered tones of beige, green and grey. These subtle colours work all year round and gently set

off seasonal bursts of colour such as the plane canopy’s gold in autumn and the waves of almond bloom in February.

Above all, Vésian taught both Idoux and Nucera the mastery of graded space. The spectacular mountain view is not merely ‘framed’, it is orchestrated, from near to far, by progressive planes and volumes. Similarly, this garden works with layers from the ground up, from its pebble paths, rough grass cut at different heights, clumps of sub-shrubs, small to larger trees and, above all, the vast blue Provençal sky. There is no fuss, but much whimsy. Nothing is obvious but everything is gracious.

Marc Nucera has always worked alone and with the same passion for places and favourite clients that the gallery owner discerned in Saint Rémy. His living sculptures are planned to evolve over many years, which means continuing care once a commission is completed. Gardeners must be trained and willing.

Today, the region’s most innovative gardens all have some work by Nucera, but he has no interest in simply leaving his signature here and there. He prefers to keep deepening his relationship to sites he already knows and loves. The danger of such fidelity may be overcrowding, the blurring of strong, simple sight lines, leading to a kind of outdoor gallery effect. Perhaps, for Nucera, working with whole sites will now prove the way of the future. ◻

Sources

The only currently accessible public Nucera project is Château La Verrière, a winery in northern Provence. Visit www.laverriere.com

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Tel +33 4 9092 9921. His own garden is open by appointment.

Clockwise from far left:
Large wooden ‘pebbles’ form part of a serpentine feature in the garden

Olive trees are a favourite feature of the designer, here nestling in the shadow of the Alpilles mountains

Typically robust sculpted wooden seating – Nucera’s way of giving a new lease of life to a felled tree