

THE TRICK FOUNTAINS AND
THEIR
Grottos

Just imagine: jolly court society by the flickering light of hundreds of candles and torches, carried by ghostly servants and effectively posed in one of the five grottos, The Neptune Grotto, the Ruins Grotto, the Shell grotto, the Mirror Grotto and the Bird Call Grotto, masterpieces of artistic mannerist design, which could bring visitors to a terrible dread and delighted astonishment. And that not only due to architectural design, such as in the Ruins Grotto, which artificially awakened the impression of utter destruction to the smallest detail.

A further dimension of amusing wonder is awakened by the technical intricacies that could bring about deceptively “real” sounds: the Bird Call Grotto in which ten different bird calls are heard from several niches in the tuff coating in the walls, which one would imitate with a simple tape-recording today, required a large room on the north side of the palace containing the entire mechanism of the eight water-pipes and three dry pipes: a vertical waterwheel is driven by a jet of water from above. The wheel moves the bellows, which drives the wind into the sound-board of an organ works. These works are then driven by a turbine-like waterwheel mounted horizontally on the floor, which turns the pin roller four times each minute. The pin roller carries eleven rows of pins for the eleven bird calls. Valves are opened by the pins when the roller turns, which then allows the pressurised air access to the pipes outside in the grotto. The air passes through lead pipes. The feet of the pipes, which are hidden in the grotto, are dipped into water containers. The water in the containers is always kept at the same height through an exactly regulated inflow and outflow. When the pipe responds, air flows out through the water resulting in bird calls that resemble the gurgling of water. The original system of 1613 contained only the calls of three birds. The works of today are from Hradil the fountain master. Parts of an old organ works by Sautner of circa 1830 still exist.

Visitors to the fountains of the Neptune Grotto are shocked by the Germaul, a tin, water-driven grimacing face, which rolls its eyes and pokes its tongue in disrespect at the observer. A first sample of the countless hidden jets and pipes is given in this grotto: a downpour with a rainbow!

If one wished to walk from the palace from the royal parterre to the fountains, an entire cascade of water jets could be a hindrance. Even from the stags’ antlers attached to the left and right of the portal could be made to spray according to the mood and desire of the host.

If the jolly party then turned to the south towards the theatre, it soon confronted by a stone table with ten stone stools. Down the centre of the table was a long depression that was meant to cool wine for the pleasure of guests who took their place at the table. Their host could take vindictive pleasure at a moment’s notice by spraying those seated from beneath the stools, naturally without getting wet himself. Those wishing to flee were hindered by a curtain of water, which was created by 87 lead pipes hidden in the floor.

D. Gisberthi wrote in 1670: “One does not allow oneself to be insulted without joy and pleasure, and must nevertheless laugh despite the lack of politeness.”

When one turns away from the palace to the north where the park becomes suddenly narrow, somewhat gloomy and almost intimate, there is a very different effect than the loud screams and pleased fright that was created, and is still create today, by the trick fountains.

Another mannerist detail is noticeable among the many fountains and water jets at Hellbrunn: the water is never felt as a torrent or a gush, but more as something that one intrudes in a certain form. These thin jets are combined together like silver wires; sharp sounds are given as pictures, while a Baroque fountain rushes, surges up and bubbles. The people of this period loved again and again to prove that nature could be tamed and could be used for their own purpose. Alone the playful details in the Venus Grotto, compared to the five above-described grottos, is witness to this endeavour: Venus steps on the head of a dolphin from the mouth of which swirls a stream of water that then flows over a bouquet of flowers in a bell-shaped form. The two tin tortoises, which appear to spit water into each other’s mouth, are noticeable in the outflow channel, whereby the impression of a solid glass staff is created because neither the inflow or outflow of the jet are to be seen.

Moreover, it wouldn’t be the Hellbrunn trick fountains if there were no cascading, needle-thin water jets, which following their absorbed rapture brings visitors properly back to reality!

Another attraction when strolling among the trick fountains is offered by the Midas Grotto, or Crown Grotto, in the middle of which a bursting jet of water raises a crown, and according to the pressure, holds it almost immovably at the desired height. Naturally, the observer will be startled again and again by water jets inside this grotto, which shoot from wall niches. Access to this watery technical gem is made difficult by sudden gushes from the floor.

*Homo ludens IX, Automatic Games
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