

ITALIEN WATER JOKES  
AND  
*Automata*  
AT HELLBRUNN PALACE

Where are the best Italian giochi d`aqua dating from the early seventeenth century? Where can you see automata – moving gures operated by hydraulic machinery – turning, singing, sawing or chopping as they have done for nearly 400 years? The Villa d`Este at Tivoli? Alas, no, though it once had the best collection of both in the later sixteenth century. At Frascati, perhaps, where a clutch of cardinals lavished fortunes on the latest inventions for the garden, competing with each other in the race for frivolous attractions? Cardinal Aldobrandini`s highly architectural baroque garden won the highest praise from many visitors for many years, but its automata have gone.

The water jokes that delighted Monsieur de Montaigne in 1581 at the Villa Medici di Castello near Florence operate no more, although a few gardens, such as the Villas Lante and Garzoni, still have one or two little jets of water that catch visitors with their spray. Sadly astute was Bishop Gilbert Burnet when he observed in 1685 that “there are none that lay out so much Wealth all at once, as the Italiens do upon their building and finishing of their Palaces and Gardens, and that afterwards bestow so little on the preserving of them.” (Dr. Gilbert Burnet, *Some letters containing an account of what seemed most remarkable in Switzerland, Italy, London, 1724, p240.*)

France has no working automata, nor, I think, has Germany, although some water jokes have survived at the Eremitage at Bayreuth. In England there is only Chatsworth`s enchanting tree fountain of c.1700 to sprinkle amused visitors. But at Hellbrunn near Salzburg the water jokes and automata installed nearly 400 years ago are still intact, and still in working order. It is only here that it is genuinely possible to experience the pleasures of a seventeenth century garden, for the water jokes and automata are virtually complete. But why this astonishing Italian creation in Austria and why have they survived when so many others have perished? The answer to the latter question lies in four careful owners and the conservation minded character of the Salzburgers, while the key to the former is found in the aristocratic, worldly, humorous and energetic Prince Bishop of Salzburg. Marcus Sittikus, Graf von Hohenems (1574-1619).

Destined for the church at an early age, much of Marcus Sittikus's education was in Italy, and by 1601 he was Honorary Treasurer at the court of Cardinal Aldobrandini, whose villa in Frascati was in the course of construction. Also with a country house in Frascati was the young priest's uncle, Cardinal Marco Sittico Altemps, another churchman keen on grand houses and gardens to match. No doubt he was also familiar with many other of the great villas of the age, like the Villa d'Este and the Villa Lante.

Marcus Sittikus was appointed Archbishop of Salzburg in 1612, and thereby also became the ruling prince of the independent state of Salzburg with both temporal and spiritual powers. Soon after assuming office, he engaged Santino Solari to build a summer palace just a few kilometres from the centre of Salzburg and within three years the palace was more or less complete.

Unfortunately there is no information in Salzburg records about who designed the gardens or who created the moving figures and hidden sprays. Perhaps there are records in the Vatican that might reveal his identity, but these are currently inaccessible. That the designer was Italian is very likely, since expertise in these devices had reached a form of high art in the hands of Pirro Ligorio at the Villa d'Este, which had been completed by 1575. So it may have been Marcus Sittikus himself, or Solari who planned the layout with expert assistance from an Italian fountaineer for the grottoes and water jokes.

Alternatively, the design for the automata and their machinery could have been taken from *Les Raisons des Forces Mouvantes*, which was written by Salomon de Caus and published in both French and German in 1615. The illustrations and explanations in this book are so graphic that it would not be hard to copy them precisely, and the machinery behind the grottoes bears a remarkable resemblance to de Caus's diagrams. Since the schloss was finished in 1615, it is possible that the gardens were started about that time and completed with the help of de Caus's book.

Now to the gardens themselves. The schloss sits on one side of a flat valley beside a wooded hillside where there is a reservoir with a constant supply of water, a vital ingredient for fountains, water jokes and automata. A large water parterre laid out for the Prince Bishop still exists today, and although the mount in the centre has gone, the design is clearly visible in the background of a portrait of Marcus Sittikus that hangs in the schloss, and it is little changed. The water jokes and automata are disposed beside a path that nestles into the hillside beyond the water parterre.

Today's visitors, armed at least with a sense of humour (only wimps will need a mac) enter the gardens above the house and start the tour at the Sovereign's Table. Doubtless inspired by an earlier version at the Villa Lante, this is a handsome stone affair with a wine cooler running down the centre of it, with space to chill enough bottles for seriously ambitious drinkers. Ten stone stools surround the table, only nine of which have a small nozzle in the centre of each seat, so that the host could nod to a servant whenever he wanted to irritate or sober up his guests. Or make them to leave with a wicked parting shot! The table is in outdoor room whose centrepiece is the Roman Theatre, a splendid early baroque extravaganza of pebble mosaics, statues of emperors, finials, urns and Marcus Sittikus's coat of arms.

Next comes the Orpheus Grotto in which there is a delightful composition of Orpheus with Eurydice reclining at his feet surrounded by animals and volcanic limestone. Eurydice, whose features bear a striking resemblance to portraits of Countess Isabel Mabon whom the guidebook coyly describes as the Prince Bishop's 'muse,' wears nothing other than a portrait of Marcus Sittikus round her neck. Further on past various pools in a variety of shapes are the principal grottoes which are located in the ground floor of the house. The entrance facade has a touch of Mannerist absurdity, for the semi-circular rusticated columns on either side of the entrance rise not from conventional semi-circular bases but each from a pair of delicately sculpted feet.

The first grotto is dedicated to Neptune who is predictably guarded by a pair of seahorses. But here at Neptune's feet is Hellbrunn's most original feature, known as the Big Mouth. About 30 centimetres high and made of copper and painted, it is a caricature face of a man with enormous ears who can roll his eyes and stick out his tongue, all operated by the simple flow of water behind the mask. It is exactly what a cheeky child would do to a pompous adult, and is said to represent Marcus Sittikus's laughing reaction to his critics. The man must have had a puckish humour for the Big Mouth is wonderfully bizarre.

Beyond is the Mirror Grotto where the first of the automata is to be found. In a pool of water, dolphins and sea horses process continuously around a rock on which another statue of Neptune once sat, although he disappeared at some time after 1855. This type of Neptune tableau, publicised by de Caus, remained a favourite into the eighteenth century, and was illustrated by Dezallier d'Argenville in *La Theorie et la Pratique du Fardinage* in 1709. Next comes the Birdsong Grotto, where little birds perching on the walls open their mouths and sing remarkably sweetly, all operated by hydraulic machinery. This, too has precedents at Tivoli and Frascati and was illustrated by de Caus. Before leaving the Neptune Grotto the guide gives visitors a quick sprinkle of water from jets hidden in the elaborate ceiling, and as they dash for safety outside he operates another lever to turn on yet more hidden jets that come from – well, to reveal the source would spoil the fun!

Next come five small-scale automata each one a perfectly executed scene of wooden figures housed in ivy-smothered stone and tantalisingly viewed across a stream. A knife grinder, a potter and a miller are each hard at work in domestic settings, while Perseus is forever trying to kill a sea-monster and Apollo is flaying a bloodied Madyras in macabre detail. The first three could easily be dressed up by Selfridges for the Christmas windows, and the last two are just right for the Chamber of Horrors at Madame Tussaud's.

In the Venus Grotto on the other side of the path is a little fountain which forms a complete dome of water under which a bouquet of cut flowers is kept cool and fresh for several weeks, claim the guides. Another delight is a pair of tortoises that cleverly spout water into each other's mouths across a narrow stream. There seems no end to surprising inventions in this garden.

There are other grottoes, pools and fountains along the way, but two more that are remarkable. The first is the Mechanical Theatre, which was added to the garden in 1752. It is a huge and complex display of life in a provincial town with no less than 160 wooden figures that either rotate on turntables or else are jointed so that they can bend or move their arms or legs. There are townspeople strolling, musicians playing, soldiers marching, gypsies dancing with a bear, butchers slaughtering a calf and many craftsmen hard at work. All this activity is powered by water, which moves wooden wheels and countless levers under the stage and behind the scenery. To counteract the inevitable sound of creaking, the designer, Lorenz Roseneger, added a hydraulically operated organ. The music comes from a large revolving drum of the type found in a musical box and its jollity complements the bustling scene.

Finally there is the Crown or Mydas Grotto, a rectangular building whose mosaics and statues are particularly pleasing. It includes also a small mound decorated with sea creatures from the top of which issues a powerful jet of water. A metal crown is held aloft by the force of the water, and dances up and down according to the pressure released by the guide; it is similar to one of about the same date at the Eremitage in Bayreuth. The approach to this grotto is along a path lined on either side with jets of water that arch so high that visitors can walk underneath. On leaving the grotto, the guide turns these on, and visitors scamper quickly, still dry, under the arch, only to be caught just when they thought they were safe by another set of sprays from an unexpected direction at the end. Everyone thought it hilariously funny, and there was as much laughter at the end of the twentieth century as there doubtless was nearly 400 years ago, for visitors in the past wrote about water jokes with great amusement. Nobody ever complained about getting wet. Such pleasures are simple, but enduring, and it is perhaps surprising that these devices are rarely included in gardens today.

What about the automata? Are we too sophisticated for these moving figures? What's more, are they today's kitsch? They certainly still have the power to fascinate. Perhaps they remind us of Oxford Street or Disneyland (which, don't forget, draw crowds to watch their elaborate moving tableaux) and they certainly would look odd in a new garden today. But these questions are irrelevant.

Once automata were chic attractions which only the very rich could afford, and in a pre-industrial age they would have amazed spectators. Today we have to view them through the eyes of a seventeenth century visitor to appreciate the full power of their magic, for we are sated by too many visual experiences. What is most important is that Hellbrunn's automata have survived to give us an authentic taste of the past.

Would that others example, the Villa Aldobrandini, for they still have crowd appeal plus more than enough originality and quaint charm to amuse to Millenium Man.

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