

EUROPEAN GARDEN AWARD 2021

Laudation for Rundāle Palace and Garden

1st Prize “Management or Development of a Historic Park or Garden”

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2020 was a special year.

The Corona virus has held Europe and the rest of the world firmly in its grip. Travelling was difficult at that time.

But the incidence levels in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia were great.

So, nothing stood in the way for a round trip through the Baltic States. And on this trip, I visited Rundāle Palace for the first time – and it impressed me deeply.

Rundāle Palace and its garden have a reputation far beyond its borders as a "dream of a castle" or the "Versailles of the Baltic".

Not unjustly highly praised, it is nevertheless somewhat surreal to come across this lovingly restored property in this agricultural – and very lonely – landscape of southern Latvia.

A few words about the history and construction of Rundāle Castle:

In the 18th century, the "Versailles of the Baltic" was built.

The Russian Tsarina Anna Ivanova commissioned her favourite, the Duke of Courland, to build the magnificent summer residence with a French garden in 1735/36.

None other than one of the most famous architects of the time, Francesco B. Rastrelli, was to realize the gigantic project in the style of the Palace of Versailles. Rastrelli had already made a name for himself by building numerous magnificent palaces in St. Petersburg.

The total area of the palace ensemble covers 85 hectares. The park extends in the southern part of the palace – and a palace of the Baroque period is hardly imaginable without a "French garden" ... Although the "French garden" of Rundāle only covers an area of barely 10 hectares, Rastrelli succeeded in creating an intricate avenue, a transverse avenue, a pergola as well as a labyrinth bosquet in the garden.

The central basin is nowadays enclosed by 4 ornamental parterres with ornately cut box hedges, brick, and white marble gravel, and also by lawns.

On either side of the parterres, a large rose garden has been laid out on the bosquet squares, covering an area of almost 1 hectare, to show the history of rose cultivation in Europe from the first half of the 18th century to the present day.

All Baroque elements, such as the ornamental parterre, the bosquets surrounded by hedges, the "Green Theatre", the pergolas and the pavilions, shine again today in their former splendour. A hunting park adjoins the southern side of the baroque park, leading into a forest park with avenues laid out just as regularly.

A few words about the restoration:

The Rundāle Palace Park – surprisingly enough – was not affected by the 19th-century European fashion trend to create landscape parks instead of regular gardens.

The 1974 tree inventory and cartography revealed that the design worked out by Rastrelli was repeated throughout all the 19th-century plantations. Only the parterre part was changed, creating round flower beds and planting a poplar circle and some spruces. In 1882, there have been alleys of sheared trees in the park.

The park was regularly cultivated until the First World War; later it grew over. A small cleaning up was carried out in the 1930s, when the Latvian Board of Monuments included the Rundāle Park into the list of monuments protected by the state. At that time, the canals were cleaned, the damaged trees were cut out, the paths were fixed, and the parterre and lawns were made with a pond in the centre.

After the Second World War, sports grounds with a pond in the centre were built in the parterre. The linden trees of the central alley were trimmed to shoot.

After the establishment of the Rundāle Palace Museum, the future of the palace park had to be decided. At that time, the Baroque Garden was overgrown, the carved trees had grown tall and thin, and there was a school sports ground instead of the parterre.

Theoretically, everyone agreed that Rundāle is the only place in Latvia where it is possible to reconstruct a regular French-style Baroque Garden. But in practice there was a lot of resistance, because the old trees had to be cut out and the plantations had to be renewed. The trees were cut out from 1975 to 1978; the planting of trees could begin in 1984.

Implementation of the projects was slow and complicated, as it was impossible to find an organization that could in rural conditions be able to accomplish all the necessary complexities. A part of the work was taken by the museum staff, a lot of help was provided by the people in joint work. In September 1983, the largest joint work in the history of the museum was organized in the park – 2.180 people continued to build a network of paths, which was begun in 1978. In 1985, 8.900 hornbeams were planted, and the formation of high hedges was begun, which surround the bosquets – areas separated by alleys and cross-alleys. All planting and maintenance work were carried out by the museum staff.

The renovation of the park became more intense after 1998, when the restoration of the Gardener's House began. And in 2002, after the restoration of the southern façade of the palace. Currently all typical elements of the Baroque Garden in Rundāle Palace Park have been restored: ornamental parterres, bosquets surrounded by hedges, the "Green Theatre", the arbour passages or pergolas and pavilions.

The rose garden of Rundāle Palace is located on both sides of the ornamental parterre, filling up the areas designed by architect Francesco Rastrelli. Roses were not planted there during the 18th century. The largest part of the rose garden is taken up by modern roses, which have been grouped by colours, in order for it to be possible to compare the work of various breeders in the formation of a single colour variation. The area closest to the parterre is planted with English roses that resemble old garden roses. Now, in total, there are 2.230 rose varieties including 600 historical varieties grown in the garden of Rundāle Palace.

As you can see, the restoration of Latvia's unique Baroque Garden was a very complicated and huge project that was only made possible by the dedication and work of the museum staff and many, many volunteers.

So, this park really deserves the first prize 2021 in the category "Management and development of a historic park or garden":

Congratulations!

And from my own experience I can say:

The "Versailles of the Baltic" with its absolutely stunning baroque garden and the castle, located in the middle of an extraordinary landscape, is definitely worth a visit!