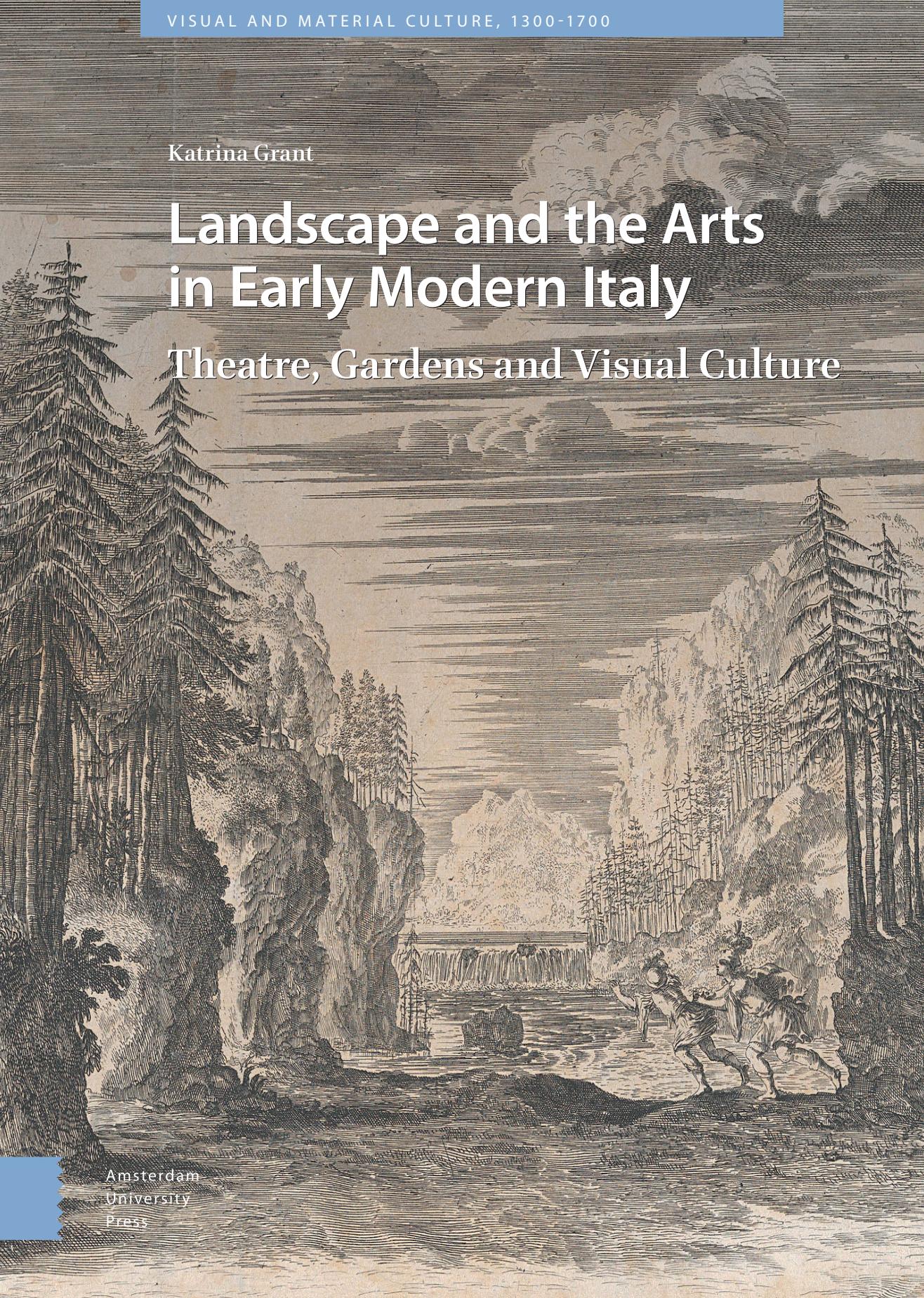


VISUAL AND MATERIAL CULTURE, 1300-1700

Katrina Grant

# Landscape and the Arts in Early Modern Italy

## Theatre, Gardens and Visual Culture

An engraving of a mountain landscape. In the foreground, a river flows through a valley. On the right bank, two figures are engaged in a theatrical performance or dance. The middle ground features a waterfall cascading into the river. The background is dominated by steep, rocky mountainsides covered in dense evergreen forests. The sky is filled with dramatic, swirling clouds. The entire scene is rendered in a detailed, hatched engraving style.

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Allison Levy is Digital Scholarship Editor at Brown University. She has authored or edited five books on early modern Italian visual and material culture.



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# Landscape and the Arts in Early Modern Italy

*Theatre, Gardens and Visual Culture*

*Katrina Grant*

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# Introduction

All'Atto secondo un'improvvisa mutatione della Scena, che di grotta si vidde a un tratto rappresentare l'Isola disabitata di Magistea, nido horrendo della Chimera; Boscareccia era l'apparenza, e qualche fabrica, che pur si vedeva per entro rovinosa, e disfatta, erano però quelle rovine dilettevoli alla vista come piene d'arte eccellente, [...] gl'alberi si vedevano con somma diligenza intagliati [...] Ondeggiava in faccia un gran mare turbato.<sup>1</sup>

The Second Act began with an unexpected change of Scene, a cave suddenly appeared to represent the uninhabited island of Magistea, the horrendous nest of the Chimera; A woodland could be seen, and some of the buildings, which, although they were ruined and destroyed, still delighted the eye with the excellence of their art [...] the trees that could be see had been carved with great diligence [...] in front was a great and turbulent sea – *Bellerofonte*, 1642

These words from the libretto of the opera *Bellerofonte* conjure up a vision of a long-lost scene from the Venetian stage. The landscape is both delightful and horrendous, it shows great art in its design and takes the eye across a landscape. This theatrical, or scenographic landscape, is just one of many that were staged for audiences in the seventeenth century. Written descriptions tell us of the '*meraviglia*' or wonders that captured the eye and the feelings of delight and horror they elicited in the audience. They speak of the illusion of naturalness of the scenes and amazement at the mimicry of the natural effects of clouds, lightning and thunder brought inside. The seventeenth century was a time when the relationship between humans and nature shifted. In art this new fascination with nature saw the rise of the genre of landscape painting. In gardens architects introduced monumental structures designed to overwhelm spectators, which were contrasted with smaller, intimate spaces designed for retreat. At the same time engineers revived ancient techniques and built upon them to realize new ways to control and reshape the landscape and put these techniques to work in gardens. Yet, there is one aspect of this visual

<sup>1</sup> From the libretto for *Bellerofonte* (1642), reproduced in Per Bjurström, *Giacomo Torelli and Baroque Stage Design* (Stockholm: Almsquist & Wiksell, 1962). Author's translation.

culture that has been largely neglected, and that is the theatre. On stage painters, architects and engineers conjured living, moving landscapes to delight audiences. While texts and images reveal to us the scripted nature of garden experiences during this period, visitors were routinely cast as performers and spectators and encouraged to imagine themselves entering the worlds they had seen conjured upon the stage.

## Theatre, Theatricality and the Landscape as Stage

The study of gardens, designed landscapes and their audiences in seventeenth-century Italy has, like art more broadly, been subject to theatrical analogy. The histories of this period often shift between the use of sociological metaphors like 'life as theatre' and 'all the world's a stage' to capture a general sense of the spirit of the time and a search for evidence of actual exchange between theatre and art. The garden was, as will be explored below, often used as an actual stage for performances, but it also often fulfilled a role analogous to that of theatre, of making tangible a fantastical or idealized world. It is important to look at the way in which gardens were conceived as stages, and to examine the connections between the depiction of nature on stage and its presentation in gardens. In seventeenth-century garden design and in stage settings for theatre we can observe a desire to access 'imaginary or physically inaccessible worlds', or to generate experiences of wonder (*meraviglia*) in ways similar to the theatre. In the theatre this was achieved through the use of special effects and illusionistic scenery, and within the garden it was achieved by creating an immersive space that mimicked or alluded to fictional worlds.

The aim of this book is to demonstrate that the idea of nature evoked on stage through performed narratives and theatrical scenography reshaped—both physically and conceptually—the exterior world in early modern Italy. This study provides a new perspective on the landscape as a means of cultural expression. It reveals the central role that theatre and performance played in the new styles of landscape design, painting and narrative description that emerged across the 1600s. This book looks at a range of sites, specific performances, and contexts throughout Italy. By taking this long view, in terms of both time and place, it is possible to draw out links, continuities, and dramatic shifts that illustrate the way in which the idea of landscape was being transformed. This long view is grounded in a series of focused case studies that examine key moments in the development of theatre and landscape design. The research includes critical analysis of visual material and extant sites supported by the close examination of a range of primary source documents from archives. It draws on visual records of performances, official descriptions and audience accounts, treatises on performance, and the poetry written for opera



and other performances. This study takes an interdisciplinary view, with the focus on visual culture of theatre, landscape, and garden performances supported by a comprehensive use of current research from musicology, theatre, and social history of the period.

## The Theatrical Baroque?

The study of the visual culture of theatre is a challenging one for several reasons. The sources are largely ephemeral and fragmentary. A culture of secrecy around theatrical staging meant that very little was published in formal treatises, compared to the arts of poetry and music. But there is an additional challenge, the problem of how to disentangle our modern ideas of ‘theatre’ and ‘theatricality’ from those relevant to the seventeenth century. The use of the term theatrical and the application of the word theatre as metaphor is common in discussions of the long seventeenth century in Italy, and Europe more broadly. Numerous texts, books and catalogue essays invoke the idea of the ‘theatrical baroque’ as a period when ‘all the world was a stage’ and life, and art, was a performance. This framing comes in part from the fact that theatre flourished as an art during the period. New styles of performance, such as opera, emerged. Texts were written that explored, categorized and promoted the performing arts. The culture of fêtes, festivals and courtly performance thrived as rulers combined music, poetry and art to entertain and persuade their subjects. Despite this rich array of sources, the use of the terms theatrical and theatre are still often applied to the period as though they are an explanation, in and of themselves, of the artistic and cultural milieu of the time. Chapter 1 asks what is meant when we describe the seventeenth century as theatrical? It looks both at the seventeenth-century attitudes toward theatre and performance as a metaphor, and the characterization of the baroque period as ‘theatrical’ in subsequent centuries. It also introduces the vast array of sources and the key critical and interpretative issues that are central to the study of the visual culture of theatre, and of designed landscapes. The rest of the book is divided into two halves—the first looks at ‘landscape in the theatre’, the second ‘theatre in the landscape’.

## From Satyrs to *La gran strega* – the Landscape on Stage

The rich culture of performance and spectacle in Medici Florence around 1600 is a key moment not only in the emergence of opera, but in the development of the stage set. The sets played a crucial role in the transformation of opera into an immersive



environment that transcended sound to appeal to all the senses simultaneously. Chapter 2 traces the development of the stage set, and the significance of the pastoral or 'satyric' scene from the classical revival of antique plays in the fifteenth century to the rise of the *intermedi*, one of the precursors to opera, and the emergence of opera itself at the court of the Medici dukes. Gardens and landscapes played a key narrative role in these productions. Early plays by fifteenth-century poets such as Poliziano were based on classical fables, and characters like Orpheus roamed amongst pastoral settings. The revival of classical plays meant that designers looked to the ancients as sources for staging plays, and architects like Sebastiano Serlio (1475–1554) designed set types of stages based on sources such as Vitruvius. One of these, the satyric setting, was a vision of rustic nature and intended to be the setting for satirical plays. Despite the popularity of Serlio's type as a source for understanding sixteenth-century settings, his design for a satyric set captures a type of play that never became as popular as the tragedy or the comedy (also illustrated by Serlio). Instead, the classical, mythical pastoral setting became the dominant vision of nature on stage. A concern for verisimilitude and 'unity of place' in the first operas meant that the settings tended to be pastoral settings because it seemed more plausible that characters such as shepherds, shepherdesses, and nymphs would sing their speech. This meant that the powerfully emotional music and poetry of the first operas, with their themes of love and loss of love, tended to be closely associated with landscape settings.

As opera gained in popularity across the Italian peninsula, the idea that sets should contribute to the 'unity of place' began to be superseded by a focus on the visual appeal of sets, and the surprise and wonder that they could induce in audiences. The role of opera as a tool of courtly politics to produce displays of magnificence meant that scenes of landscape rapidly became settings for the staging of wonders, or *meraviglia*. The audience were presented with visions of marvellous landscapes where gods would fly across the clouds, nymphs would assemble to perform dances and songs, and hellish caves would spew forth fire. This vision of the landscape as stage echoed a shift in the use of gardens. At the Medici court the engineer and designer Bernardo Buontalenti presented nature as a stage for performances, he conjured a vision of Apollo's Mount Parnassus (replete with automata) in a physical feature designed for the garden of Pratolino in 1586. Three years later this same scene appeared on stage in an *intermedio* staged for the wedding of Grand Duke Ferdinando I de' Medici and Christine of Lorraine.

This demand for special effects and the fascination with new aesthetics, such as 'endless' one-point perspectives, shaped the vision of nature presented on stage. Technical innovations meant that set designers and opera impresarios delighted in creating effects that mimicked nature. This reflected an approach that fed, and was fed by, contemporary interest in human ability to control and manipulate nature.



Chapters 3 and 4 treat set design and special effects as conceptual inventions, capable of persuasion, which responded to current aesthetic ideas and were driven by the social and cultural contexts of their own time and place. In Chapter 3 set design is considered alongside other forms of visual art, particularly landscape painting and drawing. The ideals of unity and verisimilitude of sets intersected with the rise of landscape painting as a genre and both led to the creation of a new vision of nature on the stage. The work of Giulio Parigi and his son Alfonso at the Medici court are taken as an example of artists who worked across drawing, painting and set design. The sets of the elder Parigi seem to respond to the newly emergent style of landscape painting, such as a desire for naturalism, but the resulting compositions are clearly scenographic. They include large open spaces for actors to ‘fly’ across the sky, or for dances to take place. These links between painting and theatre are further examined in relation to the work of the designer Francesco Guitti for the Barberini court, where the landscape sets seem to change in response to the style of artists such as Pietro da Cortona and Claude Lorrain.

A particular iconography of the landscape set also began to emerge. Scenes set within nature became a standard type for performances, especially in opera where sets multiplied from just four or five to over ten, and an iconography of the landscape set emerges. Ludovico Burnacini’s 23 separate sets designed for *Il Pomo d’Oro* staged at the Hapsburg court in 1668 featured visions of nature that ran a spectrum from gardens of love to forests where fearful characters lost their way, literally and metaphorically. As opera became more standardized, such landscape and garden settings came to have set meanings within the narratives, which in turn shaped audience reception of these places away from the stage.

## Engineering Landscape on the Stage

It was architects and engineers who tended to be put in charge of the development of sets and special effects during this period and it is they, more than any others, who would shape the visual experience of theatre. Chapter 4 explores how sets became a tool for creating wonders and magnificence and how the audience emotionally engaged with them. Seventeenth-century set design, like painting, was not simply concerned with filling the gap between the representation and the real with an affective response; but with exploiting the gap itself. The wonder and illusion of stage sets were central to eliciting an emotional and sensory engagement from the viewer. Gianlorenzo Bernini created several plays that directly engaged with these ideas. Either tricking the audience by creating fake fires and floods or poking fun at himself as a designer seeking ‘real’ instead of ‘false’ illusions. Designers for the theatre also seem to have engaged with more serious debates about nature and the

experience and understanding of natural phenomena. Several translations of key texts from the antique about hydraulics, engineering and mechanical philosophy were driven by engineers who worked for the stage. Buontalenti commissioned an Italian translation of Hero's *Pneumatics*, and Giovanni Battista Aleotti, the designer of the innovative new wing-system, then produced his own translation of Hero. The scenes of nature devised by these engineers can be read as a visual expression of a new idea about human relationships with landscape. Set designs and special effects overwhelmed the viewer and expressed the capacity of rulers and their engineers to mimic and control the elements of the natural world.

### **The Theatre in the Landscape: from Pliny to the Parrhasian Grove**

The second half of this book examines the theatre in the landscape. The challenge of tracing the development and use of the garden as a theatre returns us to the problem of theatre as metaphor. What exactly is a garden theatre? Terms like 'teatro' appear in numerous views of gardens, diary accounts and garden plans. The term is used to describe a myriad of features from obvious amphitheatres to vague open spaces. In some cases it appears the term itself drove the function of these spaces. The label of water theatre, for instance, transformed a collection of fountains and statuary into a spectacle of hydraulic engineering. To understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to trace both the development of the theatre as a physical feature of the garden, and the way that ideas about performance and spectatorship informed the experience of landscape.

Chapter 5 begins by looking how the idea of the landscape or garden as theatre developed in the sixteenth century. The earliest garden and outdoor theatres tended to recreate what was known of antique villa design and included features like hippodromes and theatres. In the sixteenth century architects like Palladio, and others, picked up the Plinian idea of the landscape as a vast amphitheatre and built it into new garden designs. The U-shaped hillside planted with trees at the Boboli gardens, designed in the sixteenth century by Niccolo Tribolo to mimic a 'natural amphitheatre', would later become a setting for a permanent one made of stone in 1637. Designs inspired by the antique gradually gave way to garden theatres that mirrored theatrical designs from the stage.

### **Spectators and Performers**

The rise of the theatrical garden was not only a matter of the construction of physical theatres, but also reflected a shift in the way that gardens were experienced.



Chapter 6 looks at this phenomenon in detail. It returns to the challenges outlined in Chapter 1 around the use of the term theatre as metaphor and the idea of the viewer or visitor as audience or performer. The widespread use of the term *teatro*—both during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and in recent secondary literature on the period—to describe a myriad of often quite different garden features has made it a difficult form to classify. Over the course of the seventeenth century, it is possible to trace a continuity and development of the theatre in the landscape from the examples outlined in the previous chapter. Theatres were built for performances and continued to draw both on classical precedents and on contemporary theatre design. Theatres were also built to present wondrous and marvellous spectacles of nature, of hydraulic engineering or collections of antiquities. ‘Theatre’ and associated terms also entered the lexicon for describing the way in which gardens and landscapes were experienced.

The theatre in the garden is, in a sense, not simply a popular feature of the baroque garden but rather a manifestation of a certain ideological approach to the space of the garden and its accompanying art forms. From the early 1600s different types of theatres appeared with a certain regularity in new gardens and redesigned landscapes. Many of these were not performance spaces for plays in the conventional sense, instead their designers and patrons took concepts or shared ideas from the theatre and implemented them within landscape settings. More than just the product of a society obsessed with spectacle, these theatre types often explored more particular ideas. Chapter 7 examines the way that garden designs made a spectacle of nature. These features illustrate the different ways that the idea of theatre and performance guided the human experience of nature. The famous ‘teatri d’acqui’ of Frascati are an example of the fascination with monumental design, which drew on the tradition of designing villas after the antique but added in feats of hydraulic engineering that created an immersive spectacle of the elements of nature.

The final chapter looks at smaller, more intimate performances in the landscape. The hedge theatres of Lucca, or ‘teatri di verzura’, are a starting point for understanding the role that performance within natural settings played in the intellectual life of early modern Italy. Hedge theatres were constructed within in the gardens of members of the Lucchese Accademia degli Oscuri, whose culture of poetic composition and semi-private performances gave rise to these intimate performance spaces. This ‘academic’ culture of performance in the landscape was transformed in Rome in the decades around 1700 by the members of Accademia degli Arcadi. The fragile, temporary spaces this group carved out in nature for their meetings and intellectual games of composition and performance bring us back to the operatic stage. This group of poets and intellectuals created a culture of place-making in these aristocratic gardens and semi-wild nature around Rome. In doing so they



ushered in new ideas about both landscape and the performance of opera that would have an impact on the move toward a more romantic, melancholy, and personal relationship with nature that would shape how the people of enlightenment Europe approached the natural landscape.

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