The gardens of Versailles have been famous ever since their creation in the second half of the seventeenth century. Work on them was begun in the 1660s, when Louis XIV started to enlarge the small house that his father had used as a hunting lodge, and their development can be followed in contemporary prints; these reproduced each new adornment as it appeared, especially the fountains, then, as now, the most spectacular features of the gardens. Through such prints, the magnificent landscaping and ingenious waterworks became known to many who had not seen them; princes all over Europe made similar additions to their own estates, just as they tried to emulate the palace that dominated the great French park.

Another reflection of contemporary admiration for Versailles is seen in an embroidered hanging that has recently come to the Metropolitan Museum through the generosity of Irwin Untermyer. Yvonne Hackenbroch, in the catalogue of the Untermyer collection, indicated the connection of the panel with Versailles, and pointed out that the design must have been devised especially for this truly extraordinary piece of needlework. For although gardens have been depicted on tapestries and embroideries ever since the Middle Ages, it is rare to find an identifiable garden on any wall hanging. But interspersed among groups of classical figures on the Museum’s panel are five of the fountains constructed for Louis XIV at Versailles, each clearly and accurately depicted.

The embroidery is five and a half feet wide and over seven feet high. It has been cut at the bottom and was perhaps originally a good deal taller, as a wall panel could well be; the great Montespan hangings in the Metropolitan Museum, of the same period, are about fourteen feet high. It is worked on canvas in silk and wool in tent and cross-stitch, the simple technique still popular today and often called “tapestry” or “needlepoint.” The workmanship is not too expert and suggests a labor of love rather than the brisk efficiency of professional hands. The ground is black, the figures mostly in blues and yellows, with areas of pink and brown, such as the drapery hanging above the actors in the central scene. People have red lips, dogs have pink tongues and pink, blue, or yellow collars. The colors are not solid, but are made up of dark outlines shading through lighter tones to centers that are often white, a technique that gives great liveliness to the entire surface. The border has a red ground, with a bold pattern largely in yellows and blues. The general effect is intense, even brilliant, in color—a necessary characteristic for a wall covering that must hold its own with the upholstery and costumes of the period.

It was not unusual for extremely ambitious projects in needlework to be carried out
by ladies in the late seventeenth century. Addison, in a Spectator of 1714, lamented the passing of this fashion in a letter supposedly written by an industrious old lady bemoaning the frivolity of today: “Those Hours which in this Age are thrown away in Dress, Play, Visits, and the like, were employ’d, in my time, in writing out Receipts, or working Beds, Chairs and Hangings for the Family.” The essayist commented at length and most favorably on these strictures, saying, “How memorable would that Matron be, who should have Inscribed upon her Monument, ‘that she wrought out the whole Bible in tapestry, and died in a good old Age, having covered three hundred Yards of Wall in the Mansion-House.’ ” French as well as English ladies embroidered: Mme de Maintenon, according to Saint-Simon, “read or worked in tapestry” every evening while the king did business with his ministers in her room. The same writer even mentions a man, the Marquis de Vervins, who spent several years in bed engrossed in the same occupation.

But the ladies apparently did not make their own designs, though they might alter them; a lady of the English Verney family, writing in 1665 about a crewel work bed she was making, said, “Ther is too much work in it, and ther is sertan birds and flyes and other crepers which I know not, and frute which I do not much like, but it is a very fine thing, tho they be left out.” Elizabeth Watson, advertising in the London papers between 1696 and 1706, said of herself, “She Draweth Beds, and directeth in the Working,” and offered for sale “all sorts of material for the said Work, and Patterns set at reasonable Rates.” Mme de Sevigné, writing to her daughter in 1675, spoke of sending her wool and canvas, as well as “un patron sur quoi vous pourrez travailler.”

But the pattern for the Museum’s hanging would certainly have been commissioned, not bought ready-made. Presumably there was a reason why the customer wanted a classical story and Versailles fountains, but what this was can only be guessed at. Did a lady wish to commemorate her association with the French court? The arms in the upper corners of the embroidery are probably those of a nobleman of the Holy Roman Empire, according to Meurgey de Tupigny, president of the Société Française d’Heraldique et de Sigillographie. Thus, though the style of the piece is French, it could have been made elsewhere, perhaps in Flanders or Lorraine (part of the Empire until 1735). Or the designer may have been French, perhaps a drawing master at a small German court. In any case, the juxtaposition of classical figures and contemporary gardens would not have seemed incongruous in any part of Europe at the time; Louis XIV appears throughout Versailles in the role of Apollo and was called, of course, the Roi Soleil.

The designer of the Museum’s embroidery must have found his immediate sources in available prints. This was standard practice; from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, any elaborate scene on an amateur embroidery can be expected to be based on a print, though it is not always possible to find the original, nor, since the designer often treated his material rather freely, to be certain which of a number of related prints was the one actually used. Professional or semiprofessional work could have other resources; the Montespan hangings (which can be called semiprofessional, since they were made in a school) are based on drawings from Le Brun’s studio. The types of prints used for most of the Museum’s hanging can, however, be indicated. Only the central columnar structure, apparently a stage set, has escaped identification.
The figures in the classical scenes are engaged in the hunt of the Calydonian boar. According to the Greek legend, Diana sent a savage boar to ravage the country of Calydon because its king, Oeneus, had forgotten to sacrifice to her when he was thanking the gods for a rich harvest. All the heroes of Greece assembled to hunt the boar; Atalanta, a beautiful princess from Arcadia, was the first to wound it, but it was killed by the king’s son, Meleager. A designer who wished to show this scene would, at any period from the fifteenth century on, have turned to a doubtless well-thumbed illustrated edition of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. In the seventeenth century, this would probably have had illustrations by Antonio Tempesta, or one of his imitators. A French copy appeared in 1619, and there were many other French versions throughout
the century and into the next. The main figures on the embroidery, Atalanta with her bow, Meleager with his spear, the boar with the dog worrying it, and the dog in front of Meleager, are very close to the Tempesta print. The subsidiary figures are presumably additions by the designer and suggest that he was at least a competent draughtsman.

The central scene is less dependent upon Tempesta. Meleager fell in love with Atalanta during the hunt and presented her with the head of the boar. In the print, he grasps it by the ears, whereas on the embroidery he offers it politely on a platter. Atalanta has also changed her pose and looks more like a goddess than a huntress. She even wears Diana's crescent. This may refer to her determination to live in perpetual virginity, like a nymph of Diana, but one suspects that the designer may here have received definite instructions. Could the lady who was to work the embroidery have been called Diane?
Forming an unexpected background to these classical scenes, and a world away from the Greek landscape where the Calydonian boar was hunted, are the Versailles fountains. Not all of them can still be seen, for the gardens have been much altered since the seventeenth century. But if a visitor today walks due west from the palace, down the steps, past the Bassin de Latone, and along the Tapis Vert until he stands gazing across the Bassin d'Apollon down the immense length of the Grand Canal, he will see the view in the upper right corner of the embroidery and in the engraving by a member of the Perelle family from which it was probably copied.

Or rather, he would see it if he could rise a considerable distance into the air. The prints were intended to be as informative as possible, not to give the effect of a modern snapshot; sometimes they do not correspond exactly with reliable contemporary accounts, suggesting that they were rushed into publication before the fountains were actually finished. The Bassin d'Apollon may have been part of Louis XIII's simple garden around his hunting lodge, but the sculpture was added by his son; Apollo guiding his chariot symbolized, of course, the king himself. On the embroidery, the horses are red-brown, spouting blue water, but actually, like all the sculpture of the first construction program in the gardens, they are lead, originally gilded. This program lasted until 1674, after which work on the palace became the most important activity; when embellishment of the park was again undertaken on a large scale, in 1680, bronze and marble were used for all but small elements of sculpture, which, however, played a lesser role than it had done earlier. The Apollo group was in place by 1670, and La Fontaine wrote about it in admiring verse, describing the horses rising from the waves when the sun came up and shaking their manes so that waterdrops should fall as dew: "Ils forment la rosée en secouant leur crin."

Behind the fountain stretches the Canal, the most grandiose feature of the park. It was part of Le Nôtre's original scheme for glorifying the estate and served both to drain
the swamps that had previously occupied the terrain and to help supply water for the fountains. One length was dug in 1668-1669 and an enlargement made in 1671-1672. On the Canal the king assembled pleasure boats of many kinds, some of which are shown in the print; the embroidery, unfortunately, has here been extensively restored, so that it is impossible to say whether it originally included some of the king’s English yachts or gilded gondolas. These last were a present from the Republic of Venice. Four gondoliers came with them; their quarters were the buildings on the Trianon side of the Canal, called Petite Venise, where the tourist today can eat lunch at an outdoor restaurant.

Louis XIV, like any enthusiastic gardener, was continually changing his plans. The fountain in the upper left corner of the embroidery took three years to make, but it was allowed to exist for only thirty more. It was called the Salle des Festins, and was on the spot in the northwest corner of the garden where the fountain of the Obelisk now raises its single jet. The Salle des Festins, seen in a bird's-eye view on the print and in the embroidery, was even more elaborate than these representations of it. There were movable bridges, giving access to the central island (one is shown, bright yellow, on the embroidery) and there were seventy-three jets of water according to the descriptions, though fewer appear in the print. Each jet sprang from a group of sculptured children in gilded lead; they are sketchily rendered in the print, but only the figure in the circular pool in the foreground is visible in the embroidery. It has, however, a flying yellow cloak, suggesting gilt. There is an account of a supper being served in the Salle des Festins in 1674; 150 chandeliers were hung in the trees for light. But much of the water of this fountain lay in narrow, stone-lined channels that were difficult to keep in repair, and the whole thing was swept away in a great remodeling of the gardens early in the eighteenth century, when many complicated structures were replaced by grander and simpler designs.
If the visitor to Versailles, leaving the palace on the garden side, turns right and walks across the Parterres du Nord and down the Allée d’Eau, he will come to the site of the scene in the middle of the upper part of the embroidery. Again, the view is schematic, as if seen from a height. The main elements, the Fontaine du Dragon and the Bassin de Neptune (formerly called the Grande Pièce d’Eau) are still in place, but they have been much altered. The Dragon of today is a replacement of 1885, much larger than the original, and though the Bassin de Neptune was dug in 1679-1680, and the smaller sculptural ornaments – icicles, vases, masks, and metal shells – were in place when the king first saw the fountains play there in May 1685, the large groups that are so conspicuous today were added in the reign of Louis XV. It was not always an entirely agreeable spot; in 1746 a guard at the Bassin du Dragon complained that his pavilion was full of toads, and in 1759 the Bassin de Neptune was used as a sewer.

In the distance, both in the print and in the embroidery, are some of the many windmills, now vanished, that once toiled to raise water
for the fountains. Near the bottom of the hanging one is shown in greater detail. It is of the primitive type called a post-mill; the whole body of the mill pivoted on an upright post, and had to be turned when the wind changed. The windmills around Versailles were never entirely adequate for their purpose; Louis XIV wrestled all his life with this problem. The palace was badly sited in this respect, and, though the panegyrists made a virtue of the fact that the king had done wonders in a "lieu le plus ingrät," it was unfortunate that there was no convenient river in the neighborhood. About a million and a half gallons of water are needed today for an hour of the rare grandes eaux, with a much smaller number of fountains playing than were once turned on whenever the king was in residence.

The swans seen in the print, though not in the embroidery, were another of the king's enthusiasms; his minister Colbert wrote to the French ambassador in Copenhagen asking for three or four hundred to be sent, but the land of the Ugly Duckling could supply only forty and some eggs. Others were obtained in France, however, and when the king moved the court permanently to Versailles in 1682 there were nearly two hundred swans on the waters.
Below the Salle des Festins on the embroidery lies a fountain that can still be seen. On either side of the Tapis Vert are parallel paths running east and west through the woods. They are punctuated by four clearings, two on each path, with fountains in them representing the deities of the seasons. These clearings are shady and rather melancholy places now, with the lonely dark fountain figures rising from their still pools, but they were very different when they were new. The print shows that the surrounding trees were cut back into solid walls of green; the basins were of various shapes and their rims were ornamented with appropriate reliefs: flowers for Flora, sheaves for Ceres, grapes for Bacchus, and icicles for Saturn. Each central group was accompanied by other figures, all spouting water, and everything was either gilded or painted in natural colors. It might be difficult to decide which of the seasons is the one on the embroidery, except that Ceres’s pairs of crossed sheaves are colored bright yellow all around the edge of the pool.

This polychrome gaiety did not last long; the palace and gardens were open to anyone respectably dressed, and accessible, unguarded works of art, as all museums know only too well, will suffer if inquisitive fingers can reach them. In 1684, ten years after the completion of the fountains, rims of plain white marble were placed around Flora and Saturn, and by the early eighteenth century all were as they are today, except for the gilding of the statues. The king’s taste had changed under the influence of Mansart, and what once seemed whimsical and pretty had apparently begun to look trivial and gaudy.
The remaining fountain, at the bottom right corner of the embroidery, was one of the most elaborate and expensive at Versailles. On the east side of the Allée d’Eau is a grove, which now contains a large lead group by Tuby called France Triomphante; this is all that remains of the fountain called the Arc de Triomphe and its surrounding decorations. The fountain, which commemorated the peace of Nymwegen of 1678, was still under construction when the king visited the gardens in March 1680; he was on foot, though the ladies who accompanied him, including the queen and Mme de Montespan, could ride, when they were tired, in any of twenty small open wheelchairs, ornamented with rich
fabrics and gold and silver galloons and fringes, and pushed by servants in the king's livery. Trumpets sounded for the party at the Salle des Festins; haut-bois and violins were played on boats on the Canal. By October 1682, when the king had come to Versailles to live, the Arc de Triomphe was ready, and the king's visit to it is recorded. It was made mostly of gilded iron, though there were marble reliefs and copper shells as well, and over it all streamed the water. Stepped pyramids on either side were bathed in running water, and water fell in sheets down the sides of four tall thin obelisks. The France Triomphante group, gilded, faced the Arc, and so is not seen in the print or in the embroidery. In the pediment of the triumphal arch were the arms of France, and they can be distinguished on the embroidery: three yellow fleurs-de-lis on a blue ground.

Contemporary descriptions of this fountain are ecstatic. On the print illustrated, it is said that "the Architecture seems to be a Palace of crystal, the shelves [buffets] Sheets of water, and the Pyramids [the obelisks] chandeliers of gilded silver. . . ." The Buffet d'Eau fountain, still in the Trianon garden, with its tiers of shelves over which the water is intended to pour, can perhaps give some faint idea of what the Arc de Triomphe looked like. The Arc survived the remodeling of the early eighteenth century and lasted until 1775, when Louis XVI obliterated so much of his ancestor's work in the garden. It is strange indeed that it should still gleam, in silk, on the walls of the Museum.