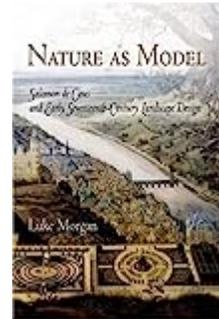




Luke Morgan. *Nature as Model: Salomon de Caus and Early Seventeenth-Century Landscape Design.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. x + 328 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3963-8.



Reviewed by José Mouthaan (Dutch University Institute for Art History, Florence)

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The Life and Works of an Early Modern Pragmatist: A Critical Evaluation

The hydraulic engineer and garden designer Salomon de Caus was involved in some of the most significant European landscape projects of the first quarter of the seventeenth century. His designs for fountains, grottoes and mounts were applied to famous gardens such as those of Coudenberg Palace in Brussels; Richmond Palace, Hatfield House, Somerset House, and Greenwich Palace in London; and the Hortus Palatinus in Heidelberg.

Since the nineteenth century, historical interest in the figure of Salomon de Caus has been characterized by several revivals. However, previous studies of this important protagonist in early modern garden design have been rather fragmentary. Luke Morgan's *Nature as Model* forms the first serious attempt to obtain a comprehensive reconstruction of the life and works of de Caus. Although the author is well aware of the many gaps in the widely dispersed documentary evidence regarding de Caus's biography, he has compensated for these lacunae by a close reading of de Caus's own written works—something which garden historians have failed to do before. By systematically comparing what de Caus built with what he wrote, Morgan observes the purpose and

meaning of his landscape designs from a different perspective.

One of the main objectives of *Nature as Model* is to throw new light on previous historical representations of de Caus as the unsung inventor of the steam engine, a madman, a Protestant martyr, and a garden designer whose work was highly influenced by his supposed hermetic affiliations. In the first two chapters Morgan evaluates former historiographical accounts and confronts them with newly found documentary evidence. For example, in the nineteenth century it was a widely held assumption that the hydraulic engineer had spent the last years of his life in a lunatic asylum at Bicetre in France, but this is no longer tenable. This assumption was based on the rediscovery of an eyewitness report stating that de Caus had been spotted as a resident of the asylum in 1641. De Caus, however, was buried in 1626, fifteen years prior to this encounter. According to Morgan such misunderstandings regarding the personal life of de Caus should be placed in the context of the broader Romantic interest in misunderstood geniuses.

More important for the central theme of this book—a

reconstruction of de Caus's practices and theories of garden design—is the late twentieth-century representation of de Caus as an adherent of the hermetic tradition and a secret member of the Rosy-Cross. According to historians who have favored this assumption, the gardens of de Caus clearly reflected his hermetic affiliations. Occult meanings have been attributed especially to his designs for the Hortus Palatinus at Heidelberg. Morgan, however, has found no evidence in the written works that de Caus actually held hermetic sympathies. Instead, his texts and plates are entirely technical and descriptive. Paradoxically, in the past, this absence of esoteric allusions has actually been taken as evidence of de Caus's hermetic affiliations.

The image of de Caus that emerges from Morgan's book is that of a down-to-earth pragmatist whose designs were based on functionality and utility. The author underpins his thesis by means of several case studies including large-scale landscape projects in Brussels, London, and Heidelberg. The case studies reveal that de Caus's contributions to these projects show a remarkable consistency, repeating the same techniques and motifs. Rather than implying esoteric narrative programs, his designs were in conformity with the fanciful pattern of the Italian Renaissance garden. Throughout the book, Morgan underlines the importance of de Caus's trip to Florence and Rome around 1598. This educational sojourn in Italy provided him with architectural models that proved to have been influential throughout his further career. Considering his involvement in several international landscape projects, de Caus's main contribution to the history of gardens has therefore been the transmission of the conventional principles and topoi of the Italian Renaissance garden in early modern Europe.

A characteristic feature of this type of garden was the integration of natural and artificial elements in such a way that the boundaries between nature and art became apparently effaced. For his grottoes at the gardens of Coudenberg Palace in Brussels, for example, de Caus combined natural shells with porcelain ones. The main reason for this integration was to make these grottoes look as natural as possible in order to reflect the inherent order of nature as established by God. This attitude towards the relationship between nature and art forms also forms the key epistemological principle in de Caus's writings and his choice of reading. It thus implies—as the title of Morgan's book suggests—that the order of nature, rather than occult hermetic principles, served as a fundamental model for his garden designs.

To conclude, *Nature as Model* provides the reader with an interesting new perspective on the hitherto difficult-to-define figure of Salomon de Caus and his activities as a hydraulic engineer and landscape designer; a perspective that could only be obtained through a close reading of the protagonist's own writings. The book is not limited to garden history but integrates various historical disciplines such as art history, architectural history, the history of science, the history of patronage, and the history of reading. It may therefore interest not only scholars specialized in the history of gardens and landscape, but also a wider scholarly audience. The complexity and specificity of the figure of de Caus and his works makes the book, however, less suitable as a reference text for an undergraduate course. Finally, the text contains a large number of illustrations that help the reader visualize what the garden projects of de Caus might have looked like.

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