

## 1 The Fountain of Hercules

The Fountain of Hercules was designed by architect Amedeo di Castellamonte at the behest of Christine of France and Charles Emmanuel II, respectively, Duchess and Duke of Savoy and was built between 1669 and 1672, expanding a previous project drawn up around 1650.

Designed as a spectacular set of constructions and fountains, the majestic "water theatre" featured two "gooseneck" staircases (self-supporting vaulted steps and landing) that surrounded the central basin bridging the difference in height between the upper garden and the lower park.

The linchpin of the entire composition was the large statue of Hercules killing the Hydra monster, located on another pedestal in the centre of a basin enlivened by statues of tritons and sirens from which high jets of water spurted.

Below the side stairways, decorated with dozens of statues and marble bas-reliefs, there was a system of artificial caves and pavilions rich in mosaic decorations. The exhibition and philosophical tour used to lead visitors to the large underground "nymphaeum". The monument supported the upper terrace, decorated with a marble facade with four colossal statues of "telamons" (*Atlantes*) supporting the cornice. The nymphaeum, divided into several rooms, contained many sculptures and bas-reliefs of mythological divinities attributable to the underworld and to water, the source of life.

The complex work, seen as an allegorical device with works of art that alluded to the good governance of the prince, was completed near the great canal by two pavilions with terraces and small apartments sumptuously decorated with stuccos and frescoes surmounted by light spire roofs, of which, today, only the foundation walls remain.

## 2 The statue of the Hercules colossus.

The statue of Hercules located on the pedestal in the centre of the fountain is part of the original monument in stone, marble, bronze and lead created by Bernardo Falconi, the artist who designed most of the sculptures of the fountain between January and March 1670. The statue, 3.24 metres high, made of a single block of Frabosa marble, was erected on its pedestal (now lost) on 30 April 1670.

The work included gilded bronze elements such as the lion skin that covered the head and torso of the hero and Hercules' famous club. Hercules was depicted in the act of killing the mythical monster Hydra of Lerna, from whose seven heads spurted as many jets, reproduced here in a simplified way.

Four bas-reliefs were engraved on panels placed on the pedestal, of which the casts obtained from the originals – now kept at the Govone castle – are exhibited here. The bas-reliefs depicted four labours of the demigod:

Hercules kills the giant Antaeus, Hercules and the Nemean lion, Hercules as a child with the snake, Hercules captures the Cretan bull.

The choice to erect a statue dedicated to Hercules killing the Hydra as a monument symbolising the fountain is in line with the symbolism that underlies the entire architectural and artistic project. Hercules represents the good hero, a mortal man who reaches the apotheosis of Olympus thanks to his labours. On the contrary, the hydra is the symbol of earthly evils, the negative tendencies of the ego, the pitfalls and plots that must be permanently eradicated like the heads of the monster that grow back if not cauterised.

The statuary group therefore represents the monumental metaphor of the human ability to master the primordial instincts to start the adventure of man, a fundamental objective for a prince who must govern with good judgement and coherence.

### **3 The caves of the nymphaeum**

Inspired by the nymphaea of the Hellenistic and Roman civilisations dedicated to the mythical place sacred to the "nymphs" (female deities representing the myth of nature and the waters flowing on the earth). In line with a Renaissance and Baroque practice popular in large villas and princely residences, also the Fountain of Hercules was equipped with a large nymphaeum, richly decorated with thousands of shells and polychrome mosaics of minerals and fragments of quartz. Before reaching the nymphaeum dedicated to Neptune there was a large covered hall with rib vaults which housed niches and exedras covered with calcite incrustations from which ingenious water jets spurted creating surprising effects and jokes. The ancient vaults that were destroyed have now been replaced with dropped ceilings with wooden centring.

Within the niches along the walls, there were four gigantic allegorical statues representing as many rivers of the underworld, from whose bases water jets gushed out. The statues held torches in their hands that could be lit for the occasion, creating fairy-tale scenarios. The original statues are now preserved in the gardens of the Agliè castle, except the one exhibited here, which comes from the collections of the Antiquities Museum of the Royal Museums of Turin.

Bas-reliefs depicting stories of the myth of Diana and Hercules were engraved in the oval niches, the octagonal overdoors and the joints at the base of the pillars, today preserved in the Govone castle, the Villa d'Agliè in Turin and the Ciriè Town Hall. The playful water tricks were triggered by the "fountainmen" who secretly operated the taps inside a "control room" located behind the right wall, spying on unwary visitors from the open windows in the false doors.

Two small fountains on the floor suggest the presence of two circular tables with marble seats equipped with fountains and water jokes unwittingly triggered by those who sat down at the table.

#### **4 The facade of the nymphaeum**

The fountain of Hercules comprised several artificial caves; the main one, the "nymphaeum", vast and richly decorated, featured an imposing marble facade that made it a unique work of its kind.

Four gigantic statues in Frabosa marble dominated this baroque scenery; they represented the "telamons", (also known as Atlantes, figures who supported the pillars of the sky in Greek mythology) or slaves, made by sculptors Giovanni Battista Casella and Carlo Pagano between 1669 and 1670. These busts of "bearded old men and prisons", that is, slaves or prisoners, one of which with a Moorish turban, supported a marble entablature with stuccos and calcite incrustations. The few fragments unearthed, preserved in the Govone castle and Villa della Regina, and the iconographic documents of the time revealed the original design of the facade. Thanks to a 3D reconstruction, it was possible to create handcrafted matrices from which to derive the individual parts of the architectural elements that make up the sector of the complex technical work exhibited here.

The four statues are direct casts obtained from the originals placed on the external staircase of the Govone castle in the eighteenth century.

The marble block cladding concealed the arches behind it and formed the scenic backdrop of the great show of the "water theatre" that took place in front of it, creating a stunning visual effect.

#### **5 The Neptune cave**

At the centre of the middle wall of the nymphaeum, in an apsidal pseudo-cave, there are some statues that made up the cortege of the chariot of Poseidon (the god Neptune, for the Romans), placed on a shell valve pulled by a pair of sea horses. The sculptural group included several statues and bronze parts that were lost; up to now, only the sculptures exhibited here have been found, including the precious sculptures by Bernardo Falconi made of Carrara marble – Neptune in the centre and a deity of the winds (Aeolus) in the niche on the right – temporarily loaned by the Castle of Racconigi. The two *hippocampi* from which jets of water originally spurted are full-size copies of the originals, now placed on the pillars of the gate of the Costa Canalis castle in Cumiana. The basin, rebuilt according to the archaeological traces found during the restoration works, included a cliff with limestone rocks and incrustations on which there were other divinities and figures representing the myth of the sea and life-giving water.

## **6 The banquet hall**

This hall, which has remained unfinished, was perhaps intended, as the documents of the time refer, for small shows and banquets. At the centre of the collapsed wall, the large statue of Diana the huntress is exhibited, a work by Bernardino Quadri (1667-1668) formerly placed on the central arch that led from the "flower garden" in front of the Palace to the terrace above the Fountain of Hercules.

The statue, identified thanks to the sculpted marbles preserved in the Turin Museum of Antiquities, was one of the icons of the seventeenth-century garden of Reggia di Venaria. According to the first project, it should have been placed in the unfinished temple dedicated to the goddess at the end of the great canal.

Under the glass floor is the base on which rested the rock that supported the statue of Hercules in the centre of the large fish pond, as originally designed by Amedeo di Castellamonte. The structure, found at the bottom of the basin, was moved here for conservation reasons in 2020.

The setting shows part of the numerous marble fragments found in the excavations which descend from above, evoking on the one hand the lost wealth and on the other the dispersion and destruction that the complex has gone through. The marble waterfall, however, must be interpreted from bottom to top: the marbles seem to emerge from the bottom of an ideal water basin and allude to the revival of the monument which from its ruins, immersed in its bowels, rediscovered and interpreted, comes back to life with a critical architectural reinterpretation consistent with the culture of the current time.