Peterhof (Petrodvorets) is among the first remarkable suburban ensembles which make «a pearl necklace of Petersburg». It appeared in the beginning of the 18th century as the main summer imperial residence, and received the name Peterhof which means Peter’s yard in Dutch. Inspired creativity of several generations of talented architects, sculptors, gardeners, whose grandiose plans were embodied in life with the work of thousands workers, made Peterhof a treasure of world’s landscape art. There are some groups of palaces and parks as well as separate historical systems of the 18-20th centuries’ architecture within today’s Peterhof.

Peterhof near St.-Petersburg, a Unique Monument of Palace Fountain and Garden Art

There are two regular parks, the Upper Garden and the Lower Park, and seven gardens and parks of landscape type: the English, the Kolonistsky, the Ozerkovyj (Meadow), the Belvedere Garden, the Proletarian (Alexandrian), the Alexandria Park and “Personal Summer Residence”.

This unique architectural group of palaces and parks made Peterhof famous all over the world. It is a constellation of palaces, collections and, first of all, fountains and cascades that brought Peterhof world-wide fame. At present 14 parks stretched along the shore of the Gulf of Finland from Strelna to Peterhof for more than 10 kilometres are opened for walks and sightseeing. Their total area exceeds...
1000 hectares. In the Grand Peterhof Palace, the Monplaisir and the Marly Palaces, the Catherine and Bann Houses, the Hermitage Pavilion and the Cottage Palace expositions of collections and exhibitions are placed. The most beautiful are the magnificent sculptures, four cascades and 150 operating fountains which deeply impress. No wonder Peterhof is usually called “Capital of Fountains”. It exceeds Versailles and other groups of palaces and parks in Europe taken by Peter I as a prototype in terms of splendour and luxury of the design and originality of technological ideas.

The Upper Garden and the well-known Lower Park served as a foundation for these landscape parks stretched in the western, southern and eastern directions at various times. And from the chronological point of view it will be more correctly to start a short story about the greens of Petrodvorets with the Upper Garden.

The Upper Garden

The Upper Garden occupies the area of about 15 hectares, has a form of a rectangle and is a classical example of a regular park with a strict symmetry of the plan, a figured cut of the trees, numerous arbours and sculptural ornaments and, at last, a magnificent parquet in the central part, with four lines of cut limes on each side. The project of its lay-out had already been designated in the earlier sketches of 1714. The author of the project is I. Braunstein. The basic ornament of the Upper Garden as well as the Lower park, are fountains. Three of them – the “Mezheumnyj”, the “Neptune” and the “Oak” – are located on the central avenue, and the other two are in the eastern and western square ponds arranged opposite to the side wings of the palace. The Upper Garden played a role of the front entrance to the Grand Palace, and its lay-out submitted to architectural problems of the composite centre – the palace.

The Upper Garden occupies the area of 15 hectares. The construction of the Garden and the Palace began at the same time in 1714.

The Adam Fountain

Photo A. Borcz

The Stack Fountain

Photo A. Borcz
In 1735–1737 the Upper Garden was decorated with fountains, and the central figured reservoir of the parquet with a sculptural composition “Neptune’s Cart” (K. Rastrelli). This sculptural group was made of lead and by the end of the 18th century had become unfit for use. In 1800 it was replaced by another sculptural group of bronze bought the same year in Nuremberg. The central place in it was occupied by the Neptune, the mythological god of the seas. The installation of the bronze sculpture of Belvedere Apollo cast by the foundry master V. Yekimov refers to the same time as well. In the second round pool opposite the entrance to the park the sculpture of the “Winged Dragon” was placed in the end of the 18th century. The foundation of the monumental fencing cast under the project of the architect V. Rastrelli, and the settlement of elegant pillars at the Front Entrance refer to the same period of time. The largest building crowning the architectural complex of Peterhof is the Grand Palace, majestically stretching its facade on the upper terrace. In the middle of the 18th century the palace was reconstructed and considerably expanded by the well-known architect V. Rastrelli. Together with the Grand Cascade, the Grand Palace makes the art centre of the Lower and Upper Parks.

The Lower Park

A special place among remarkable suburban parks in terms of their art and historical value is occupied by the Lower Park of Petrodvorets. It was created in the first quarter of the 18th century and has every reason to be considered an outstanding monument of not only Russian, but also world’s culture. The park was laid out in 1710–1724 by the design of the tsar Peter I, reconstructed in 1730–1740s (arch. I. F. Braunstein, Z. B. Leblon, M. G. Zemtsov, gardening masters L. Garnihfelt, A. Borisov, etc.). In the ensemble of the central...
part of the Lower Park a special place is occupied by the Grand Cascade. It is located on an abrupt slope before the Grand Palace and is the most grandiose fountain construction in the world. In the 18th century it was called «a big grotto with cascades». The sculptural design of the big grotto and cascades differs by an exclusive variety and splendour: there are bronze statues, busts, vases, hermas, bas-reliefs – almost 250 sculptures and decorative ornaments on the grotto and under the arcades, by the sides of the waterfall ledges and on the granite sides of the ladle. More than 140 sparkling foamy streams fly up into the sky from 64 fountains situated there as well. The refined silhouette of the palace, fancy patterns of water streams, gilt statues, greens of trees and bushes – this remarkable synthesis of architecture, sculpture and landscape gardening art creates a really fantastic show. Rough waters of the Grand Cascade descend into a semicircular ladle (pool), where one can see a well-known sculptural group “Samson opening the Lion’s mouth” on a rock in the centre.

From the Grand Cascade along the Sea channel there is a central Avenue of fountains, and to the sides two radial avenues lead to the Monplaisir Palace and the “Adam” Fountain and to the Hermitage Pavilion and the “Eve” Fountain. The Grand Cascade is an outstanding work of art. It was created under the project of well-known architects and masters of gushing art, decorated by sculptures of outstanding Russian sculptors. The architects A. Voronihin, N. Benoit, the sculptors F. Shubin, I. Prokofiev, I. Martos, the masters of art moulding V. Yekimov and others took part in making this remarkable creation of the 18–19th centuries.

From the Grand Cascade to the Gulf a channel is laid. In the end of the 18th century under the project of the architect D. Kvarengi its walls were revetted by stone, and in the middle of the 19th century under the project of the architect N. Benoit pilasters with bronze masks were built. Along the channel you can see the Avenue of fountains which is a composition connecting the Grand Cascade with the Gulf.

On the slopes of the hill by the sides of the Grand Cascade 10 terrace fountains were built in 1800. In front of the Grand Cascade among flower beds there are “Bowl” fountains. They were built in 1721–1722. Destroyed by fascist aggressors during the Second World War, they were restored in 1946. The area in front of the Grand Cascade is closed up by graceful pavilions located on both sides of the channel and topped with copper domes.

A great attention is paid to “the Roman fountains” located to the right and to the left of the Monplaisir Avenue. Vigorous streams of foaming water, breaking out from the centre of the top bowl, descend to the second, more extensive marble bowl, whence they fall down with noise into a figured pool at the foot of the fountains. The water pattern of these fountains is surprisingly beautiful. Each of them has its peculiarities and charm.

The Monplaisir Palace of Peter I is of particular interest. The beginning of its construction refers to the 1714 year. In 1717–1720 to the main
body galleries and light halls were attached. In 1723 a wooden balustrade over the galleries was placed, which completed the architectural shape of the palace. The Monplaisir was built by the architects M. Zemtsov, J.-B. Leblon and I. Braunstein. The Monplaisir is an outstanding monument of the Russian architecture of the first half of the 19th century. The tent roof, low room-towers, lateral “small attics” testify of having used the style of the 18th century Moscow architecture by the architects.

On the shore of the Gulf there is a small two-storied palace pavilion – the Hermitage (architects I. Braunstein and M. Zemtsov). Graceful and strict, it also is a remarkable monument of landscape gardening of the 18th century. The architectural shape of the Hermitage has remained till the present time. The Marly Avenue leads to a big rectangular pond from the opposite side of which the Marly Palace can be seen. It was built in 1721–1724 under the project of architect I. Braunstein. There was a library and personal things of Peter I in the Palace.

At present about 130 fountains operate in the Lower Park throwing out 34000 liters of water a second. The total length of the channels makes over 62 kilometers and 14 kilometers of the pipelines. The Lower Park is the most interesting and valuable from the point of view of art out of all the remained ensembles of parks of the 18th century. Being an inimitable and unique masterpiece
of the world’s landscape garden art, the Lower Park of Peterhof deserves its popularity. It is enough to say that in summer the park is visited by over two million people.

Alexandria

The eastern part of the Lower Park borders with the Alexandria Park. The area of the park is 115 hectares, but it looks much larger due to the abundance of twisting avenues and paths. As well as the Lower Park, the Alexandria Park is connected with the sea and stretches far off along the shore of the Gulf of Finland. The St.-Petersburg governor general A. Menshikov was the first owner of the whole area. During Menshikov’s disfavour his estates were given to Dolgorukov princes. Later the area was taken away for tsar’s hunting. In 1825 Nikolay I presented the area to his wife Alexandra, that’s where the name “Alexandria” came from. The design of the park and its art plan belong to the architect A. Menelas. His works were usually imitations of the Gothic style. Thus, the constructions created by him on the top terrace of the park – the “Cottage”, the “Farm”, the “Chapel” were prevailed by step pediments, roofs with peaks and lancet arches, as in many buildings of the Middle Ages. The Gothic “Chapel” entered the surrounding landscape quite well. It looked like a fantastically expensive toy.

The St.-Petersburg restoration workshops are carrying out restoring works in the “Chapel” at present. The greens of the park are carefully rehabilitated. The restoration of all architectural constructions is also being planned. The Alexandria is greatly loved and popular among the residences of St.-Petersburg. Its friendly lawns, thick oak groves of secular trees and a large beach on the sea shore invite to relax there.

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The Roman fountains with classical bas-reliefs
Photo A. Borcz