

A Modern Twist to Four New Fountains in Nantes, France

L'évasion



The 150th anniversary celebration of the first Wallace fountains in Paris, which took place in 2022, brought new attention to the existing Wallace fountains in the city of Nantes. It also sparked an artistic project to completely restore the five existing fountains in the city and add four new ones with modern designs based on the original.

Charles-August Lebourg was a notable sculptor from Nantes and a friend of Richard Wallace. Wallace commissioned Lebourg to create the original sculptures for the fountains to serve as models for the cast iron replicas that would be manufactured by the Val d'Osne foundry and installed by the city of Paris in a partnership to provide equal access to clean drinking water to everyone.

Lebourg's sculptures were based on rough sketches provided by Wallace. These sketches incorporated lots of symbolism from classical mythology and Christian beliefs, of which Wallace had an interest. Wallace was also very enamored with French Renaissance art. As an art collector and connoisseur, Wallace believed art can educate and inform so he wanted the fountains to be beautiful works of art that enhanced the environment in which they stood. He also hoped people drinking from the fountains would not only quench their thirst but also nourish their souls by adopting the virtues personified by the caryatids and the other symbols on the fountain's dome and base.

In the nineteenth century, the City of Nantes supposedly placed orders for a dozen fountains. Today five original Wallace fountains are in Nantes. In 2024, they were fully restored, along with the addition of four new drinking fountains designed to update their original mythology.

The new fountains, placed in four different locations, show the caryatids making their escape from the fountains in four stages while trees grow to take their place in supporting the dome.

Text from the bilingual sign near a new fountain which also gives the location of the other new fountains in the sculptural story telling series:

"The agency in charge of Nantes' drinking fountains wished to draw the public's attention to the availability of drinking water throughout the city. It has done this through the emblematic fontaine Wallace – those magnificent green fountains found around Paris since 1872.

150 years later, Le Voyage à Nantes invited artist-author-illustrator Cyril Pedrosa to design a project involving this historical emblem of urban design and write the next chapter to its original mythology imagined by artist-sculptor Charles-August Lebourg (Born in Nantes).

For this chapter in the story of Wallace fountains, Pedrosa has woven a tale in four chapters in four locations in the centre of Nantes: "The [female] sculptures on these fountains are meant to embody Goodness, Charity, Simplicity and Sobriety carrying a dome on their shoulders [heads]. However noble and virtuous this role may be, they had neither chosen nor desired it. So, like countless other women throughout the world, the four caryatids of the fountains have patiently organized their escape....."

Through this metaphorical account of the long history of feminism and, more broadly, the history of humanity's quest for emancipation, Pedrosa pays a respectful and poetic homage to those who seek to escape the roles assigned to them."

Reflecting on these new designs, many like to think the caryatids came down from the fountain to spread the virtues of kindness, generosity, simplicity and sobriety to mankind and future generations in other more contemporary ways.

