

The creativity of the Tiger*

Playing on colours and fragrances

The gardens of 'the Shack' are unique, highly personal creations: Clemenceau designed their "profusion of plants"**, arrangement of species and colour schemes himself.

These 'wild' compositions – actually carefully designed - reflect the great man's decision to live the final years of his life free and unfettered.

Against the advice of nursery owners, Clemenceau succeeded in growing many different perennials and annuals on the dunes, using seaweed as fertiliser, protected by windbreaking hedges and watered from a water tank which supplied up to "24,000 litres a day"**..

A shared love of gardening

Clemenceau and the painter Claude Monet (1840-1926) were firm friends from their youth, as demonstrated by their extensive correspondence. They swapped advice on gardening, seeds, plant cuttings, and so on. Some of the information garnered on plant species, quantity and layout was used to restore the garden in 2006. Just as Clemenceau recognised that Monet taught him how to "understand light", he was also convinced that his garden was a reflection of his personality. As he wrote to Monet: "As the man, so the garden...".

Glossary

Impressionism: a 19th-century art movement using colour to reproduce the artist's impressions of an object.

Koinobori: a carp-shaped windsock, made from painted fabric.

Louis Pasteur (1822-1895): a French chemist and pioneer in microbiology.

Pointillism: a painting technique, following on from Impressionism*, which consists of using tiny dots of colour.

Edward de Rothschild (1868-1949): baron and founder of the Rothschild bank.

The Tiger: the nickname given to Clemenceau, a radical Republican who fiercely opposed his political adversaries, to the point of becoming known as the "terror of Ministers" at the beginning of the Third Republic (1875-1940). Cartoonists used to draw him with tiger's features.

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Georges Clemenceau's house and gardens

"flowers, sun and waves..."

The "Father of Victory's" retirement



Clemenceau in 1922 by Jean-Baptiste Tournassoud

Georges Clemenceau (1841-1929) moved into 'the Shack' in 1919. He had just signed the peace treaty marking the end of the First World War, which had required

a high degree of personal engagement. He wanted to rest after a long career in politics and return to his native Vendée.

'The Shack'

This was his affectionate nickname for this small, humble, isolated dwelling where he spent each summer until his death.

Notwithstanding the sand, sea breezes and high tides, he patiently planted his garden, following the advice of his good friend, the painter Claude Monet, and his own whims. He also received visits from VIPs there, such as the Japanese and American ambassadors. The house was bought by the French State shortly after his death. Ever since, the marks of the "Tiger's"* presence there have been preserved, along with objects bearing witness to his friendships and passions: literature, hunting and Far Eastern art.

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* Explanations overleaf.
** Excerpts from Georges Clemenceau's correspondence.

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The house

- 1 The kitchen** still has the very long, low enfilade sideboard which Clemenceau had specially made to hold the marble altar top from the royal abbey at Saint-Michel-en-l'Herm. The walls are decorated with Longwy enamel tiles, one of the many signs of gratitude the great man received from the towns and cities of France after signing the peace treaty in 1919. None of the chairs around the table faces away from the sea, in order to make the most of the view.
- 2 The corridor** containing the library has exactly 1,500 books, to which Clemenceau would refer for the purposes of his work.
- 3 The two guest rooms**, like the corridor, were made by partitioning one big room. They have two identical vanity units: based on marine furniture, the drawers conceal a washbasin with a water tank and drainage system. The prints on the walls are further proof of the collector's detailed knowledge of Japanese art.
- 4 The bedroom** reveals many aspects of its famous owner's personality. The antelope and crocodile heads hung on the wall echo his passion for hunting and travel. The gun is a reminder that he was an intrepid dueller. Clemenceau liked to face the sea when writing. He used the bookshelves next to his desk to store books he referred to frequently which were usually kept in the corridor. He had his bed raised so that he could always see the ocean, from sunrise to sunset. The Buddha figures are a reminder of the fact that he considered himself to be "France's first Buddhist"**. To the left of the door, a dressing table is set with seven pieces of pale pink English ceramic decorated with blue flowers: a jug, a pitcher, a bowl, a bucket, a sponge holder, a soap dish and a toothbrush holder.



- 5 The gazebo**, thatched with heather, was used at tea and coffee time.
- 6 The lounge**, the only reception room, opens onto the forest and the sea, but does not communicate with the other rooms. Like the rest of the house, it still has its original fittings. These include the carpet, a gift from Marshal Lyautey, the governor of Morocco, and the cupboard doors - a present from the people of Saint-Vincent-sur-Jard. The bouquet holders on the walls illustrate Georges Clemenceau's interest in Japonism. The tiger skin on the floor attests to his political role as leader of the opposition. He dubbed the two bronze foxes, allegories of wealth and science, Rothschild* and Pasteur* respectively - a personal dig at these two celebrities. At the time they stood guard outside the door to his bedchamber...

Towards the ocean

- 7 The planted front terrace** emphasises the blue of the sea and the sky. Clemenceau would admire it while sitting on his bench: "I have the most beautiful garden in the world. The entire rainbow in a jungle of greenery"**. It can be classified as a 'wild' garden because the free-growing (i.e. untrimmed) plants are arranged in adjacent swathes of colour, just like an Impressionist* painting.
- 8 The shrubbery** was the only part of the garden which was subject to regular trimming. The pointed plants shimmer in the wind, forming a 'pointillist'* tableau. The mast is used to hoist the koinobori*, identical to those given by the Japanese ambassador.
- 9 The well** is a reminder of the Tiger's* efforts to tame nature and counter the drying effect of the sea winds.

The forest

- 10 The walled garden** was planted with rose bushes, evergreen oaks and stone pines. Clemenceau used to welcome his guests at the end of the forest path (**A**): there was no fence or gate at that time.

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