

A STONE farmstead in Provence sits among fields and pastureland, picturesque limestone outcroppings dotted with groves of evergreen oaks. On the horizon sits a medieval hill town and a line of silver crags—the Alpilles.

With its mix of wild and working landscape, the Mas Benoît is a ‘natural’ for Land Art, a masterpiece of the genre, now the best remaining work of landscape sculptor Alain David Idoux. Born in Marseille, trained in the deserts of Israel and at the Beaux-Arts in Paris, Idoux later helped the legendary Nicole de Vésian, whose plant tapestries in green and grey are now copied worldwide. Together, they taught a younger man, tree sculptor Marc Nucera, who continues to work at the Mas Benoît. All three—each of a different generation—laboured to shape and enrich existing wild vegetation in stony settings, creating modulated planes from intimate house terraces out towards spectacular views, subtle transitions from clipped to

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wild, from small to vast, always engaging a deep sense of Mediterranean heritage. Farmland, scrubland and light woodland all intermingle, as they did in Roman times. Vésian and Idoux both passed away in the late 1990s, she in her eighties, he at an untimely 46. However, their work, continued by Mr Nucera, is still bearing fruit.

The owners of the Mas Benoît are collectors of contemporary art, who shared Idoux’s admiration for the British artist Richard Long and the American Land Art movement (which gained ground, literally, in the 1970s). Drawn by the breathtaking panoramas of this windswept terrain (of about 20 acres), the couple purchased it in 1993, restored the house and began work outdoors in 1995.

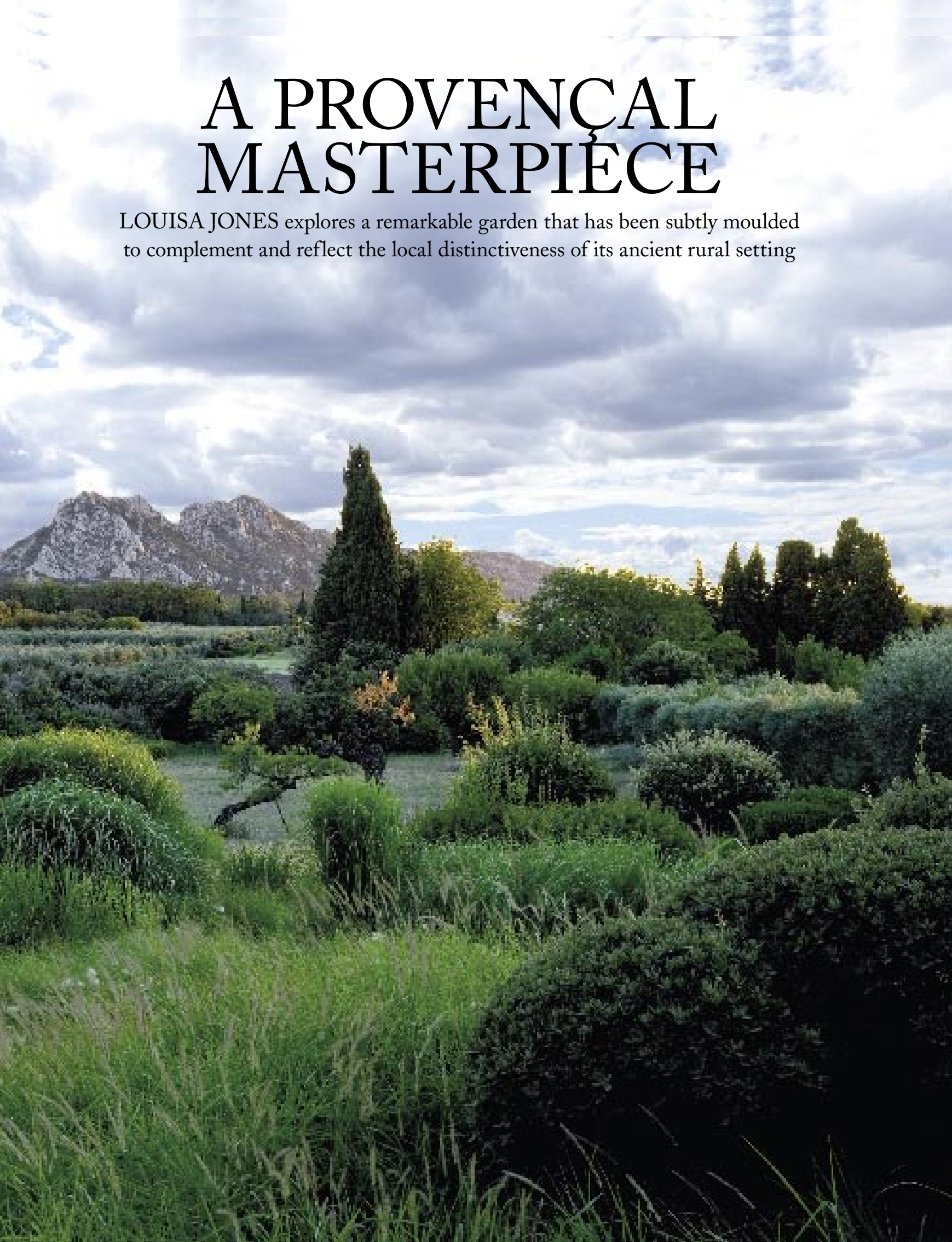
Small rises of land to the north were planted with windbreaks, loose groupings of local species—mainly evergreen and white oaks and Aleppo pines. With that protection, Idoux began creating a series of ‘sculpted landscapes’ radiating around ➤

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A PROVENCAL MASTERPIECE

LOUISA JONES explores a remarkable garden that has been subtly moulded to complement and reflect the local distinctiveness of its ancient rural setting



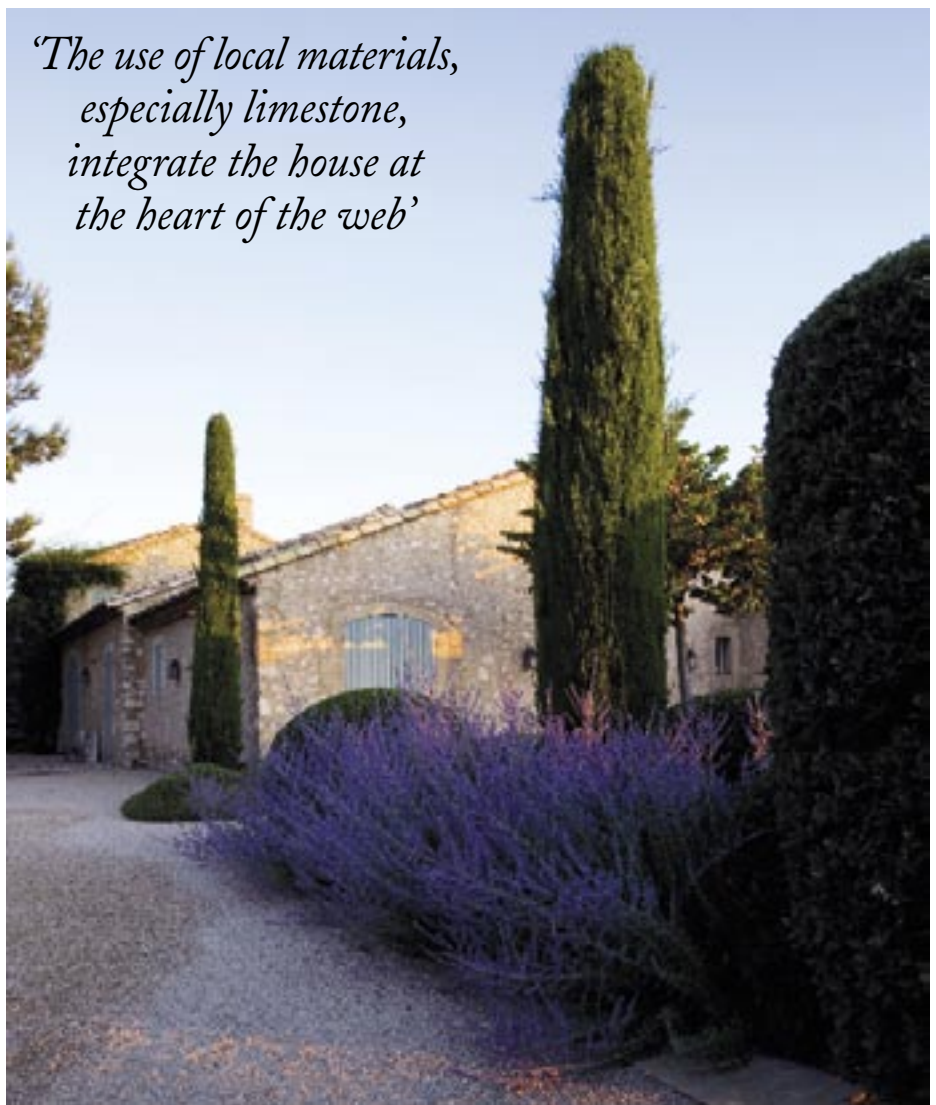


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the house, each a focal point in its own right, all connected merely by stretches of rough grass. To the east, a triangular field of lavender points towards an obelisk, beyond which rises the silhouette of the hill town. At first glance, it looks like an ordinary rectangular field, punctuated by the ancient almond trees that keep the memory of the site. But as you walk past it, the configuration shifts, always with balanced proportions, like the movement of a kaleidoscope. The transitions are continuous and harmonious, with no dead spaces, an extremely difficult sequence to plan.

To the south, a series of small terraces has become a Grass Garden (with *Pennisetum*, *Miscanthus* and *Festuca* species, among clipped evergreen globes of oak and box). To the south-west, a white limestone ridge outlines a spiral planting of almond trees, mixing old and newly planted, rising against ➤

'The use of local materials, especially limestone, integrate the house at the heart of the web'





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cypresses, woodland and rounded ridges. A cistus garden near the house makes a rich early summer tapestry. To the west, a discreet swimming pool is surrounded by small-scaled tapestry plantings in the Vésian style. Here and there, natural oak groves have been turned into green rooms, the graphic lines of their trunks made visible, rising from gravel. Behind a long stone line directly inspired by Richard Long, half hidden in the brush, are Marc Nucera's upside-down pine trunks, the Walkers. The most formal element in the garden is an olive avenue with santolina rings

at the base of each tree, leading to the Secret Garden. This hidden bench near an old well, under the shade of a magnificently sculptural walnut tree, was the favourite spot of the Spanish landscaper, Ferdinand Caruncho, when he visited in 2002.

All the gardens at the Mas Benoît are secret, in fact. First, because they blend so successfully with the landscape that conventional visitors sometimes ask: 'But where is the garden?' Secondly, because Idoux refused to impose an itinerary with paths or hedges. You can move in any direction at any time, and



it's quite easy to miss important features. Coming up from the road, the left fork leads to the house, but the right one unveils a stone cross set in a circle of cypresses. Beyond, a dry stone and cactus 'river' leads to another obelisk, rising against the mountains. This last scene is also accessible from the swimming-pool area, if you happen to notice a small path winding through the oaks. Most of the 'sculptures' are of a scale that you walk through, sometimes on top of or underneath.

Land Art in Provence is sometimes compared with a Japanese aesthetic, because of its clipped, broad-leaved evergreens and its panoramas, but here there is neither miniaturisation nor 'borrowing'. In Japan, itineraries and



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vantage points are clearly defined. At the Mas Benoît, landscape is kinetic sculpture that you make happen as you walk. Each arrangement may be admired close up, from inside and from a distance, from all angles. You decide.

Idoux felt very strongly about the symbolism of his creations, however. The pleasures they offer to the eye, heart and mind, are never just for art's sake. His fascination with the line and the spiral, the informing shapes of this garden, always had deeper resonances, echoes of millennia of land use in this region, agricultural and pastoral, an attempt to link today's humanity

with the past and the future, and with the natural energies of the land. His choices of local materials, especially the limestone, integrate the house perfectly at the heart of his web.

Very little water is needed here, and the main upkeep is keeping shapes and spaces clearly defined. And yet the plant palate is far richer than might be expected. The local vegetation of gorse and oak has been enriched by the greys and greens familiar in most gardens in Provence: santolinas and germanders (silver and green), various phlomis, perovskia, artemisias, helichrysums, pittosporums, as well as

carpets of *Stachys lanata* and clumps of wild iris. The little self-sowing erigerons of the south find cracks in all the dry-stone walls, as do the ubiquitous *Centranthus ruber*, gaura, *Verbena bonariensis* and acanthus. Wisteria, roses and honeysuckles shade the house terraces.

Each arrangement makes use of local materials and common plants that are either native or naturalised. Nothing is mannered or extravagant. This is a kind of soft Minimalism: hardscape and plantings are both organic, of the earth, bearing witness to an age-old dialogue between man and nature. 🐦

Photographs: XX