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### **Multi-Perspective Gardens of Gabriel Guevrekian: Persian garden into cubist pain- ting or cubist painting into Persian garden?**

**Zohreh Soltani**

#### **Abstract:**

The only surviving example of French modernist landscape design, Gabriel Guevrekian's garden at Villa Noailles at Hyeres (1926-1927) has been described as "Persian", "cubist", "modern", and "simultaneist". The way the three dimensional Persian garden has been translated and abstracted into the spatial concept of cubism represents a tension between the planarity and spatiality of gardens as objects or spaces of art. This paper aims to push further these two competing aspects of these gardens – cubist and Persian – to illustrate the possibility of such coexistence.

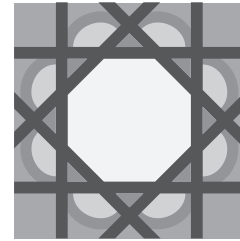
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# Multi-Perspective Gardens of Gabriel Guevrekian: Persian garden into cubist painting or cubist painting into Persian garden?

Zohreh Soltani

State University of New York, Binghamton



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“A hundred meadows have bloomed into roses  
from the heart of my confusion –  
I am the nightingale of the painted garden –  
don’t ask about my lamentation!”  
Andalib, Nala-i Andalib<sup>1</sup>

The nightingale of the painted garden cannot sing, because he is only a trace of color and line in a lifeless painting, on a lifeless canvas. If the garden offers a walk through a “paradise”<sup>2</sup> on earth, then what does a painting of a garden offer? And what about a hybrid entity between the garden and the painting of the garden?

In the context of Iran, Gabriel Guevrekian has been largely studied as one of the modernist architects who shaped modern Tehran through his public buildings and villas. In Western literature, however, his gardens have gained greater significance than his buildings. Rather than focus on Guevrekian’s architecture, which would require an extensive tracing of his work through several continents, this paper seeks a possible new reading of his well-known garden designs. The lack of writings by Guevrekian himself makes the interpretation of his gardens a complicated field of inquiry. Furthermore, some of the key criticisms on his works remain untranslated. Richard Wesley offered the first cubist reading of Guevrekian’s gardens in 1981, comparing his exposition garden in Paris to Picasso’s *Man with a Mandoline* (1912).<sup>3</sup> Later readings have mainly built on this cubist conception, with more in-depth discussions of the gardens’ relevance to modern painting. In her short article on Guevrekian, Dorothee Imbert reads his designs as successful unions of “architecture, landscape, and the plastic arts through the synthesis of Persian and simultaneist influences”, on which she expands further in her later work.<sup>4</sup> However, writing in 2002, George Dodds recognized the marginalization of Guevrekian’s gardens from the history of landscape architecture,<sup>5</sup> revealing that their reduction to the “weak image of a cubist painting” or their enlargement to “nothing more than full-size maquettes for the production of elaborately staged photographs” diminishes their power and conceals their meaning.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, Dodds attempts to move beyond a mere definition of the gardens as cubist, purist, or simultaneist, in order to achieve their more comprehensive understanding as new territories of experience.

<sup>1</sup> Mohammad Nasir Andalib (1697–1758) was a Persian writing Indian poet. Annemarie Schimmel, *A Two-Colored Brocade: The Imagery of Persian Poetry*. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), p. 314.

<sup>2</sup> The English word “paradise” is a transliteration from the ancient Persian word “*pardis*” which means a walled garden.

<sup>3</sup> Dorothee Imbert, *The Modernist Garden in France*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 144.

<sup>4</sup> Dorothee Imbert, “Book Review: Gabriel Guevrekian (1900–1970): Une autre architecture moderne by Elizabeth Vitou; Dominique Deshoulières; Hubert Jeanneau”, *Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 49 (1990), pp. 449–50, 450.

<sup>5</sup> Dodds mentions the reasons for this marginalization as follows: “they were too decorative for such major polemicists as Sigfried Giedion, and too bourgeois for the CIAM”: George Dodds, “Freedom from the Garden: Gabriel Guevrekian and a New Territory of Experience”, in John Dixon Hunt and Michel Conan (eds.), *Tradition and Innovation in French Garden Art*, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), p. 184.

<sup>6</sup> Dodds, “Freedom from the Garden” (see note 5), p. 197.

The question of vision and cubism's break with Renaissance perspective becomes an intricate point in reading these gardens. Cubism does not adhere to one-point perspective and presents objects from several points of view simultaneously. This form of representation introduces the principle of simultaneity, which is intimately bound up with modern life.<sup>7</sup> While cubist painting presents multiple perspectives of the three-dimensional object on its two-dimensional surface, Guevrekian's drawings for his gardens represent the three-dimensional space of Persian gardens in a two-dimensional entity within a cubist framework, and then project it back into the three-dimensional space of the garden. A parallel view of his designs as translations of the Persian garden on one side, and as three-dimensional practices of cubism on the other side, suggests they are more than mere copies of cubist painting. Additionally, the question of perspective will open a path for understanding the break that these gardens offer from the tradition of European landscape design through a very specific utilization of the Persian tradition. Toward that end, this paper will move beyond the simple geometric tracing of Persian gardens in Guevrekian's garden, offered by Dodds, by analyzing Guevrekian's drawing for his Garden in Paris as "a purist technique of a 'straight up' axonometric to represent half of a Paradise garden."<sup>8</sup> Such a simplified geometry limits the understanding of the modern interpretation of the Persian garden geometry as offered by Guevrekian.

While scholars have perceived Guevrekian's gardens as cubist reinterpretations of the Persian garden, his reputation in Persian architectural history is fully detached from his fame in the West and is based on his contribution to modern architecture. Guevrekian was the general secretary of CIAM from 1928 to 1932, and a year later in 1933 he went back to Iran, where he stayed for four years. He served as the chief architect for the Municipality of Tehran and later served in the same position at the Ministry of Finance.<sup>9</sup> Despite his short stay in Iran, he has been considered one of the main protagonists in the shaping of modern Tehran. While his villas mainly represent a pure modernist approach, his public buildings – although it is not certain if they were built fully based on his designs – were hybrids of neoclassical and modernist architecture. However, it is important to note that the gardens he realized in the villas were perceived more as a return to tradition, and were "little more than a cliché of the Persian garden hybridized with the International Style, thus lacking the originality of his French translations of the Paradise garden."<sup>10</sup>

It is a highly complex task to trace Guevrekian's works in the larger context of his portfolio, due to his mobility and exposure to very different cultures. An Armenian with Iranian nationality, Guevrekian was born in Istanbul, grew up in Tehran, studied in Vienna, practiced in Paris, spent the years between 1928 and 1932 as the general secretary of CIAM (he was a participant in the Vienna Werkbund Exhibition of 1931), and moved back to Tehran in 1933 where he was commissioned for several public and private buildings. After returning to Europe in 1937, he relocated to US in 1948 where he taught in University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and

<sup>7</sup> Siegfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture: the growth of a new tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 432.

<sup>8</sup> Dodds, "Freedom from the Garden" (see note 5), p. 193.

<sup>9</sup> Mina Marefat, "The Protagonists Who Shaped Modern Tehran", in Chahryar Adle and Bernard Hourcade (eds.), *Tehran; Capitale Bicentenaire*, (Paris, Tehran: Institut Francais de Recherche en Iran, 1992), p. 118.

<sup>10</sup> Imbert, *The Modernist Garden in France* (see note 3), p. 232.

died in 1970 in Paris. It is important to note that while he designed some avant-garde gardens from 1925 to 1927, right afterwards he distanced himself from those projects and demanded to be appreciated more for his buildings, rather than his gardens. In his notes written in 1929 on Villa Heim in Neuilly, which he had designed in 1928 without the intention of creating “an object of art”, Guevrekian emphasized his functionalist approach to architecture. For him architecture had to suit the properties and requirements of the user, was separable from art and perceived as science.<sup>11</sup> However, while describing his garden in Hyeres, he stated that “the whole is more architecture than a garden”, and he defined his garden as “a piece of organized soil, that integrates itself in an harmonic way into nature”.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Jardin d'Eau et de Lumiere: Cubist Garden or Pop-Up Persian Carpet**

Known as the first application of the modern movement in landscape design, Guevrekian's *Jardin d'eau et de lumiere* (Garden of Water and Light) was designed for the 1925 *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* in Paris, also known as the *Art Deco Exposition*.<sup>13</sup> While meant to showcase the work of French artists and designers and their commitment to modern industry, the exposition took on a symbolic role by allowing the nation to celebrate post-war recovery.<sup>14</sup> The five official groups of objects to be displayed in the exposition were: Costume, Furniture, Architecture, Theatre – Street – Gardens, and Education.<sup>15</sup> Garden design was incorporated with theatre and street as components of the urban scene of the exposition. Even though many critics have overlooked the modernity it displayed, the exposition established a connection between decoration and the city through creating a “city-within-a-city” with modernist aesthetic visions, which were not quite clear at the time.<sup>16</sup> For Le Corbusier, 1925 was at once marked by the elevation and decline of decorative arts, and the eclecticism of the exposition was a sign of the plurality of the style with an uncompromising attitude towards the traditional, local, and the historical.<sup>17</sup>

The exposition aimed to present a wide range of objects from architecture to fashion as mass-produced entities. The chief designer of the grounds for the exposition, J.C.N. Forestier, invited Guevrekian, who was representing Austria as a juror in both the architecture and music sections,<sup>18</sup> to design a garden that was at once “Persian” and “modern”.<sup>19</sup> This interest in the “orient” and the desire to offer a mixture of the traditional and modern in the heart of Paris of 1925 is central in reading Guevrekian's response to the call. Among the several entries from figures such as Robert Mallet-Stevens, Jan and Joel Martel, and Albert Laprade, the most influential and radical design was his Garden of Water and Light.<sup>20</sup>

In reading the conditions under which the garden was designed, it is useful to bear in mind that it was supposed to be built in less than ten days,

<sup>11</sup> Gabriel Guevrekian, “Ein Landhaus in Neuilly”, in *Innendekoration: mein Heim, mein Stolz; die gesamte Wohnungskunst in Bild und Wort*, January 1929, Darmstadt, pp. 318–330, 319.

<sup>12</sup> Guevrekian, Gabriel, “Bei der Planung des Gartens des Vicomte de Noailles in Hyères” in *Innendekoration: mein Heim, mein Stolz; die gesamte Wohnungskunst in Bild und Wort*, January 1929, Darmstadt, pp. 331–332, 331.

<sup>13</sup> Marc Treib, “Axioms for a Modern Landscape Architecture”, in Marc Treib (ed.), *Modern Landscape Architecture: a critical review*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), p. 37.

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Hornbeck, *Visions of Modernity: The Architectural Landscape of the 1925 Exposition of Decorative Arts, Paris*. (ProQuest, UMI Dissertations Publishing, 2002), pp. 56–7.

<sup>15</sup> Hornbeck, *Visions of Modernity* (see note 14), p. 61.

<sup>16</sup> Tag Gronberg, *Designs on Modernity: Exhibiting the City in 1920s Paris*. (Manchester; New York, NY: Manchester University Press; St. Martin's Press, 1998), pp. 18–9.

<sup>17</sup> Imbert, *The Modernist Garden in France* (see note 3), p. 32.

<sup>18</sup> Imbert, *The Modernist Garden in France* (see note 3), p. 126.

<sup>19</sup> Dodds, “Freedom from the Garden” (see note 5), p. 185.

<sup>20</sup> Treib, “Axioms for a Modern Landscape Architecture” (see note 13), p. 39.



and needed to remain vivid for six months.<sup>21</sup> Due to its avant-garde nature, the Guevrekian scheme was highly debated by the organizing committee of the exposition. Nonetheless, the jury awarded the Grand Prix to the architect.<sup>22</sup> Due to its short life, the garden has been reviewed by later critics only through its representation in photographs and drawings, which has added to its comprehension as a two dimensional entity (Fig. 1). The lack of possibility for a corporeal experience of the garden has limited the understanding of it to the few points of view from which it has been represented.

The garden was designed in a triangular site, enclosed with glass partitions on two sides, along the Esplanade des Invalides. The limited and contrived shape of the site in the exposition resembled “horticultural samples” or “decorative fragments” rather than designed landscapes that would traditionally require larger sites.<sup>23</sup> The name of the garden was derived from its central elements, water and an electrically operated sphere. As a “city-within-a-city,” the garden offered a miniature representation of central Paris in 1925, identified as a monumental display of *eau* and *lumiere*.<sup>24</sup> A triangle was used as a geometrical module through out the whole design both in vertical and horizontal planes, from the pattern of the ground to the texture of the enclosing partitions. The partitions were made of small glass triangles, ranging in color from pink at the bottom to white at the top.

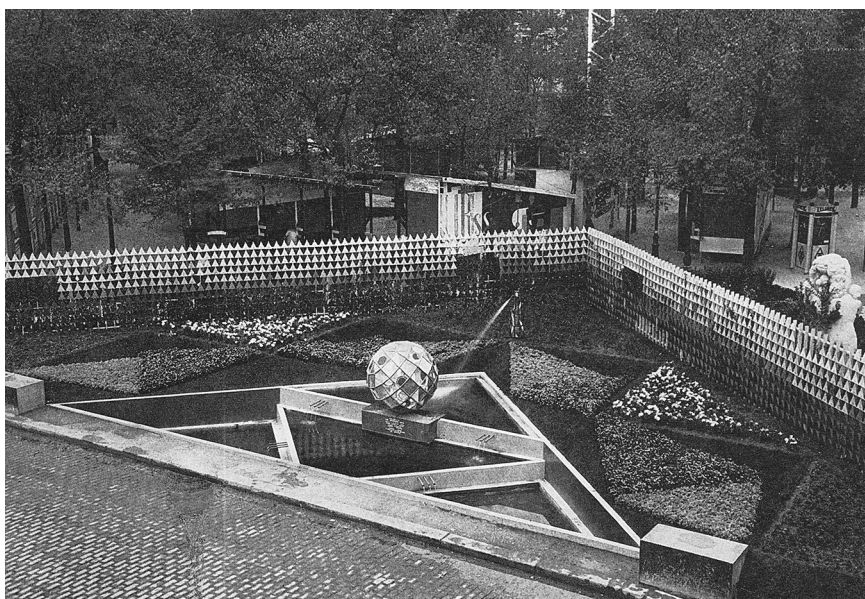
At the center of the site, adjacent to the open side of the triangle, was another triangle divided into four small triangular pools arranged on three levels. Water would fill the upper triangle from a fountain that was purposefully distanced from the pool, and would then flow into the lower pools. The water is not only a visual element in the Persian gardens, but is always articulated thorough fountains and different levels to produce gushing sounds and thus have a soothing effect on the visitor. Because of the small scale of the stepping pools, the sound effect of a fountain had

<sup>21</sup> Dorothee Imbert, “A Model for Modernism: The Work and Influence of Pierre-Emile Legrain,” in Marc Treib (ed.), *Modern Landscape Architecture; a critical review*, p. 93.

<sup>22</sup> Imbert, *The Modernist Garden in France* (see note 3), p. 128.

<sup>23</sup> Imbert, *The Modernist Garden in France* (see note 3), p. 128.

<sup>24</sup> Gronberg, *Designs on Modernity* (see note 16), p. 1.



**Fig. 1**  
Jardin d'Eau et de Lumiere, Gabriel Guevrekian, 1925, Paris  
([www.tehranprojects.com/The-Cubist-Garden](http://www.tehranprojects.com/The-Cubist-Garden))

to be obtained artificially, by directing the water through small pipes to create a pressured flow.

The design and construction of the garden were reliant on modern technologies and new materials such as glass and concrete. The luminous sphere in the center was electrically propelled, and its surface made of mirrors and colorful ceramics was meant to reflect the colorful surrounding and the water. Guevrekian's amusement with the use of electricity in his design appear in one of his few notes on one of his buildings published in 1929:

"The electric light, the greatest invention of our times, is not fully understood yet. This re-formed light creates, when utilized by an expert, the most significant impressions. It is full of nuances. One can shrink or grow or elevate rooms with its help. One can replace the daylight with it."<sup>25</sup>

The enclosure of the garden with semi-transparent triangular glass was a clear reinterpretation of Persian gardens, which were always walled. It is also possible to interpret the sphere as the representation of a traditional Persian architectural element, a small edifice placed either at the highest point or in the middle of the garden, and reflected in the water surrounding it. In response to the limitations of the site, Guevrekian translated the central edifice of the Persian garden into a sphere of light placed in the pool in his miniature sample landscape. The thin, concrete walls of the pool were colored in white, blue, and red, which can be interpreted as a nationalist reference to France.<sup>26</sup> The motif of colorful tiles at the bottom of pools, a defining characteristic of Persian garden, seems to have been achieved by the three circles in blue, white, and red drawn by Robert Delaunay in the Garden of Water and Light pool.

Symmetrical on one axis, the Persian garden is divided into four quarters by a waterway. This type of pattern is called *Chahar Bagh* (Four Gardens), which refers to the Garden of Eden that was watered by four rivers. The concept of a walled, quadripartite garden containing a pavilion points to an ancient Iranian concept of garden design, going back to Achaemenid times.<sup>27</sup> Guevrekian translated the quadripartite geometrical division of Persian gardens into a cubist language of forms through a four-part division within the triangular space. Apart from the four-part pool, the layout of the triangular flowerbeds around the pool is a repetition of the pattern of quarters. Truncated rectangles, triangles, and circles are the characteristic vocabularies of analytic cubism utilized by Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso.<sup>28</sup> One can clearly recognize how the cubist vocabulary utilized by Guevrekian in the Garden of Water and Light presents a spatial abstraction of Persian gardens.

If we view Guevrekian's garden as a cubist, modern representation of Persian gardens, it is useful to refer to another two-dimensional form of representation, combining the top-plan and elevation of a garden simulta-

<sup>25</sup> Guevrekian, "Ein Landhaus in Neuilly" (see note 11), p. 319.

<sup>26</sup> Imbert, *The Modernist Garden in France* (see note 3), p. 128.

<sup>27</sup> Maria Eva Subtelny, "Agriculture and the Timurid Chaharbagh: The evidence from a medieval Persian agricultural manual", in Attilio Petruccioli (ed.), *Gardens in the Time of the Great Muslim Empires: Theory and Design*, (Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1997), p. 116.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Vargish, *Inside Modernism: Relativity Theory, Cubism, Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 112.



neously. Persian gardens have been widely depicted in Persian carpets – in particular the four-part plan, representing the four major elements of Zoroastrian religion (fire, water, soil, and wind) and symbolizing an earthly paradise.<sup>29</sup> In these carpets, at the intersection of the two axes there would usually be a pool (Fig. 2). The *Chahar Bagh* carpet, a woven Persian garden, appears as a very distinct form of representation from cubist painting. However, it is possible to draw similarities in the concept of perspective offered by the carpets and the cubist representation of objects and space on the canvas. Just like the cubist painting, or more precisely the 1920s simultaneist understanding of cubism, the carpet also provides simultaneous views of the same entity. Just like in Guevrekian's garden, the viewer is supposed to look at the carpet on a horizontal plane, and there is no fixed point of view assigned. In the garden, however, the viewer can move and view the design from different perspectives.

Persian gardens were usually located on sloped land that would create a better vista into the landscape and would naturalize the flow of water in the garden. In Guevrekian's garden the slope is achieved through tilted triangular flowerbeds that are not separated from each other by their tilt angle and the texture and color of their vegetation. The triangular flowerbeds included blue ageratum, white pyrethrum, red begonias, and a green lawn.<sup>30</sup> Although these colors have been described slightly differently in various sources,<sup>31</sup> Guevrekian's garden has nonetheless been evaluated as a direct realization of his gouache rendering published in 1925, "an over-scaled cubist painting in which the depth of the field was frontally compressed" (Fig. 3).<sup>32</sup> The closure of the garden formed a frame into which one was supposed to look, but not enter; the viewer was not assigned a single point of view, and was supposed to have dynamism in his visual journey through the garden. The spatial properties of Persian gardens were represented in an entity that was visual and spatial, somewhere between painting and space.

<sup>29</sup> Donald N. Wilber, *Persian Gardens and Garden Pavillions*, (Tokyo, Japan: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1962), pp. 33–34.

<sup>30</sup> Dodds, "Freedom from the Garden" (see note 5), p. 185.

<sup>31</sup> Imbert describes the color of the flowerbeds as orange pyrethrum instead of white pyrethrum, and in the only available picture of the garden, the pyrethrum are yellow.

<sup>32</sup> Imbert, *The Modernist Garden in France* (see note 3), p. 128.



3



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Fig. 2  
Isfahan Chahar Bagh "Paradise Garden" carpet, 17th c.  
([www.electrummagazine.com](http://www.electrummagazine.com))

Fig. 3  
Gouache rendering of the Jardin d'Eau et de Lumiere, Gabriel Guevrekian  
([www.tehranprojects.com/The-Cubist-Garden](http://www.tehranprojects.com/The-Cubist-Garden))

While the use of straight lines can be interpreted as a common characteristic of Persian gardens as well as cubist painting, Guevrekian's geometric shapes and intense colors have been read as a sample of cubist landscape design. However, his gouache rendering of the project bears more reference to paintings of Robert Delaunay than Picasso and Braque. Dorothee Imberth connects Guevrekian's garden to simultaneism, stating: "The garden literally rendered Forestier's view of nature as a *tableau d'art*, while achieving the effects of the Delaunay's simultaneist paintings in two and a half dimensions".<sup>33</sup> Later, George Dodds re-affirms this opinion by strongly rejecting the cubist reading of color in the garden, and states that "the palette of colors that Guevrekian used in the drawing is neither cubist, nor purist, but an extension of color schemes of *simultaneisme* developed by Robert and Sonia Delaunay".<sup>34</sup> The rendering of the garden is somewhere between architectural plan and a perspective in sharp lines and colors. This ninety-degree axonometric drawing was favorable in architectural drawings as well as purist paintings of the time.<sup>35</sup> Guevrekian's design has been described as the first full break from the architectural nature of traditional gardens, having become an abstract picture composed of natural living elements.<sup>36</sup> However, in order to draw an analogy to cubism or simultaneism it is crucial to better understand Guevrekian's modernist reading of the "oriental" garden.

The playfulness of the composition in terms of layout, color, material, even the literal dynamism of elements such as the water and the rotating sphere, created an optical vibration that draws his work more away from cubism and closer to the simultaneism of Sonia and Robert Delaunay. In their paintings and textiles, "the contrast of difference was exchanged for a contrast of resemblance" and the line disappeared in favor of freedom, while "color brought forth form, movement, and depth: not a perspectival or successive depth, but a simultaneous one".<sup>37</sup> Although it is not possible to ascertain that Guevrekian's garden is a spatial translation of the Delaunays' paintings, it is possible to observe that he was exploring a similar thematic in his gardens. However, apart from the use of the color palette of simultaneism in Guevrekian's garden, the distinction between the garden as cubist or simultaneist is not a key issue for this argument. The concern here is more on their geometrical vocabulary and the question of perspective.

The simultaneist vision of Sonia and Robert Delaunay was displayed in several parts of the 1925 Exposition. Vibrant textiles of Sonia Delaunay were presented in the background of the avant-garde designs displayed in the Exposition. Guevrekian was familiar with their work, as he had previously designed a boutique for Sonia Delaunay that was presented at the *Salon d'Automne* in 1924. This was the first step of an ongoing collaboration on his 1925 garden and also led him to meet Jacques Heim, for whom Guevrekian designed a villa and garden in 1928.<sup>38</sup> The paintings of Robert Delaunay not only show a connection to architecture and space, but also his approach to color is similar to Guevrekian's designs.

<sup>33</sup> Imbert, *The Modernist Garden in France* (see note 3), p. 46.

<sup>34</sup> Dodds, "Freedom from the Garden" (see note 5), p. 191.

<sup>35</sup> Dodds, "Freedom from the Garden" (see note 5), p. 191.

<sup>36</sup> Catherine Royer, "Art Deco Gardens in France", in Monique Mosser and Georges Teyssot (eds.), *The Architecture of Western gardens: a design history from the Renaissance to the present day*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 1991, p. 460.

<sup>37</sup> Imbert, *The Modernist Garden in France* (see note 3), p. 128.

<sup>38</sup> Elisabeth Vitou, Dominique Deshoulières and Hubert Jeanneau, *Gabriel Guévrekian (1900–1970): une autre architecture modern*, (Paris: Connivences, 1987), p. 32.



The theory of simultaneism developed by the Delaunays was based on the work of Michel Eugene Chevreul (1786–1889), the French chemist who drew a classification of colors and a chromatic diagram that illustrated the relationship between colors. The diagram demonstrated the effect of the complementary image of one color on the appearance of another color that would generate a new color.<sup>39</sup> Robert Delaunay created paintings that depended on color: “contrast would develop in time, simultaneously perceived, at a single moment”.<sup>40</sup> The juxtaposition and coexistence of complementary colors would create a tension and vibrancy, and color was the element that would generate motion and dynamism in the painting. This is also evident in Guevrekian’s gouache rendering of the garden, and indeed in his avant-garde garden he offers an inherent optical vibration. The reason behind the persuasiveness of such a claim, in the case of Guevrekian’s gardens, is his specific approach to color and its utilization in the creation of form, movement, and depth. His concern with color appears in a part of one of the few remaining writings: “Another important factor is the color. It influences, depending on the tone, the human neurosystem in various ways. Through experience and experiments, it has been found that red stimulates, green calms down, yellow increases the motivation for work, and blue has a tranquilizing and ‘neurasthenic’ effect”.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Robert Delaunay, *The New Art of Color: The Writings of Robert and Sonia Delaunay*, (New York: Viking Press, 1978), p. 11.

<sup>40</sup> Delaunay, *The New Art of Color* (see note 39), p. 23.

<sup>41</sup> Guevrekian, “Ein Landhaus in Neuilly” (see note 11), p. 320.

<sup>42</sup> Treib, “Axioms for a Modern Landscape Architecture” (see note 13), p. 39.

## A Garden for Villa Noailles: Cubist Collage or Bas Relief

The Garden of Water and Light gained the attention of many critics, including the Vicomte Charles de Noailles, a major patron of the avant-garde art world. In 1926 de Noailles asked Robert Mallet-Stevens, who was designing for him a concrete modern villa in Hyeres in Southern France, to commission Guevrekian for the design of the garden.<sup>42</sup> While his Garden of Water and Light was created generally from a gouache rendering, Guevrekian presented the Villa Noailles design through a model (Fig. 4),

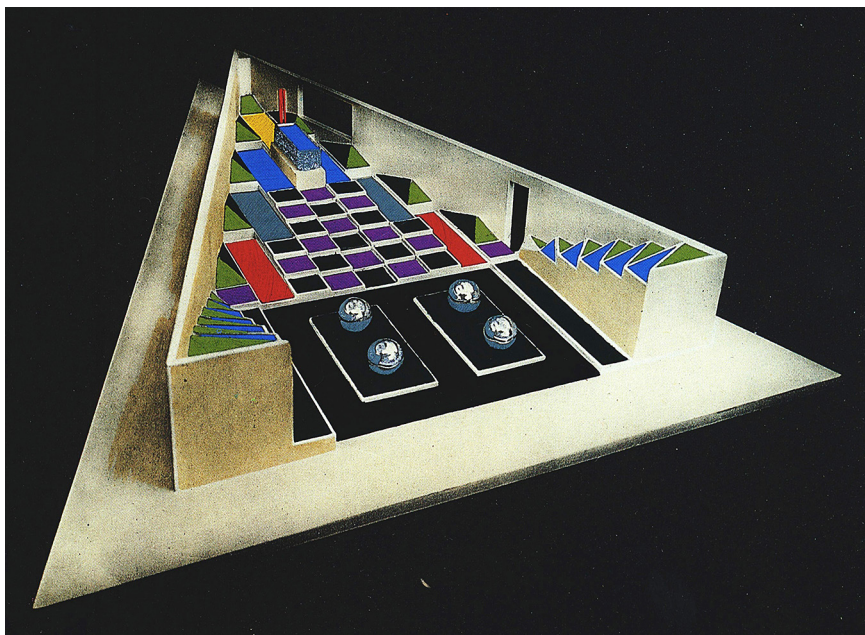


Fig. 4  
Model for the Villa Noailles garden,  
Gabriel Guevrekian, 1926  
([www.tehranprojects.com/The-Cubist-Garden](http://www.tehranprojects.com/The-Cubist-Garden))

exhibited at the 1927 Salon d'Automne.<sup>43</sup> Although resembling his earlier project, the second garden's sharp geometrical form and color were still unacceptable as a landscape design, and some critics define it as a "garden that looked like anything but a garden," and added that any natural addition, for instance plants, to this garden would be a nuisance.<sup>44</sup>

In a short description, Guevrekian introduces his project for Villa Noailles:

"During planning the Garden of the Vicomte de Noailles in Hyères the idea was to create a contrast to the rich and bountiful vegetation of the South. Thus, the garden has been demarcated with walls to isolate and distinguish it and to give it the impression of a backyard. A triangle corner of the premise/area has been left open to allow a view on the wide sea. In addition, the garden has been planned in this particular way in order to allow a totally different view from the salon on the first floor than from the roof terrace above. (...) The whole is more architecture than a garden; utmost profound composition and work to the last details with particular consideration of proportions and tone and nuances of colors have produced a piece of organized soil, that integrates itself in an harmonic way into nature."<sup>45</sup>

The model, showing a triangular site walled on two sides, was detached from the vast site of the villa, and its effect on the landscape and connection to the villa were missing. The design was once again symmetrical on one axis. A square grid resembling a checkerboard was placed at the center of the triangular site. Adjacent to the walled edges of the triangle the square grid turned into rectangles that touched the edges of the triangle at one corner. At the connection of the grid with the triangular site, new triangles were formed that surrounded the grid. The squares, the rectangles, and the triangles proposed a bold composition of colors, sharp tones of black, purple, red, green, blue, and yellow.

The shallow steps rising towards the apex of the triangle culminated in a rotating statue by Jacques Lipchitz called *La joie de vivre* (The Joy of Life)<sup>46</sup>, which replaced the rotating sphere in the Garden of Water and Light. Indeed, in his model Guevrekian uses a raised rectilinear pool of water with a bright red element on top of it, which could have been a fountain, as the focal point of his garden. Considering this statue a turning point in his career, Lipchitz described it as a culmination of all his findings in cubism, but at the same time an escape from cubism.<sup>47</sup> Water, initially aimed to be the focal point of his design, was still present in this garden in the rectangular pool covered with glazed tiles.

Close to the open side of the triangle, facing the villa, two triangular, zigzag flowerbeds sloped up from the ground level to the walls of the villa. In the model, below the square grid close to the villa entrance, there are two squares with four steel or mirror spheres that provide reference to the Persian *Chahar Bagh*. However, in the final construction of the

<sup>43</sup> Dodds, "Freedom from the Garden" (see note 5), p. 187.

<sup>44</sup> Imbert, *The Modernist Garden in France* (see note 3), pp. 130–131.

<sup>45</sup> Guevrekian, "Bei der Planung des Gartens des Vicomte de Noailles in Hyères" (see note 12), p. 331.

<sup>46</sup> Treib, "Axioms for a Modern Landscape Architecture" (see note 13), p. 39.

<sup>47</sup> Imbert, *The Modernist Garden in France* (see note 3), p. 135.



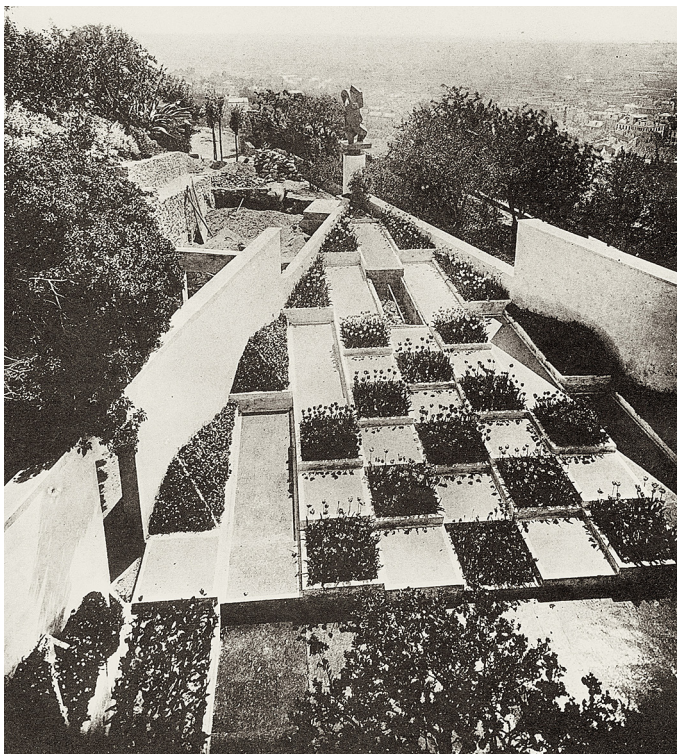
garden, these four spheres are replaced by two mini orange trees. Using the natural setting of the site as a framed view subjected to change with the movement of the viewer, Guevrekian played further with the tension between perspective and the in-betweens of the dimensionality of the garden. In the actual construction the portions of the wall near the apex on both sides were removed, reinforcing the connection of the garden to the surrounding vista.

Although the garden was physically accessible, its geometrical layout and spatial arrangement of plants and paved surfaces within its grid clearly called for a visual and pictorial experience rather than a physical one. Indeed, with all its various planes angled in different direction and its playful fragmented surfaces, the garden demanded a dynamic mode of perception placed outside its frame – a different mode of engagement, neither completely resting on traditional gardens, nor on cubist paintings. To perceive the space, the viewer was required to move, not within the space, but around it. The existing pictures usually represent two views, a flat garden from one point of view and a sloping garden from another (Fig. 5, Fig. 6).<sup>48</sup> Although these two viewpoints might have been the most appealing in photographic representations because they provide a full symmetrical, perspectival view of the garden, it is crucial to recognize that the semi-spatial experience offered by the garden provided many variable viewpoints, not only around the garden, but also from the villa. In a range of pictures showing the garden, it is possible to see how the design offers a different perspective from every viewpoint, and that it called the viewer to be dynamic, not inside the garden, but outside it. No single perspective from a single point equaled another one. The fragmented views of the

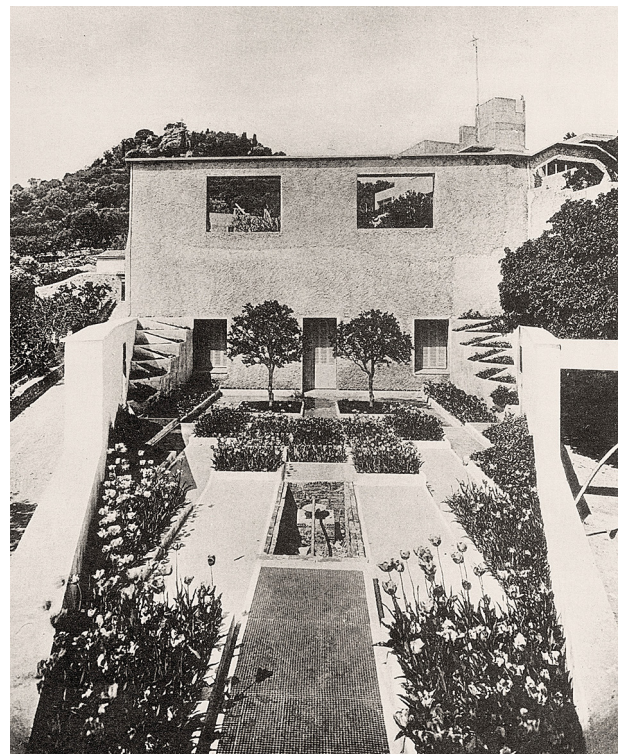
<sup>48</sup> Imbert, *The Modernist Garden in France* (see note 3), p. 138.

**Fig. 5**  
Villa Noailles, view from the roof of the villa to the garden, 1930s  
([www.tehranprojects.com/The-Cubist-Garden](http://www.tehranprojects.com/The-Cubist-Garden))

**Fig. 6**  
Villa Noailles, view from the rotating statue to the villa, 1930s  
([www.villanoailles-hyeres.com](http://www.villanoailles-hyeres.com))



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garden from various points, suggesting new perspectives at every moment of the movement of the viewer, was an intentional avant-garde theme of the garden offering a new perception of space that was different from the spatial experience of traditional European gardens. The sharp triangular shape of the garden is indeed inverting the cone of vision, which adds to the inherent dynamism of the scene.

Overlaying a strong perspective with a plan of geometrical fragments, Guevrekian created a cubist garden with material layers of such as plants, water, concrete, steel, ceramics and mirror; a cubist collage made from a palette of plants and different materials. Reading Guevrekian's gardens not just as cubist paintings, but as cubist collages, would suggest the material aspect of these gardens as three-dimensional entities that make them more complicated than their representations in pictures and drawings. Just as cubist collages presented an uneasy and paradoxical relation to the objects and materials they were using to produce art, Guevrekian's cubist gardens were also offering an uneasy experience for the viewer. For instance, the steel and mirror sphere in the Garden of Water and Light seem to belong to a nightclub rather than a garden.<sup>49</sup> By creating an electrified garden, with a statue or a sphere that was illuminated and rotating, he was introducing a movement and dynamism into the garden that was not familiar to the public of that time and was a strong avant-garde step in the field of landscape design.

Based on the principle of contrasting monochromatic geometric areas in order to revitalize them, the simultaneist paintings intended to create the impression of a "relief" of intense colors.<sup>50</sup> Imbert has justified Guevrekian's garden for Noailles as a "bas-relief", which is a metaphor to familiarize and ground its two-and-a-half dimensionality.<sup>51</sup> A reading of Guevrekian's garden as a relief might provide a better understanding of its essence as a ground of tension between two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality, but it reduces the dynamism and the specific visual-spatial experience that the garden offers. Moreover, the question of the depth that is achieved by the exaggerated perspective of his design and its geometric determinism remains intact.

## Epilogue

Despite the painterly readings of his gardens, Guevrekian saw art and architecture as essentially different:

"A piece of art can be progressive, without being understood by its time and is not subordinate to any conditions. However, the building of sheer utility and use is being created through the limitation through the needs and technical means of its time. The architecture of today is like craft, a science. It delivers a house to the human, just as the tailor creates a suit (there are good and bad tailors). It is not bound to fashions and trends that just last

<sup>49</sup> Fletcher Steele, "New Pioneering in Garden Design", *Landscape Architecture Quarterly* 20, no. 3, (April 1930), pp. 158–77, 166.

<sup>50</sup> Suzanne Krizenecky, "Im Avant-Garten der Avantgarde: Gabriel Guevrekians Garten für die Villa Noailles in Hyeres", in Annemarie Buchler and Johannes Stoffler (eds.), *High and Low: Garten zwischen Kunst, Luxus und Alltag*, (Zurich: SGGK Topiaria Helvetica, 2013), pp. 30–37.

<sup>51</sup> Imbert, *The Modernist Garden in France* (see note 3), p. 138.



for a semester, such as hats for ladies. Architecture changes from generation to generation – unless modifications and changes occur that change a whole epoch such as social or technological upheavals.”<sup>52</sup>

Guevrekian’s cubist gardens, his designs can be approached as tailor-made for specific purposes, integrating avant-garde artistic approaches into traditional forms of landscape design. However, it appears that Guevrekian himself was not able to position his two gardens within his wider portfolio of architectural works. Despite his association with CIAM, his gardens were closer to art than architecture, challenging his functionalist approach to architectural design. His cubist gardens as avant-garde practices of a certain moment were not taken up in garden design and were not subsequently replicated.

In both gardens, the enclosed triangular forms of the site appear as a clear manifestation of a play with the traditional form of perspective. In the dilemma between a modernist European design and a traditional Persian garden, Guevrekian does not confine himself to a presentation of a mere mixture of the exotic aspects of Persian garden with modern techniques and materials. Indeed, he moves far beyond an exotic and primitive representation of the “orient”, and offers a break within the European tradition of garden making that simultaneously moves forward along the modernist vision and expands sideways over the reinterpretation and translation of traditional Persian gardens. However, these two discourses come together in an uncanny and unresolved way within these two gardens. They are not static entities, but rather apply opposite forces on the viewer; the viewer is not welcome to engage with the space due to its organization, while being pulled into it by the extreme directionality of the gardens.

Guevrekian’s gardens would only reveal themselves conditioned by the dynamism of the viewer. In contrast to other similar designs of the time, Guevrekian did not use plans to show his project for Villa Noailles to the public – he used a model instead.<sup>53</sup> A model as a form of representation of an architectural project provides a three-dimensional, tangible representation of the design to communicate the ideas and the concepts of the structure. The viewer is invited to look at the model from various angles and distances simultaneously, conditioned by his movement around it. The model was thus a clear manifestation of the visual experience of this semi-flat space by the moving viewer. However, it is worth noting that Guevrekian’s gardens, just like Persian gardens, have nothing to do with the Renaissance point of view, and they both require a different visual experience that is fragmented and not holistic. The two avant-garde gardens of Guevrekian are both “Persian” and “cubist” and yet indeed neither “Persian” nor “cubist.” In his pursuit to find an alternative direction out of the dead end of the European tradition of garden design, and by utilizing his experience with Persian gardens, Guevrekian offers an approach that is not primitivized, but rather highly sophisticated. Through the arguments presented here, this paper aimed to reveal the intricacy of these

<sup>52</sup> Guevrekian, “Ein Landhaus in Neuilly” (see note 11), p. 318.

<sup>53</sup> Imbert, Dorothee. “Unnatural Acts: propositions for a new French garden, 1920–1930”, in Eve Blau and Nancy J. Troy (eds.), *Architecture and Cubism*, (Quebec, Canada: Canadian Center for Architecture and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), p. 176.

two gardens while indicating that being cubist and Persian at once, they suggest internal conflicts within these two discourses and therefore they are neither Persian, nor cubist.

Robert Delaunay's paintings have been described as motivated by the retinalism of the painting of modern life that aimed to see more, see quickly, and see simultaneously.<sup>54</sup> The undeniable reflection of these approaches in both Guevrekian's gardens resonate in the simultaneous aerial and lateral visions that the composition of the gardens offer to the dynamic spectator – a simultaneity and transparency that was being practiced through cubism. As Robin Evans suggests, the common ground between architecture and cubism was not a new conception of space, nor the perception of objects in space, but it was picture-making itself: creating pictures of pictures.<sup>55</sup> Through such an analogy, Guevrekian's gardens demand a reading as the two-and-a-half dimensional pictures, recalling Persian gardens' representation on traditional carpets. The Guevrekian's cubist approach a modern interpretation of the Persian garden is indeed a utilization of two-dimensional space of cubism as a way of representing rather than building. Due to this representational significance of the cubist approach, the pictorial quality of his gardens becomes more dominant than its material quality. However, the realization of the gardens with various materials, turning them into cubist collages, forms a tension between the material and the pictorial. Therefore, Guevrekian's gardens are inherently positioned in a space of tensions: Persian and modern, two dimensionality and three-dimensionality, materiality and pictoriality, dynamism and staticity.

<sup>54</sup> Gordon Hughes, "Coming into Sight: Seeing Robert Delaunay's Structure of Vision", *October*, Vol. 102, (Autumn 2002), p. 89.

<sup>55</sup> Blau and Troy, *Architecture and Cubism* (see note 53), p. 7.

Zohreh Soltani is a third-year PhD student in the Department of Art History at the State University of New York, Binghamton. She completed her MA in Architecture at Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Turkey in 2011. Her research interests include modern architecture of Iran, public space and power relations, and socio-political transformation of space in post-conflict societies. Her dissertation will examine the reflection of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the proceeding Iran-Iraq war on the architecture of Tehran by examining specific sites that have been transformed in that moment.