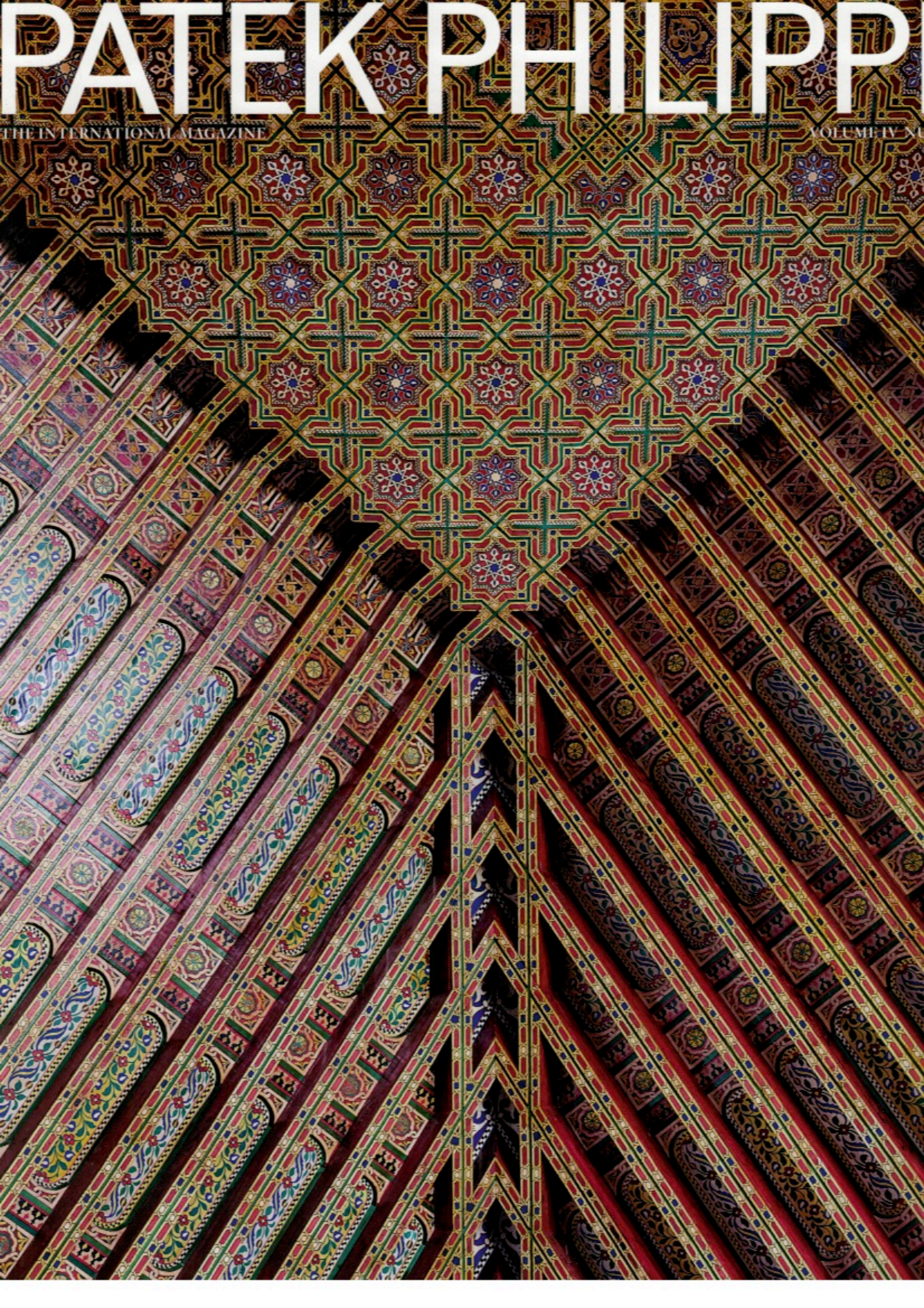


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# The flowering of genius

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A plant nursery located in a small French province is home to some of Europe's earliest imports of Japanese bamboo. The place is still in use today, and one of the original species that was cultivated there has just flowered for the first time in more than a century

The croaking of frogs is the first thing you notice. We're in the lush southwest of France, in the little village of Le Temple-sur-Lot, midway between Agen and Bergerac. This is prune country, a gentle landscape of pasture, woods, and orchards, stocked with plums, cherries, and hazelnuts. It's a quiet, undramatic region, well off the tourist trail, and it would have been even more cut off in the nineteenth century before the advent of cars and high-speed trains. Yet on this well-watered spot in 1875, a local landowner opened a nursery that would introduce new plants to Europe and America from the world's farthest corners and inspire one of the greatest artists of his time.

Joseph Bory Latour-Marliac came from a prosperous local family that had amassed

*Phyllostachys bambusoides*, from which "Castillonii" (left and above) derives, flowers roughly once every 120 years. Surprisingly, all the plants flower at around the same time, wherever they are in the world. This evolutionary trait is thought to ensure the survival of the species, since no number of predators could possibly devour the vast seed quantity that is produced in a year. After flowering, the plants die

extensive land around Le Temple and Granges-sur-Lot (where Latour-Marliac was born and his father was the village mayor). Though their origins were provincial, they spent winters in Bordeaux, which was a cultured and cosmopolitan city, and the young Latour-Marliac would have been exposed to the latest ideas and fashions. In 1847, his parents sent him to Paris to study law, but he arrived just as the storm clouds of the 1848 revolution were gathering, and the 17-year-old found himself in the middle of what was, to all intents and purposes, a civil war.

With his studies cut short, he returned to the peace and safety of his provincial roots, where he helped run the family estate, studied horticulture, and, in 1852, married Alida Gonnère, setting up home in a house in Le Temple-sur-Lot. In 1875, close to his residence, he opened the commercial plant nursery that was to make his name. It stood (and stands) on a 10-acre site dotted with freshwater springs and edged by a tributary of the Lot river.

By this time, Latour-Marliac was corresponding with a wide range of leading nurserymen and horticulturalists, and he had built up a notable collection of hardy bamboos. In this he was a true pioneer. Though French gardeners might take bamboo for granted today, in the late nineteenth century it was still a rare and exotic import. The opening up of trade between Japan and the West following the Perry Expedition of 1853 led to a craze for all things Japanese across France and many other countries. *Japanism* had a huge influence on artists such as Monet, Degas, and Van Gogh, as well as on architecture and the decorative arts, not to mention horticulture.

Writing toward the end of the nineteenth century, the British gardener and author Algernon Bertram Freeman-Mitford rhapsodized about the revolutionary effect that Japanese bamboos had had on Western gardens, “[They] have added to our borders, our shrubberies, and more especially to our wild gardens, a wealth of beauty which a few years ago would have been deemed beyond the craziest dreams of the enthusiast.”



## *The plant nursery is dotted with freshwater springs and edged by a tributary of the Lot river*

As one of the earliest importers of these bamboos to Europe, Latour-Marliac built up a roster of wealthy clients, including the Comte de Noailles in France, the Rothschilds in the UK, and the Vanderbilts in the United States. Freeman-Mitford acknowledged that it was “above all M. Latour-Marliac of Temple-sur-Lot” whose energy and enterprise established that “even if we may not hope to see our bamboos grow to the huge dimensions which they attain in their native countries, there are many the hardiness of which is proof against our severest winters.”

Latour-Marliac was a prolific letter writer, and as his biographer Caroline Holmes notes, “the Latour-Marliac archives are filled with scientific enquiry often laced with chatty correspondence.” His entrée into high society seems to have been via a local grandee, the Comte de Castillon, whose family were major landowners around Agen. The Count was one of Latour-Marliac’s early bamboo customers, but he clearly went on to become a friend, and Holmes details the breadth of their correspondence, in which, among other things, “they discussed

Opposite: "Castillonii" bamboo still grows around the borders of the Latour-Marliac plant nursery in Le Temple-sur-Lot. Joseph Bory Latour-Marliac can be seen at the nursery in the image, c. 1895, below (sitting far left), presiding over his hardy water lilies, which were created by

crossing the white variety with wild varieties that he sourced from North America and beyond. The palette of his hybrids ranged from yellow to fuchsia to deep red. Bottom: an illustration and photograph showing the unusual variegated stems of the "Castillonii" species

growing bamboo shoots for the table, they swapped roses, French beans, discussed persimmons, prunes, children and religion."

Arguably the most beautiful of Latour-Marliac's introductions was the variety that in Japan is known as *kinmei-chiku* or golden brilliant bamboo. A form of the Japanese timber bamboo *Phyllostachys bambusoides*,

it is unique in that both its leaves and stem are brilliantly variegated. And it has one other remarkable feature: it only flowers roughly once every 120 years.

As was common at the time, Latour-Marliac gave his Japanese introductions Western names. He must have thought hard about the one for *kinmei-chiku* bamboo. In the end he called it "Castillonii," in honor of the Count, whose support had done much to establish Latour-Marliac's reputation.

Yet bamboo was only the beginning. From the start, Latour-Marliac had sold aquatic plants alongside bamboo, digging a series of decorative pools in which to grow and display them. One plant in particular obsessed him: the water lily. Up until his time, water lilies in Europe were white, but new species had been discovered in North America and the Far East, and by crossing those Latour-Marliac was able to create a range of brilliantly colored hybrids hardy enough to grow outdoors. In 1889 he exhibited them at the World's Fair in Paris, and they caused almost as much of a sensation as the newly built Eiffel Tower. Overnight, Latour-Marliac became a famous nurseryman, and the orders flooded in.

One customer was to give Latour-Marliac's water lilies lasting fame. Claude Monet had seen the display at the World's Fair, and when he began creating his water garden at Giverny, he placed an order for water lilies from the nursery. These were the subject of his last and greatest paintings, *Les Nymphéas*.

Latour-Marliac died in 1911, and the business stayed in his family until 1991. In 2007 it was acquired by a young American called Robert Sheldon, who, by dint of hard work, good contacts, and an entrepreneurial approach (he teaches entrepreneurship in Paris), saved the nursery from ruin. Today its 65 cultivation pools are full of water lilies again, but Latour-Marliac's first love has not been forgotten. Fringing the edge of the site are magnificent stands of tall bamboo, and among them is a variety whose vividly striped stems make it instantly recognizable as "Castillonii." This year, for the first time in 120 years, it flowered: a fitting commemoration of a remarkable man. ♦

