This past December, two extraordinary mid-eighteenth-century lead sculptures from the historic Portuguese palace of Queluz (see ICON, Spring 2004) returned to their native London where they are undergoing a dramatic restoration at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Cast by renowned British sculptor John Cheere, the sculptures were part of a large consignment of works commissioned in the late 1740s by the Infante Dom Pedro, the future Dom Pedro III (1717–1786), for display in the gardens and fountains of his private retreat and hunting lodge.

The scale of the commission for the gardens—designed by the French goldsmith Jean Baptiste Robillion—was exceptional, and it is believed to have numbered 98 pieces, perhaps the largest-ever order for lead statuary.

To create the statues, molten lead was poured into molds made of plaster, the finished sculptures being structurally reinforced by internal iron supports, or armatures. Most of the garden’s statues have classical or biblical themes, from Samson Slaying the Philistine to gods and goddesses of the Greco-Roman world. Some are more playful, depicting leaping dolphins, monkeys with castanets, and serpents with water jets.

At least 22 of the statues have survived, although all are in desperate need of conservation. Due to weathering and water penetration over the centuries, the iron armatures have rusted, causing the lead statues to partially collapse.

The two statues now in London—Aeneas Carrying his Father Anchises and The Rape of Persephone—are being conserved as part of World Monuments Fund ambitious £1 million campaign (so far £100,000 has been raised) to restore the surviving garden sculptures. In March, the two statues return to Queluz, where they will be displayed in their original setting for the first time in 50 years.

—Will Black