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Preface  [Transforming the American Garden: 12 New Landscape Designs]

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Garden design is a transformation of nature into a visionary and symbolic expression; it is not merely an ordering of plants within a defined boundary, which might be termed landscaping. Parks, larger landscapes and even most backyards are shaped by an accrual of artifacts and interventions such as roads, buildings, playing fields and monuments. They are a collective expression of popular culture, while a garden is a singular expression. This is more a critical judgment than a definition, but it is important to realize that a garden can be a very public place. Gardens are distinctive not for their private nature, but for the designer's intention.

What, then, is an American garden? Like architecture, gardens in the United States during the 18th and 19th centuries were strongly influenced by European models. Often, they were copies of European gardens with little regard for their context or meaning. In the 20th century, this eclectic borrowing broadened to include Japanese references, as well as the abstraction of functional forms from nature. American garden design has not been widely regarded either as a fine art worthy of serious investigation and critical analysis or as fertile ground for psychological and metaphysical speculation. By describing the garden in subterranean such as walks, graveled areas and walls, many garden publications have reduced the idea of the garden to a combination of ingredients which provide comfort, function and horticultural display.

Any meaningful discussion of the American garden must address the American landscape. In the nation's early days, the Edenic wonder and transcendence of its unspoiled beauty lured the painters of the Hudson River and Luminist schools with images of primal creation. In their vast canvases, man is a tiny spectator. Americans, however, soon learned to domesticate this majestic landscape. The wilderness was tamed through celebration of amenities such as New Hampshire's Old Man of the Mountain, or framing photo opportunities of the Grand Canyon and other scenic wonders. Today, the grandest views of Niagara Falls are so endued in popular culture that they can never again inspire the awe captured in Frederick Edwin Church's paintings. For the designers in this exhibition, a field of California poppies, a row of Siberian irises or a triangle of chaparral have become symbols of the formerly sacred and sublime landscapes. It is no longer the spectacle of Niagara Falls but the daily ebb and flow of a Miami tide that endows the spiritual essence of nature.

Many of the participants in the exhibition, free to invent their site and context, produced designs which exemplify a strong response to ecology and regional culture. But they do more than mimic motifs or regional styles; they transcend aspects or emblems of the regional landscape into gardens where one can make spiritual connections to one's own culture and values. The gardens are not only sited among the Virginia coast or on a Milwaukeen farm, for example, but also express the "souled humanity" of Virginia's past and present, or the independent, practical nature of the Illinois farmer.

The range and diversity of its sources make it difficult to define the American garden. At the same time, these are the very qualities which make the garden a provocative field for artistic exploration today. Americans are not beholden to the almost
oppressive traditions of Europe. At the same time, the diversity and
to the underworld
ingenuity of this country’s
definitions of what
influence from sources
as widespread as Sufi
mysticism and pop art.
But if the American
designer the freedom
to borrow from sources
as widespread as Sufi
mysticism and Pop Art.
But if the American
garden does not really exist
as a single, identifiable
form, how can it be
transformed? The
twelve designers in this
exhibition do not invent
new forms, but revise
traditional garden ele-
ments such as lawns,
hedges and fountains
to formulate designs with
new content and mean-
ing. The transformation
gardens from an
eclectic
ensembles in cohesive,
legible designs in the
underlying theme of this
exhibition.

There are many pre-
cedents for symbolic
expression in garden
history. A prominent
element of a narrative
and symbolic garden is
Henry Hoare’s Stour-
head, built in England
in the 18th century.
Hoare lost many mem-
ers of his family
through illness and
tragic accidents, and
sought to express his
teen of despair and
rejuvenation by con-
structing a symbolic
journey in his garden.
He tried to universalize
his private sorrow
through classical allus-
sions to Semeas’s jour-
ney to the underworld
father and through the
sensory experiences of
his garden.

Many of these twelve
designers describe their
gardens through a simi-
lar narrative of its
parts, confident that
one would find the emo-
tional experience of
their gardens’ intention
compelling.

Henry Hoare’s vision,
as expressed at Stour-
head, was not as strong
an influence on Ameri-
can garden design as
that of his compatriot
and contemporary,
Capability Brown.
Brown’s gardens, devoid
of classical allusions
and Claudian motifs,
did not express philos-
ophical ideas about
the landscape, but
rather exploited the
“capabilities” of a site
to yield a pleasing com-
position of trees, fields
and water. Long before
architecture was shorn
of ornamentation and
classical orders, West-
ern gardens, partially
through Brown’s influ-
ence, had become
abstract compositions
of self-referential
forms. Yet design in
this exhibition, like
Henry Hoare’s, reflect
an interest in symbolic
expression rather than
in the lure of abstraction.

From the time a shaman
stood in front of a cave
painting and recited
the myth or tale that
inspired it, words have
been a necessary part
of art. In America, gar-
dens have been impor-
tant in this tradition
of meaning in favor of an
emphasis on craft. The
personal statements
of each designer in the
exhibition are part of
a vital effort now
evolving to develop a
theoretical context for
landscape architecture.

By examining old
assumptions and offer-
ing new challenges,
these designers have
expanded the scope of
the American garden.
But the garden can only
hold ideas which can be
expressed in physical
form. Once inside a gar-
den, we are caught in
the immediacy of the
experience. We can
never react dispassion-
ately and intellectually,
and one problematic
aspect of any design
exhibition is the effort
required to imagine
ourselves within these gar-
dens, experiencing them
spatially from dawn to
dusk. The designs all
serve to create an
American garden capa-
ble of embodying a
generation of a
sensibility of ourselves. If
they are to succeed,
these gardens must be
part of a larger order
of meaning as well as sig-
nificant guides to the
future of American
gardens.