

Lecture 41

History of Gardens: Formalism and the Western Tradition

Gardens are as old as civilization. The word, garden, derives from Anglo Saxon *gyrdon* which means *to enclose*. Gardens are rooted in the desire of humans to surround themselves with beautiful plants, shade, and unique foods. *Paradise* is the Persian word for garden; thus, an allusion to the concept that gardens are pleasure grounds.

Egyptian gardens originated on the edge of the desert where the natural vegetation is sparse; there was no natural landscape to copy except that of the oasis so an artificial landscape was created. In Egypt, gardens represent the beginnings of agriculture. The garden was an **artificial oasis**. Gardens were enclosed; artificial pools added to provide an “oasis feeling.” Plantings are ordered and planted in straight rows because of irrigation requirements and flatness of land. Irrigation canals are a common feature. Fences and walls protect plants. Plants are treated architecturally; trained on lattice structure to artificial shapes (referred to as arbors, **bowers** or **pergolas**). Common plants were fruit trees, vines and palms with few flowers. Gardens represent human dominion over plants and the landscape creating an ordered and artificial environment. Egyptian gardens are the forerunner of our present day formal gardens which use plants as architectural elements. Formalism represents the dominance of humans over plants.

Assyria and Persia

Hanging gardens of Babylon were one of the seven wonders of the ancient world; based on **ziggurats**, temple towers constructed as artificially stylized hills (e.g. the tower of Babel), created in a flat land by people who yearned for hills. Walled gardens predominate. Wells were dug and there is complicated apparatus for watering and fountains. Gardens were rectangular and formal. Flowers enter the picture. Gardens become synonymous with relaxation and pleasure.

Hellenic and Hellenistic Gardens

Utilitarianism is the predominant feature of Hellenic gardens. Greek gardens were planted courts associated with buildings and serving as outdoor assembly rooms and public courts. Concept of **gymnasia**-public areas used for sports and recreation; **palestra** = playing field. Flowers were used as decoration. Drainage systems were involved and complicated. The Greeks after Alexander infused the Persian sense of pleasure with the Greek spirit of utilitarianism in their gardens.

Romans contributed advances in gardening. With their sense of order combined with their wealth and power, Romans incorporated gardens as an integral part of their lives. **Villa Rustica** of wealthy families was a country home built around gardens and provided the household with fruits and vegetables. The **Villa Urbana** was an urban estate with an ornamental garden. Common arrangements of plants utilized the **quincunx** formation which persists in our cemeteries.

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x      x

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Academies were large parks with grass enclosures. Common architectural features included **porticos** (colonnaded or covered ambulatory walks), statuary, columns, groves of trees (plane and cypress predominate), **grottos** (artificial caves), **pergolaed walks**, water and water works, fountains, and terraces. Many plants were introduced from other areas. Gardens became highly ornamented and luxurious (with questionable taste according to present standards); for example, heavily pruning and clipped hedges. Outdoor walls were painted with garden scenes; sculpture was also painted. (When this was recently carried out by a wealthy Saudi prince in Los Angeles there was a public protest!!)

Medieval Gardens

Medieval gardens originated in the monastery. Gardens were a combination of the villa rustica and the academy. Appended to churches was the **cloister**, a covered passage on the side of a court, usually having one side walled, and the other an open arcade or colonnade opening up into a garden. These gardens became a place of religious seclusion. Monastery gardens contained vegetables as well as spices, and grapes for sacramental purposes. Wines today are still associated with monasteries (e.g., Christian Brothers). Learning, including the ancient art of gardening, was preserved in the monastery following the tradition of Alberto Magnus. Two types of medieval gardens existed, ornamental and kitchen gardens.

When gardening spread to the nobility gardens became enlarged and splendid. Mazes, an ancient feature of gardens, was reintroduced strictly for pleasure (and romance?). There was an expansion of gardening as an art form and gardens became a mark of status for an emerging secular, wealthy class.

Italian Renaissance

Botanical gardens about 1550 originated in Padua and Pisa (Italy) and spread throughout Europe. The concept of gardens as a showplace for plants was a byproduct of botanical studies and the age of exploration. The beginnings of orangeries and protected gardening emerge. [Not exactly a new concept; the Romans had a rudimentary greenhouse (coldframe) made out of mica (**specularia**) that was used to force cucumbers.]

Garden design featured opulence. **Topiary**, training of hedges into fantastic shapes, was emphasized and when overdone, was ridiculed as plant butchery.

French Renaissance

Italian gardens changed direction in France; 1500–1600 is now known as the French Century. The accent was on elegance: vistas, long views, long steps and promenades, rushing waters, and fountains. **Le Notre**, master gardener and landscape architect of Louis XIV, made grand uses of water and canals, splendid vistas, and views. The extremely elaborate landscapes are the high point of formal gardens. Landscape architecture became as important, or even more important, than architecture. The supreme achievement was the **gardens of Versailles** (near Paris) which took 50 years to complete (worth a trip to France). It involved enormous earth moving projects, transplanting of large trees, and employed 18,000 workmen. It featured elaborate pruning and hedging. The gardens were on a vast scale with a grand canal, extensive use of sculpture, and container-growing of plants. The gardens today are beautifully restored although smaller than the original.

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