

Gardens and history: from ancient Egypt to modern America

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Gardens have evolved from two essential elements, plants and ornament. Of the two the plants have a longer history, from prehistoric times when gardens first emerged as domesticated agriculture. They have also been more constant because man has always needed to grow food and the cultivation of plants represents man's relationship with nature at its most fundamental and continuous.

Given the right circumstances, when he has not been preoccupied with the struggle for existence, man has been a creature of aspiration and herein lies the impetus for garden ornament. Ornament has elevated the garden from being a place of production to being a place of pleasure. In architectural forms it has enabled man to regulate the landscape. It has also enabled him to define and demonstrate his own relationship with nature and the landscape, be it one of subdued harmony or of desired supremacy. At certain historic peaks the ornamentation of gardens has produced great works of art, as well as bold and exciting illustrations of a society's sentiments towards the natural world.

Unlike horticulture, which has developed steadily around available plants and improvements in their cultivation, and which has usually been practised on both the humblest and the grandest scale, ornamental gardening has had certain important prerequisites. Because it has been expensive compared merely to growing things, it has been, until modern times, a pastime of the wealthy and privileged. Stimulated by a desire for relaxation, artistic expression and the enrichment of both mind and eye, it has been most successful in conditions of social stability, economic prosperity and intellectual and artistic activity and originality.

The evolution of garden ornament has gone through periods of both innovation and imitation, with successive civilizations drawing upon the traditions of their predecessors and integrating them into their own culture. This process reached a zenith during the Renaissance in Italy, the major watershed in the development of garden ornament. During the Renaissance the classical traditions of ancient Greece and Rome were reinterpreted and established as the backbone of garden ornament and architecture which, in the Western garden with which we are primarily concerned, they have remained ever since – at least until this century and the development of modern art.

While the gardens of China and Japan have histories as long as those of the Near East and Western worlds, and have during certain periods had an important influence upon garden ornament in some European countries, their evolution has been closely allied to the developing cultures of the two countries and therefore somewhat detached and independent rather than part of the historical mainstream.

The origins of this mainstream are to be found in the civilizations of Ancient Egypt and, to a lesser extent, Mesopotamia. We are fortunate that thanks to the wealth of material in hieroglyphics which adorn the walls of pyramids and other Egyptian remains, there is considerable evidence about and illustration of Egyptian gardens – very little of which exists in the case of Mesopotamia.

The whole culture of ancient Egypt revolved around the River Nile and the country's economy depended upon the agriculture which it supported. Given a social hierarchy which enjoyed stability for many centuries, the development of an ornamental style of gardening was a logical consequence. The gardens were created around the temples, royal palaces and the homes of important Egyptians such as high priests and they were tended by the slaves who were the country's workforce.

The terrace at Longwood, Pennsylvania, overlooks the Italian Water Garden and is therefore made into a feature for viewing. Beneath it a series of urns, fountains and trellises give character to the retaining wall.

Historical introduction

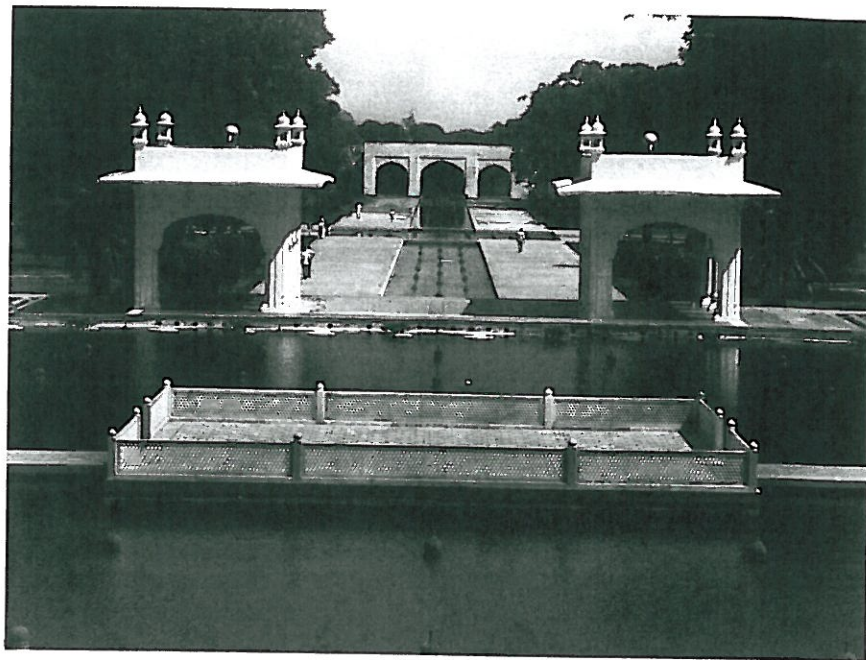
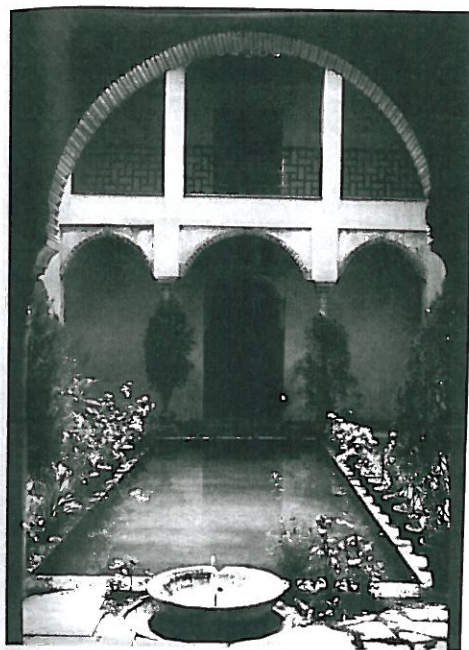
The most important general feature of Egyptian gardens was that they were designed in a formal, orderly style, a precedent which has been followed ever since. At an early stage the gardens were enclosed, originally for seclusion and privacy. Later the brick walls provided the opportunity for ornamentation in the form of patterned brickwork and tiled coping along their tops, and with gates and doorways. Because of the country's heat and the arid surroundings to the Nile valley, trees and water were highly prized. Trees were planted in geometric rows while water was contained in rectangular pools and canals. Other important features were wooden pergolas to support vines, many of them with carved and painted pillars; terraces joined by stairways as a means of linking a garden of different levels; and the decoration of gardens with statues of kings, deities and sphinxes, and with large earthenware pots containing small trees and shrubs.

There is no doubt that the Egyptians were influenced in their gardening by what had been established in the older civilizations of Mesopotamia, but evidence of the extent and general appearance of Mesopotamian gardens is scarce. We do know, however, that ornamental gardens were created in the cradle of Western civilization between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, some on the terraces of the great ziggurats, others around palaces and temples. Water, contained in formal pools and canals, was essential, as it was in Egypt and has been in the gardens of most countries – especially those with a hot climate – ever since. Again the overall plan was regular and geometric, thereby providing a satisfying sense of order.

The importance of water in ancient Egyptian gardens is charmingly illustrated in this mural from a tomb at Thebes. The owner is shown raising water for his garden by means of a pole with a bucket on one end and a weight on the other. These devices are still used today.



In Islamic gardens water is used in ways that have few parallels in the West. Here, at Shalamar Bagh, in Lahore (right), a place for sitting in the midst of the pool is reached by flat causeways at water level. In Granada, Spain (below), one can still recapture the cool tranquillity of the Moorish courtyard garden.



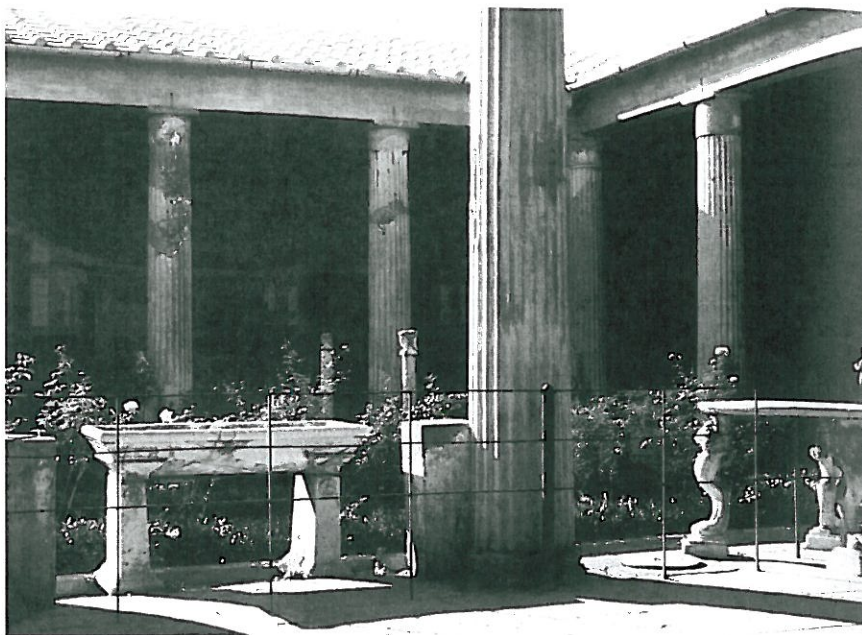
Both Mesopotamia and Egypt were conquered by the ancient Persians, features of whose gardens show clear descent from the two countries. Despite being fierce conquerors the Persians made considerable developments in ornamental gardening and were to establish the tradition of what became the Islamic garden. It was with them that the concept of the garden as Paradise first emerged, as early as the time of Cyrus the Great, who established the Persian empire, and whose gardens, described by Xenophon, were called Paradise.

After the foundation of Islam during the 7th century, the tradition of the Persians provided the basis for Islamic gardens in which ornamental gardening reached new heights. Two outstanding surviving groups are the Mughal gardens of India and the Moorish gardens of Spain. Like those of their ancient forebears, Islamic gardens were formal, most often rectangular in shape and divided into quarters by four channels of water representing the four rivers of life, which flowed from a central tank or – as in many Mughal gardens – from a central pavilion. Water was an all-important element in Islamic gardens and was used with wonderful ingenuity, whether in the fountains which play in the courts of the Alhambra Palace in Spain or in the cascades or *chadars* down which great sheets of water fall from one terrace to another in the Mughal gardens in Kashmir.

As well as their water features, Islamic gardens contained exquisite architecture, ranging from delicate pavilions providing shade to breathtaking buildings such as the Taj Mahal, or the colonnades and cloisters, with their richly carved arches and pillars, which enclosed courtyard gardens. The overall effect which was striven for was the creation of a scene of ordered beauty and repose, aspiring to the gardens of Paradise as described in the Koran.

There is virtually no surviving evidence of gardens created by the ancient Greeks. They were almost all dedicated to their gods and subservient to the temples and grottoes which they surrounded. But if they made little direct contribution to the development of ornamental gardening, the Greeks' influence upon subsequent ornamental gardening has been of fundamental importance in that the classical architecture of their temples, the statues of their gods and heroes and the style of other smaller features such as urns and vases, have dominated the ornamentation of Western gardens ever since.

Roman gardens varied from the domestic to the palatial. The urban houses of towns like Pompeii presented blank walls to the street, but inside were closed gardens where planting was cunningly used in conjunction with fountains, furniture and statues.



The importance of this influence was first evident in the gardens of ancient Rome, in particular in the villa gardens of wealthy Romans as described in great detail by Pliny the Younger. Roman gardens combined horticulture and ornament in a manner which had never been seen before and which raised the gardening art to a new level of sophistication. Garden and villa were intrinsically linked and the garden itself presented a picture of orderly balance made up of architectural features such as colonnaded porticoes copied from Greek originals, water, statues and a wide range of ornamental plants collected from all parts of the empire.

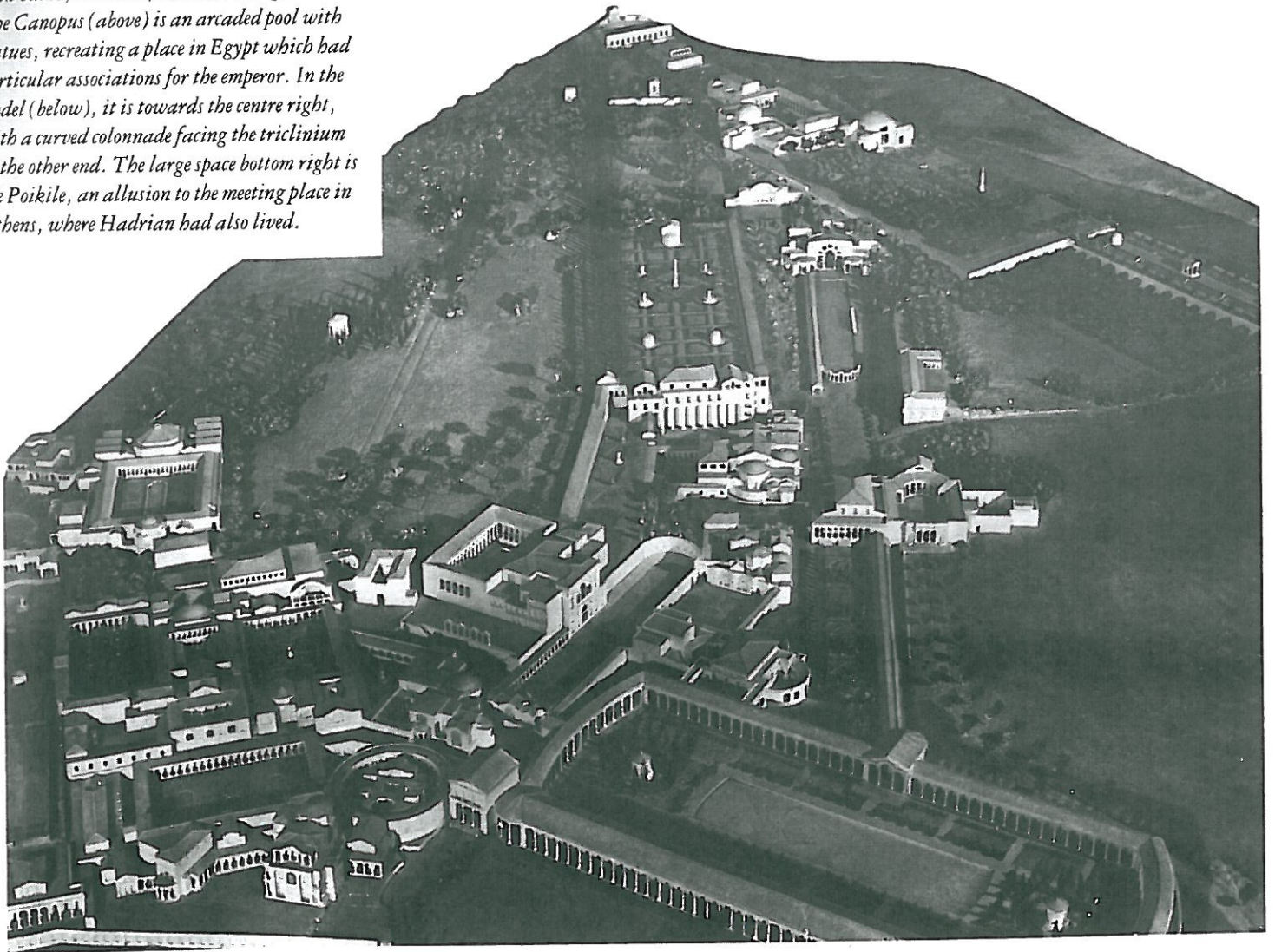
The most famous Roman villa garden was made by the emperor Hadrian near Tivoli. The enormous villa complex – more like a small town than a single residence – was built between 118 and 138 AD and the various groups of buildings and different areas were named after places which Hadrian had particularly enjoyed visiting during his travels through the Roman empire. Foremost among the garden features was the Canopus, named after the canal in the Nile delta near Alexandria, enough of which survives in original or restored form to reveal its masterly quality.

The Canopus was made in a natural valley which was enlarged to allow the canal which dominates the picture to be of sufficiently impressive proportions. The canal was surrounded by an arched colonnade with statues between the arches and, along one side, by a loggia supported by caryatids copied from the Erechtheum at Athens. At the far end of the canal was the focal-point of the whole design, the *triclinium* (or *nymphaeum*), a dining-room with an arched ceiling in the shape of an apse with water running down the curving stone of the semi-circular walls. Here Hadrian entertained and impressed his guests.

The symmetry of Hadrian's Canopus, the perfect balance of architecture, statues and water, represented a zenith in ornamental gardening in the ancient world. Like the rest of the villa, however, it did not survive intact for long after Hadrian's death. With the collapse of the Roman empire and the beginning of the Dark Ages the destruction of all such places was widespread throughout Europe. Garden making, along with all other aspects of civilized life, retreated into small protected pockets such as Christian monasteries and ornamental gardening disappeared almost completely. When it was revived over one thousand years later, excavations revealed that part of the Canopus had survived and, as the Renaissance dawned in Italy, it was destined to become a major inspiration to the garden makers of this most exciting and creative era.



Hadrian's Villa, outside Tivoli, is almost a world of its own, at least a miniature city, with baths, a theatre, libraries and gardens. The Canopus (above) is an arcaded pool with statues, recreating a place in Egypt which had particular associations for the emperor. In the model (below), it is towards the centre right, with a curved colonnade facing the triclinium at the other end. The large space bottom right is the Poikile, an allusion to the meeting place in Athens, where Hadrian had also lived.

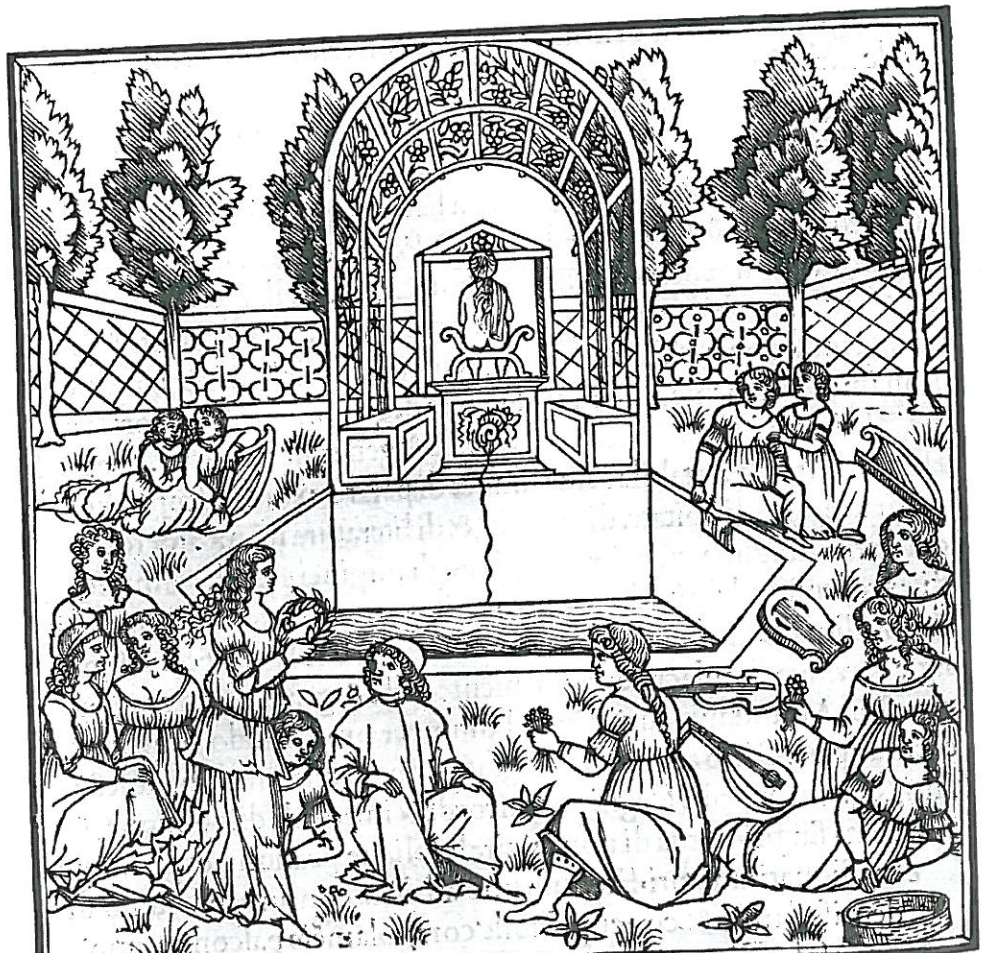


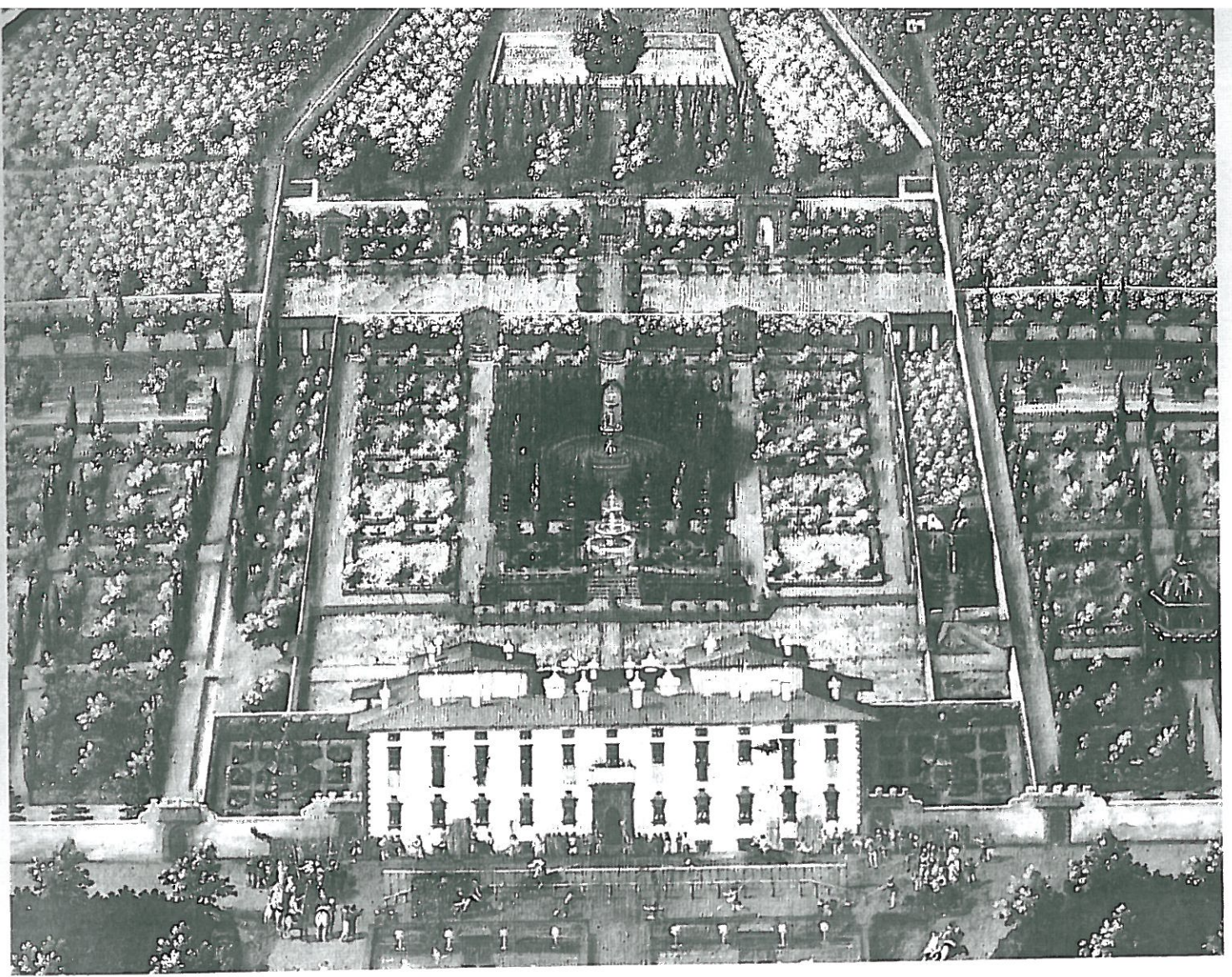
The philosophical inspiration of the Renaissance was the relationship of individual man and his surroundings, and so the creation of a garden was an ideal medium in which to examine and celebrate this relationship. The ideology behind the gardens of the Italian Renaissance was rooted in humanism, going back to the writing of Petrarch and – centuries earlier – Pliny; their style was rooted in the classicism of ancient Greece and Rome. Architectural symmetry went hand-in-hand with the aspiration to represent a state of natural order with man as the figure of central importance. It is this completeness of concept and execution which gave the gardens their astonishing strength and vitality.

In all fields of the arts the relationship between patron and artist in the Renaissance achieved a productivity which has never since been equalled, and nowhere more so than in the creation of gardens. The patrons, for whom villas with surrounding gardens became an essential part of life, as they had been for the élite of ancient Rome, were the leaders of Italy's great mercantile and financial families (notably the Medici of Florence who, by the middle of the 15th century, had acquired enormous wealth and power) and the leaders of the Church – the popes and cardinals. The men whom they commissioned were the architects, engineers and craftsmen who were the life-blood of the Renaissance and who strove towards its ideal of the *uomo universale*.

Compared with what was to follow, the early Renaissance gardens, made around the villas in the hills surrounding Florence, were subdued in both atmosphere and appearance. This was partly because they retained ties with the medieval *hortus conclusus* and also because they were primarily places for philosophical discussion, reviving the spirit of the Platonic Academy. The guidelines for the creation of these gardens were laid down by Leon Battista Alberti in his treatise *De Re Aedificatoria*, published in 1452.

The Italian humanists could be said to have rediscovered gardens, seeing them as the ideal setting for civilized amusement, conversation and music. Renaissance gardens still have something of the medieval 'hortus conclusus', a refuge from the outside world, but combined with ideas from ancient Rome. Francesco Colonna's 'Hypnerotomachia Poliphili' (1499) is an involved love-story in which gardens play a major part. Its woodcut illustrations had a lasting influence. This one shows the lovers Poliphilus and Polia at the Fountain of Venus.



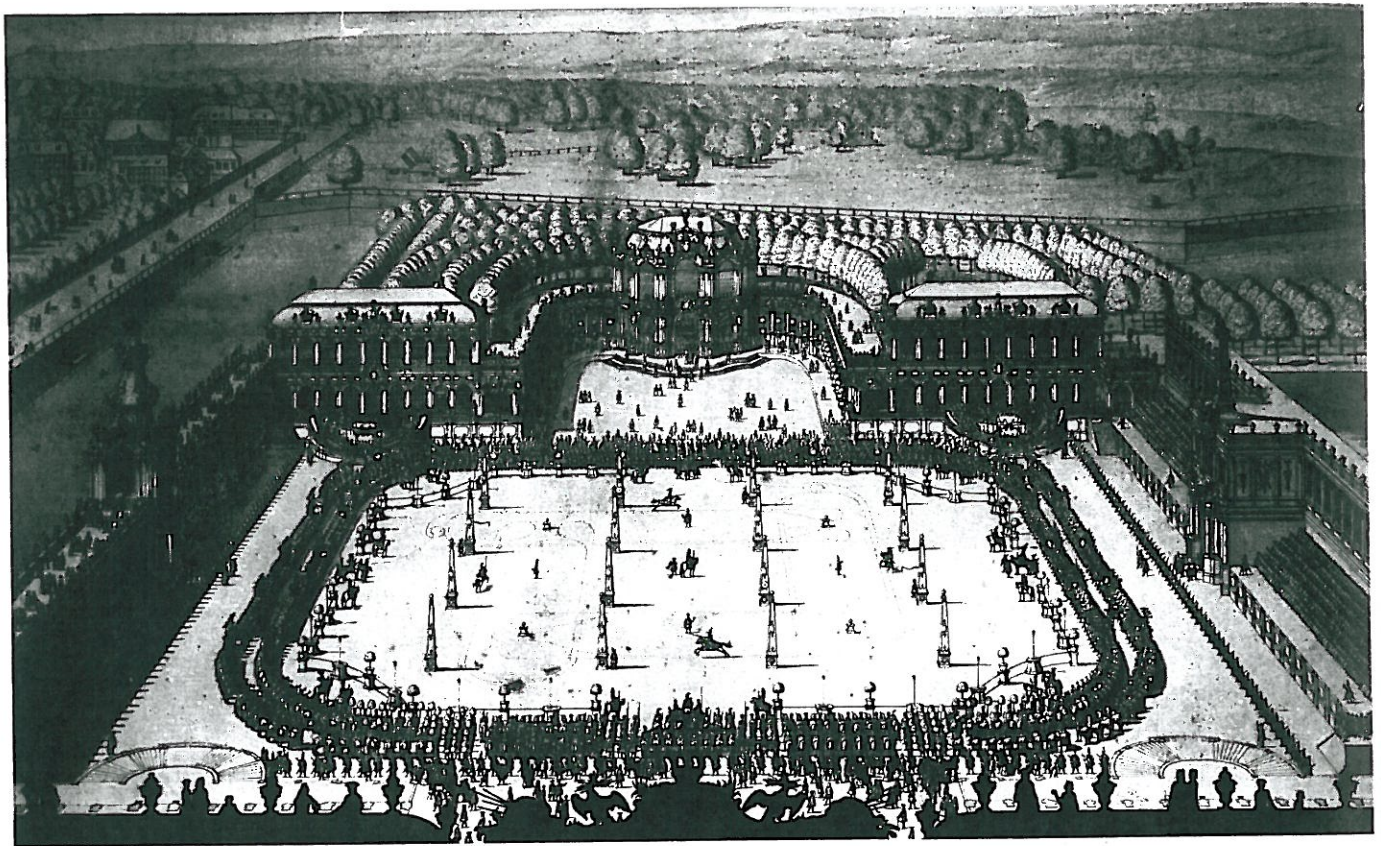


The Medici Villa Castello, outside Florence, which Vasari called 'the most magnificent garden in Europe'. Begun in 1538, it consisted of a series of terraces linked on a main axis and at each level using a statue and fountain as a visual focus. Outside the ornamental walled garden are areas for growing fruit and vegetables. The grotto is shown on p. 12.

Alberti advocated a revival of the principles and design of gardens employed by the Romans and the creation of a suitably peaceful and orderly setting for learned conversation. Therefore, while the overall picture was classical, architecture and ornament were only to be used when dictated by the complete design and not for their own sake. At the Villa Careggi, Cosimo the Elder, the patriarch of the Medici, gathered together a group who were called the Platonic Academy and his garden closely followed the advice set down by his contemporary, Alberti.

A century later Alberti's principles of garden making were carried to probably their highest limits at the Medici Villa at Castello. The garden was designed for Cosimo the Great, Duke of Tuscany, by Niccolò Tribolo and while the plan is conservative in its reserved simplicity, an important break with Alberti's limitations is marked in the fountains and statues. The original centrepiece to the main walled garden, which rises gently away from the villa uphill to the entrance to the grotto set in the enclosing wall, was a fountain by Tribolo surmounted by a statue of Venus (sometimes referred to as Florence rising from the Water) by Giambologna. This was replaced in the 18th century by the present statue of Hercules and Antaeus by Ammanati. Crouching among trees beyond the upper wall is the colossal stone figure 'The Apennines' also by Ammanati. Set in the garden's upper wall, on the main central axis, is the pillared entrance to the grotto.

The decisive step from the contemplative garden to the garden whose main point is visual excitement was taken, as we have seen, at Bramante's Cortile del Belvedere in 1503. The essential values of this type of layout – axial, sophisticated, artificial in every sense – remained paramount for two hundred years, dominating the whole of garden history, from the great Italian masterpieces, through the vast formal gardens of France to the England of Vanbrugh and Kent (see pp. 10-23) and indeed beyond.

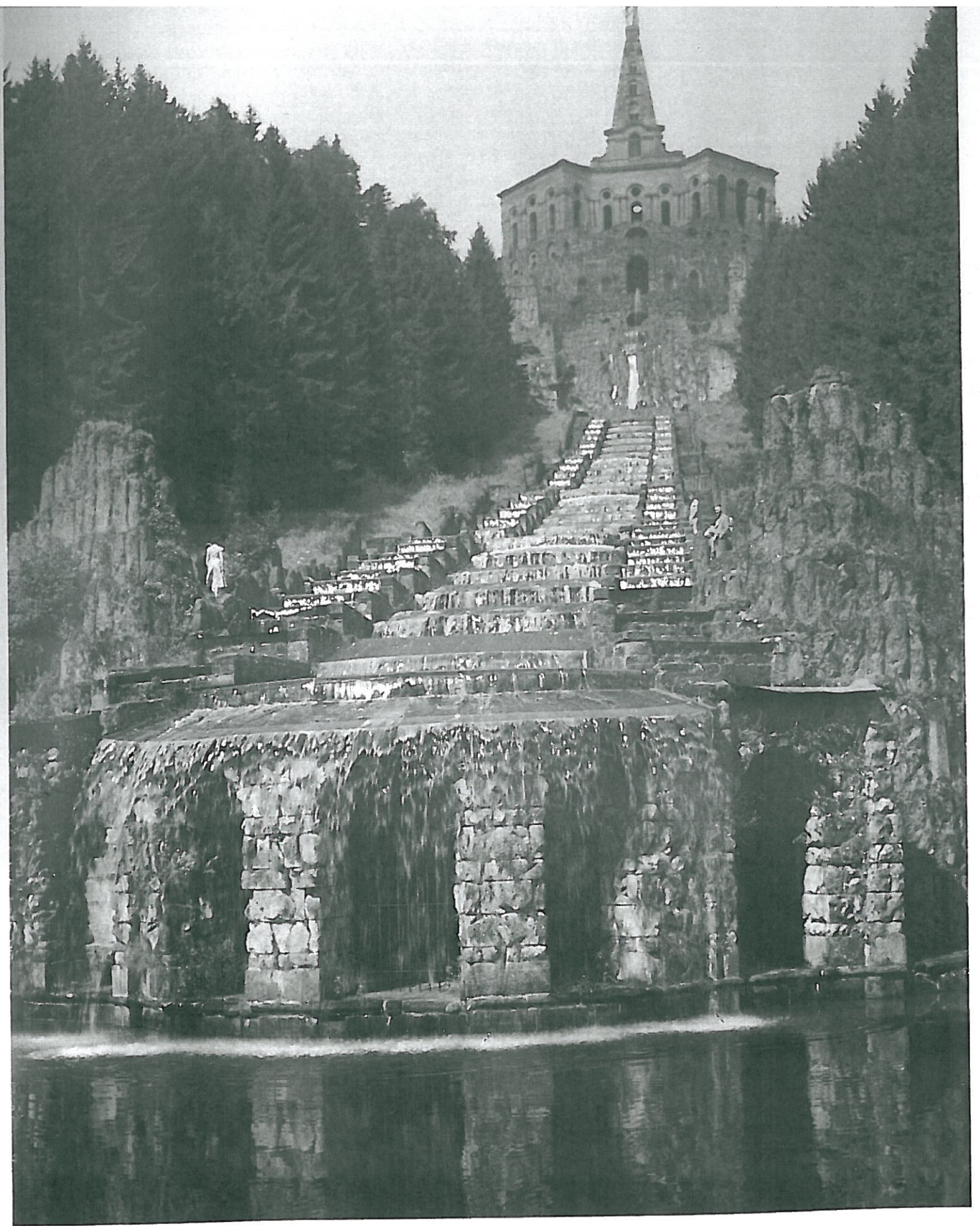


The Zwinger, in Dresden, was exactly the sort of festive architecture which had its place in gardens, though in fact it was a parade ground attached to the royal palace. It consisted of a highly ornamented gate, ranges of galleries and a central pavilion acting as a grandstand.

Opposite: the octagon and cascade at Wilhelmshöhe. Planned by Giovanni Guarnero, its most spectacular feature is a great cascade incorporating statues and grottoes. The building at the top, surmounted by an obelisk carrying a copy of the Farnese Hercules, is the reservoir.

In Germany the story of gardens is similar to that of architecture. At a time when the Baroque impetus had waned in Italy, the rulers of the small German courts took it up with renewed vigour, transforming it into something lighter, less serious, more playful, and producing the late flowering that is known as Rococo. The masterpiece of this style is perhaps the Zwinger at Dresden, an ornamental courtyard that has all the characteristics of a garden except planting. Elsewhere, the same style was expanded to fill extensive parks. At Wilhelmshöhe, outside Kassel, the layout, begun in 1701, was supervised by an Italian. Its focal feature is an enormous cascade, clearly suggested by Italian models, but on an even vaster scale. Even this was only a third of what was originally planned. Veitshochheim, in Bavaria, dates from later in the century and is less spectacular than Wilhelmshöhe. But it excels in the variety and boldness of its sculpture – over three hundred figures of gods, ladies of the court, musicians and animals (including the winged horse Pegasus) as well as garden furniture of amazing, if uncomfortable, Rococo shapes.

In England, by this date, a wholly new style had emerged – introduced by William Kent and his contemporaries – which was to sweep most of Europe. At Stowe and Rousham the quality of visual surprise is still there, but the overall approach has relaxed to take account of natural features; a strong element of informality and the landscape is allowed to play its part.



Typical of this progression from the garden as expressing control over nature to the garden as harmony with nature is Stourhead, in Wiltshire. It is at once the climax of the idealized natural landscape and the moment of the discovery, attributed by Horace Walpole to Kent, that 'all Nature is a garden'.

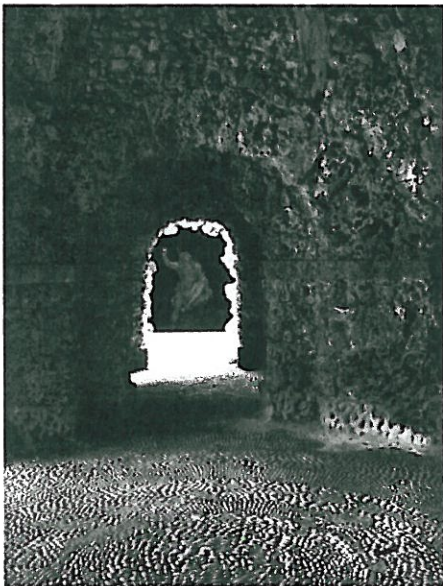
Stourhead was created by Henry Hoare, one of the many talented amateurs who were practising as both architects and gardeners during the 18th century. Here landscape has become detached from garden, and the house, out of sight some distance away, plays no part in the design.

Around a large, irregularly shaped lake, made by damming the existing stream, surrounded by sloping woods, Hoare planned his garden as a progression from one classical building to another, each with its own significance. As well as the temples such as the Pantheon, he included a large grotto, a rustic hermitage and, at one end, a five-arched bridge and the Bristol Cross, a genuine Gothic monument relocated. Horace Walpole described Stourhead as 'one of the most picturesque places in the world'.

In the work of 'Capability' Brown classical allusion, and indeed all architectural ornament, virtually disappeared and the boundaries between garden and surrounding countryside were removed. The acceptance of open parkland as the ideal setting for a country house continued after his death in 1783. Its most successful exponent towards the end of the 18th century was Humphry Repton. Repton's work did reveal an important development, however, in that he accepted that some garden around the house, in the form of flower-beds or terraces, was a desirable prelude to the surrounding park.

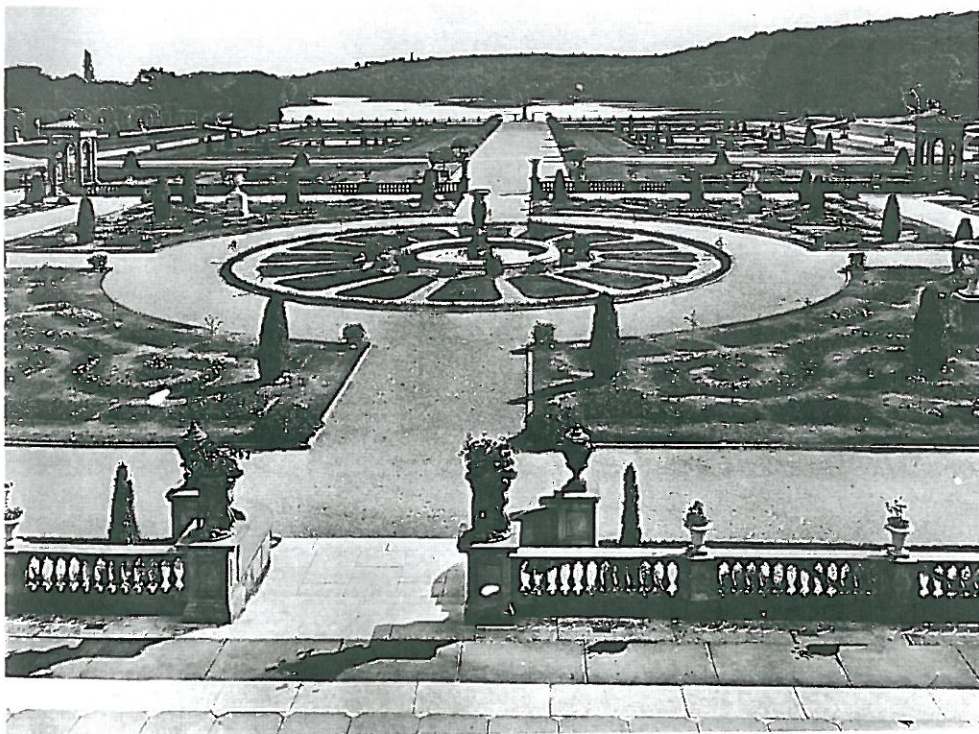
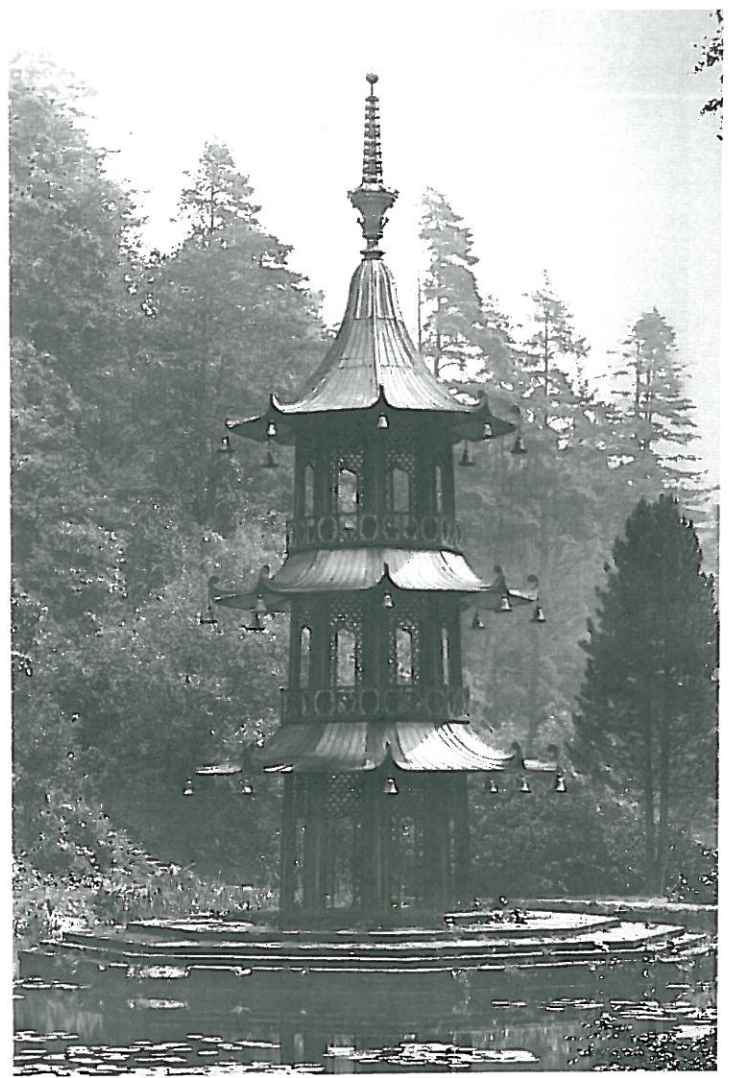
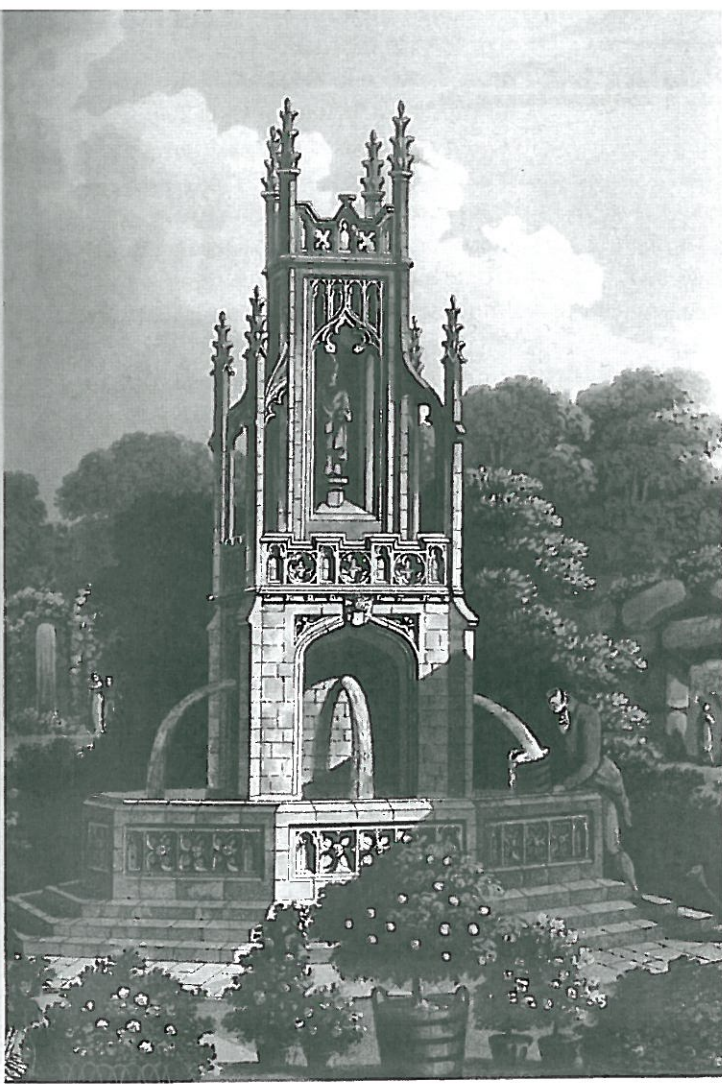
To this extent, Repton hinted at the change that was to come early in the 19th century when gardens once again attained supremacy over landscape. As the writings of John Loudon show, gardening was no longer the exclusive domain of the upper classes but was hankered after by the emerging Victorian middle classes. With no one style dominant and with new plants constantly becoming available from overseas, English gardens embarked upon a period of eclecticism which continued throughout the 19th century and into the beginning of the 20th.

Gardens throughout continental Europe continued to be dominated by the ornamental formality of the Italian and French styles during the 18th century, but by its later decades the influence of the English landscape had spread and was evident in gardens such as Canon in Normandy. In one feature, the Chinese kiosk



Stourhead in Wiltshire is set in a wooded valley watered by the river Stour. Here Henry Hoare in the 1740s created an Arcadian world full of classical and poetic allusions, and artfully informal in its succession of buildings and images. The grotto (above) is a circular domed space lit from above, one part of it containing a statue of a river god. Right: the Temple of Apollo (1765) seen across the lake from the Temple of Flora (1745).





Gothic and oriental tastes in the 19th century: Repton's design for a fountain at Ashridge (above left), and the Chinese pagoda fountain of Alton Towers (above right), designed by Robert Abraham and made of cast iron.

At Trentham Park, Staffordshire, Sir Charles Barry laid out extensive gardens in the revived Italianate style that became fashionable as a reaction against the Picturesque in the 1840s. Symmetrical gravel paths, clipped hedges, steps and balustrades reappeared after an interval of a hundred years.

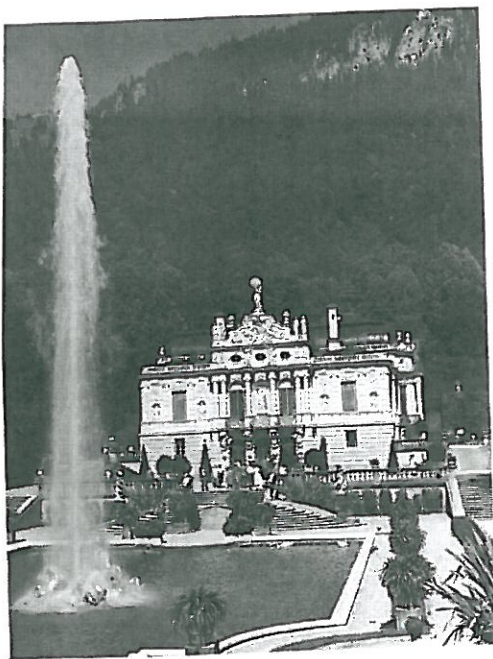
Historical introduction

which stands as the focal-point at the end of a main vista, Canon also revealed the oriental influence which became popular in many gardens and which was practised in England by Sir William Chambers, who added the Chinese pagoda to the royal gardens at Kew. The Chinese style was to see its most dramatic application in England during the 19th century, at Alton Towers in Staffordshire, in parts of Biddulph Grange, also in Staffordshire and, later, at Whatton in Leicestershire.

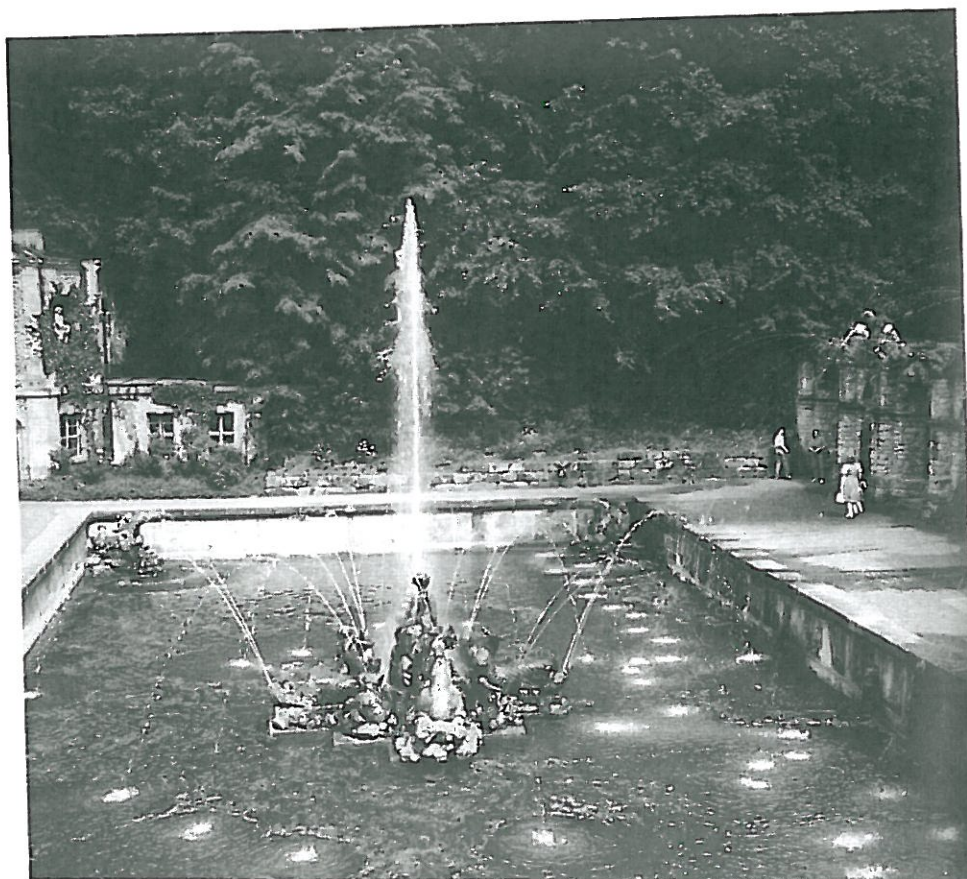
Gardens such as these were, however, individual and unusual. In most large Victorian gardens Italianate or French formality was the rule. The aim was to be both impressive and decorative: the result was often opulent and sometimes garish. Brightly coloured flower parterres were decorated with statues, urns and seats, and formal rose gardens centred upon metalwork arbours, all of which were reproduced in large quantities by new industrial techniques, and in particular through the use of artificial stone and cast iron.

Both in England and on the Continent most 19th-century garden design and ornament was derivative. Linderhof, one of Ludwig II's Bavarian estates, combines Italianate features with English Picturesque and French formality, plus heavy overtones from Wagnerian Romanticism (one grotto contains Lohengrin's swan-drawn boat). The centrepiece is a fountain consisting of a single immensely tall water-spout that Louis XIV would certainly have envied, water-pressure being less of a problem in the Bavarian Alps than on the levels of Versailles. The garden of the Eremitage at Bayreuth is also in its way deeply Romantic, with its quiet pools, dripping grottoes and artificial ruins.

England at this time was again wide open to influences from abroad. Sir Charles Barry's terraced gardens such as Shrublands Park were inspired by the Italian Renaissance, while the complex parterres laid out by William Nesfield, another leading figure in Victorian gardening, recalled those of 17th-century France. Statues and urns were copies of famous classical figures or reproductions of well-established designs. Novelty was provided by the flood of plants, especially into England where new species were to transform the appearance of gardens.



Two German gardens. Linderhof, in Bavaria, is a combination of styles, centred upon an enormous fountain. It was created by King Ludwig II in the 1870s. The Eremitage at Bayreuth (right) was begun a century earlier but looks forward to 19th century Romanticism. Around the lake with its central fountain are a hermitage, a grotto and an artificial ruin.



Hidcote, in Gloucestershire, shows the influence of Lutyens and Jekyll, with its combination of picturesque planting and clipped hedges, brick paths and steps that re-introduce an element of classicism.



Ornamental originality reappeared with the advent of the Art Nouveau movement towards the end of the 19th century. Although its influence upon gardens was limited compared to its importance in other artistic spheres its effect can be seen in ironwork for gates and screens, in garden furniture and in some statuary, such as the series of bronze figures at Chirk Castle in Clwyd.

A movement which was to have far more influence upon English gardens was the Arts and Crafts, for out of it grew the partnership of Gertrude Jekyll and Edwin Lutyens. The style which they developed and practised with huge success combined plantsmanship and vernacular architecture to a most satisfying degree, as well as stressing the importance of a close integration of house and surrounding garden. Their work became the primary influence upon the development of English gardens through the 20th century and its influence can be clearly seen in some of the century's most celebrated gardens, such as Hidcote Manor in Gloucestershire and Sissinghurst Castle in Kent.

Since the days of the earliest Dutch and English settlers, the gardens of the United States have been strongly influenced by developments in Europe. At the same time gardens have evolved to demonstrate the size and diversity of the United States and the differences to be found in contrasting areas, as well as to reflect the character of the American people.

The first gardens were functional, growing vegetables and fruit for food. Once the settlers became more established and self-assured, flower gardening followed but there is little evidence of any sort of architectural or decorative ornament. During the 18th and early 19th centuries two gardens of considerable significance and influence were created by two of the country's foremost political figures, the first by George Washington at Mount Vernon, the second by Thomas Jefferson at Monticello. Both gardens were strongly influenced by the landscape style which had become established in England, but were adapted in a manner and to a scale that was distinctly American. There is still little architectural ornament other than small summerhouses and gazebos and the gardens' plans were essentially areas of flower beds and borders leading to more informal shrubberies linked by winding paths.

After the upheaval of the Civil War the return of peace to the United States ushered in a period sometimes known as the Country House Era, when the country's wealth and power made rapid advances. It was this generation of enormous wealth in the hands of private individuals which was to bring about an

upsurge in ornamental gardening in many parts of the United States. The spirits of the Italian Renaissance and of Baroque France were emulated in impressive formal layouts dominated by pools, fountains and a rich variety of architectural ornament and smaller embellishments.

Shortly after the turn of the century one of the most spectacular American gardens was made at Longwood, Pennsylvania, for Pierre S. du Pont. Longwood's highlight is the enormous Fountain Garden where the complex series of jets rivals anything produced in France during the 17th century. The Italian Renaissance was most impressively revived at Villa Vizcaya, Florida, in the garden of James Deering made just before the beginning of the First World War. Here the whole design is Italian, with terraces and fountains and an abundance of imported 17th- and 18th-century statuary and urns.

Probably the most admired of these American gardens was one of the last to be created, at Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, DC. Owned by Mildred Barnes Bliss, Dumbarton Oaks was laid out between the wars and virtually all the design was by Beatrice Farrand. Here the Italian influence was most successfully incorporated into an American style which also revealed clear sympathy with English gardens and in particular with the work of Gertrude Jekyll. Dumbarton Oaks remains one of the truly outstanding gardens to have been made in the United States.

More than in almost any other country of the world, contemporary American gardens have shown a capacity to incorporate modern and abstract influences in both their overall design and the style of individual ornamental features. Free from the restrictions of a deeply entrenched historical tradition such as exists in all European countries, and aided by the manner in which original modern styles have been accepted in architecture, American garden designers have moved away from classical traditions more easily. As a result a truly individual American style of garden emerged during the post-war decades, no longer derivative from those European originals which provided the models for so much of the country's history.

Dumbarton Oaks, Washington DC, is among the most ambitious and successful gardens in the USA. It consists of a number of interrelated, small-scale spaces creating variety and surprise. Some elements are drawn from the European Arts and Crafts Movement, others (illustrated in colour) are purely American in inspiration.

