

RESTORATION ASSESSMENT OF THE
FRENCH GARDEN AT HILLWOOD MUSEUM

November 17, 1997

I. INTRODUCTION

Something Old Something New

In understanding the gardens here at Hillwood, one must first understand the meaning of where and why Mrs. Marjorie Merriweather Post chose to create it the way she did. One thing of importance to Mrs. Post was that all of her gardens incorporate those styles or aesthetics which she found pleasing. This is quite evident in our gardens here at Hillwood.

The Hillwood Museum Gardens are created from little parts of all the gardens Mrs. Post had before her residency at Hillwood. Such similarities can be seen throughout all her gardens, from the front entry where she used the Porte Cochere at Tregaron, just as she had at her New York apartment, to the planted ellipse taken from Tregaron. At Tregaron one would see the exact garden design of the ellipse at Hillwood. Other similarities in the gardens are the location of a formal garden to be viewed from her bedroom window. The French Garden is probably the best example of how important she felt it was to recreate a past garden. If you go to the first Hillwood on Long Island and view the outside from her bedroom window, you look down to a formal parterre garden. Also important in that garden is the variegated Boxwood. This boxwood is significant because she repeatedly used it in all her gardens and because it is no longer available on the market. But that is not all. Mrs. Post took elements of the veranda at Tregaron and applied them in the French parterre garden at Hillwood. The compass set in the pavers of the pavilion garden was "borrowed" from Tregaron. The limestone curbs on all the drives also existed at Tregaron. The streetlights lining the drive are indicative of Tregaron, and a putting green can be found at almost all her properties.

Another important aspect of the Hillwood garden is the fact that Mrs. Post did not approach a new property to completely alter it, but she chose to retain the elements that already existed and were of value and to enhance them, rather than destroy them. This can be seen again and again in all her gardens. Each of her gardens is associated with prominent landscape designers, which meant that all the gardens have a good foundation. Mrs. Post took what was usually a well-designed landscape and customized it to her desires. Marion Coffin designed the original Hillwood; Ellen Biddle Shipman designed Tregaron; and at the present Hillwood, Mrs. Post utilized the work of four famous landscape design firms, Willard Gebhart, Innocenti and Webel, Shogo Myaida, and Perry Wheeler.

The association with Innocenti and Webel is of most importance to the present aesthetics and condition of the gardens. Together they took the best elements of the old and melded them with the new to create the world class garden we now enjoy. Mrs. Post saw it necessary to preserve elements of the gardens she inherited and to incorporate them into the new site. It is now our responsibility to preserve and protect the old gardens of Arbremont (Hillwood pre-1955) as well as the "new" Hillwood gardens as updated by Mrs. Post.

I. PRESERVATION GOAL

This preservation project will focus on the preservation and restoration of the French Garden, which was originally designed by Umberto Innocenti of Innocenti and Webel Landscape Architects. The preservation goal is to correct existing design problems and material failures without changing the original design intent of the architects, Umberto Innocenti and Richard Webel, or that of Mrs. Post.

III. EXISTING CONDITIONS

Existing problems include limestone failure in the water features and in the curbing around the flower beds, steps and veranda. Many of these problems exist due to improper maintenance of masonry joints and the introduction of exposed aggregate concrete pavers in walkways. Most of the joints of the limestone failed due to the use of the wrong type of mortar, or in many cases, no mortar at all. This caused the stone to either break away from the larger piece, or, in the case of no mortar, to fill with water and freeze. Some of this damage was further exacerbated by faulty repairs to the limestone features over the past twenty years.

By introducing the exposed aggregate concrete (we are not sure who did this or when it was done, but we do know it was not in the original installation) most of the drainage in the garden was compromised, causing much of the garden to heave in the winter. This further created problems in the limestone coping, because no expansion joint was provided. When the concrete expanded and contracted throughout the year, there was no relief between the two surfaces, thereby causing the limestone to fracture. Another problem likely caused by the concrete pavers is the entry of water into the basement of the main house when it rains. The addition of the concrete pavers covered over the existing drainage system and rendered it useless. Because no drainage was provided onto the surface of the concrete, the water thereby had to create its own path. As we know, water follows the path of least resistance, which in this case seems to be the southeast and northwest corners of the garden and into the basement..

Another problem is the installation of the tile in all three pools. When the fountains were originally designed, no tile was to be installed and the pool walls were to be plastered. At some point in the installation, it was decided that tile would line the pools. Although this creates visual relief from all the stone, the method of installation was not considered. The original design clearly showed a one-inch overhang of the capstone inside the pools. Because of the thickness of the tile and the mortar base necessary to install the tile, the overhang was lost. In early photographs of the garden, one can see the awkwardness in the final design and installation. In addition, the original tile was Italian glass tile. Under the normal course of weathering, it came time to replace the tile because it either fell off or buckled due to the lack of overhang needed to protect it. Rather than remove the first application of tile before making the repair, new layers were added on top of the old, original layer. It is not known when the ceramic tile now used was introduced, but this clearly changed the look of the pools. The only remaining glass tile, we believe, is in the base of the Swan Fountain.

The stability of all sculpture in the garden is questionable and should be evaluated as to present condition. A course of action for repair or replacement should then be recommended. The Swan fountain should especially be considered for replacement, as it is made of a material that is not durable in the Washington area and shows severe signs of rapid deterioration. It is expected that all the features of the Swan fountain will be destroyed in another twenty years, leaving nothing but a nondescript block of soft marble. The lead of the putto fountains in the center pool has deteriorated to a point that the fountains may need to be replaced.

The ivy wall that surrounds the French garden is constructed of steel and shows some signs of corrosion. A consideration should be made to determine whether or not to replace it with a more durable material. Missing from the garden is the ivy that surrounds the Swan fountain on the west wall of the house. This was removed at some point after the death of Mrs. Post and its removal seriously compromises the overall design intent. Every attempt should be made to recreate this lost feature without compromising the durability of the brick surface.

The remaining problem in this garden is that of the boxwood parterre. In the original installation, English boxwood was used, but it suffered severe winter damage every year. Throughout the years many different plants have been tried as a replacement to the English boxwood. We now know that 'Winter Gem,' a cultivar of Korean boxwood, is the best choice to use for parterres in this climate. This was also discussed with Alfred Manfree of Innocenti and Webel, the original designer of the garden, and they agreed. At this time the steel edging used to create the pattern of the boxwood planting can be adjusted as it has shifted in some places.

IV. SCOPE OF WORK

The scope of work for the French garden restoration is to correct all structural and/or design problems to recreate the design intent of Mrs. Post and the original architect. In doing so, first all exposed aggregate surfaces should be removed. The original plan clearly indicates the desired method of installation of walks, which in addition to being an important aesthetic feature, was critical to the proper drainage of the garden. Restoration of the walks to the original design will also restore the proper drainage of water. Any limestone failures should be addressed, assuring structural integrity at every level. Some stones will need to be replaced. In no area of the garden will patching or Dutchman of stone be allowed. If a piece of stone cannot be salvaged in its entirety, then a new piece should be made. This is to ensure that the design intent is not compromised to save material.

The coping in all three pools must be further evaluated to determine the most appropriate solution to correct the tile appearance and durability without compromising the design intent. Selection of comparable tile to match that of the original glass tile is crucial to the effect of the water presentation. Every effort should be made to select a color range comparable to that of the original. All stone work should be placed on proper concrete footings. Any freestanding sculpture should also be installed on proper concrete footings.

During the evaluation of structural integrity of the fountains, the integrity of all plumbing should be assessed further. It is strongly suspected that the plumbing for the fountains is leaking or corroded and should be replaced at this time. The drainage system should be evaluated as to its condition. If it appears to be deteriorated or in failing condition, it should be replaced. The original drawings show the exact location and function of drainage system.

At this time the ivy on the west wall should be reintroduced. A hinged trellis must be designed and installed so that it can be pulled from the wall to trim the ivy and prevent it from growing into the brick and mortar. The material used to fabricate the trellis must be durable and noncorrosive, yet maintain the original design intent. Recommended changes in any other plantings will be done at the same time.

V. THE HISTORY OF FRENCH-STYLE GARDENS

The first formal gardens in France were copied after the magnificent Italian villas that French troops first encountered on military exploits in Naples. In a letter back home, Charles VIII described the lavish and extensive gardens of Italy's Alfonso II as "an earthly paradise." When French troops withdrew in 1495, they took back to France vast quantities of classical statuary, paintings, and other artwork to decorate their dark and austere chateaus.

Beginning with Charles VIII, the French monarchy embarked on a program lasting two centuries that employed designers with military backgrounds to move earth, and to build terraces, canals and roadways incorporated into vast pleasure gardens.

Italian antiquity became the fashion, and Francois I in the 1520's hired Italian artisans to improve the castle and grounds of Fontainebleau. The chateau's main courtyard opens onto a large artificial lake bordered by symmetrical garden parterres enhanced with copies of Italian statuary depicting mythological gods and goddesses. A few decades later, Henri II hired a French architect, Philibert de l'Orme, who had studied in Italy, to oversee his buildings. Working with the king's powerful mistress, Diane de Poitiers, de l'Orme transformed the grounds of the royal hunting lodge at Anet. Statues of Diana, classical goddess of the hunt, were placed throughout the chateau and gardens.

What we think of today as a classical "French" garden did not really come into its own until the mid-1600's under the direction of landscape architect Andre Le Notre. Le Notre came up with a revolutionary design for the garden at Vaux-le-Vicomte, south of Paris, developed for Louis XIV's finance minister. It is generally considered the first design to emphasize man's control over nature. Military expertise was required to build the massive canals, terraces, bridges, parterres, fountains, and roads that link the grounds to the chateau and to the wilderness beyond.

The design includes a powerful central axis with an enormous canal running perpendicular through the center and out into the natural surrounding forest. Geometric

and symmetrical parterres march up both sides of the central axis. At either end of the axis, avenues radiate outward from a central circle in the classic French "goosefoot" pattern. The design links chateau and forest; earth and sky in massive proportions. Yet Vaux-le-Vicomte was only a pale shadow of what Le Notre accomplished for Louis XIV at Versailles.

Once only a hunting lodge surrounded by marshland, Versailles was extended far beyond its original borders and converted into the *sine qua non* of French gardens. It signifies the power and wealth of the king and his ability to even transform nature. The Grand Canal runs through the property in the shape of a cross and the east-west axis reflects the sun's rays into the palace all day long. The roads fan out into the surrounding area, bringing all within the frame of the garden. The clipped allees of greenery, the geometric parterres aligned in perfect regularity, the fountains, the forced vistas framing classic sculptures, all became the norm in French gardens that followed.

Although fashion has changed, French gardens in later centuries, and even today, have retained much of Le Notre's basic design philosophy. This philosophy basically includes a firmly delineated overall structure, whether linear, geometric, or balanced; an attention to detail which includes such things as topiary forms, espaliers or tightly clipped trees; and a strict control which is carefully planned, even when the gardens appear perfectly natural.

Our debt to French garden designers through the centuries is evident in the origin of some of our most common terms to describe gardens and garden elements: canal, parterre, trellis, arbor, allee, terrace. These are part of the familiarity of French gardens that many people don't even realize.

VIII. FRENCH GARDEN ORNAMENT INVENTORY

Statue of Diana

France, 19th century

Maker: Unknown.

Description: Statue of Diana, the Huntress, in terracotta. Based on a marble statue by Antoine Coysevox of Marie Adelaide de Savoy, Duchess of Bourgogne. She stands with her right foot forward, in mid-stride. A dog is on her right, standing on its hind legs and resting its paws on her leg. Diana reaches her right hand to touch the dog on its head, while holding her left hand up to touch her hair. She wears a Roman toga-like outfit, and in her hair is a crescent moon. Said to have come from the castle of Madame de Lavalade in Saint Germain, France.

Origin: Albert Georges Marbrerie-Sculpture, Paris, France, September 1956

Condition: Recently restored by in-house conservators using Yahn masonry procedure. The present condition is good.

Bronze Fountain

USA, 20th century
Maker unknown

Description: Bronze frog fountain, shows bullfrog seated with mouth open. The water from the fountain pours from his mouth.

Origin: See Garden Ornaments by Kenneth Lynch, Wilton, CT.

Condition: good. No action required.

Two Lamps

USA, 20th century
Maker unknown

Description: Two metal and glass lamps hanging on either side of the swan fountain. A long black metal pole is attached to the side of the house with gold colored clamps, ending in an arabesque and a curve from which hangs the lamp. The lamp is attached with a chain from which hangs the lamp. The top of the lamp looks like a crown from which is attached an armature. The bottom part of the lamp is an elongated half sphere with glass panels etched with a star design. From the top of the lamp are suspended swags in gold colored metal. The bottom of the lamp has a pine cone shaped finial.

Origin: Unknown

Condition: The overall condition is good. However, both need to be re-gilded.

Two Lead Fountains

England, 20th century
Maker unknown

Description: Two fountains in lead depicting puttos astride animals, one on a seahorse, the other on a dolphin. Both puttos are smiling and holding onto the animals with both hands. The one on the dolphin has a rein to hold onto. The bases are carved to simulate waves.

Origin: Parke-Bernet, New York, N.Y. June 7-8, 1956

Condition: The lead is pitted and very thin on the bottom. The condition is poor. It is recommended either to re-cast or find replacements, which should be readily available since they were mass produced.

Two Marble Sphinxes

France, 18th century
 Maker Unknown

Description: Two sphinxes in marble, each with a putto on its back holding a garland of flowers. One represents Marie Camargo, the other Marie Salle. The heads are turned slightly to one side and have half moons on top of their heads. The sphinxes wear bodices and saddles and rest on a marble pillow on top of a rectangular plinth. The puttos are winged and hold garlands of flowers.

The sphinxes, allowing themselves to be caught in snares of flowers by children, depict light comedy and the more graceful manners of 18th century France, not prevalent in an earlier period. Marie Camargo (1726-1751) was a brilliant ballerina of the Paris opera. Marie Salle (1707-1756) was a famous French dancer who was the first female choreographer and produced the first ballet, Pygmalion, in London in 1734. The two dancers were immortalized by the French painter Nicolas Lancelotti (1690-1743). One painting hangs in the National Gallery, Washington D.C. The other is in the Louvre, Paris.

Origin: Alavoine, Decorateur, Paris, France, November 1961

Condition: The marble shows signs of weathering and pitting. The overall condition is good. However, we need to provide some winter protection.

Marble Fountain

USA, 20th century
 Maker: Vincent Tonelli

Description: The fountain is carved from pink marble and is a reproduction of an original 19th century terracotta fountain. The center of the fountain shows a Grecian urn with a pinecone finial and elaborate leaf handles. On each side is a swan. On the right, the swan has raised his neck and wings, on the left the swan is seated. The background shows large leaves and plants, probably laurel leaves.

Origin: Standard Art, Marble and Tile Company, Washington D.C. , 1959-1960

Condition: The marble shows signs of rapid deterioration and a loss in detail. The condition is critical. It is recommended that this sculpture be replaced with a stone copy more suited to the Washington climate.

Six Urns

France, 20th century
 Maker unknown

Description: Six urns in stone. Four of the urns have two swags of leaves decorating them, the other two have four swags of decoration. The four similar urns have a pine cone finial with acanthus leaves around the dome of the lid and beading around the edge. The top of the vase has a band of intertwined ribbons creating a row of circles containing rosettes. This band has two handles shaped in a half circle from which the swags of leaves are hung. The main portion of the urn is plain with acanthus leaves at the bottom. The plain base is joined to the urn with beading. The bottom of the base is decorated with a garland of leaves. The other two urns are decorated similarly except that the handles are large scrolled acanthus leaves. Also, the garland creates four swags as the center of each garland is draped over a peg attached to the top band of the urn.

Origin: Albert Georges Marbrerie-Sculpture, Paris, France, September, 1956

Condition: The overall condition is fair, No action is required.

IX. VEGETATIVE INVENTORY

Buxus microphylla 'Insularis'
Buxus sempervirens
Euonymus japonicus?
Hedera helix
Hyacinthus orientalis
Magnolia grandiflora
Rhododendron x ('Hinode Giri')*
Rhododendron x ('Christmas Cheer')*
Rhododendron x ('Delaware Valley White')*
Taxus cuspidata 'Capitata'
Thuja occidentalis 'Biota'

*These azalea cultivars will be checked for accuracy when the shrubs bloom in spring of 1998.