A Garden for All Seasons

Marjorie Merriweather Post’s Hillwood
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Overview of Tonight’s Material

• A Garden made to be shared
• MMP’s approach to her gardens
• Important Influences
• MMP’s gardens pre-Hillwood DC
• Arbremont to Hillwood – major changes
• Landscape Architects at Hillwood
• Two important new additions to Hillwood’s gardens
A Garden to be Shared

• “Ours is an age in which proper recognition is being given to the importance of preserving cultural monuments of historic significance...Hillwood[‘s] gardens ...are typical of the best way of life that is fast disappearing.” [MMP, transfer document]

• Gilded Age lifestyle was “fast disappearing” and MMP wished for future generations to be able to learn about it firsthand
Louise Shelton, Beautiful Gardens in America, 1924, with photos of Hogarcito: “How few would be content to create a beautiful garden if none could see! ... In the flower garden the efforts are for ...giving back... If a garden is worthy of being shared with our intimates, can we close it to the stranger who may need [it] even more...The foreign custom of opening the fine places to the public...is one that we should freely emulate.” (MMP’s copy of this book is in HW’s library)

By the time Hillwood was completed, MMP had decided it was worthy of being a public institution.
MMP’s Approach to Gardens

MMP directed landscape architects
Every garden was meticulously drawn before it was planted
Beauty is paramount
Color in every season
Formal and informal areas
Perfection is desired, although practicality is considered
Exquisite relationship between interior and exterior
Marjorie Post Directed her Gardens

• MMP directed the overall design and feel of her gardens and asked the landscape designers with whom she worked to render her ideas and to suggest individual trees, shrubs and plants

• “I am wondering if perhaps you might have a line on some garden design firm. I feel I am going to need some advice on the new garden at Hillwood and will be wanting to contact as large and as well organized a unit as I can, because I will probably be needing information as to where we can obtain certain types of plants, trees, and so forth, as well as suggestions for arrangements. On the other hand, we may simply need to consult them only for advice.” MMP to McMillan and Company, August, 1955, Hillwood Archives.
Every garden at Hillwood was meticulously drawn and approved by MMP before it was installed.
Beauty is the dominant theme
“She loved the beauty of gardens”  Ellen Charles
Color in all seasons

“She loved color in her garden” Ellen Charles
Formal and Informal Areas
Perfection is desired

Low maintenance not a consideration, although practicality counted
Interior and Exterior Relationship
Relationship of Indoor to Outdoor Spaces

• Very careful relationship between the indoor and outdoor spaces – resulting in several significant changes to original grounds

• French parterre outside of French drawing room and below bedroom

• Octagonal garden room outside of Pavilion – steps inside Pavilion lead to doors to this small pocket garden, which functions as an anteroom to the French Parterre next door, or as the gateway to a stroll on the bituminous paths

• Lunar Lawn is on the central axis with the foyer at the porte-cochere. In MMP’s time, guests could circulate through the house and out the door from the first floor library onto the portico and lunar lawn.
Important Influences

• “Country Place” era – ideal based on English model of the grand manor house with beautiful manicured gardens surrounding it.

• MMP visited England with her father in 1905 in a “coach and four” touring cathedrals, castles, formal and informal gardens and keeping a detailed scrapbook of her trip. Some of the ideas noted later find their way into her gardens.

• Frederick Law Olmsted: “We want a ground to which people may easily go after their day’s work is done, and where they may stroll for an hour, seeing, hearing, and feeling nothing of the bustle and jar of the city put far away from them.” (1870)
Marjorie Post’s Gardens

The Boulders, her first home in Greenwich, CT (with E.B. Close)
Camp Topridge, Adirondacks
Hillwood, L.I., and Laurel Springs, S.C. (with E.F. Hutton)
Mar-a-Lago, Palm Beach
Tregaron, D.C. (with Joe Davies)
The Boulders
built 1904 – 1905,
burned down 1917
Camp Topridge purchased 1920
Hillwood, Long Island
built in 1921, sold 1951, named C.W. Post College in 1954
Laurel Springs, purchased 1927
Mar-a-Lago, built 1923 - 1927
Tregaron, MMP 1942-55
By the time Marjorie Merriweather Post is developing Hillwood, she is a seasoned creator of gracious homes and gardens.
Arbre + mont = wood + hill = Hillwood. Also refers to L.I. home
Arbremont built in 1926

• Architect John Diebert; built as a residence for Colonel and Mrs. Henry Parsons Erwin
• Mrs. Erwin (Helen) was one of the Blodgett sisters
• The Blodgetts built houses for both of their daughters – Arbremont for Helen and “The Rocks” for Monica (Mrs. David St. Pierre Gaillard) across Rock Creek, both on hilltops but not “twin” houses
• Arbremont placed on axis with the Washington monument, due south by 5 miles
Arbremont’s gardens

• Designed by Willard Gebhart and Rose Greely
• Reflected the lifestyle and activities of a family of five: swimming pool, stable and riding trails, circular rose garden, greenhouse, and oriental garden
MMP Changed Arbremont to suit her needs

• Swimming pool was removed – was in the area where the dacha was built. MMP spent her summers in the Adirondacks.

• A fish pond, originally outside what became the French drawing room, was removed and in the footprint, French parterre installed as a private garden with ivy walls. MMP’s bedroom window overlooked the parterre
What MMP Changed, continued

• Arbremont had a parterre, but it was located where the putting green was installed. MMP had it removed and replaced with a bentgrass putting green with 9 holes.

• The Rose garden remained essentially in the same location, and the stone steps that had been designed and installed by Rose Greely and Willard Gebhart were kept, as was the semi-circular pergola. She worked with Perry Wheeler to redesign the rose garden with a fountain in the center, planted with roses and tulips in the spring.
Arbremont’s Rose Garden in T&C in 1937
Hillwood’s new Entry Drive
Lunar Lawn Becomes Entertaining Space

- Arbremont had a boxwood allee from portico to overlook, which bisected what would become the Lunar Lawn, her biggest outdoor entertaining space.
Landscape Architects at Hillwood

Innocenti & Webel
Perry Wheeler
Innocenti & Webel (1955-1957)

- Large, important Long Island firm established in 1931, working for many wealthy clients
- Umberto Innocenti consummate plantsman; Richard K. Webel a flawless draftsman, more academic
- Their gardens had strong formal geometries, axes, and evoked historic European gardens
Innocenti & Webel Gardens at Hillwood

- Entry Drive
- First version of Motor Court
- French Parterre
- Octagonal Garden outside Pavilion
Perry Wheeler (1956-1959)

• “an urbane Southerner” (Higgins, Washington Post 2017)

• Born in Cordele, Georgia; BA in Landscape Architecture in 1937; moved to DC after WWII service in the camouflage unit

• Worked for many DC tastemakers, in 1961 with Bunny Mellon on White House Rose Garden (after Hillwood’s)
Perry Wheeler’s gardens at Hillwood

- Refined Motor Court 1956
- Rose Garden 1957
- Lunar Lawn 1957
- Putting Green 1957
- Friendship Walk 1957
- Dog Cemetery 1959
Major additions to Hillwood’s Gardens

Friendship Walk
Flagpole
Friendship Walk

• Organized in secret in 1956 by Lady Lewis (Connie), Madame Augusto Russo (Frances), George Williams, and General and Mrs. H. Conger Pratt (Conger and Sadie)

• as “a testimonial to Marjorie... We are fully conscious of her love of beauty and the endless care she gives to her gardens.”

• contributions only from her intimate friends- diplomats, supreme court justices, ambassadors, generals, senators, socialites, cabinet members and her staff-to buy sculpture, paving, and shrubbery for the walk
“I know of no one more worthy of this recognition than Marjorie Post, or more kind and generous, yet withal so modest...I am delighted, and indeed greatly honored, to join you in this lasting expression of love.”

Letter from Anna Case MacKay to Major General H. Conger Pratt, March 12, 1957, Bentley archives
Vision of Friends Planned by Perry Wheeler
Sculptures

Marjorie Post’s intimates knew well her sophisticated taste in the decorative arts, reflected in each piece of sculpture on Friendship Walk.

Lead cherubs representing the four seasons surrounding the circle are an extremely rare complete group that were cast in England in the late 18th century, set on limestone bases.

Three bronze eagles by American sculptor Paul Bartlett were given by Caroline Jones Peter, his stepdaughter.
Ault birdbath

A lead birdbath was given by Commander Ault, who was in charge of overseeing Hillwood’s renovation.

Organizers first approached him with the idea for Friendship Walk, and “with his assurances and blessing, [they] decided to go ahead with [the] plan.”

The bronze plaque reads, “The birds are singing and the beauty of a garden is very close by. Presented to Mrs. Merriweather Post 1957 Cmdr & Mrs. Clyde B. Ault.”

HW Archives Notes from Conger Pratt from FW dedication, 1957
Later additions to Friendship Walk
Flagpole

• “Now hear this. Now hear this. To the Commodore, all hands of all branches of the service salute you on your birthday and beg to present to you in honor of this special occasion flagstaff with yardarm to fly the stars and stripes and house ensign aboard the flag ship Hillwood. Positive bearings to the Commodore’s decision. Respectfully Officers and Crew."

• Marjorie Post received this telegram on the morning of her 75th birthday, March 15, 1962
A Gift from a Devoted Staff

• “The one thing that HILLWOOD lacks is a flagstaff and with yardarm once again Mrs. May’s house ensign can fly – reminiscent of the SEA CLOUD”

• Staff from all 4 properties (Hillwood, Mar-a-Lago, Camp Topridge, Rosewall) was invited to “participate to any extent you might wish.”

• Outpouring of response, and over 100 contributions from $2 to $300 came in

• Eight bronze tablets around the base bear the names of the participants
Staff Invited to the Dedication

• Charles Cronk, 83 year old 50-year security officer for Post, retired but considered the “dean”, spoke for the staff. He cited her “never-failing kindness, friendliness and devotion” and presented the flagpole and scroll to her.

• Afterwards, a color guard of U.S. sailors hoisted the flag and yellow-and-blue pennon, Post’s personal signal on the Sea Cloud. That small flag was flown at Hillwood and Camp Topridge, when she was there.

• teen-aged fife-and-drum platoon of boys in Revolutionary costume danced a minuet with girls wearing Colonial hoop skirts and wigs
Flagpole dedication on 10/20/1962
A Weekend of Celebration

• Staff were put up in hotels and given tickets to the symphony
• “I believe you to be the two most marvelous and exceptional persons in the world, to open that beautiful home to all of us and to treat us so royally. I felt like Cinderella most of the time…”
• ”You’ve heard the old saying that no man is a hero to his own valet. I guess that you’re the exception needed to prove the rule, for it’s obvious that you’re heroine, goddess and lady bountiful rolled into one for everyone from the gardeners up.”
Major Themes

• MMP was intensely involved in creating Hillwood’s gardens, even though she never planted anything. She had great experience in making memorable, large garden spaces.

• She had a vision for spaces that would serve her needs during her lifetime and provide public good after her death

• She worked with great landscape architects to achieve her vision

• Beauty and color in all four seasons as well as many “rooms” both formal and informal characterize Hillwood’s gardens

• Her friends and staff gave her “Friendship Walk” and the Flagpole to show their admiration and appreciation for her generosity and love of beauty
Honoring and Executing Marjorie Post’s Vision

• Staff maintain the seasonal displays that MMP established: tulips and other bulbs in the Spring; annuals in the Summer and Chrysanthemums in the Fall
• 5 year plan to revitalize the interstitial gardens was created with her aesthetic in mind – rejuvenating the spaces with new plant material in keeping with historic plantings
• Hardscape renovations put the same stones back in the same spots as much as possible
• The garden is living, so renewing it is a constant, and is always done with MMP’s standards and style in mind
QUESTIONS?