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### Author:

[Johnson, Jory](#)

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Jory Johnson

Garden design is a transformation of nature into a visionary and symbolic expression; it is not merely an ordering of plants within a described 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 subcategories such as walks, groundcovers 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 anomalies such as New Hampshire's Old Man of the Mountain, or by framing photo opportunities of the Grand Canyon and other scenic wonders. Today, the grandest views of Niagara Falls are so enshrined 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 iris or a tangle of chaparral have become symbols of the formerly sacred and sublime landscape. It is no longer the spectacle of Niagara Falls but the daily ebb and flow of a Miami tide that embodies 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 transform aspects or emblems of the regional landscape into gardens where one can make spiritual connections to one's native culture and values. The gardens are not only sited along the Virginia coast or on a Midwestern farm, for example, but also express the "bonded 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 vigor of this country's heritage grants its designers 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 elements such as bosques, hedges and fountains to formulate designs with new content and meaning. The transformation of gardens from eclectic ensembles to cohesive, legible designs is the underlying theme of this exhibition.

There are many precedents for symbolic expression in garden history. A prominent example of a narrative and symbolic garden is Henry Hoare Stourhead, built in England in the 18th century. Hoare lost many members of his family through illness and tragic accidents, and sought to express his sense of despair and rejuvenation by constructing a symbolic journey in his garden. He tried to universalize his private sorrow through classical allusions to Aeneas's journey to the underworld in search of his dead

father and through the sensory experiences of his garden.

Many of these twelve designers describe their gardens through a similar narrative of its parts, confident that one would find the emotional experience of their garden's intention compelling.

Henry Hoare's vision, as expressed at Stourhead, was not as strong an influence on American garden design as that of his compatriot and contemporary, Capability Brown. Brown's gardens, devoid of classical allusions and Claudian motifs, did not express philosophical ideas about the landscape, but rather exploited the "capabilities" of a site to yield a pleasing composition of trees, fields and water. Long before architecture was shorn of ornamentation and classical orders, Western gardens, partially through Brown's influence, had become abstract compositions of self-referential forms. Yet designs 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, gardens have been impoverished by a denial 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 emerging to develop a theoretical context for landscape architecture.

By examining old assumptions and offering 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 garden, we are caught in the immediacy of the experience. We can never react dispassionately and intellectually, and one problematic aspect of any design exhibition is the effort required to imagine oneself within these gardens, experiencing them spatially from dawn to dusk. The designs all strive to create an American garden capable of embodying a sense of ourselves. If they are to succeed, these gardens must be part of a larger order of meaning as well as significant guides to the future of American gardens.