

IMAGE-MAKING IN ENGLAND – 4 – THE RISE OF THE LANDSCAPE GARDEN

As the ancient Persian ‘paradises’ (see 2) or the Medieval *hortus conclusus* remind us, gardens – enclosed, secluded microcosms from which the perils and pains of the outside world were carefully excluded – were always conceived as privileged, sheltered spaces where a prelapsarian or Eden-like state of bliss could be restored or at least suggested. The history of landscape gardening in England is bound up with these paradisiacal associations: Francis Bacon’s essay “On Gardens” presents gardening as the finest achievement human civilizations are capable of, and suggests that a perfect garden should somehow restore the bliss of Eden by overcoming the alternation of seasons (3). Bacon’s ideal gardens, it should be noted, are also laboratories of ‘progress’, and his ideas on the improvement of vegetable species would be a key influence on the 17th- and 18th-century agricultural revolution that would turn England into a major economic power and generate a new way of looking at landscape and countryside. Indeed, landscape played such a crucial part in 18th-century English culture that in 1771, the virtuoso Horace Walpole could identify poetry, painting and gardening as the “Three Graces” of modern taste.

In Renaissance Europe, Italian gardens were the most celebrated, not only because of their proximity with Ancient Roman originals (4), but also because of the skilful balance they achieve between nature and art, harmony and invention, regularity and surprise (5). Although the 17th century saw the triumph of more rigidly formal, geometrically-ordered gardens, mostly French (6) or Dutch (7), memories of the Italianate Renaissance gardens would contribute to the early 18th-century reaction that gave rise to a specifically English kind of garden. The rejection of topiary and of formal *parterres* in the Versailles style – already implicit in the influential Earl of Shaftesbury’s preference for the “genuine order” of Nature over the “mockery of princely gardens” – was encouraged by a range of attitudes: in particular, political hostility to a ‘despotic’ order perceived as incompatible with English freedom, as well as the new scientific and philosophical ideas fostered by the Royal Society, which replaced Cartesian dogmatic rationalism with a more empirical attitude to ‘Nature’ and ‘experience’. Meanwhile, the growing prosperity and power of many English landowners, combined with the popularity of Classical ideals of country retirement, made sure that a large part of the British élite became involved in planting, gardening and ‘improving’.

In the late 17th and early 18th century, enlightened theology and science lay major emphasis on the diversity and perfection of the Universe, thus encouraging contemplation of the manifold works of Nature as a new kind of pleasure mixed with spiritual discipline. The new appreciation of the varied and irregular aspects of nature (understood as a divine art above all human art, as a rich and complex order superior to rigid human designs) could generate a sophisticated interest in the ‘hidden designs’ of Chinese gardening, as in William Temple’s seminal 1685 essay (8), just as it could serve to reconcile usefulness and beauty, as in Joseph Addison’s 1712 proposal that any gentleman might “make a pretty Landskip of his own possession” (9), adding cultivated fields and deer parks or forests to the traditional garden’s visual elements. Thus, in a crucial innovation, the new English garden was – or at least seemed to be – an open one, gradually extending into the surrounding countryside (‘calling in the country’). This was achieved, in particular, through the device of the ha-ha or *saut-de-loup*, a sunk, invisible fence that blurred clear-cut limits between the garden and the landscape beyond (16). Attributing (incorrectly) that invention to architect and landscape designer William Kent, Horace Walpole famously said of him that he “leapt the fence, and saw that all nature was a garden”.

From 1715 onwards, the rise of the new, less formal English garden was also encouraged by a major artistic and political reaction against the Baroque architecture of Wren and Vanbrugh. Whig aristocrats, in particular, liked to see themselves as the true heirs of the Roman Senate, and consequently attempted to imitate the majestic simplicity of Roman patricians. This favoured the Neo-Palladian fashion (partly inspired by Inigo Jones as well) that would dominate the country for about half a century, illustrated here by the Neo-Classical house built at Wanstead (10) by Colen Campbell (author of a successful series of plates entitled *Vitruvius Britannicus*), by the Earl of Burlington's controversial country house at Chiswick (11), and by the 'humble villa' which the poet Alexander Pope built at Twickenham (12). Although it has often been criticized as unimaginative, this new architectural trend helped establish different relations between house and gardens, in which the former became a visual element in the latter, instead of commanding or controlling it – therefore paying greater respect to what was called 'the Genius of the Place' (see Pope's influential "Epistle to Lord Burlington", 13). At the same time, the pictorial sensibility fostered among the aristocracy and gentry by the practice of the 'Grand Tour' to Italy was an increasingly strong influence on how landscape was perceived (see 17 and 18), so that English landowners were often keen to re-shape their estates as some version of the famous Roman Campagna.

The new imperatives in landscape gardening, such as Pope summed them up, found one of their most spectacular realizations in the Temple family's country house of Stowe, Buckinghamshire. Originally a rather mediocre painter, William Kent (1685-1748) rose to key employments as an interior decorator, architect and landscape designer, mostly due to the protection of eminent patrons such as Burlington and others. His work at Stowe, where smooth green lawns and 'natural' groves of trees replace the gravel walks and clipped hedges of classical French-style gardens, marked a decisive step towards the English Arcadian landscape that would dominate the century. However, his surprising prospects and great wealth of architectural detail, loaded with political and literary symbolism (see the Palladian bridge, 14, and the famously patriotic 'Temple of the British Worthies', 15), can easily be distinguished by the grander, more solitary landscapes designed by his successor Lancelot 'Capability' Brown (1716-1783) in the second half of the 18th century. Brown, at Blenheim for instance (19), relied on large-scale composition and long, sweeping lines to achieve an even more 'natural' – or rather pictorial – effect, also perceptible in Henry Hoare's famous landscape gardens at Stourhead, Wiltshire (20). It should be noted that despite their natural appearance, Brown's landscape gardens often involved huge amounts of work and money, as he went on remodeling his clients' grounds according to what he liked to call their 'capabilities' (that was the origin of his nickname).

The new, pictorialized landscape gardens became, in turn, a favourite topic for an emerging English school of landscape painters still captivated by 17th-century Roman artists (see 21). Meanwhile, the peasants and labourers, whose work provided the foundation of the whole new programme of aesthetic improvement, remained generally absent from, or relegated on the margins of, the new modes of representations, at least until the end of the century (22).

Suggested readings: John Dixon Hunt and Peter Willis (eds.), *The Genius of the Place* (introduction); Marie-Madeleine Martinet, *Art et nature en Grande-Bretagne au XVIII^e siècle* (useful introduction in French).