Principles of Taste: Book Review

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With the advantage of hindsight, it might be said that Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer (1851-1934) led a life of quiet contradiction. She was a noted writer on art, architecture, and landscape subjects; the first biographer of Henry Hobson Richardson and Frederick Law Olmsted. She was thoroughly professional in her work, precise in her negotiations for a proper fee, and never hesitant to ask for timely payment. She was a friend of Charles Sprague Sargent and a valued contributor to his weekly, Garden and Forest. Yet Mariana Van Rensselaer was an active opponent of women's suffrage and wrote a popular pamphlet on that subject, “Should We Ask for the Suffrage?” (1894). Her answer was no, women should concentrate on their families and on educational and intellectual matters, leaving business and public affairs to men. Perhaps this was a comment on the politics of her day; to be fair, she was also concerned that new money interests would exploit working women who would be unable to defend themselves.

Until the publication of this collection of her writings, Van Rensselaer's work had fallen into relative obscurity. With the exception of her biography of H. H. Richardson, to which subsequent generations of Richardson scholars invariably pay homage, her work has been treated as that of a rather quaint lady writer who presented to the world the ideas of designers, whom she strongly promoted as “artists.” As evidenced by this collection, her work is much richer than that, more nuanced and original. If Van Rensselaer's work has not been given more prominence, it may be because of her commitment to the explication of taste, that illusive predilection for form (and fashion) tightly bound to social class that is just now engaging the attention of the academic community. In the world of serious critical writing, the consideration of taste has often been treated in a patronizing, if not outright contemptuous, manner. But if in popular literature the issue of taste has now become the domain of Martha Stewart and the shelter magazines, it has also become the territory of serious critical battle: Susan Sontag on kitsch, Martha Schwartz on the viability of bagels as garden ornament, and any number of writers on the sociological implications of well-clipped suburban lawns vs. their treatment as wildflower meadows.

Insofar as a concern with good taste is a characteristic of the upper middle class—since both the aristocracy and working class can afford to indulge eccentricity—Van Rensselaer was speaking for a world she knew well. But her writing on taste went well beyond the proper and the decorous to encompass appropriateness as well. Included in this collection is an important essay, “Architectural Fitness,” first published in Garden and Forest in 1891 (some say at the instigation of Charles Sargent). Her reflection on the quality of stonework and boulders in Central Park and Franklin Park predates the modernist dictum of “truth to materials” but is certainly on the same intellectual path.

Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer was born in New York City in 1851 to parents well positioned socially and financially to give her a broad, sophisticated education, albeit by private tutor and extensive European travel. The family relocated to Dresden, Germany, when Mariana was still in her teens, and it was there that she met and married Schuyler Van Rensselaer, a young mining engineer and scion of the great New York family. The couple returned to the United States where their only child, George, was born. Sadly, Schuyler Van Rensselaer died
in 1884, followed by their young son only eight years later, and Mariana found herself alone at the age of forty-three. While she had begun to write for publication during the years of her marriage—an activity not wholly supported by her husband—she now recast her life to include serious scholarship and travel in order to further her writing career.

Van Rensselar's position in American landscape history is firmly established by her 1893 book, *Art Out-of-Doors: Hints on Good Taste in Gardening*. With this publication she emphatically aligned herself with the naturalistic/pastoral landscape movement led by Frederick Law Olmsted, supported by Sargent and with a debt to Andrew Jackson Downing.

I have assumed that the naturalistic methods of gardening are the most interesting and important to Americans... for nature speaks to us more variously and naturally in America than in Europe.

The enemy here was the ornamental style of gardening. The promulgators of carpet bedding ["ugly things of which no sensitive eye can approve"] had a strong voice in both public and residential horticulture. The use in public parks of bold-colored plants arrayed in tight, highly organized groups, with no respect for their natural form let alone their natural habitat, was beloved by the public, who borrowed these patterns for their home gardens. Beds of geraniums, coleus, lantanas, heliotropes—any plants that could be manipulated either by the designer or the hybridizer to take on a brighter hue—were filling the great lawns of Newport, the village squares in New England, and, to Van Rensselar's great dismay, Boston's Public Garden.

Our public has seen too few good examples to know, theoretically, what it likes in the way of gardening art. Naturally it likes flowers and bright-hued plants of all kinds. When it sees them as they are shown in the Public Garden, it delights in them for their own sakes while it rarely thinks of the general effect of the place. But if it could once see this place as it ought to look, softly green and quiet, enlivened but not confused by a few touches of brilliant color, I am sure it would recognize the improvement, and not mourn the scores of vanished beds.

Van Rensselar's biographical essay on Olmsted, originally published in *Century Magazine* in 1893, and included here in its entirety, offers a much more vivid picture of the man than many later works. Suspicious of personal publicity and certainly not garrulous by nature, Olmsted nonetheless met with and maintained a vigorous correspondence with Van Rensselar, providing her with rich material for her article.

In answer to a question asked not long ago, Mr. Olmsted said, "The most interesting general facts of my life seems to me to be that it was not as a gardener, a florist, a botanist, or one in any way specially interested in plants and flowers, or specially susceptible to their beauty, that I was drawn to my work. The root of all my work has been an early respect for an enjoyment of a more domestic order—scenery which is to be looked upon contemplatively, and is productive of mus- ing moods."

The late David Gebhard, a noted architectural historian, has done a great service in editing this collection. His introduction surveys her life and gives her work a new importance in American design history, although in the space of an intro-
duction he was not able to delve deeply into the intellectual roots of her work. It is a minor criticism to say that he uses that oddly speculative manner of biographical writing that relies on "she must have...," "expected of upper middle class women," etc. The collection is divided into three sections: Architecture and the Decorative Arts, Recent Architecture in America, and Landscape Architecture and the Environment; while heavily slanted to her writings on architecture—perhaps a reflection of Gebhard's interests—her writings on the context of architectural practice transcend specific disciplines.

Architecture is a necessary trade as well as an art. Its work must be done, and as nature is not likely ever to give us geniuses in sufficient number to do the whole of it, the second or third rate architect is a very necessary and valuable citizen. All our architectural work cannot be great, but all of it ought to be good; and fair intelligence, earnest study, and conscientious effort may make it good, though only a high artistic gift can make it great. Van Rensselaer was one of many voices at the end of the nineteenth century calling for the professionalization of many pursuits earlier seen as "crafts." In an important essay, "Client and Architect," she points out the need for an educated client and deplores the limitations placed on the designer by a client with a stubbornly limited vision. She is, as always, protective of the creative force.

Even apart from competitions, the public's conduct is not what it should be to encourage loyal service. Often enough in all his dealings the client shows a disregard for truth, honesty, and business methods which he would find very shocking were the architect the sinner and he the sufferer. And when the work is complete, he constantly takes credit for good ideas which do not belong to him, blames the architect for defects that his own ignorant demands have brought about, and, above all, cries out against an excess in cost that has been necessitated by changes from the original scheme which he himself has suggested.

In addition to the essay on Olmsted and the short but insightful "Landscape Gardening: A Definition," the landscape section reprints several pieces of local interest. Van Rensselaer summered in Marion, Massachusetts, and her piece on the protection of road sides was prompted by a concern for the insensitivity of road commissioners and the dreaded linemen in clearing vegetation. ["There seems to be no science or art, no reason or plan in their work."] She acknowledges the difficulty in managing the publicly owned wild border with its thickets of rose, viburnum, and vines as it grows into privately owned lawns, but suggests that a simple appreciation of natural growth could create rural roads as beautiful as any English lane.

This collection of Van Rensselaer's writing has expanded our understanding of the maturing of America's design professions, the period when they cut their close ties with Europe and began to look to our own history and culture for reference points. For the landscape community, one hopes that the collection, positioning Mariana Van Rensselaer among the original thinkers of her period, will lead to the republication of Art Out-of-Doors, making this classic text on American landscape gardening accessible once more.

Endnotes
1 Henry Hobson Richardson and His Works (Boston and NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1888); on Olmsted: Accents as Well as Broad Effects, 284–299.
3 Ibid., 146.
4 Accents, 284.
5 Ibid., 38.
6 Ibid., 48.

For Further Reading

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