

# Garden and Forest and “Landscape Art”

Ethan Carr

Laura Wood Roper notes in her 1973 biography of Frederick Law Olmsted that the 1890s were years of “staggering reverses” for the profession of landscape architecture. Pioneers such as Frederick Law Olmsted and H. W. S. Cleveland retired from practice, while the untimely deaths of Henry S. Codman and Charles Eliot diminished the next generation.<sup>1</sup> But it was also during this period that a body of theory and technical expertise was developed and became the basis for training landscape architects. What had been a practice, in other words, matured into a profession. And much of this transition is documented in the pages of *Garden and Forest*.

*Garden and Forest*, published from 1888 through 1897, benefited from an extraordinary group of editors and contributors who saw it as their best forum for shaping the profession of landscape architecture. Correspondents included (besides Olmsted, Cleveland, Eliot, and Codman) Beatrix Jones (later Farrand), Samuel B. Parsons, Charles H. Lowrie, Frank A. Waugh, O. C. Simonds, Warren H. Manning, Harold A. Caparn, Wilhelm Miller, J. C. Olmsted—all leading practitioners of the day. Eliot and Codman described European landscapes seen during the travels that had been part of their apprenticeship. Others discussed specific aspects of technique and practice, for example, “The Treatment of Slopes and Banks” (J. C. Olmsted), “Park Construction” (Cleveland), and “The Garden in Relation to the House” (Farrand).<sup>2</sup> The editors Charles Sprague Sargent and William A. Stiles published descriptions of showcase projects including the Boston Metropolitan Parks, the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, and Biltmore, as well as plans of smaller but typical residences and gardens.<sup>3</sup> In an era before a professional organization or academic instruction existed in the field of landscape architecture, *Garden and Forest* took on aspects of both.

The magazine did all this, of course, while also promoting scientific forestry, botany, horticulture, city planning, and scenic preservation;

indeed, numerous professions trace their early development in part to the influence of *Garden and Forest*. But landscape architecture, which aspired to combine planning and design on many scales, enjoyed a special status in the magazine and influenced its editorial structure. Landscape architecture was not limited to the “planting of flower-beds and of ornamental shrubs,” the *Garden and Forest* editors asserted in 1897, but was a “broad and catholic art . . . as useful in the preservation of the Yosemite Valley or the scenery of Niagara as it is in planning a pastoral park or the grounds about a country house.”<sup>4</sup> Descriptions like these summarized not only the ambitions of landscape architects, but also the editorial goals of *Garden and Forest*. It was the emphasis on landscape architecture, Stiles felt, that distinguished *Garden and Forest* from “any other garden paper.”<sup>5</sup> Stiles and Sargent published articles on horticulture and “country place” design alongside calls for the “Preservation of Natural Scenery” from suburban Boston to the Sierra Nevada.<sup>6</sup> In the editorial tradition of Loudon and Downing, readers were urged to expand the aesthetic sensibilities developed in their own gardens and to become advocates for better management of the larger landscape, especially of public parks and forests.

If the practice of landscape architecture offered conceptual unity to *Garden and Forest*, the magazine in turn helped define the emerging theory of the profession. This was largely due to the contributions of the art historian and critic Mariana Griswold (Mrs. Schuyler) Van Rensselaer, who contributed a total of almost 50 articles beginning with a seven-part series on “Landscape Gardening” in 1888. Already an established art critic, Van Rensselaer became intrigued with landscape architecture through her friendship with the elder Olmsted. In her *Garden and Forest* articles, she set out to define landscape architecture as “landscape art,” which, after architecture, sculpture, and painting, constituted the “fourth art” of design.<sup>7</sup> To Olmsted’s great satisfaction, she helped establish the professional status of landscape archi-



### A VIEW IN CENTRAL PARK.

THE view on this page is taken from a point in the Ramble in the Central Park of this city, looking southward, and including a portion of the Terrace. Of course, it is much more than a picture of the Terrace, but it clearly shows how much this bit of architecture adds to the composition. The distant horizon line of trees has an attractiveness of its own. Nearer by are the upper Terrace lines contrasting with the masses of foliage above them. Below these are the open arches with deeper shadows, then the lower lines of the Terrace, the lake shore and the passage of water separating more distinctly the extreme distance from the middle distance. All these, with the lines of the shrubbery about the little lawn, mark the successive planes of the composition and help to bring out the gradations of light and shadow. In the Park the observer would enjoy in addition the ever varying tints of the sky which would also be reflected in the water, while he could look up to and into the leafy framework in the foreground forever without exhausting its interest. The illustration is a good example of what can be accomplished by framing in a distant object with foliage, so as to make a complete and consistent picture, and there is no reason why such planting as it shows should be confined to public parks. Many a lawn could be made the foreground of a picture quite as attractive, and it could be graded and planted so as to emphasize the interest and increase the pictorial effect of some important object, natural or artificial, and trees could be disposed about it so as to concentrate the attention which would otherwise be distracted by surrounding objects.

[*Garden and Forest* 1 (1888): 30]

fects by defining their practice as a fine art, unlike the craft or trade of gardening.<sup>8</sup>

Continuing this essentially Reptonian discourse, Van Rensselaer distinguished landscape art from the other fine arts by observing that it "uses the same materials as nature herself."<sup>9</sup> The landscape gardener (her preferred term) "takes from nature not only his models but his materials and his methods." This "partnership with Nature" might seem to limit the artist's opportunity for self expression, a necessary quality of true art. But like the painter or the sculptor, the landscape gardener observes nature and "re-unites her scattered excellences" in artistic compositions that express the wholeness and unity that nature possesses but rarely reveals in a single place or view. Nature always provides "vitality, light, atmosphere," she concluded, and especially "what no other artist ever gets—perfection in details." But "composition . . . is the chief thing in art . . . and the landscape gardener's compositions are and must be his own."<sup>10</sup>

Van Rensselaer's contributions in *Garden and Forest* made her a foremost landscape theorist of her day, and her ideas would be taught to generations of American landscape architects.<sup>11</sup> If many of her discussions of nature and art would not seem out of place in the late eighteenth century, to a remarkable degree they also anticipated some of today's debates in the fields of landscape design and planning. Van Rensselaer deplored the naive tendency to assume that rural scenery was "natural," for example, when it was usually the (often unintended) product of generations of cultivation and management. Nature and art were rarely mutually exclusive in the landscape. Sargent and Stiles adopted this theme and criticized the excessive veneration of what was assumed to be natural or "wild" because it had led to the neglect of "that part of the landscape which is necessarily not wild—the landscape of our daily lives—the humanized scenery of the earth." In words that resonate today, they regretted the tendency of people to travel "in search of the picturesque while what might be the picturesqueness of their own neighborhood is unperceived or destroyed."<sup>12</sup>

Throughout the pages of *Garden and Forest*, simplistic distinctions between what is "nature" and what is "art" were condemned, as were dogmatic preferences for either the "natu-

ral" or the "formal" styles in garden design.<sup>13</sup> "Landscape art" encompassed both spheres, which is why it offered a unique means for improving a broad range of public and private environments, from vacation villas to city plans and from municipal parks to national reservations. Landscape art was necessary in all these designs because without it they could never achieve the unity inherent in great artistic compositions. The "true artist" planned landscapes—from gardens to entire cities—by first analyzing and recognizing the "characteristic and salient aspects of the place," in order to "work in harmony with them instead of coming into conflict with nature."<sup>14</sup>

*Garden and Forest* was dedicated to advancing landscape design as a compositional "art," inspired by the greater composition and unity of "nature" and intended to integrate human society into the larger, natural environment. Landscape architecture was seen as the profession that would supply the necessary artists. But landscape art was not for art's sake alone. In an editorial reflecting the sentiments of the elder Olmsted (as was often the case), Sargent and Stiles state that "true art is not the servant of some temporary fashion, but something that is to endure, and must, therefore, have a permanent basis in the necessities and aspirations of human life."<sup>15</sup>

Among contemporary landscape projects, therefore, none received more attention in the pages of *Garden and Forest* than the Metropolitan Park Commission's system of suburban parks around Boston. Charles Eliot, who first proposed the system in an 1890 letter to *Garden and Forest*, was praised as an example of the "true artist" needed to successfully direct such a project.<sup>16</sup> But the deaths of both Eliot and Stiles in 1897, followed soon by the demise of *Garden and Forest*, marked the end of one era and the beginning of another. Within three years, landscape architects had established their own professional organization, the American Society of Landscape Architects (1899), and instituted the first academic program in the field, at Harvard University (1900). The profession flourished, bolstered by a growing market for "country place" residential design. Whether *Garden and Forest's* ideals of "landscape art" survived as well in the new century, however, is an open question.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Laura Wood Roper, *FLO: A Biography of Frederick Law Olmsted* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 475.
- <sup>2</sup> *Garden and Forest* (hereafter, *G&F*) 1 (1888): 267, 326–327; 3 (1890): 129; 4 (1891): 184; 10 (1897): 132.
- <sup>3</sup> *G&F* 1 (1888): 508; 6 (1893): 361–362; 8 (1895): 481–482.
- <sup>4</sup> *G&F* 10 (1897): 192.
- <sup>5</sup> Quoted in Roper, *FLO*, 404.
- <sup>6</sup> See *G&F* 2 (1889): 133; 3 (1890): 257; 7 (1894): 1; 10 (1897): 222.
- <sup>7</sup> The articles, as well as at least one *G&F* editorial written by Van Rensselaer (6 (1893): 119–120), became the basis for her book, *Art Out-of-Doors: Hints on Good Taste in Gardening* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893). In 1889, Van Rensselaer began a series of *G&F* articles on garden history.
- <sup>8</sup> *G&F* 1 (1888): 2.
- <sup>9</sup> The late 18th-century British landscape gardener Humphry Repton (who coined the term "landscape gardener") was a figure of considerable interest to American landscape architects in the 1880s. When J. C. Olmsted, Eliot, and others began to meet as an informal professional society at that time, they named their group the "Repton Club." Norman T. Newton, *Design on the Land: The Development of Landscape Architecture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 386. Also see Humphry Repton, *The Art of Landscape Gardening*, ed. John Nolen (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1907).
- <sup>10</sup> *G&F* 1 (1888): 2, 14–15, 27, 38.
- <sup>11</sup> *Art Out-of-Doors* was republished in 1925, and many of Van Rensselaer's ideas were assimilated into Henry V. Hubbard and Theodora Kimball's standard textbook, *An Introduction to the Study of Landscape Design* (1917; rev. ed., New York: The Macmillan Company, 1929).
- <sup>12</sup> *G&F* 6 (1893): 531.
- <sup>13</sup> See *G&F* 1 (1888): 51–52, 481; 7 (1894): 261–262, 341–342; 10 (1897): 191–192.
- <sup>14</sup> *G&F* 6 (1893): 531.
- <sup>15</sup> *G&F* 9 (1896): 171; see Roper, *FLO*, 435.
- <sup>16</sup> See *G&F* 3 (1890): 85–86; 3 (1890): 109, 117–118; 7 (1893): 191.

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## THE FIELD OF LANDSCAPE-ART.

WE are constantly asked whether the profession of landscape-gardening offers a promising field for young men who are looking for some calling in life which will be useful and remunerative. We have always felt obliged to reply that there is comparatively small demand for the counsel of landscape-gardeners in this country . . . The prevalent idea is that his work is chiefly ornamental and that his province is to do about the same thing for the surroundings of a house that the decorative artist does for its interior when he selects the furniture, rugs and hangings and decided upon color-schemes and the like. That is, after an architect has built a house, it is considered proper to call in a landscape-gardener to plant some ornamental trees and shrubs about it and lay out paths and flower-beds in order to beautify the grounds. . . . In fact, the beauty of the scene, which includes both the house and the grounds, should grow up from the general design and framework of the house and grounds as a place where all the varied necessities of the family in the way of health and happiness and home life are the first things considered. . . .

All this means that a landscape-gardener ought to be much more than a mere decorative planter. The successful designing of public parks or of private grounds for daily occupation means first of all the study of human wants—the necessities of men and women and children of various circumstances and conditions. A good artist must be primarily a man of sound judgment and he should have a cultivated mind, wide sympathies and catholic tastes. Reading and travel and scholarship can do for the designer in landscape all that they can accomplish for the architect. A man may be able to mass a shrubbery effectively or arrange a border of herbaceous plants with skill and yet not have a particle of that profounder art which was seen in the grouping of the great buildings at the Columbian Exposition, and the planning of that Court of Honor which was the crowning artistic success of Mr. Olmsted's life. This view of the case contemplates an ideal that is rarely attained, and it is because the work of real artists in this line is rarely seen and still more rarely appreciated that the very existence of such an art is practically ignored or denied. . . .

[Editorial. *Garden and Forest* 10 (1897): 161]