

# Designing Woman: Martha Brookes Hutcheson

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A number of America's first women landscape architects depended on informal learning at the Arnold Arboretum as part of their professional training, and Martha Brookes Hutcheson (1871–1959) was among the most talented of them. Two examples of her work in Massachusetts gardens are now open to the public—Maudslay State Park in Newburyport and the Longfellow National Historic Site in Cambridge—as well as a third, her own home in Gladstone, New Jersey, now Bamboo Brook Outdoor Education Center. Even as the Longfellow Site is being restored, the Library of American Landscape History has reprinted Hutcheson's widely praised articulation of the architectural principles of garden design, *The Spirit of the Garden*. The following essay on her training and practice is excerpted from the introduction to the new edition.

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When Martha Brookes Hutcheson's *The Spirit of the Garden* appeared in 1923, the number of books already available brimming with advice for the amateur gardener might have daunted a less assured writer.<sup>1</sup> As Hutcheson observed in her foreword, there already existed a proliferation of literature that provided "comprehensive and helpful planting-charts, color-schemes and lists of valuable varieties of plants"—information, in other words, to enable the amateur to create interesting and attractive set pieces of garden art. Hutcheson, however, was confident that her book would find a place on the shelves of many newly prosperous, upwardly mobile Americans who were avidly seeking advice on homebuilding, decorating, and especially gardening. Her contribution offered something unique: a straightforward articulation of the basic architectural principles of the design of space and their application in the small garden, combined with an enthusias-

tic and knowledgeable advocacy of the use of native plants.

History has proved Hutcheson correct. Although she maintained that her book was neither a practical manual of instruction on how to make a garden nor a substitute for employing the services of a professional landscape designer, nevertheless it clearly filled such a need, particularly for the many Americans in the 1920s who were becoming homeowners for the first time. And *The Spirit of the Garden* continues to be read and valued, not only for its clear explanation of landscape design concepts but also for Hutcheson's ideas on the social and cultural importance of gardens to individuals and to their communities.





*Detail of the pergola in the rose garden at Maudesleigh, as it appeared in the 1920s. The Newburyport, Massachusetts, estate, which was designed by Martha Brookes Hutcheson for Frederick S. Moseley, is now open to the public as Maudslay State Park. Photograph by Martha Brookes Hutcheson, courtesy of the Morris County Commission, New Jersey.*

That Hutcheson is little known today has to do in part with the fact that Hutcheson's active career lasted a short time: her first documented work dates from 1901, and she seems to have built little after her marriage in 1910. Another contributing factor is that her work, almost without exception, consisted of private, domestic gardens for wealthy Northeasterners. The design of large-scale landscape projects was the nearly exclusive purview of men in early

twentieth-century America, and their built works—urban parks, cemeteries, parkways, and subdivisions—have also, quite naturally, been the focus of most previous historical research.<sup>2</sup> The smaller, domestic garden in the United States was generally left to the care of women, and the work of those who did create successful careers for themselves as designers, photographers, and writers focusing on these small private spaces has been marginalized because of its perceived lack of social relevance as well as its association with “women’s work.”

Martha Brookes Brown Hutcheson was born in New York City on 2 October 1871. She grew up in a family of avid gardeners, and as an adult she

recalled among her earliest pleasurable experiences working in the gardens and fields of her great-uncle John Pomeroy's farm, Fern Hill, near Burlington, Vermont, where her family spent every summer.<sup>3</sup> From 1893 to 1895 she attended the New York School of Applied Design for Women. Like many other young people of the day with the means to do so, she augmented her formal education by undertaking the American equivalent of the grand tour, studying and making notes on gardens in England, France, and Italy during the late 1890s.

In 1900 the country's first academic programs in landscape architecture were instituted, at Harvard (restricted to male applicants only<sup>4</sup>) and at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Hutcheson enrolled at MIT where, although official policy did not exclude women, they found gaining admission difficult because of their lack of opportunity to study the mathematics and sciences that were vital parts of the entrance requirements and the curriculum. Undoubtedly Hutcheson's family expected her to marry or perhaps pursue a career in the decorative arts, but Hutcheson had other ideas, as she later recalled:

About 1898, one day I saw the grounds of Bellevue Hospital in New York, on which nothing was planted, and was overcome with the terrible waste of opportunity for beauty which was not being given to the hundreds of patients who could see it or go to it, in convalescence. In trying to find out how I could get in touch with such authorities as those who might allow me to plant the area of ground, I stumbled upon the fact that my aim would be politically impossible, but that there was a course in Landscape Architecture being formed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the first course which America had ever held. After a conference with those in connection with this training, and with Mrs. Farrand, who was then practicing alone in the field, I was fired with the desire to enter the Institute . . . [and] I began at once to study the mathematics which were required for entrance, and to put my private-school-tutored mind into as good shape as I could on the various subjects before entering the second year of the course.<sup>5</sup>

MIT's program strongly emphasized the architectural and scientific aspects of landscape design, with courses such as perspective and



*Charcoal sketch of Martha Brookes Hutcheson by Jane de Glehn, 1922.*

topographical drawing, geometry, physics, and structural geology composing a major portion of the curriculum. Only in the second term of the fourth (and final) year was any requirement listed that focused on the social importance of landscape architecture: a course in public health and sanitation.<sup>6</sup> Although horticulture was offered in each term of the second, third, and fourth years, Hutcheson found MIT's program inadequate in this respect, and later wrote, "I saw at once that the curriculum did not give nearly enough time to what must be known of the plant world." Accordingly, she took the course of lectures offered by Professor Watson at Harvard University's Bussey Institution and made further studies at local commercial nurseries to "note periods of bloom, combinations in color, variety of species in flowers, and the effects of perennials after blooming."<sup>7</sup>

Hutcheson left MIT in 1902 without taking a degree and opened her own office in Boston that

same year. *The Spirit of the Garden*, published twenty-one years later, showcases—with Hutcheson’s own photographs—the best of the more than fifty private gardens she designed and built during the career that ensued and summarizes the skill and knowledge accumulated over the course of her professional life.<sup>8</sup>

The fundamental tenet of her design philosophy, namely, to combine elements of European (and more specifically Italian) design—axes, vistas, and an architectural framework—with the richness and variety of native plant material and a freer planting style, is alluded to in her foreword. “As individuals,” she writes, “we are slowly becoming conscious of the value of cul-

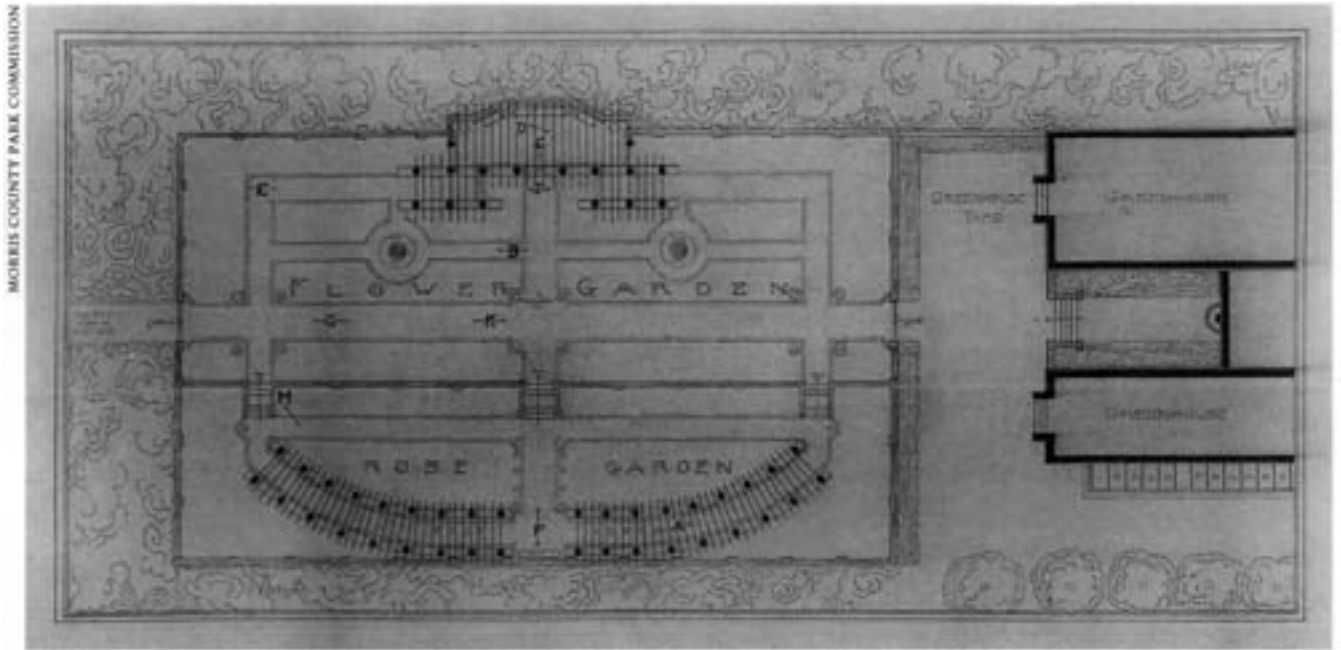
tivated and aesthetic knowledge in adapting to our home surroundings the good principles in planning which have been handed down to us from the Old World.”<sup>9</sup> To this emphasis on the importance of studying historical precedent and reshaping the best of this legacy in contemporary gardens, Hutcheson added three guiding principles: the necessity of a strong relationship between house and garden; the idea of the garden as an “outdoor room” whose hedges, walls, and paths blend the disparate elements of the garden into a harmonious whole; and the use of less structured plantings in more informal areas to blend the garden naturally with the surrounding landscape.

*The Spirit of the Garden* includes three of Hutcheson’s own site plans of gardens to illustrate how it might be possible to create a system of logical relationships among house, garden, and surrounding landscape. These relationships not only would “tie everything together” but would also provide what she memorably termed the “reasonable complexity of a garden”<sup>10</sup>—in other words, the variety and interest that can result from revealing controlled vistas or glimpses from one part of the garden into another, making the farther rooms or reaches seem mysterious and inviting.

She believed, for example, that the designer should always include some changes in ground level—even if slight and unobtrusive—both within the garden and between the garden and its surroundings. Well-orchestrated changes in level can be used to give a sense of intimacy to certain chosen spaces, providing contrast and surprise to a walk through the garden. Terrac-



Martha Brookes Hutcheson actively promoted many landscape-related progressive causes. She was one of the founders of the Woman’s Land Army of America, which attempted to alleviate the shortage of farm labor during World War I by employing women. Seen here are members of the Women’s Land Army at her summer home. Today Merchiston Farm is in the care of the Morris County Park Commission as Bamboo Brook Outdoor Education Center. It offers an excellent opportunity to experience Hutcheson’s built work and to understand her design intentions in three-dimensional form.



*Plan of gardens at Maudesleigh, ca 1902, drawn by Hutcheson. Her photograph of the formal flower garden, seen on the inside front cover, corresponds to D on the plan.*



*"Roses," sketch made while Martha Brookes Brown was a student at the New York School of Applied Design for Women, ca 1895. A number of her original sketches and finished designs are preserved in her former home, Merchiston Farm, near Gladstone, New Jersey, now administered as the Bamboo Brook Outdoor Education Center by the Morris County Park Commission, to whom the property and Hutcheson's papers were bequeathed by her daughter and son-in-law in 1972.*

ing, steps, and pathways can be understood not only as tools for solving the practical problems of getting from one space to another; they also help set the garden apart from both architecture and nature as a distinct and fortunate place. Indeed, the separation of the garden from its surroundings, as “a place apart,” was as important to Hutcheson as the connections with them.

What she calls the “green elements” of a garden—trees, shrubs, and hedges—are given their own chapter in the book [see reprint following this article]. They are also, of course, basic structural elements, and here Hutcheson’s knowledge and experience of Italian gardens provided her with particularly instructive examples. The hedges at the Boboli Gardens in Florence and the Villa d’Este at Tivoli—to mention just two of the best examples—are chosen to illustrate how “the green used . . . in the construction of gardens gives us our backgrounds, our contrasts, our proportions, our perspective—above all, our shadows.” Hutcheson believed that flowers had been overemphasized in American gardens at the expense of basic structure and form, leading to “too solid a mass of color and too little well-planned green.”<sup>11</sup>

Her photographs and discussion of Maudesleigh prove the effectiveness of her approach. At Maudesleigh, the estate of Frederick S. Moseley in Newburyport, Massachusetts, Hutcheson created a number of gardens, redesigned the approach drive to the house, and made various other changes to the landscape over a period of some twenty years.



*Hutcheson’s work at the Craigie-Longfellow House in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which she herself called a “restoration,” is included in the garden restoration now in progress at what is now the Craigie-Longfellow National Historic Site*



*A gateway and border in the flower garden at Maudesleigh.*

Because of its size and visibility within the community of wealthy New England garden builders, Maudesleigh was a tremendously important commission for Hutcheson. It is also significant as one of the few remaining Hutcheson designs



*Gates along an axis in Maudesleigh's flower garden.*

in any degree intact today and open to the public. Although the house is no longer extant, the drives and gardens she designed for it are now part of Maudslay State Park.

Hutcheson faced a difficult challenge at Maudesleigh. Both the site of the house and the location of the new garden (with no obvious or coherent relationship to each other) had already been determined by the client.<sup>12</sup> These constraints not only made it impossible to join the garden directly with the house, they necessitated a major project to screen the view of the greenhouses and a water tower north of the garden. Hutcheson's solution was to design a long, curving path from the entrance to the house, which straightened as it approached and again as it left the garden, providing the illusion of axial connection but also an aura of mystery and surprise as it eventually led to "a natural wooded walk of great beauty beyond."<sup>13</sup> Having achieved this atmosphere, Hutcheson created an enclosed garden—analogueous to the Italian *giardino segreto*—filled with roses, perennials, arbors, fountain, sundial, and birdbath, and surrounded by a hedge to hide the greenhouses and promote a general feeling of peace and seclusion. Substantial plantings of native shrubs and

trees were also made on the formerly bare hillside between the garden and the unfortunately prominent water tower.

The resulting changes in view from the formal garden to the greenhouse are dramatically illustrated in photographs that show how the original bare site was transformed into a sheltered space whose arbors and luxuriant plantings almost totally obscured any intrusion from the outside world, except through the arched openings cut in the hedge for paths. Hutcheson's other major achievement at Maudesleigh also affected the relationships among house, gardens, and landscape. She persuaded her client to relocate the main approach drive from the side

of the house that faced the Merrimack River to the opposite "land" side, thereby separating the views of the architecture from the most dramatic views of the river, to the advantage of each.

Maudesleigh is just one of the many specific examples included in the narrative and illustrations of *The Spirit of the Garden* to show how the general principles that Martha Brookes Hutcheson defined were to be carried out. Regrettably little physical evidence remains, but it is clear from the pictures and written record that she was a skillful gardenmaker and—perhaps of even more significance—an articulate and influential advocate for good design. Her most important contribution arguably was her understandable articulation of a set of architectural, rational principles of design, expressed both in the gardens she created and in her writings. These principles—the ideal unity of house, garden, and landscape; the garden as an outdoor room, with a structure of walls, hedges, paths, and ornamentation that could be the focus of a logical planning scheme; and the integration of both formal and informal elements, often through the use of naturalized

## MARTHA BROOKES BROWN HUTCHESON

### KNOWN GARDEN COMMISSIONS, CONSULTATIONS, AND EXECUTED WORK 1901-1934

#### CONNECTICUT

**Stonington**  
Miss Mary E. Dreier

#### MASSACHUSETTS

**Beverly**  
Mr. Robert Hooper

**Boston**  
Mr. Charles C. Walker

**Brookline**  
Miss Elizabeth Head

**Cambridge**  
Miss Alice Longfellow, "Craigie House"  
(now Craigie-Longfellow National Historic Site)  
Mr. Edward C. Moore

**Danvers**  
Mr. Francis Peabody

**Dover**  
Mr. Arthur E. Davis

**Gloucester**  
Miss Myra Tutt, "Eastern Point"

**Hamilton**  
Mr. A. Lithgow Devens

**Ipswich**  
Appleton  
Mr. Eugene A. Crockett  
Mr. Robert G. Dodge

**Lancaster**  
Mr. Eugene Thayer

**Manchester**  
Mr. Charles Head, "Undercliff"  
Mr. Francis M. Whitehouse, "Crowhurst"

**Newburyport**  
Mr. Frederick S. Moseley, "Maudesleigh"  
(now Maudslay State Park)

**North Beverly**  
Mr. John Philips

**Petersham**  
Simes

**Prides Crossing**  
Mr. Charles Head  
Mrs. Oliver Ames, "Highwall"

**Readville**  
Amory

**Wareham**  
Mr. Stephen M. Weld, "Indian Neck"

**Wellesley**  
Mr. Walter Hunnewell

**West Manchester**  
Mr. Robert C. Hooper

**Yarmouth**  
Mr. Gorham Bacon

**Unknown city in Massachusetts**  
Miss M. Pierce

#### NEW JERSEY

**Gladstone**  
Mr. William A. Hutcheson, "Merchiston Farm"  
(now Bamboo Brook Outdoor Education Center,  
Morris County Park Commission)  
Mr. John Sloane

**Morristown**  
Fraser

**New Vernon**  
Mr. Thomas M. Debevoise

**Princeton**  
Dr. Stewart Paton

#### Red Bank

Mr. Andrew V. Stout, "Brick House"  
Mr. Herbert N. Straus

#### NEW YORK

**Bedford Hills**  
Mr. William Borland  
Mrs. Henry Marquand, "Whitegates Farm"

**Brookville**  
Mr. David Dows

**Glen Cove**  
Mr. Frederick B. Pratt, "Poplar Hill"  
Mrs. Harold I. Pratt, "Welwyn"

**Great River**  
Mr. Julien T. Davies

**Lawrence**  
Mrs. Daniel Lord, "Sosiego"  
Mr. Hobart Porter

**Manhasset**  
Mr. Payne Whitney

**Millbrook**  
Mrs. Oakleigh Thorne

**Mt. Kisco**  
Mr. Reginald H. Bishop  
Mr. Louis Boissevain  
Mr. Carl Petrasch

**Oyster Bay**  
Mrs. Charles Tiffany

**Plandome**  
Mr. W. B. Leeds

**Suffern**  
Dr. Henry Patterson

**Westbury**  
Mrs. Robert Bacon, "Oldfields"

**Westport**  
Mr. Charles Head, "Headlands"

#### OHIO

**College Hill**  
Mr. Peter G. Thomson

#### PENNSYLVANIA

**Bryn Mawr**  
Mrs. Charles Tiffany

**Sewickley**  
Mr. J. H. Tate

**Shields**  
Mr. J. G. Pontefract

#### RHODE ISLAND

**Newport**  
Miss Susan Travers

#### VERMONT

**Bennington**  
Bennington College  
Mrs. James A. Eddy  
Mr. Howard H. Shields

**Putney**  
Andrews

**Woodstock**  
Miss Elizabeth Billings (now Marsh-Billings-  
Rockefeller National Historic Site)

#### UNKNOWN LOCATION

Mr. Everett V. Macy  
Mr. Frederick Peterson



plantings within an architectural framework—still inform domestic gardenmaking in the United States today. Although many of her basic ideas were derived from Italian and English traditions, Hutcheson's advocacy of native scenery and her use of local plant materials made her gardens distinctly "American" and helped foster an appreciation for what, even in the early twentieth century, was a rapidly vanishing landscape.

#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Some idea of the amount and variety of this literature may be glimpsed in Anna Gilman Hill, "The Gardener's Miscellany: The Literature of American Gardening," *Garden Club of America Bulletin*, ns., no. 20 (November 1924): 47–53, and in Stephen F. Hamblin, "Gardening Books for the Client," *Landscape Architecture* 10 (April 1920): 122–123. Hill actually mentions Hutcheson, on p. 53, along with Fletcher Steele and Grace Tabor, as the authors she finds most helpful on the subject of design. See also Elisabeth Washburn, "Addendum of Books Published from 1861–1920," in U. P. Hedrick, *A History of Horticulture in America*, rev. ed. (Portland, OR: Timber Press, 1988): 557–566; and Beverly Seaton, "Gardening Books for the Commuter's Wife, 1900–1937," *Landscape* 28, no. 2 (1985): 41–47.
- <sup>2</sup> Some exceptions are Beatrix Farrand's work on the campuses of Princeton and Yale, Ellen Shipman's design for Lake Shore Drive in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, and Marjorie Sewell Cautley's landscaping for such planned developments as Sunnyside Gardens, New York, and Radburn, New Jersey.
- <sup>3</sup> Biographical information has been compiled from American Society of Landscape Architects membership application forms, letters, and other documents held in the Martha Brookes Hutcheson Archives, currently in the care of the Morris County Park Commission, Morristown, New Jersey; hereafter cited as MBHA. Hutcheson herself supplied brief biographical data for Clarence Fowler's "Three Women in Landscape Architecture [Beatrix Jones Farrand, Martha Brookes Hutcheson, Marian Cruger Coffin]," *Cambridge School of Domestic and Landscape Architecture Alumnae Bulletin* 4 (April 1932): 7–12. Fuller discussions of Hutcheson's life and work are in Rebecca Warren Davidson, "Images and Ideas of the Italian Garden in American Landscape Architecture" (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1994), esp. 322–378; idem, "The Spirit of the American Garden. Landscape and Cultural Expression in the Work of Martha Brookes Hutcheson," *Journal of the New England Garden History Society* 4 (Spring 1996): 22–29.
- <sup>4</sup> Only under wartime duress in 1942 did Harvard open its doors to women.
- <sup>5</sup> Hutcheson, quoted in Fowler, "Three Women," 9.
- <sup>6</sup> "Option 3. Landscape Architecture," Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston, Department of Architecture [course catalog] (Boston, 1901), 75.
- <sup>7</sup> Hutcheson, quoted in Fowler, "Three Women," 10.
- <sup>8</sup> In her application for membership in the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA), dated 3 March 1920, Hutcheson stated that during the time she was head of her own office in Boston and New York (1901–1910), "some 83 private places or gardens were laid out from my plans under my supervision." Her "Professional Record," however, lists only 48 clients. Undoubtedly, more gardens designed by Hutcheson remain to be discovered. ASLA applications and typescript "Professional Record" are among the papers held in MBHA.
- <sup>9</sup> Martha Brookes Hutcheson, *The Spirit of the Garden* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1923). For a more extensive discussion of Hutcheson's contribution in this regard, and the importance of the Italian model in American landscape design, see Davidson, "Images and Ideas."
- <sup>10</sup> *The Spirit of the Garden*, 14.
- <sup>11</sup> *The Spirit of the Garden*, 15.
- <sup>12</sup> As she later described: "In 1902 I was called upon to locate and plan a garden for Mr. Frederick S. Moseley, the only stipulated requirement being that I should make the garden a part of an approach to the already established greenhouses and fruit and vegetable gardens." Martha Brookes Hutcheson, "Report of Work Done on Estate of Frederick S. Moseley, Esq., Newburyport, Massachusetts," typescript draft of documentation submitted to the Secretary of the Examining Board, American Society of Landscape Architects, 12 May 1920, in support of her application for membership, MBHA.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

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In her continuing research on Martha Brookes Hutcheson, the author would be most grateful to hear from anyone with additional information about her work at any of the above properties. Rebecca Davidson, [davidson@princeton.edu](mailto:davidson@princeton.edu), (609) 258-3197