Painting Paradise: The Art of the Garden

What does your garden say about you? Is it all in straight lines, does it wander about all over the place? Is it full of flowers, or used to grow your own veg – or (heaven forbid) has it been paved over to save time or create a much-needed parking space?

Although modern gardening can certainly become a form of one-upmanship – what do you really think about your neighbour's purple woodchip? How ironic are your own garden gnomes? – you're probably not planning to make a statement to foreign monarchs. It wasn't so long ago that gardens were used for just this – to emphasise their owners' status, wealth and power, to symbolise Biblical texts, and even to reflect the country's politics. In ***Painting Paradise: The Art of the Garden,*** a major new exhibition at **The Queen's Gallery** we see how the role of the garden has changed and developed through the centuries – for Great Britain was not always the 'nation of gardeners' it is today.

The Greek writer **Xenophon** came back to Athens from Persia and planted a grove. He is credited with creating the term 'paradise' (*pairi* – around, *diz* – formed) after seeing King Cyrus's enclosed hunting garden at Celaenae, 'a great park filled with wild animals… and watered by the Meander' . Persian illuminated manuscripts teem with pictures of garden scenes – and the Persians didn't just make them in Herat. When they invaded India in 1526 they set up court workshops in which Murghal styles developed. ***Seven Couples in a Garden*** (c 1570) is one of six illustrations accompanying a set of poems written in Herat in 1492, which make it clear that this garden is a paradise – one filled with cool pavilions, flowing water

and shady trees, for although Herat's climate is described as temperate, it can still reach 37°C in summer. Turquoises, reds, pinks and yellows colour this animated scene.

By the late 1400s royal families had realised that a garden was one more way to make sure everyone knew they were important. Now for the first time artists began to produce accurate reproductions of real Western gardens – gardens that combined pergolas and knots with features inspired by classical antiquity, such as obelisks and water mazes. The exhibition includes an original copy of ***Hypnerotomachia Poliphili***, a strange romance whose woodcut illustrations evoke the dream world of the island garden of Cythera, which is full of classical architecture; the book shows how much value people placed on Greek and Roman antiquities at the time of the Renaissance. On one page a couple lounge around a formal hexagonal pool with an elaborate fence, for gardens were still enclosed, a setting rather than a subject in their own right.

Mazes were popular in Italian gardens of the period as a form of courtly entertainment, and many artists included them in their works. Mazes also symbolised earthly pleasures, suggesting that people will always struggle to escape from either. In **Lodewijk Toeput** (**Pozzoserratto's)** huge ***Pleasure Garden with Maze*** (c 1579-84) men and women are canoodling, eating, drinking, bathing, making music or dancing, while far in the background the Piazza San Marco tells us that we are in some kind of fantasy version of Venice.

At this time gardens were planned by estate managers rather than landscape architects. **Franciabigio's** lovely ***Portrait of Jacopo Cennini*** (1523) is the earliest surviving picture of a professional gardener; he is seen writing in a book – he is obviously literate, and his important position is emphasised by the keys hanging round his wrist.

Painting Paradise also looks at sacred gardens; illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages depict an imaginary Garden

of Eden based on Xenophon's idea of paradise as an enclosed space, and gardens soon become an important symbol in religious art. The Virgin Mary is seen in a variety of horticultural settings; one of the exhibition's highlights is **Rembrandt's *Christ and St Mary Magdalene at the Tomb,*** in which Mary Magdalene mistakes Christ for a gardener – not surprisingly, as here he wears a big floppy hat, carries a spade and looks every inch the rustic. The painting typifies Rembrandt's use of light, which shines on the two central figures, whilst in a bower we see two rather odd-looking angels.

A painting by **Jan Brueghel the Elder, *Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden,*** looks more like a rather optimistic safari park, with tigers, horses, swans, parrots and even guinea pigs all co-existing and the world's first couple looking on benevolently from a distance. Hesiod's believed in a time of social harmony, a mythical Golden Age in which everyone lived in a state of peace, harmony and prosperity, and this is Brueghel's version of it.

The exhibition's **'Baroque Garden'** section shows us some formal Italian gardens on the grand scale. The very wealthy spent huge sums of cash on reworking nature to produce the results they wanted – if that meant re-routing water channels, chopping down forests and levelling hills, then that's what they did, for the more they changed things, the more impressive their gardens became. In ***A View of the Cascade, Bushy Park Water Gardens,*** smart men in wigs and ladies with fans parade about, and even the Prince of Wales and Caroline of Asbach can be seen taking the air. Bushy Park is still the second largest of London's Royal Parks, and the Water Gardens – which had over the years been a hospital for Canadian troops during WW1, swimming pools as part of an open air school for East End Boys with respiratory diseases, US barracks during WW2, then Ministry of Defence premises during the Cold War – were recently restored after years of neglect;

the location of this painting was only properly identified in 1999.

Further paintings of this period show the extensive gardens at Hampton Court (where William III had 2,000 lime trees laid out in a *patte d'oie* arrangement), Buckingham House, where again the emphasis is on the vastness of the Duke of Buckingham's estate, and Windsor Castle, with its fruit garden cultivated for the Dean and Clergy of St George's Chapel. Beside the bell-shaped cloches and currant bushes (planted in very straight lines), this picture shows charming details of two ladies playing on a seesaw and a nanny walking with a boy and his dog.

The Landscape Garden was, we are told, 'England's greatest cultural export of the 18th century.' By now all those straight lines were passé – instead people wanted to see nature, though maybe not *too* 'red in tooth and claw' – and they also wanted to be seen. Public pleasure gardens sprang up and people flocked to them. In ***St James' Park and The Mall*** (c 1745) everyone – from the Prince of Wales to soldiers, bishops, milkmaids and prostitutes – is enjoying a day out. A woman sits down to peel off her stocking, another breastfeeds a baby, a dog relieves himself – all life is here. Meanwhile **Johan Jacob Schalch's *The Gardens at Kew*** shows a perfectly landscaped setting with a pleasant river, gentle slopes, blossoming trees and a rowing boat – in the background is an ornamental white bridge and one of the classical temples that were built by **William Chambers** for Princess Augusta – her botanical garden still forms part of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew.

The exhibition features not only works on canvas but also some beautiful ceramics; a **Chelsea Porcelain** tureen made in the shape of a bunch of asparagus, cabbage leaf bowls, a pair

of open pea pods, and some more elaborate **Sevres Porcelain** pieces. The most spectacular piece is the **Vincennes Sunflower Clock,** which stands on a gilded candelabra. The tiny clock face of brass shavings, made to resemble the centre of a sunflower, symbolises Louis XIV, the Sun King; it is surrounded by stems of flowers, each one removable. There are also **Royal Copenhagen *Flora Danica*** dishes, vases from **Bow China Works,** a **Minton** pen tray given to Queen Victoria on her 14th birthday, **Coalport** dishes and a **Meissen** *tête-a-tête* – a tea set for two, each piece encrusted with intertwined forget-me-nots.

In the 19th century plants (rather than garden design) made a big come-back. Parks and gardens were full of flowers, and now that the Glass Tax had been abolished, the Victorians loved nothing more than stuffing their glasshouses and conservatories full of pot plants. Gardens were no longer the preserve of kings – now even the middle classes could buy garden journals. **Jane Loudon's** illustrated books (including *Instructions in Gardening for Ladies*) sold in their thousands, **Edward Budding** invented the lawnmower, and gardening was brought to the masses. Intrepid plant-hunters brought exotic non-native species back from all corners of the world (though this was not always a good thing).

Examples of the paintings of this period include **Landseer's *Windsor Castle in Modern Times,*** in which Queen Victoria, Prince Albert and a small child (Princess Victoria) pose in a room whose window is open to a formal garden (in which a servant can be seen pulling the Queen's mother along in a bath chair). Everyone in the room – even the dogs – looks towards the Queen, who stands holding a posy of red and green flowers. The Princess holds a dead kingfisher and stands over the corpses of very dead fowl, which does seem a rather odd pastime for a 3 year old even if a kingfisher does symbolise peace and harmony. Queen Victoria liked it anyway – she paid 800 guineas for it and had it hung in her sitting room.

Queen Victoria also invented the **Royal Garden Party,** for which various monarchs have been obliged to stand under royal umbrellas ever since. **LR Tuxen's *The Garden Party at Buckingham Palace*** shows a much older Victoria, now in her carriage with Princess Alexandra; the grounds of the palace throng with the great and good, many of whom represent the British Empire. Tuxen, a Danish artist, was authorised to apply for a sitting with anyone who had been at the garden party, as the Queen wished it to be as accurate a representation as possible.

A fascinating extra in this exhibition is a case of Queen Victoria's floral jewellery, which includes drop earrings in the shape of fuchsias, made by Garrard's from Princess Beatrice's milk teeth. There is also a pretty orange blossom parure set which Prince Albert gave to his wife in instalments over the first few years of their marriage. The Queen had started a fashion for orange blossom jewellery when she wore a simple wreath of it at her wedding.

Painting Paradise concludes with a section on **The Botanic Garden.** As new species arrived from Africa, North America and the Far East, gardeners became very interested in the cultivation of non-native plants, and botanic gardens were developed for this purpose. The science of botany emerged and botanic illustration became a genre in its own right, while Dutch artists introduced the floral still life. Plant studies by **Leonardo da Vinci** are some of the first modern botanical drawings, while drawings by **Alexander Marshall** show the massively popular auriculas and tulips. Two large blue and white vases by **Adriaen Kocks** are like mini-pagodas themselves, with much smaller vases protruding from each of their nine tiers. These were used for cut flowers and bulbs at Hampton Court, and are decorated with peacocks, patterns, flowers and birds.

The final item displayed is a delightful flower book by **Esther Inglis,** created in 1607 for Henry, Prince of Wales

(eldest son of James VI of Scotland and Anne of Denmark) and containing fine drawings and watercolours of wayside flowers and native species, matched with ‘edifying verses’.

Painting Paradise is an extensive exhibition that does at times feel slightly overwhelming; it would certainly repay more than one visit. My personal favourites were the gorgeous illuminated manuscripts, the ornate ceramics, the stunning Rembrandt – and of course, the tooth earrings. The information boards written by the curator **Vanessa Remington** (who is also the author of the accompanying book) are excellent and well worth reading. Perhaps in years to come she will curate another exhibition, this time about our own royals and their approach to gardening – an approach which is no doubt quite different from that of their ancestors.

Painting Paradise: The Art of the Garden is at The Queen’s Gallery, Palace of Holyroodhouse, until 24th February 2017. Visitor information and tickets at www.royalcollections.org.uk, or call 030 3123 7306.

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