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978-1-108-06140-7 - The Formal Garden in England

Reginald Theodore Blomfield Illustrated by F. Inigo Thomas

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The Formal Garden in England

First published in 1892, this work by the architect Reginald Theodore Blomfield (1856–1942), illustrated by Francis Inigo Thomas (1865–1950), uses historical evidence to vindicate a classical approach to garden design, in which a house and its surroundings are kept in harmony. It is a response to the work of the gardener and journalist William Robinson (1838–1935), who had written vehemently in favour of romantic, naturalistic gardens. Closely linked to the burgeoning Arts and Crafts movement as secretary to the Art-Workers' Guild under William Morris' presidency, Blomfield had developed a theory of garden design which held that it should be a reflection of architectural order: honest, vernacular simplicity as opposed to the 'wild garden'. Illustrative of the contemporary debate between architects and plantsmen, this instructive text, reissued in its second edition of 1892, captures a moment in this developing relationship in the years before Edwin Lutyens and Gertrude Jekyll gave it new harmony.

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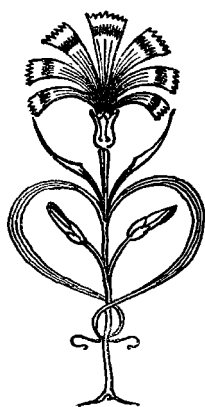
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THE
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·IN·ENGLAND·
·BY·REGINALD·BLOMFIELD·
·AND·F·INIGO·THOMAS·



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PREFACE TO SECOND EDITION

AN ANSWER TO MR. W. ROBINSON'S "GARDEN DESIGN AND
ARCHITECT'S GARDENS," MURRAY, 1892.

SINCE the publication of the first edition of this book Mr. W. Robinson has issued what is no doubt intended for a counterblast to the views advanced in the *Formal Garden* and the late J. D. Sedding's *Garden Craft*. Mr. Robinson is annoyed that any one else, and architects of all men, should presume to meddle with garden design; and after an aggressive preface, in which he casts *tu quoque* at the architect, he launches into a series of detached paragraphs to prove that landscape gardening is a very beautiful art, that he himself is an eminent professor of it, and that architects cannot possibly know anything about it at all. His method is on the one hand to take a number of passages without reference to the context and sometimes incorrectly quoted, and then to assert that such passages are obviously

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absurd, and on the other hand to refer to his illustrations of existing places in England to show the superiority of landscape to formal gardening. Mr. Alfred Parsons is a very skilful artist, and Mr. Robinson shows astuteness in selecting some of his admirable drawings of trees and foliage to prove his point. Where, on the other hand, he has to show a Formal Garden he employs the very worst possible illustrations on which he can lay his hands.

I propose briefly to consider Mr. Robinson's contribution, first, as a positive statement of his own views, and secondly, in its negative aspect as a misrepresentation of the opinions advanced in the *Formal Garden* and *Garden Craft*.

As to the true use of a garden Mr. Robinson¹ holds that "the true use and first reason of a garden is to keep and grow for us plants not in our woods and mostly from other countries than our own." Its intention is "to show, on a small scale it may be, some of the precious and inexhaustible loveliness of vegetation in plain or wood or mountain. This is the necessary and absolutely only true, just, and fair use of a garden" (*Garden Design*, p. 24). Mr. Robinson seems to conceive of a garden as a Botanical Museum, a place for the exhibition of specimens

¹ *Garden Design*, p. 23.

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from every part of the world, in which no doubt the monkey puzzler would occupy the proud position due to its conspicuous ugliness.

The paragraph in which these emphatic assertions occur is directed against the contention advanced in the *Formal Garden* that tropical plants with their large leaves and brilliant foliage are “out of scale and character” in the midst of quiet English foliage; one would have thought this obvious, though to Mr. Robinson, in default of an answer, it appears “childish.” Not being an artist, Mr. Robinson does not understand the artistic importance of mass on the one hand, and of scale on the other. Both of these elements have to be carefully considered in a garden, as I have endeavoured to point out (*Formal Garden*, p. 15) in a passage which Mr. Robinson with his usual urbanity characterises as “full of nonsense”; and I may refer to this passage for a fuller discussion of the question. The point to which I would here call the reader’s attention is this initial view of a garden. Mr. Robinson may prefer that his garden should be a Botanical Garden, but other people may be allowed to think that a pleasure garden is a garden for pleasure—pleasure of the eye, pleasure of exercise, a place for that innocent delight on which Lawson dwells so lovingly in his *New Orchard*.

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If to the pleasure of the eye it is necessary that your walks should be straight and broad, your lawns ample, and your borders glowing with many-hued flowers, and to the pleasure of the mind that you should have quiet and retirement and be sheltered from the outside world by a yew hedge or a tapestry of roses and jasmine against the garden wall, then the formal garden is your garden; you have no affair with either the scientific curiosity of the botanist, or with the uncertainty of purpose of the landscape gardener. According to our view there is no need to conceal the fact that the garden is an artificial thing, that it is the result of man's love of flowers and grass and trees, and of the care which he lavishes on them in consequence. One would, on the contrary, accept the fact frankly, and show by the orderly beauty of the garden that this is nature taken into the service of man. As Sedding well said, "Any garden whatsoever is but nature idealised." Mr. Robinson's answer to this is, "We cannot allow him (Mr. Sedding) to bring the false and confusing art drivel of the day into the garden without showing the absurdity of his ideas."¹ I do not observe that Mr. Robinson has anywhere shown their absurdity, unless he supposes that his bare assertion that

¹ *Garden Design*, p. 67.

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they are absurd, ought to convince any person of intelligence, for he drops the subject and proceeds to abuse the illustrations to Sedding's book and to call his opinions "childish." Mr. Robinson is rather fond of calling people with whom he differs "childish."

As to "nature" and "art," Mr. Robinson is often florid, never precise. Some systematic explanation of the relation between the two was to be looked for from a writer who has the one or the other constantly at the end of his pen, and who indeed appears to invoke the one or the other as a *deus ex machinâ* whenever he finds himself in an awkward corner. On p. 48 of *Garden Design* we are told that "we may be quite sure that there is a true and beautiful art of landscape gardening, notwithstanding these denunciations, and it is none the less real because there is no smug definition of it that pleases the minds of men who declare that it does not exist." One would admit the existence of anything if it was only proved. Mr. Robinson neither gives us the definition, nor shows us where the art is or what it consists of. The trees are beautiful, and so are the flowers, but where is Mr. Robinson's art? What does it do for us, or for the trees or the flowers? His skill as a tree-planter, or as a flower-grower, is no

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doubt great, but that does not make him an artist, and by no possible wresting of the term can he be called so on this ground only. Mr. Robinson seems to think that knowledge (whether it is artistic or not) and art are the same thing. On p. 68, *Garden Design*, he indulges in an irrelevant sarcasm on the idea that “the work of the late James Backhouse, who knew every flower on the hills of Northern England, is not art,” but “cutting a tree into the shape of a cocked hat is art.” Whether the cocked hat business is art is a separate question, but the work of the late James Backhouse might be an encyclopedia of botanical knowledge and yet the late James Backhouse be just as far off being an artist as ever. That eminent landscape gardener Mr. Milner has with greater boldness attempted a definition of his art, which is discussed in the first chapter of this book.

However, on p. 38, *Garden Design*, there is some very fine writing about “all other true art,” showing how all the great painters use selection in their compositions, and how “they work always from faithful study of nature, and from stores of knowledge gathered from nature study, *and that is the only true path for the landscape gardener*; as all true and great art can only be

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based on the eternal laws of nature.” But what do all these brave words mean? In the first place we have Mr. Robinson’s favourite fallacy that the landscape gardener is an artist in the same sense and on the same footing as the landscape painter.¹ Perhaps to his mind Mr. Marnock, Mr. Olmstead, possibly Mr. W. Robinson himself, are men of the same calibre as Corot, Turner, or Troyon. Now the landscape painter studies the forms and colours of nature, and selects and arranges them, for one of two purposes, either to give a representation of the phenomena as literally exact as possible, or to give his own version of these phenomena as they affect his own individuality and after they have passed through the fire of his own imagination. Mr. Robinson must be gifted with singular audacity if he can assert that the work of the landscape gardener has anything to do with either the one or the other of these most difficult problems. There is, in fact, no more analogy between landscape gardening and landscape painting than there is between landscape painting and architecture; any argument therefore based on such an analogy falls to the ground. Stripped of clap-trap, “the stores of knowledge gathered from nature study” by the

¹ See passage quoted on p. 7, chap. i. *Formal Garden*.

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landscape gardener amount to the botanical and horticultural knowledge he may possess, and to acquaintance with such natural laws as will enable him to grow the particular flowers and trees which he wishes to grow. All Mr. Robinson's eloquence about nature was put in a nutshell by Bacon, when he said, "Natura non nisi parendo vincitur," a remark which expresses the relation to nature of the landscape gardener and of everybody else as well. We are still to learn how and by what title the landscape gardener is an artist and landscape gardening an art.

As to "nature" in relation to garden design, on p. 31 of Mr. Robinson's treatise appears as a heading "Nature, and what we mean by it"; which is just what we very much want to know, but here again we are doomed to disappointment. There are references to the "tree-fringed lawns of Switzerland" and "lovely evergreen glades on the Californian mountains," also to Miss Alice de Rothschild's garden at Eythorpe. Putting two and two together, one is led to infer that it is desirable to reproduce in a garden "the lovely evergreen glade of the Californian mountains," and thus we shall get a "natural garden." It may be natural in the sense of being grown by natural methods, or of being a copy of a passage of natural scenery, but the

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question of design about it is left untouched, or rather is eliminated, and that being so, the claims of the person who has so laid it out to any artistic capacity are without foundation.

Mr. Robinson advances one very curious argument in favour of the landscape garden as opposed to the garden of ordered design. The painter, he says, is driven from the formal garden and prefers the pig-sty.¹ This, he argues, proves that the formal garden must be wrong ; to which I would answer, first, that his premiss is not true in fact, and secondly, that if it was it would prove nothing. As a fact, several of our painters have found their delight in formal gardens, Sir John Millais for instance, Mr. Marcus Stone, Mr. Fulleylove, and Mr. Elgood. I do not think any of these gentlemen would spend very much time on painting the garden of "Rhianva" or "Madresfield," or any other choice example of landscape gardening. But apart from this, it does not follow that because the painter prefers the pig-sty, the pig-sty would be pleasant to live in. The conditions which the painter has in his mind in selecting a subject are not precisely the same as those which determine the arrangement of a house and garden.

¹ *Garden Design*, p. 3.

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On the subject of clipt trees Mr. Robinson becomes violent. He is positively contumelious to the late J. D. Sedding, because the latter said that if he wished to cut a tree he should have no scruple in cutting it to any shape that took his fancy. What Sedding was really contending for was complete liberty of individual expression, that if a man had an idea in his head, instead of allowing it to be stifled by pedantic rules, he should be encouraged to express it ; even if the result was bizarre, it would at least express some personal feeling, and a garden was of all places the fittest for this free play of fancy. In principle I think Sedding was perfectly right. As to the practice of clipping generally, Mr. Robinson as usual misrepresents us. We did not say, as he implies, that because a yew tree is a yew tree it must be clipt. In certain positions and for certain purposes it should be clipt freely, but noble trees such as that shown on p. 56 of Mr. Robinson's book should of course be left alone. Mr. Robinson's view that yews and similar trees should only be clipt to form hedges seems reasonable, if only it was extended far enough to include groves, archways, buttresses, and an obelisk or two of clipt work ; but I demur to the extraordinary assertion (p. 50, *Garden Design*) that " the ugliest things in the fair land

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of France are the ugly old lines of clipt limes which deface many French towns." The depth of colour, the play of reflected light, the extreme brilliancy of the isolated spots of light, which result from these close-clipt masses of leafage, must surely appeal to a person of quite ordinary sensibility as rarely beautiful. If Mr. Robinson has ever sate under the shade of one of these groves of clipt limes under a hot summer sun, he shows ingratitude in forgetting the shelter they gave him; and if he looks again in winter he may yet find some pleasure in the intricate pattern of their intertwining boughs. No doubt the clipping of trees can easily be pushed to absurdity. It is one of the accidents which are most easily mistaken for the essential qualities of a principle of design. In architectural drawings of the last year or so there has been an alarming eruption of clipt trees, apparently placed there for no reason but to show that one trick of design is just as easy to pick up as another. No sensible person cares about one trick more than another. Merely to clip is nothing, it depends how it is done.

Mr. Robinson has charged me with writing nonsense and attributing it to him (*Garden Design*, p. 13). He then quotes a passage which simply does not exist in the *Formal*

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Garden at all, although I willingly accept it. If I have in any way misrepresented Mr. Robinson's position, he takes occasion of it to allow himself a very large license in misstating other people's views. On p. 36 he takes two passages which are separated in this book by 103 pages, and prints them in his own book as if they ran continuously. He further attributes to me phrases such as "pure and broad in design," which I am not conscious of ever having used.

Referring to walled-in gardens on p. 10 of his book, Mr. Robinson asks with scorn, "Would any one put this high wall in front of Gilbert White's house at Selborne?" and again on p. 14, "How are we to have our lawns or 'broad expanse' if we build a high wall *near* the house?" Mr. Robinson has quietly begged the position of this high wall. I never urged that the high wall was to be put immediately near the house as he suggests, but it suits Mr. Robinson's contention better to assume that I did, and he accordingly attempts a point on what was never said.

On p. 33 Mr. Robinson pursues the same tactics. "The foolish proposition here laid down, that, because a garden is picturesque there must necessarily be 'a studied avoidance of all order, all balance, all definite lines,' is

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disproved," etc. The garden to which Mr. Robinson refers is the landscape garden, and I should certainly be the last person to admit that the landscape garden is picturesque, or is indeed anything but abominable. What I actually did say was, that as the landscape garden implied a disregard of ordered design, there was necessarily a disagreement between the garden and the house which it surrounded.

On p. 28 Mr. Robinson assumes that in the formal garden no flowers or creepers are to be allowed on the walls; and on p. 30 that the flower-beds are to be filled in with pieces of broken bricks, and points out on the other hand how "the gems of the flower world stain the rocks with loveliest flowers," a remarkable physical action on the part of a gem. On p. 20 he has the effrontery to say, "Not one word of the swift worker Time." If Mr. Robinson will do us the honour to read our little book on the Formal Garden he will find on p. 214 and elsewhere constant references to the effect of time and the rain and sunshine on garden architecture, and to the necessity of this to the real charm of a garden. On p. 91 he will find a definite condemnation of the formal garden of the decadence for forgetting that "a garden is the place for real flowers and grass, and not for

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conventional flowers mapped out on the ground in various coloured sands”; but Mr. Robinson has a lofty disdain for accuracy when other people’s opinions press him closely. It is sometimes difficult to see whether his perversions are wilful or merely stupid. For instance, in opposition to the view that curved lines are more “natural” than straight, it was urged (in the *Formal Garden*) that strictly speaking there are in nature no lines, a line being a convenient abstraction ; and that therefore straight lines and curved are equally natural or non-natural. To which Mr. Robinson replies, “Then men must never again talk of the lines of a ship. Perhaps Mr. Blomfield would accept a plumb line?” The extraordinary irrelevance of this remark is its own answer. So again on p. 48, in answer to the contention that grass work as an “artistic quantity” is overlooked in landscape gardening, Mr. Robinson says, “In the old clipt gardens gravel and distorted trees are the only things seen in quantity, we cannot call it artistic.” Mr. Robinson is apparently unaware that “quantity” in relation to “values” is a technical term of current art criticism. Mr. Robinson’s irritation has betrayed him into unnecessary blunders as well as gratuitous discourtesy.

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One word more in regard to the appeal to authority. Mr. Robinson talks of a landscape garden as “the English Garden” (p. viii.) He asserts, “In every country where gardens are made we see the idea of the English Garden gratefully accepted,” and goes on to imply that this landscape gardening is based on “the eternal laws of nature” (Preface, p. x.) The remarkable thing is that till the middle of the last century a view of garden design precisely opposed to this prevailed universally throughout Europe. We are therefore to suppose that the discovery of this eternal law of nature was reserved for the acuter insight of Capability Brown and Mr. Robinson. The appeal to authority is always dangerous, because it may lead people to mistake archæology for art, but a tradition of design that prevailed throughout the most brilliant period of European art, and only failed when taste was notoriously degenerate, is not to be cast aside as a mere pedantic formula. If the question is one of eternal principle, we prefer to be guided by the men of the Renaissance rather than by these eminent professors of Landscape Gardening.

Here Mr. Robinson and this unprofitable ground of personal polemic may well be left, and we may turn for a moment to the larger aspect

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of the question. The point at issue is not one of fashion, but one of principle. It is simply one aspect of the permanent problem of art. How far is man to be the slave of nature? To put it more precisely, How far is he to subordinate the expression of his ideas to an actual imitation of the forms, of what I may for this purpose, however unscientifically, call brute nature? Is he to express his ideas, his wishes, his fancy, by selecting and reproducing literally out of the book of nature such passages as may happen to fit? or is he to use nature as his handmaid, make her speak for him within the lines that he of his own initiative has laid down for her? This last seems to us the rational position, and if it is accepted as a principle it should be carried to its logical conclusion. It is accepted as a matter of course in all the arts of design, under which head, whatever art there may be in it, garden design must fall. Therefore the designer of a garden should be free to design his garden on his own lines, he should be free of all this cant about loyalty to nature; as if nature would not very soon avenge itself for any infringement of its laws. And so, instead of merely attempting to reproduce passages of natural landscape, he will design the gardens which surround the house as freely and naturally

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as he would design the house or any other thing that he should have to design for the use and pleasure of man. For to our mind, it is the very fact that throughout the garden there is a suggestion of man's thought and handiwork, veiled it may be by the delicious mystery of nature, that gives the garden its especial charm. We protest entirely against the view that there is one art of the house and another of the garden. Each art has its own technique, but given that all the arts belong to one family. They rest on the same main principles and aim at a common end. On any other terms art must be cut off from the main stream of humanity, and become a mere plaything or a convenient means of imposture.

REGINALD BLOMFIELD, M.A.

39 WOBURN SQUARE,
LONDON, *September 1892.*

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PREFACE TO FIRST EDITION

THIS short account of the Formal Garden in England does not profess to be exhaustive. The field is a wide one and includes subjects any one of which could only be fully handled in a special study. An attempt, however, has been made to break up ground and to clear away misconceptions by giving so much of its history as will show the general character of the formal garden in England, its absolute separation from landscape gardening, and the extent and variety of design which it involves. It is to the design of the garden that the scope of the work more particularly refers. No attempt has been made to deal with horticulture, with the right methods of growing plants and flowers and trees : these are fully discussed by the proper authorities in existing works on gardening ; but the question of design, of the treatment of the grounds as a whole as well as

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in detail, is an entirely distinct one, which has been confused with that of horticulture, and finally superseded by it. Horticulture stands to garden design much as building does to architecture ; the two are connected, but very far from being identical. This book has been written entirely from the stand-point of the designer, and therefore contains little or no reference to the actual methods of horticulture.

The illustrations have been drawn by Mr. Thomas, the letterpress has been written by Mr. Blomfield from materials collected conjointly. The writer begs to thank Mr. Seeley for permission to reprint passages from an article on "Gardens," contributed by him to *The Portfolio*, December 1889.

A list of the works referred to will be found in Appendix III.

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