

The Artist & the Garden

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INTRODUCTION

When I was sixty I happened to be writing a regular column in that quintessentially English periodical *Country Life*. Its subject indeed was precisely that, in my case how two people lived and gardened in the remote and rural county of Herefordshire on the borders of Wales. In one issue I described our garden which, after twenty-five years of hard toil and plant growth, had reached a point when it seemed worthy of the brush of one of those seventeenth-century view painters.¹ The enchanting bird's-eye panoramas of Jan Siberechts and Leonard Knyff had crossed my mind as I wrote, artists ideal for delineating a formal garden stretching over some four acres and made up of compartments, avenues and vistas. Not long after that particular column was published a letter arrived from a twenty-seven-year-old man called Jonathan Myles-Lea. I am destined, he wrote or rather announced, to paint your garden, and enclosed photographs of some of his recent canvases. And, taking a leap of faith in the young, we commissioned him to paint it for my sixtieth birthday (2).

This anecdote may seem a curious point of departure for a book about pictures of English gardens. But it was this painting that caused me to ask some of the questions which this book sets out to answer: who was the first person to paint an English garden accurately, and is seeing always believing, for it certainly should not be in the case of Myles-Lea's representation of the Laskett garden. In what we called the Silver Jubilee Garden, planted to commemorate that royal milestone in 1977, for example, features like the double circle of flowerbeds are in fact inaccurate. Indeed the whole picture is a monument to tidying up and formalising into pattern a garden of which the experience on foot is very different. In short this is not an ultra-realistic record of our garden but rather a realisation of its spirit. An aerial photograph would be far more accurate, and photographs taken at ground level would certainly provide a more vivid impression of what it is like to move through the reality. Although, I might add, I am equally aware that garden photographs too are works of art, monuments to interpretation and manipulation by the wielder of the camera's lens.

Those were only a few of the problems that the picture threw up in my mind. Another was the whole question of viewpoint. Here, on the whole, the approach was cartographic, as though the whole triangle of land had been up-ended for us to look straight at, but yet, on examination, this is not quite true, for areas, like the pleached lime avenue, are seen from an angle and there are cast shadows. Then there is the choice of season, in this case certainly early

summer before the garden becomes ruffled and blowsy, the hedges calling for trimming and the leaves on the trees starting to yellow. There are other more stridently anti-naturalistic elements like the cartouches, four of them, like jewels with masks of our cats at the top. They frame individual garden prospects, a parterre, a temple, a fountain and a monument, each one caught in a different mood, from the golden effulgent light of autumn to winter snow beneath a star-spangled night sky. Nor should the role of the patrons be forgotten for there we stand flanking an even larger cartouche, and we certainly had a hand in how this garden picture should look and what it should record.

I begin with this picture not only because it demonstrates that picturing the English garden still goes on, but because it was my point of departure. The act of commissioning it prompted me to collect reproductions of pictures of English gardens and to ask a whole series of questions about them. When did they start being painted and why? What was chosen to be painted and why? And what was the significance and meaning of these views within each particular period? Was it just pride of possession or could such a picture express deeper motives, like the desire to be at harmony with Nature and to reflect on the marvel of God's creation? Then there is the extreme unevenness of the material. In early pictures we catch only glimpses of gardens through an aperture or an arch as though the artist was hesitant to reveal more. But by the eighteenth century the sitter has walked through that arch and called for the painter to depict him and his family actually in the garden. Why, one asks, did this happen? What ideological and social change did this reflect? And nagging at the back of my mind was the eternal question of idea and reality, was seeing believing? Did all these gardens recorded in paintings, drawings, maps, book illustrations and single prints actually exist or were some of them merely wishful-thinking if not downright fantasy?

Ever since garden history took off in the 1980s, galleries, museums, country houses and archives have been ransacked for garden images. Pictures which until then had barely seen the light of day, had, within two decades, become clichés of garden history publishing, as garden historians sought to illustrate their texts with images of what had gone. But little if any consideration was given to the images themselves, occupying as a genre a place midway between the landscape painting and the country house view. By now a large corpus of such images has come to be known and exhibitions have assembled them for public display. Obviously the most important are those that record gardens before the advent of the landscape style, when the garden was banished in favour of the park.

Such a topic could be treated either chronologically or thematically. Both options have their advantages, although I have opted for the latter, aware that such an approach can from time to time involve arbitrary separation of material that has relevance for more than one topic. On the other hand it makes for clarity by emphasising what were the driving forces which precipitated these images and determined the forms which they took.

Garden images are by no means an insular phenomenon – they are part of a wider European trend.² From the late sixteenth century onwards they could already act as a topographical document, an illustration, a design or a map. They could delineate a real garden as much as one that existed only in the imagination. All these images sustained in perpetuity a memory of the ephemeral art of garden design. They evoked things material – earth, water, plants and arte-