

[THEME 3: CULTURAL LANDSCAPES] Reading summary

In Knox's 2009 chapter 'Interpreting Places and Landscapes', the author outlines how European landscape gardens have evolved in response to aesthetic changes since the 16th century to the present day, and shows us four basic phases of garden types and styles: The "Italian Garden", the "French Garden", the "English Garden" and the "city park". **These evolutions suggest that the dominant European garden styles reflected, to some extent, the specific socio-political and economic structures of their contemporaries and people's attitude to nature.** The first dominant garden style, the "Italian garden", rising from 1550 to 1650, reflected a desire to domesticate nature. The gardens are adjacent to the main buildings and are separated by walls on the periphery of the gardens. These small, walled gardens display elaborate rectangular flower beds, small fountains, with uniform, regular, and symmetrical layout. We can see that landowners at this time still had a certain fear of nature, fearing that there was still uncontrolled nature present, and therefore used walls to separate their gardens from nature. The second style is called the "French Garden", which gradually flourished in the 1650s, and indicates a message that nature has been conquered. Unlike the small, walled Italian gardens, the flat terrain of France makes gardens grander and more ornate in terms of the scale of the courtyard layout: Flat avenues with two symmetrical, straight lines of trees, large lawns, and fruitcake fountains. The famous gardens of Versailles are one of the masterpieces of this period, a metaphor for the expansion of the power of the Sun Dynasty and the prosperity of the absolute monarchical political system in France. Between 1720 and 1850, the "English garden" became popular, reflecting the nostalgia and celebration for pristine natural landscapes. The change in attitude towards nature from one of fear to one of praise is not only influenced by the Romantic landscape painters, but is also closely linked to the social context of rapid industrialization and urbanization. As the antithesis of the industrial world, pristine, pure nature is deeply missed. Thus, the English garden avoids as far as possible straight lines, geometric shapes, mounding, and other landscape rules and instead restores the original natural grass landscape and blends in with nature. The last type, which we are most familiar with, is the "city park". The declining financial position of the elite, who could not afford the maintenance of large gardens, led to a significant number of gardens being passed on to government management. This also gives the city garden an obvious municipal nature. Urban parks are an important part of urban public facilities, varying greatly in design and scale from region to region, but all share a common attribute: they are free and open to the whole community.

In the transformation of European gardens from private to public, from reflecting a fear of nature to celebrating it, from symmetrical regularity of layout to integration with nature, we can see that the development of mainstream garden forms was closely linked to socio-political, economic and class structures. We can take the Huaqing Palace in the Tang Dynasty and the Genyue garden in the Song Dynasty in China for example. The Huaqing Palace in Xi'an covered an area of over 1.7 million square meters at its height. It were grand in scale and magnificent in architecture, reflecting the strong financial resources of the state during the heyday of the Tang Dynasty. In contrast, the royal gardens of the Northern Song Dynasty were much smaller in scale and the gardens were more elaborately designed. This was because the territory of the Northern Song Dynasty was only two-thirds of that of the Tang Dynasty, and there were serious conflicts on the frontiers, resulting in the country's economic power being far inferior to that of the Tang Dynasty. At the same time, the maturation of the imperial examination system (analogous to the modern civil service examination system) changed the social class. The scholarly class grew and brought the poetry of literature into the construction of gardens, giving them a more detailed and elegant mood. By comparison we can see that the regulation and style of the garden is a product of the political and economic, and cultural integration of the same period.