2 Shows Celebrate Olmsted's Talent
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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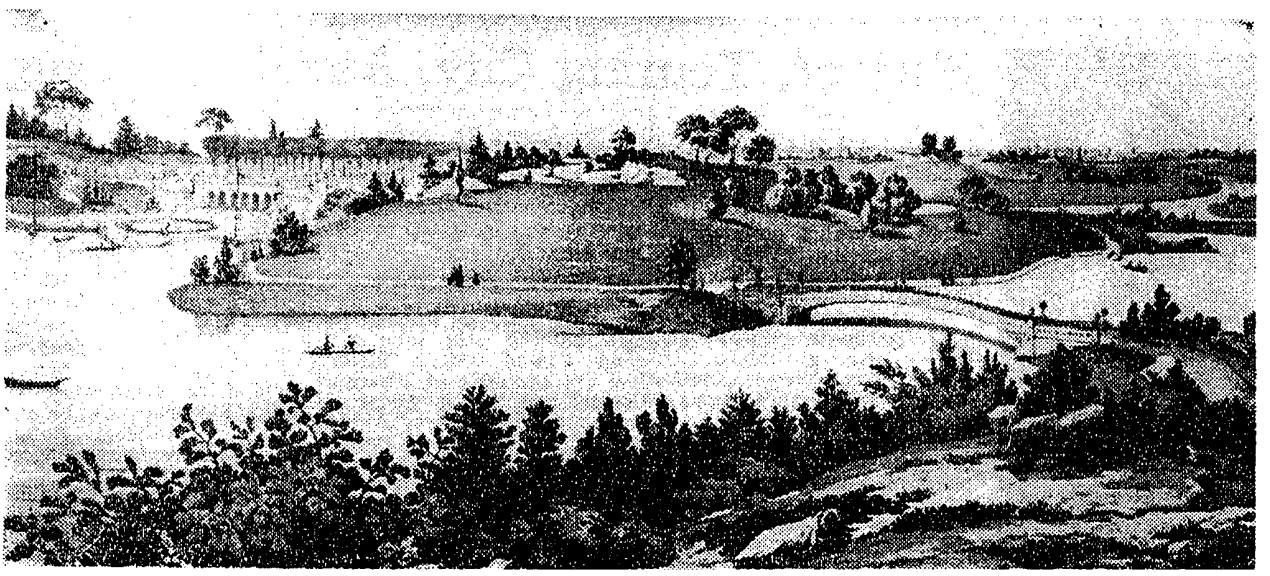

"View of Lake and Terrace Looking South," done in 1862 by G. W. Fasel, depicts a popular Central Park area. The picture is in the exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

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If the two major exhibitions running concurrently at New York's Whitney Museum and the National Gallery in Washington do not establish the protean talent of Frederick Law Olmsted, Charlton Heston will have to play him. "Frederick Law Olmsted's New York" opens at the Whitney today and "Frederick Law Olmsted, U.S.A." opens at the National Gallery on Saturday. The New York show will run through Dec. 3, and the Washington show through Jan. 7. After that a combined version will be circulated for two years by the American Federation of Arts, co-sponsors with the Olmsted Sesquicentennial Committee, which has sparked a year-long celebration of Olmsted's birth.

Both exhibitions mark the 150th anniversary of a man whom Carter Brown, director of the National Gallery, describes as "one of America's most prescient and sensitive artists."

Olmsted was a planner, conservationist, ecologist and sociologist. He was a lover of nature and cities, when cities were despised. He is responsible for that greatest of 19th-century affirmations of the city as a civilized way of life—the large urban public park—which he designed with incomparable art and skill.

That art changed lives and landscapes on an unequaled scale. With his talented architect-collaborator, Calvert Vaux, Olmsted helped shape America's physical destiny.

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This enormous achievement was willed tenaciously through the bureaucratic mazes of 19th-century political democracy. And it was done with an art at once so strong and gentle, so enduring and fragile, that those Olmsted parks and parkways tie a city into a living entity with the strength of fine steel, and can be mutilated by an insensitive touch. Beautiful and vulnerable, their impulse is both esthetic and social, and the results are environmental masterpieces.

The exhibited work is national in scope in the Washington show, with a more local emphasis in New York.

It ranges from the large, focal park he designed as an urban lung in so many American cities, to his concept of national parks, beginning with Yosemite, the chains of linked green spaces, as in Boston's Fenway, the parkway—Olmsted coined the word—as connector and civilizer, and planned communities, such as Riverside, Ill.

Today, Olmsted is recognized as an environmentalist in the highest and most complete sense of the word. We are only beginning to know what he gave us.

That understanding will be greatly assisted by these two shows. Both have been directed by William Alex, who is responsible for concept, organization and text. Stephen E. Weil, the Whitney's administrator, has coordinated the work in New York; David W. Scott has been in charge for the National Gallery. The J. M. Kaplan Fund and the Graham Foundation have helped support the New York exhibition.

A book, "Frederick Law Olmsted's New York," published by Praeger, accompanies the Whitney show, with a text of sensitive enchantment by Elizabeth Barlow, and an illustrative portfolio by Mr. Alex.

The exhibition material is drawn from 42,000 items in the Library of Congress, museum collections and historical archives. There are tiny notebooks that fit into the palm of a hand, with leaves that Olmsted pressed still staining their pages. Plans, photographs, letters and papers are shown, as well as exquisite drawings by Vaux and Jacob Wrey Mould of parks and their fittings.

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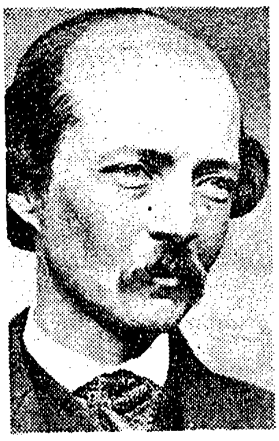
The impact of Olmsted and Vaux's lovely "picturesque" style—the "in" style of the time—offers a sudden, tangible rebuke to the heavy-handed present. Their meadows and rambles, lakes and lookouts are now locked in battle with bald playing fields and permanent, ugly paraphernalia.

The climaxes of both exhibitions are 360-degree circular screens that totally surround a visitor with projected views of Olmstead's America, using a process called Circlescan developed by Eugene Trachtman.

There are also, on a different scale, Olmsted's drafting instruments and compass and a small, worn, leather lunch bag. Portraits show a sensitive patrician.

The Whitney presentation focuses on Olmsted's work for New York. According to Mr. Alex, Olmsted was the closest thing to a master planner that this city ever had.

After a bucolic entrance and a roomful of introductory material, the New York story begins with the newspaper announcement of the city's competition for a "central park" in 1857—which led to the successful Olmsted-Vaux collaboration on Greensward, the original name for Central Park—and a letter from Olmsted in 1859 asking for the job as Park Superintendent.



Frederick Law Olmsted

The cycle is completed roughly 20 years later, with the political firing of Olmsted in 1878. There is something shocking about the personal, handwritten dismissal of the pre-typewriter age.

Between, there is a series of resignations and reappointments, during which Olmsted fought interference and frustration, politics and patronage, to complete Central Park and Prospect Park, undertake Riverside and Morningside Parks and start a prophetic system of tree-lined Brooklyn parkways.

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The original drawings for Greensward are a beautiful conjurer's trick. At the top there is a marked park map; below, a picture of existing desolation like a crater of the moon, identified modestly as "present outlines," and below that, the miraculous "effect proposed."

From a topographical indication, lakes, valleys and vistas bloomed. The miracle was achieved through massive civil engineering, including underground drainage systems, major moving of plantings and a superbly consistent vision and style.

Renderings of fountains, of what was meant to be a lacy, floating bandshell — later anchored on the Mall and still later replaced by a more pedestrian neoclassic model—"details of ornamental panels" and "enrichment of niches under arcades," take one's breath away.

It is all summed up in the delicate wonder of that small, pressed leaf. This was the gentle essence of the grand design for the refreshment of the eye and soul, that we hold so tenuously today.