ARCHITECTURE VIEW: A 'GARDEN OF DELIGHTS' AT COOPER-HEWITT

Huxtable, Ada Louise

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ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A 'Garden of Delights' At Cooper-Hewitt

The Cooper-Hewitt has had the happy idea of taking on the art of landscape for its summer show this year. Almost the entire museum — located at 2 East 91st Street in the old Carnegie Mansion — including the museum garden and conservatory, has been given over to the seasonally appropriate theme of gardens and flowers, or, more formally and correctly, to "horticulture and the decorative arts."

The exhibition, called "Gardens of Delight," is a splendid potpourri of treasures that will be on view through Aug. 23. It has been made possible by the Friends of the Cooper-Hewitt, the New York State Council on the Arts and the Garden Club of America. The delights are endless. That is not surprising, since every artful interpretation of the natural world was considered eligible for display, from the Garden of Eden on, and nature has been a source for artists and artisans of talent and sensibility throughout history. Architects have dealt as thoughtfully with landscapes as with bricks and mortar. You might say that the subject is as big as all outdoors.

This preoccupation with natural beauty, from its simple replication to the most exotic translations, alternating between romantic "naturalism" and an intellectually imposed classical order, has left us with some of the loveliest objects in the history of art and design. The Cooper-Hewitt, the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Design, seems to possess a remarkable number of choice examples. What it does not have has been supplemented for this show by the generosity of other museums and institutions, which have filled the gaps with such things as a superb millefleurs tapestry of a garden filled with musicians and flowers that hangs in the wood-paneled main hall, and a Japanese Rimpa screen of breathtaking blue morning glories on a dazzling gold ground, in a second-floor gallery. These are on loan from the Metropolitan Museum, the Cooper-Hewitt's near-neighbor on the 20-block stretch of upper Fifth Avenue known as the Museum Mile — an identification and yearly celebration of a remarkable congeries of art and cultural institutions that has also been sparked by the Cooper-Hewitt.

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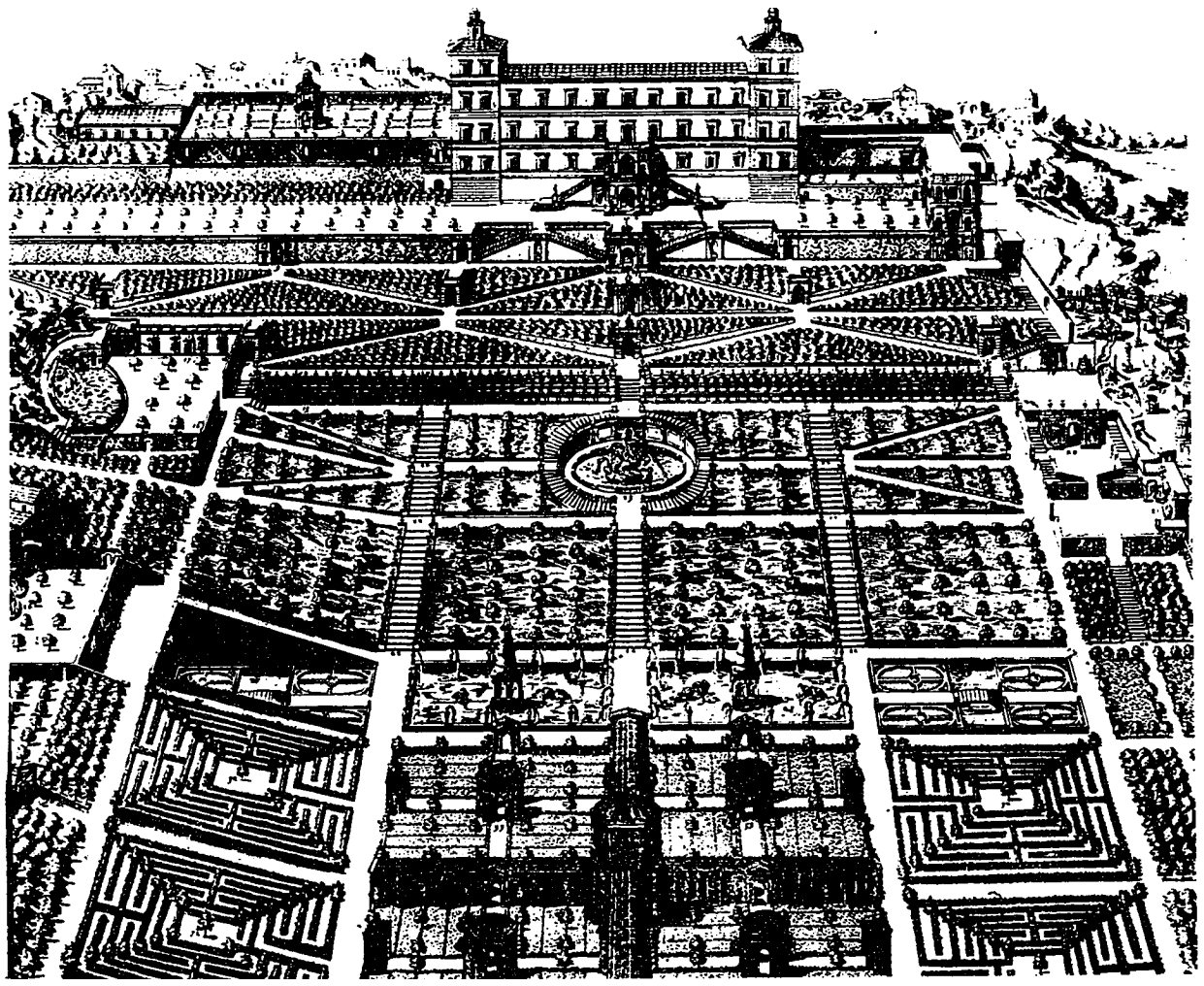
The omnibus subject has allowed some understandable license and self-indulgence among those expert staff members who have selected and installed the exhibition, and who must have been dizzy with a surfeit of temptations. Delight is clearly the universal and unwavering theme. What better escape from New York's blistering streets on these early dog days than the conservatory with its gentle splash of water from a borrowed cast-iron fountain that has clearly found its home and deserves to stay. The fountain is surrounded by a generous tangle of flowering plants, courtesy of the Horticultural Society of New York and the Office of Horticulture of the Smithsonian Institution, from which the currently redundant, fashionable species are mercifully absent. Plants and flowers, like anything else, can become a cliché.

In galleries on either side of the conservatory, and filling the rooms of the second floor, are nearly 200 architectural drawings and at least 300 objects in glass, ceramic, silver and other metals, textiles, laces, wallpaper and jewelry. There are things so delicate and fragile that you hold your breath just looking at them, and the kind of enormous exposition pieces that bowled over Victorian esthetes. The museum bills the selection as a sampling of everything from buttons to buildings.

Because it is a sampling, there are few intellectual demands. There is no reason why summer pleasures should not be easy. If it seems like an indulgence just to enjoy the objects for their own sake in New York's over-earnest cultural atmosphere, that, after all, is what they were originally intended for — the pleasures of the eye, mind and hand that creative and beautiful embellishment affords. I, for one, can take Fabergé or leave it alone, but there is an airy Fabergé dandelion puffball, which looks ready to be blown away, that must be the ultimate insouciant, jewelled gesture. A complete set of early 19th-century wallpaper panels by Zaber et Cie., still brilliant as a June day, create a summer world of their own. An Art Nouveau étagère by Gallé with a cow-and-parsley motif proves that all is art in the hands of the artist. In the clothing section, picture a cabbage leaf hat, slightly wilted by time. But visitors to the Cooper-Hewitt have learned to expect the unexpected.

These disparate delights have been organized in two parts: gardens and flowers. Obviously, such categories are scarcely confining. "Gardens" includes both real and imaginary gardens, empty and peopled, as formal designs or as settings for such appropriate activities as fireworks and amorous dalliance. They range from Rigaud's engravings of the elaborate parterres at Versailles to photographs of Gertrude Jekyll's consummate English gardens for Lutyens houses in this century. There are follies and fountains, grottos and gates, and all of the bucolic furnishings that artists and architects have devised.



Edouard Dupérac's engraving of "The Villa d'Este"—"opulent, mysterious and extravagant fantasies"

The section on "Flowers" shows the transformation of natural and botanical motifs into decorative objects and patterns, from a turquoise-glazed Egyptian plate of a stylized lotus garden to an 18th-century, floral-embroidered French waistcoat. This is where the Cooper-Hewitt collections shine. And this is where Dorothy Globus's installation also shines. Her delight in juxtaposition is clearly evident. A tin wedding bouquet and a brooch of jewelled flowers sit side by side; a translucent, latticed Belleek china tureen with roses and thistles shares surprising references with embroidered laces; the soft, glistening poppies of an Art Nouveau vase are echoed in a floral fabric; a room devoted completely to irises and tulips reveals a galaxy of styles. What seems arbitrary is really a special sense of visual affinities that illuminates the objects on display.

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For those who want more explicit information, there are labels that cover much of the history of garden design and the arts that have recorded it. A set of six marvelously detailed etchings of the gardens created for Francesco de Medici at Pratolino, near Florence, were made by Stefano Della Bella in the 17th century. Designed by Bernardo Buontalenti, the gardens were an artistic and mechanical marvel. They are filled with surprises, including aquatic "jokes," a grotto with mechanical figures, and a dining platform in a huge, gnarled oak, reached by a rustic spiral stair. There is a view of Giovanni Bologna's colossal garden sculpture of a giant personifying the Apennine Mountains — one of the few things that survives — crushing a monster from whose mouth water gushes into a pool.

Such gardens were grand, opulent, mysterious and extravagant fantasies that stagger our smaller imaginations and resources today. The grotto was one of the genre's triumphs; artificial caves and artful rocks, ferns, shells and fish, cooling streams, fountains and water basins, were miraculously united with the whole range of classical mythology in sculptured allegory.

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The aviaries, pergolas, waterworks and topiary of the formal garden persisted through the centuries. It became a matter of personal choice whether garden architecture should be in the form of Greek temples, Gothic ruins, Chinese pagodas or "primitive" huts. In England, Capability Brown (called Capability because he always found "capabilities for improvement" in his clients' estates) and Humphrey Repton popularized the new, informal landscape — a kind of romantic naturalism achieved at enormous effort.

As Elaine Evans Dee, curator of prints and drawings, points out, gardens are fragile and transitory, victims of weather and time. Art preserves them for us in paintings, drawings, prints and photographs. The decorative arts transform their evanescent elements into lasting enrichment for our lives. And the pleasure of these objects is based on evocation and memory as well as the skilled interpretation of natural forms.

Francis Bacon wrote in "Of Gardens," that the flowering landscape "is the purest of human pleasures." Gardens offer repose, the tranquil refreshment of indolence and beauty, and the benign indulgence of the senses. There is very little of any of this in modern life; pleasure is defined as a function of activity rather than of thought, the senses are pushed to extremes, and passivity is considered a form of defeat. But the secret gardens that once nourished eye and heart can still be recaptured at the Cooper-Hewitt's summer show. ■