PANORAMA
Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art
ISSN: 2471-6839

The Artist's Garden: American Impressionism and the Garden Movement

Curated by: Anna O. Marley

Exhibition schedule: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, February 12–May 24, 2015; Chrysler Museum of Art, June 16–September 6, 2015; Reynolda House Museum of American Art, October 1, 2015–January 3, 2016; The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, January 25–May 9, 2016; Florence Griswold Museum, June 3–September 18, 2016.

Exhibition catalogue: Anna O. Marley, ed., *The Artist's Garden: American Impressionism and the Garden Movement*, exh. cat. Philadelphia, PA.: University of Pennsylvania Press and Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 2015. 264 pp.; 128 color ills.; 22 b/w ills. Cloth $45.00 (9780812246650).

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What is an impressionist garden? Does "impressionist" describe the painting or its painter, the garden or its owner? *The Artist's Garden: American Impressionism and the Garden Movement*, an exhibition and catalogue produced by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA), traces these permutations through networks of American artists, gardeners, artist-gardeners, and gardener-artists. The project explores "the horticultural impulse in American impressionist art" (7), as inspired by French impressionism and motivated by the concerns of the Progressive era suburban white middle class. It focuses on New England and the mid-Atlantic region at the turn of the twentieth century. Predominantly a display of oil paintings, the installation at PAFA also included photographs, rare books, works on paper, autochromes, garden sculpture, furniture, and live plants. This variety enhanced the presentation, as did pairings such as the Childe Hassam portrait of Celia Thaxter, accompanied by her volume, *An Island Garden* (1894). When materials were so integrated, art history and garden history joined forces.

In print and display formats, *The Artist's Garden* aims to demonstrate "the role of the American artist in turn-of-the-century gardening culture and Progressive era concerns"

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(7). The exhibition begins with “American Artists/European Gardens,” which establishes the preeminence of French impressionism in the exhibition narrative. From there, it progresses thematically through the conceptually uneven “The Lady in the Garden”; the highly successful core of the exhibition, “The Artist’s Garden”; and the appealing yet somewhat extraneous “Urban Garden” and “Garden in Winter/Garden at Rest”; comprising five sections in all. The catalogue features contributions from garden historians John Dixon Hunt, Virginia Grace Tuttle, and Judith B. Tankard, as well as new perspectives from art historians Alan C. Braddock, Erin Leary, Katie A. Pfohl, James Glisson, and Anna O. Marley, who is the exhibition curator and catalogue editor. The authors address issues of gender, class, ethnicity, and nationalism within the histories of art colonies, technologies of color reproduction, environmental change, garden design, garden publications, and urban parks. To cover this broad array of sub-topics, this review interweaves discussion of the exhibition and catalogue content.

Following Paul Durand-Ruel’s exhibition of French impressionism, presented in New York in 1886, American art pilgrims sought entry into French artists’ gardens and colonies, which they then reproduced in the United States according to their own tastes, climates, and communities. In *The Artist’s Garden*, paintings by Childe Hassam, John Leslie Breck, Theodore Robinson, Cecilia Beaux, Frederick Carl Frieseke, and others offer examples of Americans working in France and adopting elements of the French style and/or subject matter. On their return, the artists established their own gardens in their own art colonies, in Cos Cob, Cornish, Old Lyme, and elsewhere. These efforts are the subject of Marley’s “Producing Pictures without Brushes” essay, which correlates to the “Artist’s Garden” area of the exhibition. There, the wall text informs visitors: “Artists’ gardens were personal laboratories for impressionist studies of light and color. They were outdoor classrooms where painters could teach their students about form and composition.” Constellations of paintings and photographs document these sites and relationships, successfully locating art communities in artist’s gardens. For instance, this section included a photograph of Hugh Henry Breckenridge’s painting class at his garden, Phloxdale; a landscape painting by Breckenridge’s student Daniel Garber; and a painting by Garber’s student Theodore van Soelen of Garber and his wife in their garden.

While it may seem that American art colonies and their impressionist garden paintings follow the French model, *The Artist’s Garden* reveals distinctions as well as commonalities unfamiliar to most viewers of the paintings. In the catalogue foreword, eminent garden historian John Dixon Hunt outlines the national character of Americans’ “impressionist” gardens. In contrast to their French counterparts, Hunt finds the American gardens and/or garden paintings—his account blurs their differences—to be more modestly scaled, vernacular in ornament, and attentive to horticulture (the cultivation of ornamental plants). On the third feature, when considered in light of earlier scholarship, quite a lot of material presented in *The Artist’s Garden* exhibition and catalogue suggests that this distinction was actually a transatlantic commonality. This is both an exciting discovery and an indication of the unsettling discontinuities between *The Artist’s Garden* scholars and their interpretations of evidence at hand.

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Several paintings in the exhibition demonstrate the horticultural modernism that Hunt himself identified in “French Impressionist Gardens and the Ecological Picturesque” (1992), where he argued that French impressionist gardens were modern in part because they featured the new imported and hybridized ornamental plants. This argument was further developed by Clare A. P. Willsdon in the *Impressionist Gardens* catalogue (2010) and then by Laura Anne Kalba, who discovered that a visual culture of new saturated colors characterized French impressionist painting as well as its subjects, the hybrid and exotic flowers introduced by the horticulture industry.[1] Katie A. Pfohl’s catalogue essay builds upon this line of scholarship by showing that during the 1870s and 1880s, American critics disliked the strong palettes of impressionist painting and the bright hybrid annuals, disdainfully comparing each to chromolithography. In response, Hassam and some other American impressionists turned to watercolor and toned down their palettes, in order, argues Pfohl, to “elevate” their work above the taint of commercial aesthetics (85). This is a valuable perspective to consider, especially because the exhibition itself is full of chromatically intense horticultural modernism. From paintings made by Americans in France, there are the red pelargoniums (geraniums) in Hassam’s *The Artist’s Wife in a Garden, Villiers-le-Bel* (1889; collection of Martin Stogniew) and Annie Traquair Lang’s *Tea Time Abroad* (c. 1912; private collection). Modern exotic and hybrid plants are also featured in work made by Americans at home: Gari Melcher’s geraniums, Jane Peterson’s iris, lilies, and poppies, Philip Leslie Hale’s crimson rambler roses, Breckenridge’s phlox, and the poppies Hassam paints in Celia Thaxter’s garden. “Even as they evoked a nostalgic look at American history, these gardens bloomed with modern hybrids sourced from around the world,” as Marley’s wall text reads.

Demonstrating painters’ and gardeners’ fondness for horticultural innovations is one way the exhibition acknowledges the fiction of American nostalgia for “old-fashioned” and “wild” gardens. Another occurs when the Anglophilic nature of American Progressive era garden design and writing is made plain. This paradox is most clearly articulated by garden historian Virginia Grace Tuttle, whose catalogue essay shows that the American suburban bourgeoisie were “seeking a uniquely American garden while unashamedly imitating the gardening styles of England” (35). Working from the principles of Michel Eugène Chevreul and the painting of J. M. W. Turner, English garden designers William Robinson and Gertrude Jekyll introduced “wild” gardens in the late 1800s. In the United States, their Arts and Crafts planting style infused the American Colonial Revival gardens with herbaceous perennials, just as the themes of pastoralism, rational recreation, and nationalism in English garden literature were reproduced in American texts. When American garden writers proclaimed the Americanness of a garden, they were imitating English garden writers who equated their own cottage gardens with English national identity. Yes, the look of “old-fashioned” American gardens, and even the nationalist rhetoric about them, were not homegrown, but instead imported from England. The book that serves as the exhibition’s touchstone, *An Artist’s Garden: Tended, Painted, Described* (1908) by Anna Lea Merritt, is perfect precisely because this Philadelphia native produced her garden, garden paintings, and garden book in England. The exhibition minimally recognizes this transatlantic element.

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Similarly present yet under-articulated: if the English "old-fashioned" garden was the style of choice for the American suburban and artistic middle class, it came to occupy that position in dialectic with styles that had different costs and class associations. English garden style facilitated the rise of middle-class recreational gardening in the United States because it was less labor intensive, and therefore less expensive to maintain than either the gaudy color-massed carpet-bedding seen in public parks (and likened to chromolithography, as mentioned above) or the highly manicured Italianate style favored by the elite. Charles A. Platt, architect and painter of gardens featured in the exhibition, introduced Italianate design into American landscape architecture with his book *Italian Gardens* of 1894. Edith Wharton, Maxfield Parrish, and Beatrix Farrand (Wharton's niece) all played a role in the popularization of the Italianate garden style and make appearances in *The Artist's Garden.* As realized by Platt and Farrand, the ostentatious Italianate style, which was undeniably the landscape du jour on estates of the nouveau riche, was tempered by English Arts and Crafts elements. Nevertheless, the exhibition's Italianate gardens undermine the argument that the featured paintings and gardens were "artistic and environmental manifestations of an emerging national Progressive era middle-class identity" (1). Rather, the Italianate examples nicely demonstrate the art colonies' garden-oriented networks, and in general, this theme is more convincingly explained in the wall text and supported by the art on display than are the nuances of the social identities of gardens and gardeners.

As presented in *The Artist's Garden*, turn-of-the-century American gardens and their representations were conservative because their makers envisioned the garden as a place for saving nature from human encroachment, shielding white elites from immigrants, and offering a retreat from urban and industrial environments and into a suburban or even rural anti-modern fantasy. Ironically, the language of conflict pervades the garden literature of the period; in the catalogue, this is the subject of essays by Alan C. Braddock and Erin Leary, each engaging with the ecological discourse in Celia Thaxter's *An Island Garden* (1894). Braddock argues Thaxter was an empathetic advocate for bird habitat conservation, and disputes claims (by Leary and others) that Thaxter's text either communicates "the worst forms of nativist xenophobia" or "foreshadow[s] later ideas about eugenic racism" (46, 48). Historical chronology is on Braddock's side, but as he and Leary each note, the tone of garden writing was tinged with anthropomorphism, and as previously demonstrated by Kathleen Pyne in *Art and the Higher Life* (1996), some of the exhibition's featured figures did participate in popular versions of evolutionary discourse.[2] These analyses from *The Artist's Garden* would benefit from the landscape-studies historiography that has debated whether native-plant "ecocentrism" past and present should be equated with fascist eugenic ideology, an extensive discussion sparked by landscape historians Gert Gröning and Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn in 1992.[3]

One of the exhibition sections, "The Lady in the Garden," addresses women's activities in relation to gardens and garden paintings. Several large paintings show "women as beautiful objects within the floral environment" (wall text), or more technically, poised between house and garden, in the superficial and imaginary border between culture and nature, a theme epitomized by the smart pairing of *The Orchard Window* by Garber

(1918; Philadelphia Museum of Art) with *Eleanor* (1907; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) by Frank Weston Benson. The section also includes “actual women—as artists, writers, hardworking laborers or celebrity gardeners” (wall text), represented by artist Maria Oakey Dewing and writer-gardener Celia Thaxter. To show other kinds of labor, there is Julian Alden Weir’s painting of male farmers resting and three paintings of laundry yards by Weir, Charles Courtney Curran, and William Merritt Chase. In these four paintings, there is neither “lady” nor “garden,” and hanging laundry is not “leisure,” despite Hunt’s inexplicable claim to the contrary (x); their inclusion strains the point unnecessarily.

Couldn’t the seriousness of amateur gardeners and their progress toward professionalization be depicted more effectively by contrasting the dreamy ladies by Hale, Garber, and Benson to visual evidence of women’s garden-related skill, knowledge, and labor? Judith Tankard’s catalogue essay clarifies the class division that manifested as “training in the horticultural arts for middle-class women, while most of the first generation of [female] landscape architects came from socially elite backgrounds” (113). Beatrix Farrand and Marian Coffin were among the latter, and their professional success—which relied upon their social contacts—opened opportunities for other women to enter the field. In the original *Artist’s Garden* of 1908, Merritt reminds readers that although turn-of-the-century texts described gardening as morally and aesthetically elevating ad nauseam, the actual work made the gardener less of a “lady.” Merritt opens her text by mocking “rhapsodies” on “gardening and the simple life” and promises to “not conceal anything I have learned about the nature of manures, the fatigue of weeding and planting, the scratches from training Roses, the discomforts of rheumatism. I will confess that my boots are often a horror to the scullery-boy, and my hands scratched and swollen, unpresentable in polite society.”[4]

Like the *Impressionist Gardens* exhibition by the National Galleries of Scotland in 2010, *The Artist’s Garden* includes impressionist and post-impressionist paintings of landscapes such as dooryards, public parks, and snowy forest clearings. Some of these surprises are a treat to see: Abbott Handerson Thayer’s camouflaged *Blue Jays in Winter* (c. 1905–9; Smithsonian American Art Museum, hereafter SAAM), John Henry Twachtman’s spare variations of a country farmhouse obscured by winter weather in *Snowbound* (c. 1895–1900; Montclair Art Museum) and *Snow* (c. 1895–96; PAFA), and Hassam’s inhospitable prehistory of New York real estate, *The Hovel and the Skyscraper* (1904, PAFA). In the catalogue essay that addresses the urban paintings in the exhibition, James Glisson considers their “conflicting temporalities,” arguing that the spatial and social mobilities of the city park unravel others’ claims that it was an “urban pastoral” (96). In contrast to the timeless peace of *In the Garden* (1892–94; SAAM) by Thomas Wilmer Dewing, and *An Italian Garden* (c. 1909; Chrysler Museum of Art) by William Merritt Chase, busy park scenes by Chase and Curran turn viewer into “*flâneur*” (104). Intriguing as the paintings and essay may be, they distract from the curator’s stated concern with “the horticultural impulse in American impressionist art” (7). The exhibition also exceeds this category by displaying several works in styles either more academic or belonging to other forms of abstraction. Most of these outliers receive caveats, communicated more effectively in the catalogue than in the necessarily abbreviated wall texts.

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Throughout *The Artist's Garden*, painting and gardening are acknowledged as sister arts, yet the exhibition and catalogue minimally address their reciprocity. We learn what artists took from gardens, but what was the horticultural demand for impressionism, or for the other garden-related images, regardless of style? Merritt's book is the exhibition's namesake, yet we never see her assertion that her real artistry was the garden itself, whereas painting was mere "toil": "I have resorted to weary paints only to show the effect of groups and arrangements that gratify me."[5] Art history is increasingly interdisciplinary in ambition. It is good to see museums supporting exhibitions with the breadth displayed here. Surely the show was and will continue to be popular with the public during its tour. The topic has great potential for future service to the field of American art history if art historians will let the primary and secondary literature of garden history more deeply inform their interpretation.

NOTES

1. John Dixon Hunt, "French Impressionist Gardens and the Ecological Picturesque" in *Gardens and the Picturesque: Studies in the History of Landscape Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), 256, 276–81; Clare A. P. Willsdon, *Impressionist Gardens* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2010); Laura Anne Kalba, "Blue Roses and Yellow Violets: Flowers and the Cultivation of Color in Nineteenth-Century France," *Representations* (Fall 2012): 93–94, 106–110.
2. Kathleen Pyne, *Art and the Higher Life: Painting and Evolutionary Thought in Late Nineteenth-Century America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996).
3. Gert Groening [*sic*] and Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn, "Some Notes on the Mania for Native Plants in Germany," *Landscape Journal* 11, no. 2 (September 1992): 116–126.
4. Anna Lea Merritt, *An Artist's Garden: Tended, Painted, Described* (London: George Allen & Sons, 1908), vii–viii.
5. Merritt, *Artist's Garden*, x, viii.

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