



Dumbarton Oaks, IV. The Garden Library

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VI. THE GARDEN LIBRARY

John S. Thacher

The Garden Library contains a specialized collection of 2,400 rare books — source materials of immediate concern to historians of garden design and landscape architecture. In addition, there is a collection of manuscripts, many of which are unpublished, and some 5,000 other books, guides, and periodicals for research needs.

The collection was begun by Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss at the end of World War II and reflects her desire that the interests of scholarship at Dumbarton Oaks be extended to the field of garden design, giving full recognition to its place in the development of western culture. While garden design, as the gardens of Dumbarton Oaks so clearly demonstrate, was a life-long interest of Mrs. Bliss, her purpose in establishing the Garden Library reflects a somewhat broader concern. The upheavals of the wartime and postwar years threatened the existence not only of a large majority of the great historical examples of garden design, but many of the long-established private libraries as well. As these libraries were broken up, dealers often found it more profitable to sell the plates from volumes on architecture and gardens individually rather than to find purchasers for the complete books. Thus, in establishing the Garden Library, Mrs. Bliss assured that many rare books which would otherwise have been lost were preserved intact.

The period covered by the collection extends back over four centuries, with virtually every major work relating to garden design which was published in Europe and America included in the Library's holdings. The earlier books and manuscripts document the development of the great European styles of garden design from the beginning of the Renaissance through the end of the eighteenth century, while those of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries record the adaptation of these styles to more modern conditions and their establishment in America.

The Garden Library is housed in a special wing which was completed in 1963. The main room, where the rare books are kept in locked cases, is a high-ceilinged space of great charm which looks out on a part of the Gardens. The room also serves as a gallery for paint-

ings and antique furniture which were left to Dumbarton Oaks by Mrs. Bliss. Leading to the Rare Book Room is a foyer containing a large exhibition case for books and manuscripts; a reference room and staff offices are adjacent. On the floor below there are two studies, a stack room, and a restoration room for routine maintenance of the collection.

The Garden Library is open during normal working hours to scholars with special permission. In the afternoon, when the Gardens and the Byzantine and Pre-Columbian Collections are open to the public, visitors are permitted in the foyer area of the Garden Library to see the books and paintings on display. Guided tours of the Garden Library are available, subject to arrangements made in advance, for clubs and other organizations with a special interest in gardens or rare books.

The Garden Library remained the property of Mrs. Bliss until her death in January 1969, reflecting the strong personal concern she held for its development. Every effort is being made to maintain this feeling while continuing to build the collection along the lines which she established. As a memorial to Mrs. Bliss, a catalogue of the Garden Library has been planned.

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