



Dumbarton Oaks, VII. The Gardens

Citation

Thacher, John S. 1971. Dumbarton Oaks, VII. The Gardens. Harvard Library Bulletin XIX (2), April 1971: 213-214.

Permanent link

<https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37364233>

Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

VII. THE GARDENS

The Gardens of Dumbarton Oaks, generally considered among the finest in the country, stand as a monument to the vision and devotion of Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss. When the estate was purchased in 1920, it consisted of an old-fashioned house standing in rather neglected grounds encumbered with farm buildings, roads, and haphazard paths. The site, however, is imposing: the house is situated on a rise in the highest part of Georgetown, the oldest section of Washington.

For many years Mr. and Mrs. Bliss were almost constantly abroad on diplomatic duty, but the idea of creating a garden of her own had long been Mrs. Bliss's dream. It was only during periods of leave that they could return to Washington to supervise the transformation of their estate. The house was completely remodeled, regaining its early nineteenth-century lines, and the garden began to take shape under the direction of the landscape architect Beatrix Farrand.

Mrs. Farrand, like Mrs. Bliss, had visited the great gardens of Europe and had a wide range of experience of garden architecture and history. Both were imbued with the idea, of Roman origin, that a garden should be designed as a place to be lived in as much as a house. Thus, provision was made for enclosed areas or garden rooms, large and small, which would be suitable for family use or extensive entertaining. From the first, two principles governed the overall plan and planting: a progressive informality of design, materials, and planting was employed in the gardens as they receded from the house; and plants were chosen which would afford beauty and interest in winter as well as during the spring and autumn, the seasons for which the gardens were primarily intended to be used.

In a garden of this kind, architectural features such as walls, balustrades, steps, gates, pavements, and pergolas are almost as important as the planting, and they complement each other. From years of residence in France, where formal gardens reached their highest development, Mrs. Bliss had acquired extensive knowledge and was determined that in her own garden every feature, from a fountain to a foot-scraper, should be individually designed for its place and use. Urns, marble garden seats, fountain sculptures from eighteenth-cen-

tury French gardens were purchased. To these were added wrought-iron gates and garden seats, urns and finials which were designed and made by the artists and craftsmen working for Mrs. Bliss at Dumbarton Oaks.

Since Mrs. Bliss was absent for many months on end, literally hundreds of sketches and detailed designs had to be sent abroad every year for her to see and choose from. When Mr. and Mrs. Bliss arrived home on leave, the past work was surveyed, future activities planned, and finishing touches decided on. For this purpose full-sized mock-ups would be prepared of a gate, a fountain, or a piece of sculpture, so that the exact scale or position of the finished product might be judged. Stakes of varying heights would be arranged to give a preview of the effect of a proposed planting, while ornaments, such as urns or finials or the decoration of a fountain, would be modeled in wet clay so that details could be altered on the spot.

The Gardens were, of course, originally intended to embellish a private residence, but when Mr. and Mrs. Bliss gave Dumbarton Oaks to Harvard University, their function changed. Quiet and beautiful surroundings now play an important part in the life of the scholarly establishment and every afternoon (except during the summer) the sixteen acres of gardens are open to the public to enjoy. A sense of tranquillity and natural charm prevails, but probably few visitors are aware of the degree to which this is the result of careful planning and planting, and attention to perfection of every detail. It seems unlikely that the future will produce anything of this kind again, and Dumbarton Oaks may be virtually the last great garden created in America.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

ELIZABETH P. BENSON, Curator of the Robert Woods Bliss Collection of Pre-Columbian Art at the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, is the author of *The Maya World*, which was published by Crowell in 1967.

MRS. ELIZABETH MADDREN BLAND is Associate Curator of the Byzantine Collection at the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

JAMES G. FRASER is an Anglican priest in the Diocese of Melbourne, and has been a lecturer on Old Testament language and literature at Ridley College, Melbourne, and at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland.

OWEN GINGERICH is Professor of Astronomy and of the History of Science at Harvard; *Theory and Observation of Normal Stellar Atmospheres* (Proceedings of the Third Harvard-Smithsonian Conference on Stellar Atmospheres), which he edited, was published by the M.I.T. Press in 1969.

HARLEY P. HOLDEN is Assistant Curator of the Harvard University Archives.

DUNCAN ISLES teaches at Birkbeck College of the University of London.

ALAN T. MCKENZIE is Assistant Professor of English at Purdue University.

MARY G. MASON is Assistant Professor of English at Emmanuel College in Boston; her Harvard doctoral dissertation (1967) was on "The Imaginary Portraits of Walter Pater."

STUART F. C. NIERMEIER is Assistant Professor in the Department of English at University College of the University of Toronto.

JOHN S. THACHER is Honorary Associate of the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection; he was Director of the Library and Collection from 1940 to 1969.