

The Painter's Garden: Design, Inspiration, Delight

24 November 2006 to 11 March 2007

Städel Annex, Ground and Upper Floors

Gardens are legacies of paradise, offering people protection, relaxation, and inspiration. The exhibition "The Painter's Garden: Design, Inspiration, Delight" traces the artists' gaze at the garden through more than 200 outstanding works from museums and private collections worldwide and reflects their personal desires as well as an urge for scientific exploration. The artistic facets of the garden are as varied as its meanings: the medieval garden of paradise was a magical realm from which evil is excluded. For Peter Paul Rubens, the garden is an erotic playground. Caspar David Friedrich saw it as a mediator between human beings and nature. For Vincent van Gogh it was a projection screen for his melancholy. The Impressionists – Claude Monet, Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissarro – designed imaginatively designed gardens in order to record them in splendidly colored paintings and discover a new, sensitive style of painting. Max Liebermann, Pierre Bonnard, and Paul Cézanne painted their gardens in perspectives that changed constantly over decades. Paul Klee felt that as a painter he was also a garden. The garden is a motif with a rich tradition and has lead many artists to find new forms.

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In many cultures the image of the garden expresses in condensed form a desire for a harmonious unity of human beings and nature that was thought to have existed at the beginning of time and was anticipated in a utopian future. The Städel Museum's *Little Garden of Paradise*, by an anonymous master of the early fifteenth century, which is one of the most prominent examples of a painted garden in the history of art, sets the tone for the exhibition. The Virgin, the Christ Child, women, and angels have assembled beneath the trees of life and knowledge; Lucifer is squatting, tied up, in the grass. This otherworldly harmony is grounded in splendid vegetation: a wide variety of plants, which can be identified botanically, flourish in the peaceful scenery; the choir of angels is accompanied by a dozen species of birds. Transcendental spheres and tangible reality join together, promising order, security, delight, and peace. For Thomas Struth, whose photograph *Paradise 24* depicts an eponymous garden, found a fundamentally different form to express the desire for those same things: at the beginning of the twenty-first century, confronted with the destruction of nature, it is wilderness, as untouched by humans as possible, that represents paradise for us.

The search for balance goes hand in hand with an examination of detail, which leads to the microcosm of works with plants or grass as motifs. Works from circles of Dürer, Cranach, and Grünewald provide insight into the intersection of science and art. One particular attraction of the exhibition is Goethe's collections of herbs and the dried plants that Alexander von Humboldt brought back from his expeditions around 1800. The latter still represent an important resource for botanical research, and at the time they were the source of numerous garden plants introduced at the time. Paul Klee also picked flowers, near his home in Dessau and in distant Italy, pressed them and glued them to hand-colored paper. His herbaria

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combine botanical knowledge and aesthetic calculation to produce an homage to the uniqueness of nature and the aesthetic power of art. How strong a foundation the individual plant can provide as the nucleus of a world order is clear in the works of Joseph Beuys, 500 years after the Renaissance drawings in the exhibition. The Swiss artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss reveal the characteristics of the garden, as splendid as they are mysterious, using the medium of the slide projection. Jeff Wall's *Sapling* causes the fragility of a young tree to become as subtly palpable as Hans Weiditz's drawings of the transience of delicate flowers did half a millennium early.

The empirical reality of the garden is confronted by the garden as an experiential space. The garden has always been a place of social activity. Its heavenly residents were followed by mythological ones, who in Corot's work, for example, offer a different myth of origin in the garden in enchanted, arcadian scenes. But earthly figures too find their happiness in the garden. In the work of Peter Paul Rubens, people play music and games in an amorous atmosphere against the backdrop of a late medieval castle with a moat. A courtly society is enjoying itself outdoors, sticking tufts of grass under each other's skirts, with erotic implications, and playing tag. Jean-Antoine Watteau and Jean-Honoré Fragonard expanded the subject matter of the depiction of gardens to include the experiential realm of social utopias. In their love gardens all social hierarchies are annulled, the sexes live together on equal footing, free of everyday troubles.

With the age of the Enlightenment began the psychological interpretation of the garden. From his prison cell in 1794, Jacques-Louis David looked over the gated meadow of the Palais du Luxembourg. In the melancholy colors of an October day the only painting David ever painted from nature is like a beacon of the will to freedom. As one of the first depictions of a garden with layers of personal meaning, it was also a pioneering of plein air painting in terms of its stylistic freedom as well. The spontaneous appropriation of a moment is reflected in the cloud studies and oil sketches of John Constable. We both legs in his own garden he looked up into the sky and recorded every meteorological change with a brush. The static, heroic nature no longer interested him; as the first landscape painter in northern Europe he dispensed with the obligatory journey to Italy: "Still I paint my own places best." But they are his "own places," and so the complex individual of modernism comes into play, not always idylls. As we look with Adolph von Menzel and Carl Blechen out of their studio windows onto the barren rear courtyards of Berlin, we become witnesses of dilapidation and the first consequences of industrialization. People abandoned their natural contact with nature and earned their money in the city. The garden as a green refuge becomes a weekend pleasure or is banned to the reservoir of a winter garden. Only women still seem to find their delight in the garden. Gustave Courbet's *Lady of Frankfurt* is seen on a terrace, on the threshold to a distant landscape. Other women are under tents, in bowers, hammocks, or deckchairs. But the quiet delight in the corner cannot disguise the fact that a sense of security and the act of demarcating have entered into a dangerous alliance. The garden has claustrophobic features as well. Caspar David Friedrich's only painting in a garden juxtaposes this structured boxing in with the view into a – longed-for – distance and thus demonstrates the fundamental ambiguity of any garden. Vincent van Gogh takes this a step farther: he instrumentalizes the garden as the mirror of his psychological predicament. Interior and exterior, garden and landscape, beyond and within the walls of the institution at Saint-Rémy – they all reflect the unstable relationship between protection and being locked in, the cleft pine becomes a symbol of his inner turmoil.

With the flourishing of plein air painting, the garden became a central pictorial motif. Impressionists planted gardens to use as models for their paintings. Monet's planted compositions of colors already

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manifest the artistic idea; the painting begins with the sowing. The practical conception of a garden and the discovery of aesthetic form are rarely as closely related as in Monet's views of his estate in Giverny and its elaborately tended garden. On the other side of the Seine, Pierre Bonnard lived in the middle of a lavishly proliferating wilderness. The message of all his colorful paintings is that nature cannot be dominated by human beings. The garden in Impressionist paintings comprises the entire world: it is a habitat, a place of artistic exchange, at once studio and motif. As such a protected and privileged space it houses people and enters into a symbiotic relationship with them. Monet paints his young wife, Camille, growing out of the beds like a flower, rocking and blooming, red, blue, and white like the flowers that surround her. Manet invited artist and model friends to play croquet in his garden, and Berthe Morisot placed the nanny Pasie in a rose bower like a modern Madonna. In the gardens of the Impressionists, tangible objects fuse with the colors of flowers and the reflections of light from the sun on the water. The water lilies on Monet's garden pond and the reflections of clouds and hanging branches have the same sensory presence. No horizon delimits the space of these gardens; fences and walls are rare; location becomes omnipresent. Delight is in the middle of the garden; it becomes synonymous with a world that promises success in all its aspects.

The exhibition will travel afterward to the Kunstbau der Städtischen Galerie im Lenbachhaus in Munich (5 April to 8 July 2007).

Curator: Dr. Sabine Schulze

Scholarly Assistance: Dr. Mareike Henning

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