

# CHAPTER 1



## Definitions, Examples, and Paradigms

### A. The Questions

This study is motivated by two philosophical preoccupations. First, is it true, as Wittgenstein claimed, that the limits of my language are the limits of my world? The evidence for the constitutive power of language is vast and convincing. Language not only describes the world but also sets up the basic terms for description and perception. To learn a new language (particularly one unrelated to one's native tongue) is to learn a new world, with fundamentally different ways of organizing and recognizing the world, a new way of being in the world, a new self—and not only new Others but sometimes new kinds of Others. To expand within one's native language the ability to speak for oneself, to bear witness to one's experience and give voice to one's own feelings and questions and doubts and objections, is to expand the world—and not only one's own world, but the worlds of those with whom one speaks.

On the other hand, we know that the relation between language and understanding is not simple. It is not the case that translation is impossible, nor that everyone with the same language background understands all other speakers of that language, nor that only people with the same language background understand each other—nor even that language is necessary for understanding or communication. While the conventions of language do much to determine our experience, not all individual experience is linguistically encoded or expressed; some remains recalcitrant to language (perhaps the best documented is the “ineffable” of mystical experience), and individuals are able at times to transcend the conventions of language.

These considerations suggest that there are—*pace* Wittgenstein—limits to the power of language to determine our world.

I would like to suggest that the major challenge to the hegemony of language over experience—and perhaps the only organized or systematic challenge—is art. If this is true, then gardens—if they are art—form an organized and important challenge to the power of language to formulate our world and our perceptions of it.

Organized and systematic, gardens operate at the border between explicit and tacit, between communal or “universal” and individual, between objective and subjective, between the conscious and the unconscious or prereflectively conscious, between deliberate and taken-for-granted. They occupy, or perhaps create, a vast transitional territory between the amorphous, unrepeatable, incommunicable chaos of irreducibly idiosyncratic experience and the readily communicated and comfortable norms of socially generated experience. Language, and especially written language, is peculiarly adept at raising the almost ungraspable, almost unknowable to consciousness, disciplining it with concepts and conventions of argument structure, preparing it to be remembered, expressed, discussed, analyzed, understood, criticized. Especially if it’s theory that you want, there’s nothing like it. All of the readers of this book belong to cultures which (rightly) value these linguistic processes enormously. Yet this keen appreciation of the power of language has led to an underestimation of other, sometimes competing, claims staked on our understanding and our loyalties by the arts and by physical practices. Within the last several decades scholars, beginning with Carl Jung and Ernst Cassirer and continuing through Rudolf Arnheim, Michel Foucault, Walter Ong, and more recently representation theorists and students of landscape and environmental design as well as of particular artistic forms and practices, have begun exploring the means and consequences of forms of formulating our world. This book works within this new stream of inquiry.

Oddly, while print, and the mass media (film, photography, television) that are viewed as replacing print, are being studied from this point of view, gardens are not. As a consequence, the present study is quite preliminary. In particular, one would want to know how specific gardens, or garden styles, manifest or formulate particular forms of knowledge or belief, how they inculcate or modify non-garden values, and what their relationships are to related linguistically encoded theories. Such questions require detailed individual case studies which are beyond the scope of this book. I would hope, however, that the present work will contribute a framework to address such questions.

Gardens are particularly important for two reasons: because they live, and hence prove their rightness or validity in their very being; and because they utilize, and hence implicate, the whole body of their "audience." (For this reason, I have avoided the impersonal "objective" forms of language which are usual in scholarship in favor of a more vivid personally engaging use of the pronouns "we," "you," "I" that I hope will evoke a more visceral understanding.) Because they live and they incorporate our bodies, gardens are particularly suited to the demonstration of power and authority of various kinds, and they make their claims with an unusually compelling force.

This makes all the more important a second burning preoccupation behind this study, namely, the question whether aesthetic theory as we know it is adequate to art and to its description and to the recognition and analysis of its effects?

The example of the garden strongly suggests that it is not. The hitherto neglected study of gardens, structured and informed by these two questions, will cast considerable light on these fundamental philosophical issues. But before we move to the questions themselves, we need a working hypothesis that answers the question, what is a garden? But before turning to that, a few notes on the limits of the study itself.

## B. The Study

While philosophically resonant for any number of reasons, gardens—unlike language and the arts of painting, poetry, music, and architecture, and unlike the concept of nature itself—have received short shrift from philosophers. There are no books and very few articles which undertake the examination of the garden from a philosophical point of view. It is this oversight which I hope the present work will begin to remedy.

In light of the unusual nature of the topic, it is important to recognize from the outset what this study is not. It is not a history—neither of gardens nor the art of gardening, nor of aesthetic theory, nor of thought about the garden. It is not a study of those aesthetic principles in accordance with which gardens have been designed. These principles vary from culture to culture and require individual treatment.<sup>1</sup>

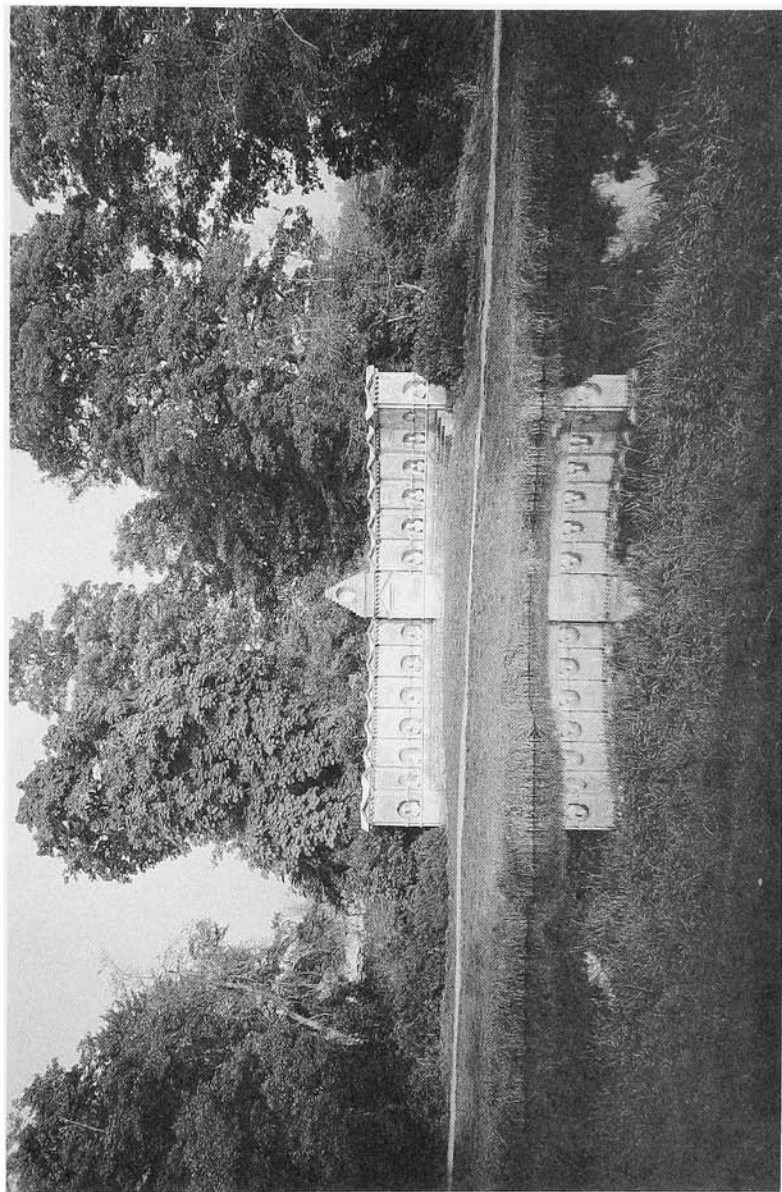
The task here is to uncover the special nature of the garden through an examination of the question whether gardens are works of art. The category "art" in this case is being used descriptively, not

normatively; evaluations as to the success or value of a work or a genre must be made independently. "Art" here designates a category of opposition both to language and to all kinds of purely pragmatic organizations, and therefore embraces a continuum of possibilities, including advertising, decoration, and many kinds of ordering or arrangement. This usage is designed specifically for the purposes of philosophers, who might be interested in such things as the ontological status of art, its hermeneutic and communicative functions, etc., rather than for the art world, for whom normative judgments are crucial at all stages. It is not my purpose here to develop a complete theory of art, nor to address basic questions in the field of aesthetics in a systematic way. The only questions which will be raised are those that seem interesting or enlightening in regard to gardens.

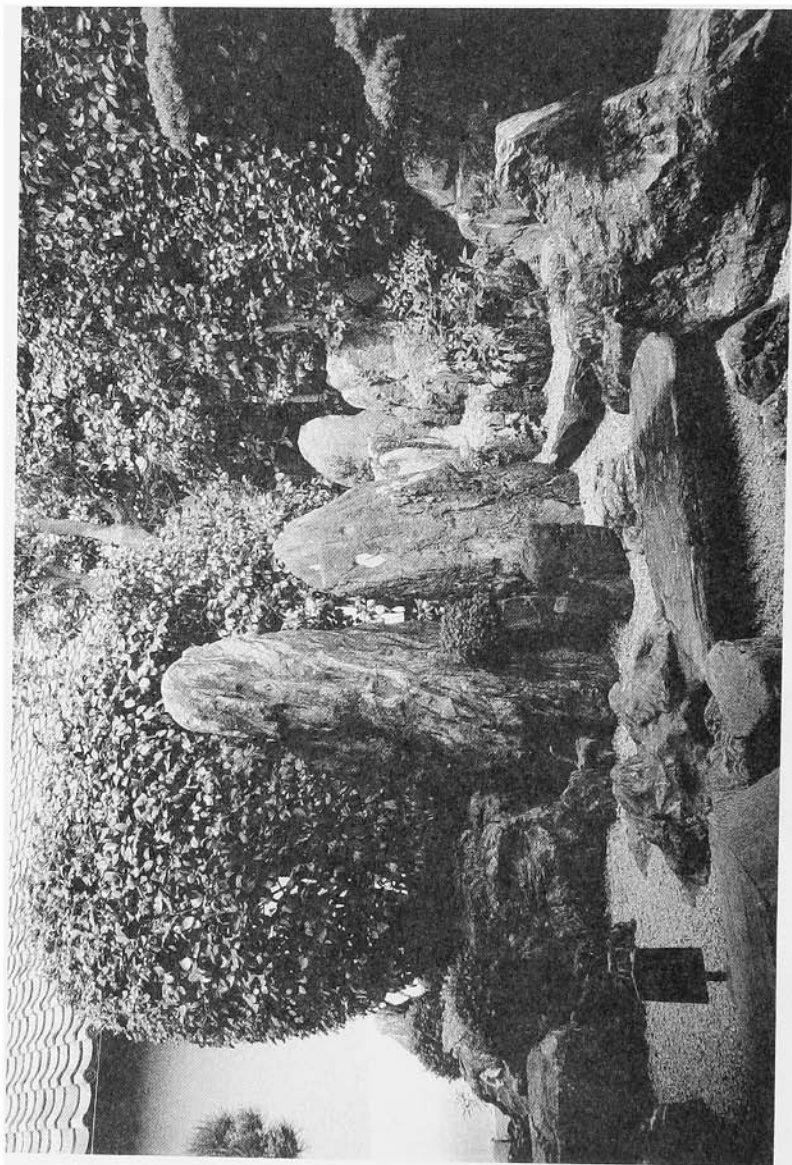
The question is pursued through a study of certain aspects of the theory of art, comparisons of gardens with other arts, and the exploration of the cross-culturally valid foundations or preconditions for the creation of gardens. It is hoped that this may shed light not only on the nature of the garden but also on the other arts and on aesthetic theory itself. This study thus differs from most philosophical examinations of art in that it starts with the phenomena—gardens—and tries to generate and elucidate the theory from them, rather than beginning with theoretical presuppositions and deriving observations about art from theory.<sup>2</sup>

### C. Definitions

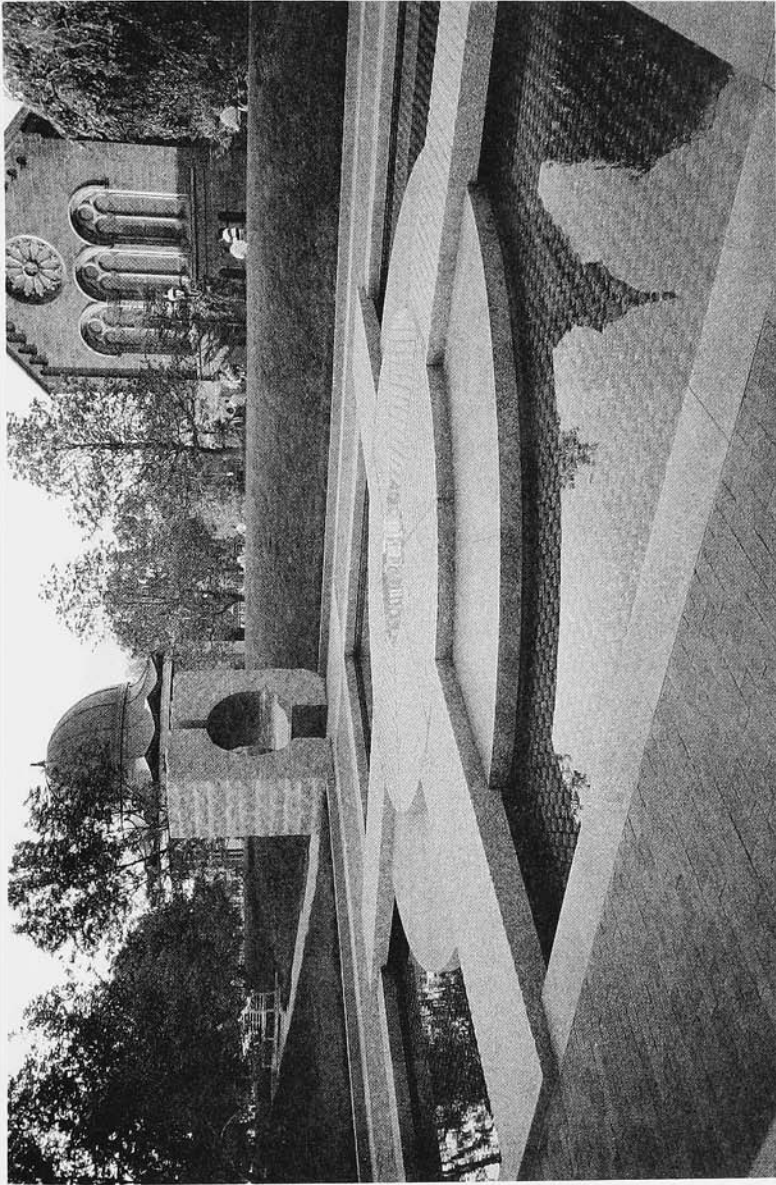
The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* offers as definition of "garden" "An enclosed piece of ground devoted to the cultivation of flowers, fruit, or vegetables; often with defining word, as flower-, fruit-, kitchen-, etc. g; b.pl. Ornamental grounds, used as a place of public resort." Yet this is at once too generous and too narrow. Too generous, for contrary to common usage, it would include large agricultural cropland, as long as it was fenced in and used for apples or grapevines rather than for cattle grazing or grains, English having special terms for these sorts of things ("orchard," "vineyard"), and rarely using the term "garden" or its compounds for any sort of commercial plot. ("Truck garden" is an exception.) On the other hand, the definition is too narrow, for many of those things we commonly think of as gardens are not "devoted to the cultivation of flowers, fruit, or vegetables." The plants in the great English landscape gardens built in the eighteenth-century were restricted to grass, trees, and shrubs (plate 1), and



1. Both the architecture of the classical past and the historic personages enshrined there create a sense of all history leading up to this moment, the so-called Whig interpretation of history. The Temple of British Worthies by William Kent at Stowe House, Buckinghamshire, England. Second quarter of the 18th century.



2. Miniature landscape of rocks in the style of Song (Chinese) painting, with a "bridge" over raked-sand "water." It is meant to be viewed from the verandah and is conducive to meditation. Daisen-in, Daitoku-ji, by Kogaku Shuko (1464–1548), perhaps with the assistance of Soami. Kyoto, Japan. Muromachi Period, 1509.



3. This contemporary formal garden utilizes the bi-axial symmetrical geometry and the flat expanses of water of the classic Islamic garden. It also includes a Chinese-inspired "moon-gate" in a minimalist style. Part of the Enid A. Haupt Garden near the "Castle," a collaborative effort by architect Jean-Paul Carlhian of the Boston firm Shepley, Bulfinch, Richardson and Abbott; Sasaki Associates Inc., of Watertown, Mass.; New York landscape architect Lester Collins, and Smithsonian Horticulture Office Director James Buckler. Smithsonian Institution. Washington, D.C. 1987.

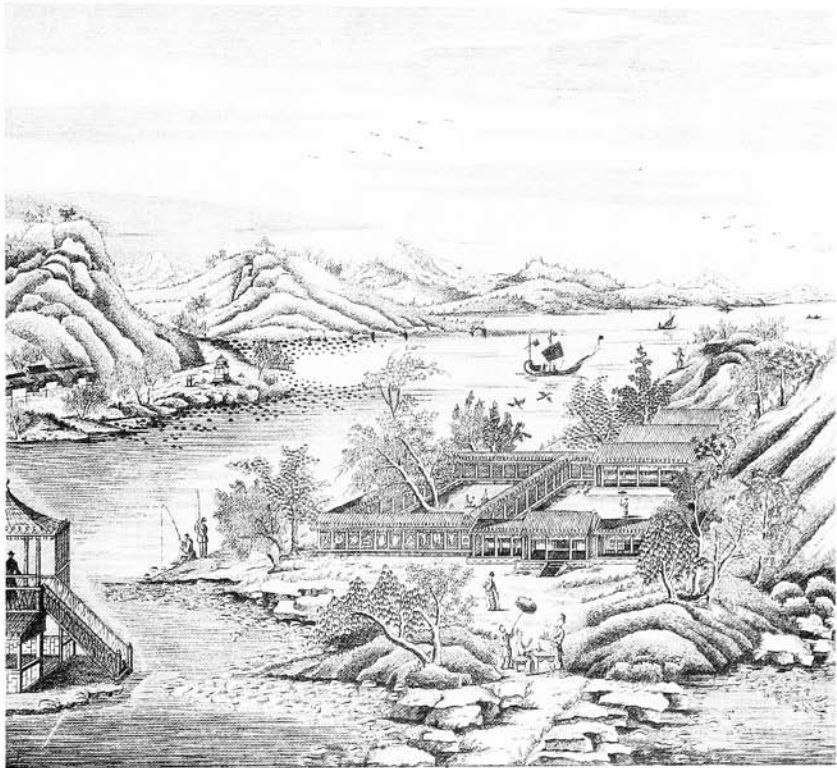
had few flowers prior to the importation of exotics like azaleas and rhododendrons from the plant-hunting expeditions of the nineteenth century. The rock gardens of Japanese temples (plate 2) have none of the kinds of plants mentioned; though some may have moss, even these could hardly be described as “devoted to” its cultivation. Similarly, neither the Lion Court of the Alhambra, perhaps the most famous of Spanish gardens (and certainly coming under that rubric as far as writers of garden books are concerned), nor the Astor Court, the Chinese-style garden at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, nor the modern Islamic-influenced section of the Enid A. Haupt Garden at the Smithsonian Institution (plate 3) could be called “devoted to the cultivation” of plants, although flowers do make an appearance.<sup>3</sup>

Colloquial British usage, moreover, has “garden” equivalent to the American “yard,” meaning the plot of ground around a house which belongs to it. Although the lack of cultivation of such an area in homes of a certain type is often noted in twentieth-century English novels (especially when the author wishes to imply connections with morality and class), the fact that it may be nothing but bare dirt does not keep it from being called “the garden.”<sup>4</sup> Zoological gardens, furthermore, are devoted to the care and/or display of animals, usually with little regard for plants (the San Diego Zoo being a notable exception). Although, in spite of their name, we today may not immediately classify them as gardens, historically they originated with the menageries that were often parts of Renaissance gardens on the grand scale, and even when there is no emphasis on plants, they share fundamental concerns and functions with other types of gardens.

A second difficulty is that a garden need not be a “piece of ground.” The sheer weight of most components of gardens, especially moist soil, water, rocks, and trees, makes a garden on the ground by far the easiest and most practical arrangement. But the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, though not hanging, were raised up on terraces, and “roof gardens,” often extensively planted, are common.

Finally, even enclosure is by no means a constant feature, although it is shared by gardens of China (plate 4), Japan (plate 3), Persia, and premodern Europe (plate 5) as well as some contemporary gardens. Paradise, virtually the paradigmatic garden for the West, the Middle East, and India, is defined, both literally and figuratively, by its walls; the word comes from Middle English, adopted from the French *paradis*, an adaptation of the Latin *paradisus*, from the Greek, an adoption of the Old Persian *pairīdāeza*, meaning enclosure or park. The walls of paradise, and the fences and moats that replace them, keep out the voracious vermin and the trampling herd animals and

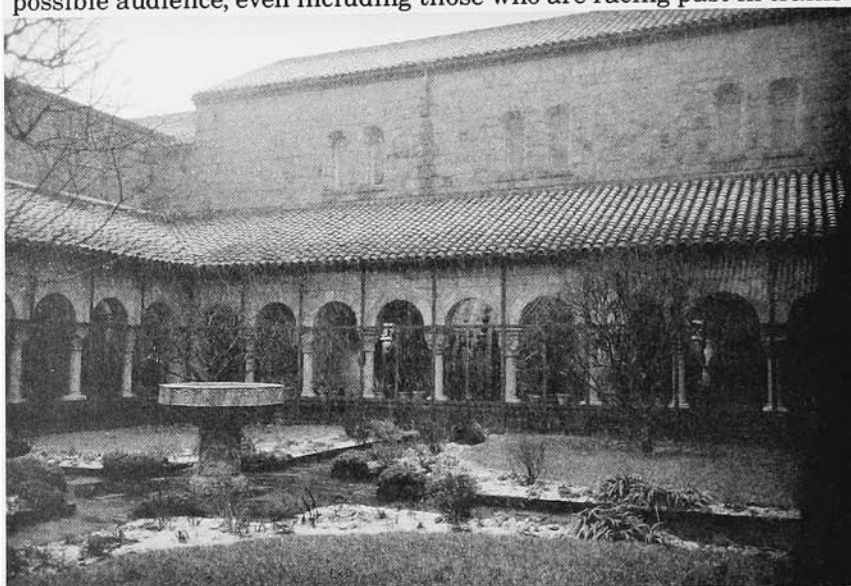




*Air without Heat*  
*The Villa of the Emperor's Mistress in Tartary frequented much by him for the Walks there*

4. This English copy of an Italian's depiction of the Ch'ing emperor's garden in literati (Han) style is from the earliest illustrations of Chinese gardens to reach England or Europe. (The Italian's engravings were sent to Lord Burlington ca. 1714.) Note especially the naturalistic water and banks and the groupings of several species of deciduous trees. "Air without Heat: The Villa of the Emperors Mistress's in Tartary, frequented much by him, for the Walks there." Imperial Garden. Jehol, China. ca. 1710. From *Illustration from The Emperor of China's Palace at Peking...* (anon.) (London: Robert Sayers, et al., 1753) based upon the copperplate engravings done on site by Matteo Ripa, ca. 1713. Yale Center for British Art.

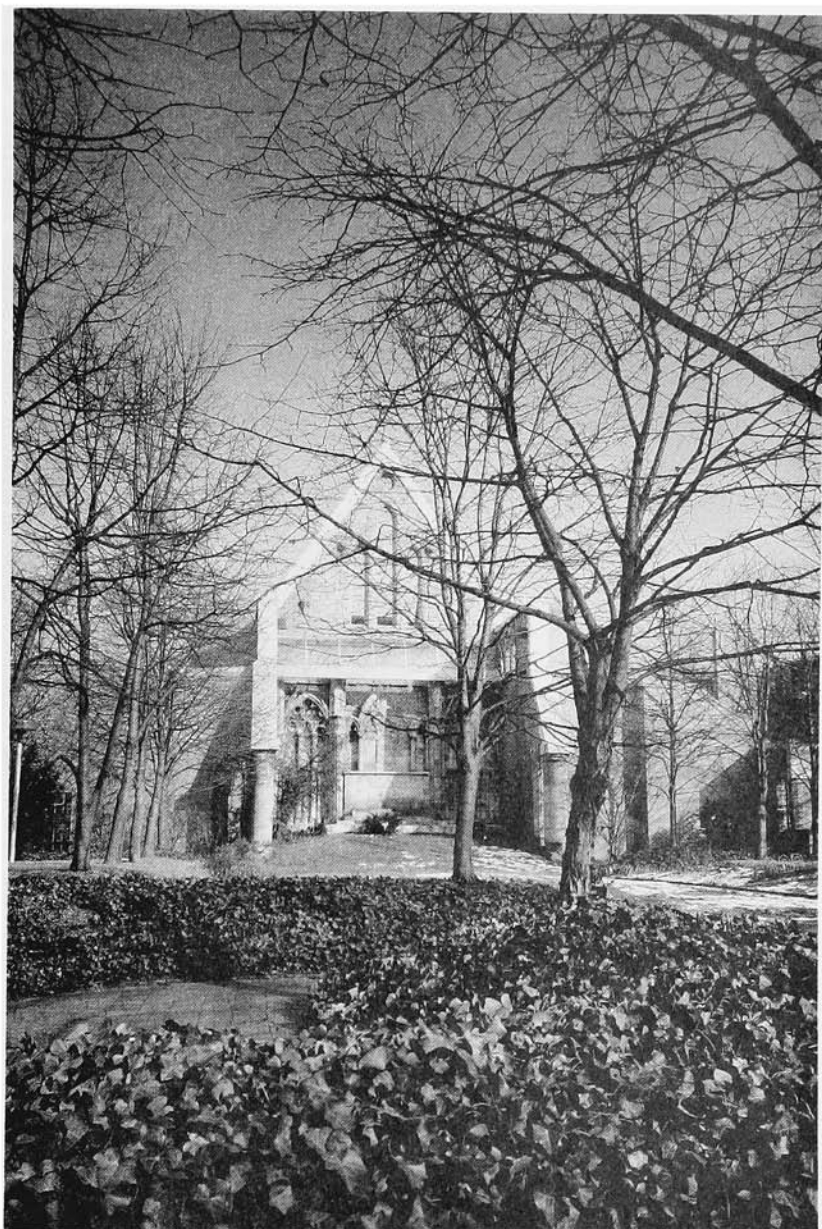
the thieves and intruders, and even the seeds of weeds and other unwanted plants. But in our age, flower gardens are often fully exposed. This is particularly true of urban and suburban gardens, and most especially of municipal and national gardens, such as those in Washington, D.C. (plate 6), where the purpose is display to the widest possible audience, even including those who are racing past in trains



5. The medieval garden is dependent upon sun, warmth and the plants of spring and summer in order to convey its full effect. At dusk, in winter, it makes little sense. Court with fountain, The Cloisters of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

and cars. And what of those cases where the enclosure is a practical physical and/or legal boundary but is obscured from the viewer so that it has no visual or aesthetic effect, such as is found with the *shakkei*, or “borrowed scenery” of Japanese landscape gardens which are enclosed but which rely on the beauty of the surrounding landscape as if it were part of the garden itself, and the ha-ha’s or hidden ditches of eighteenth-century English landscape gardens (plate 7) which similarly extend the vision of the viewer beyond the bounds of the garden without interruption? Enclosure is no more essential to gardens than are ground and devotion to the cultivation of plants.

We can only conclude that this definition is far from an adequate guide to the kinds of things that are called gardens. Even if we take only the paradigmatic cases—the grand gardens like Stowe, Chantilly,



6. An anonymous collaborative effort, this contemporary urban garden incorporates a modern ruin (the former church on that site which burned down in 1970). Like many modern urban gardens, it does without walls so as to draw in passers-by. This garden is extremely popular with residents of the neighborhood. St. Thomas's Parish, Washington, D.C.



7. The ha-ha, or hidden ditch at the boundary between a garden and the pasture land beyond it, prevents the destruction of the garden by grazing animals yet unites the two types of territory into a single picture-space without the intrusion of a fence. Woodland Walk in Alban Wood, by Lancelot "Capability" Brown at Ickworth, Suffolk, England. 1769-1776.

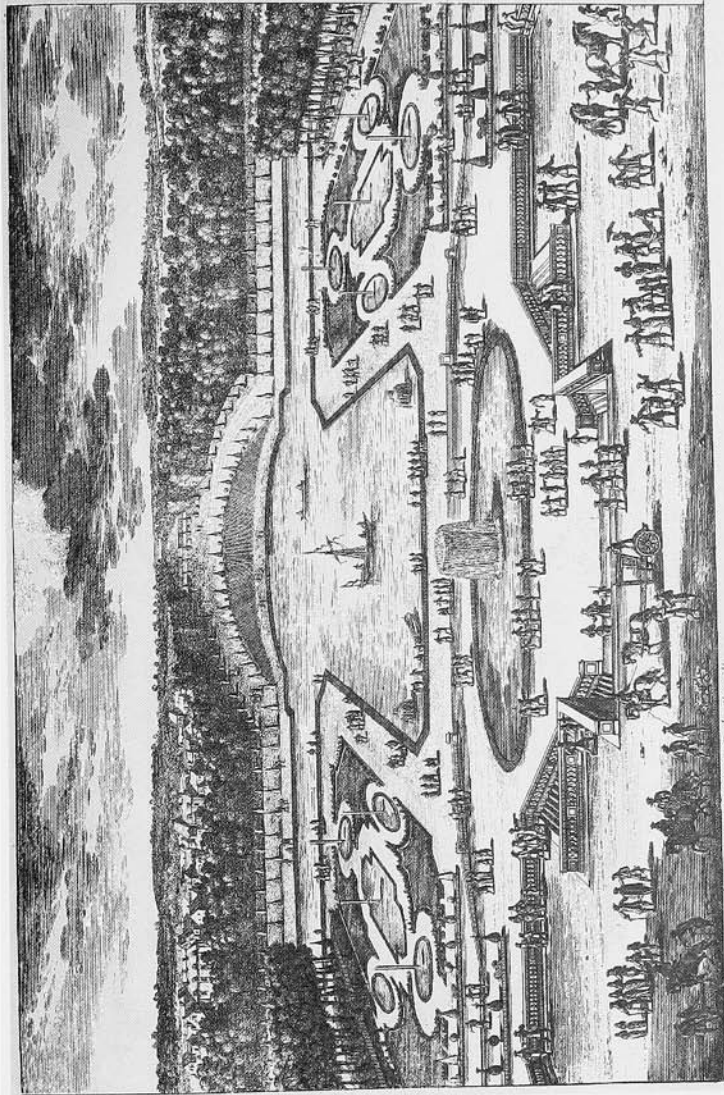
and the imperial garden at Jehol that define the various traditions—there is tremendous variation among the items that fall within the category. We need a definition that will encompass both all these variations and the various colloquial uses of the term. For our purpose of uncovering the nature of the garden as a cultural and especially an artistic enterprise, a broad definition will be more useful than a more restrictive one. Let me propose this, then, as a working definition with which to begin: A garden is any purposeful arrangement of natural objects (such as sand, water, plants, rocks, etc.) with exposure to the sky or open air, in which the form is not fully accounted for by purely practical considerations such as convenience. (By “convenience” I mean such considerations as peas in back, strawberries in front because that’s how they can be picked most easily). Three features of this definition require special note. First, a garden must include at least some natural objects; an arrangement that is like a garden but composed of purely artificial objects could be a garden only in a metaphorical sense. (An example is the sunken and walled-in space designed by I. M. Pei for the Beinecke Plaza at Yale University.) Secondly, and perhaps more controversially, a true garden must have exposure to the open air or sky; enclosed arrangements of plants become a different category—greenhouses, orangeries. Gardens which are completely closed in are extremely rare, but at least one exists; in my opinion this can only be an imitation of a garden, not the real thing. Third, in a garden, there is in some sense an “excess” of form, more than can be accounted for by physical necessity, and this form provides some sort of satisfaction in itself, and some sort of “meaning” or “significance”—whether aesthetic, or sensual, or spiritual, or emotional, we shall begin to discover as we proceed. This “excess” is not meant to entail quantitatively “more” form—it may mean less, and it would certainly include minimalist types of form. It is “more” only in the sense that more decisions, planning, consideration, perhaps measurement or study, went into it. But it is this “excess of form” that is the invariable marker, or distinguishing feature, of the work of art; *anything* which exhibits this excess is a work of art (though it may not be a *successful* work of art). From the philosophical point of view it is this excess which is interesting and requires study.

The working definition of gardens used here may seem overly broad, including as it does potted plants on porches and flower arrangements. Yet we will learn more about the nature of gardens in general (as opposed to one particular type or style of garden) by casting our net broadly, so as to include as many examples as possible

at the beginning, and excluding irrelevancies later, proceeding more systematically as we discover what gardens are and therefore what is irrelevant to them. Because the present project is not to discover or explore an already well-defined category but to uncover the phenomenon of the garden in its fullest implications, we will be willing to include individual gardens that may stretch the definitions, such as that constructed by Pat Turner in Suffolk, which the editors of the famous "*Yellow Guide*" to British gardens have reportedly refused to recognize as a garden. If, on the other hand, we try to determine at the outset a more positive definition of gardens, we risk developing a theory that is culture-specific or restricted to one or a few gardening styles rather than pertinent to gardens as a whole.

#### D. Examples

Many of the most famous gardens, those which define the notion of garden for us today, became famous precisely because of the challenges they presented to previous models or paradigms prevailing at the time they were made. The eighteenth-century English gardens Blenheim, Stowe (plate 1), and Stourhead; the seventeenth-century French Chantilly (plate 8), Vaux-le-Vicomte, and Versailles; the Japanese imperial garden at Katsura and the Zen rock garden Ryoanji (plate 9); and the American nineteenth-century Longwood Gardens and twentieth-century Dumbarton Oaks (plates 10, 11) and Pepsico Gardens, all vary tremendously in their aims and effects, but they have in common the fact that they broke with garden tradition. (This is one of our first clues that gardens are an artkind, for the role that breaking with precedent plays in gardens is much closer to the role it plays in other arts than in other kinds of social institutions such as sports, the judiciary, agriculture, or advertising. William Kent's substitution of the ha-ha for the garden wall, the fantastic nonrepresentational topiary at Longwood Gardens, and the introduction of fountains and cascades in Italian Renaissance gardens are like Bobby Blanton's development of bass as a lead instrument, Wang Hui's admission of color washes into monochromatic literati painting, and the radical reformulation of color by the Impressionists.) All of these famous gardens have also been considered major works of art, and like other major works of art, they not only operate within the confines of their tradition but also challenge those traditions and traditional assumptions about what art can do and what kinds of effects can be achieved.



8. A “bird’s eye view” of a formal garden whose plan is best revealed from a single privileged point of view, the central point upon the highest terrace. As contemporary prints show, the presence of human beings within the garden is as important to gardeners like these as to the later “picturesque” gardeners, since formal gardens represent the world controlled by the gardenist (invariably an aristocrat or monarch). “Le Grand Parterre d’eau et le canal,” at Chantilly, France. First half of the 17th century. From Adam Perelle, *Vues des belles maisons de France*, 1650. Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University.



9. An impassioned attention to detail in the most famous garden in Japan. The timelessness of the rocks and pebbles contrasts sharply with the sense of history with which the planks of the verandah are imbued. Border between the rock garden and the verandah, Ryoan-ji, attrib. Soami (1472–1523). Kyoto, Japan. Muromachi Period, 1499.





10. A modern use of formality. The simplicity is deceptive: pollarding, like topiary, is highly labor-intensive, and therefore expensive. The Ellipse, Dumbarton Oaks, by Beatrix Farrand. Washington, D.C. 20th century.



11. The disappearing path is one of the most universal of garden motifs. The rich textures of the plants, wall and path, especially in contrast to the snow, make this area as delightful in winter as summer. Dumbarton Oaks, by Beatrix Farrand. Washington, DC. 20th century.

## E. Paradigms

### 1. *Grand and Humble Gardens*

Many of the most famous gardens earned their initial fame as a result of important breaks they made with their gardening traditions. In the particular gardens mentioned, however, another factor besides their innovative artistic authority comes into play, for their fame is also related to their grandeur—their size, their expense, the magnificence of their aims, and the importance of the families, temples, or other institutions with which they were affiliated. Grandeur is a matter of scale or extent, and hence to some extent of expense, but it is also something more, a matter of pretensions and aspirations. Rarely does a small garden try to integrate itself into the larger landscape. (Rarely does it need to.) A tiny garden is much less likely to take upon itself the task of impressing observers with the wealth and social rank of its owners, and more likely to stress creativity, variety, subtlety, or sheer pleasantness. Just as size alone places constraints on the style (no suburban garden can physically accommodate the grand avenues of trees on the English estates), so size also constrains the themes and issues which a garden can raise: in the gardens of ancient Roman houses, for example, large-scale statuary for the niches and pools of the typical peristyle and nymphaeum would have been out of place because of the intimate scale; this reduced scale in turn ruled out Olympian subjects.<sup>5</sup>

It will be useful to distinguish between the grand and the humble, if only to prepare ourselves for the eventual recognition of their fundamental similarities. The humble garden is one whose physical limitations are obvious: at the extreme, a single plant in a pot, whether indoors or out. It is not just a matter of size, however, for, as Brecht points out, “A clever gardener can do much with a small patch of ground.”<sup>6</sup> The designer of the Gamberaia in Italy would have been just such a clever gardener, for, as Edith Wharton describes it,

... it combines in an astonishingly small space, yet without the least sense of overcrowding, almost every typical excellence of the old Italian garden: free circulation of sunlight and air about the house; abundance of water; easy access to dense shade; sheltered walks with different points of view; variety of effect produced by the skillful use of different levels; and finally, breadth and simplicity of composition.<sup>7</sup>

Even more telling is the fact that of the Japanese gardens, it is precisely those with the greatest artistic ambitions that are the

smallest. The Zen gardens of Ryoanji and Daitokuji (plates 9, 2), which are only a few square meters, attempt far more spiritually and artistically than the expansive landscape gardens of Katsura and Heian Shrine in Kyoto and Meiji Shrine in Tokyo. The terms "grand" and "humble" must not be taken to imply a judgment as to how good a garden is, how beautiful, how successful at achieving its purposes.

On the most obvious level, the grand garden is one which is first of all extensive, but also, as a function of extension, expensive to build and to maintain. Even small back yards and the balconies of modern apartments are extremely labor intensive,<sup>8</sup> for gardens are the only art in which changes occur not only gradually over long periods of time, but rapidly; not only by decay or decline of materials but by their increase; not only at the deliberate intervention of an artist-performer, but regardless of whether any human agency is concerned with them at all. (Some of the effects of this ability to change on their own accord will be discussed below.)

As a result of their expense, grand gardens are amenable to purposes of conspicuous consumption, conspicuous waste, and the general display of wealth and social status.

## *2. Formal and Informal Gardens*

A second important division among garden types is between formal and informal gardens. Formal gardens are those which are designed in accordance with nonintuitive, usually mathematical, principles. They may or may not be symmetrical; they are usually geometric, and this geometry is usually readily apparent. Examples are legion among Dutch, French, Italian, Islamic, American, and Renaissance English gardens (plates 3, 5, 8, 11). In addition, they usually have a single privileged point of view from which the overall plan makes most sense. The obvious paragon is Versailles, with its central axis emanating from the king's bedroom in the palace. The appeal to universal principle implicit in the mathematical organization, the attempt to overcome by rigorous discipline the changes wrought by time in the plant life (formal gardens are invariably precisely pruned), and thus to overcome exigency and the experience of time itself, have as a corollary a preference for single determinate views and final recognitions, as opposed to variable experiences while meandering. They are essentially spatial; though existing in time, they deny it.

Informal gardens, on the other hand, are designed intuitively, in accordance with poetic or picturesque principles, or to imitate the natural landscape. "Country gardens," landscape and picturesque