

The Ideology of the Place - the aesthetics and politics of the early 18th-century English landscape garden

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November 29, 2023

Abstract

Haha! ... Landscape as a signifier of moral virtue and the right to rule. How the 18th century English aristocracy created the peculiar tradition of the English landscape garden, interweaving classical and gothic iconography to assert their uniquely English mix of democratic credentials and both moral and aesthetic superiority.

The birth of *Aesthetics* as a philosophical and artistic discipline, borne out of the moral philosophy of Locke and the securing of the Protestant succession. How the rolling and open landscapes of the English gardens represented the democratic freedoms of the English compared to the formal parterres and absolute monarchy of France.

Introduction

A combination of a new monarch, the emergence of *Aesthetics* as a distinct theoretical discipline and a period of relative peace in Europe saw the development of one of England's most distinctive artistic movements: the English landscape garden. Although men of land and wealth had for many years engaged people to cultivate their estates for leisure, the years after 1715 saw grander and grander designs that shunned continental - especially French - influences in favour of a new *natural* landscape that aligned with new understandings of Nature, not just of flowers, shrubs and trees, but also of *human nature*, as evidenced in the social musings and philosophical writings of the time.



Figure 1: The Temple of British Worthies at Stowe

The landed gentry of England adopted the English landscape garden as the supreme signifier of their pre-eminence, both morally and politically, by asserting their superior taste and judgement, and lodging them, their predominantly Palladian mansions, and their estates as if they were permanent and immutable within both the English landscape and the English social fabric. The English garden dispensed with the formal structures and angles so typical of French parterres, taking on a supposedly wilder, more natural feel positioning itself as part of, not separate to, the landscape beyond. The gentry peppered their new gardens with clever vistas to garden statues, temples and buildings whose iconography further attempted to entrench their *Taste* and moral superiority in the natural laws of old England, the virtues of classical Rome and Greece, and as with the Temple of British Worthies at Stowe (Fig. 1), the lines of succession within England of upholding those traditions, in politics, art and society.



Figure 2: Berrington Hall's Haha! The landscape garden's trompe l'oeil: allowing the countryside in, whilst keeping out the estate's livestock (and peasants, of course)

The securing of the protestant succession of George I saw a newfound confidence in English society, its politics and an affirmation of its distinct culture. Traditional methods of viewing the world, based in French

Cartesian philosophy and the conformity of Nature to the laws of geometry, were challenged and new ways of viewing and assessing the world forged. Aesthetic debates shifted emphasis away from the absolute rules that governed beauty and appreciation of art and objects, towards an examination of individual responses to them and the nature of judgement itself. This had an importance for landscape art in particular, whether painting, poetry or gardening, as the analysis of individual judgement took on the form of examining responses to *natural* objects, the relationship between Man and Nature, and set the standards for the appreciation of landscape, whether natural or artistic.



Figure 3: Stourhead's Classical scene of Palladian bridge and Pantheon - providing the landowner with the cloak of classical virtues whilst signifying his artistic *Taste* by evoking the landscapes of Claude Lorrain

The new trends in moral and political ideologies were directly reflected in the writings of aestheticians, particularly in their accounts of the properties and qualities of *Taste*. The spur for this new thought was perceived and actual social change, and a wide-ranging concern over its implications. The subject of Taste was crucial to many commentators who felt a growing unease over the source of social authority, as new economic conditions were creating a more dynamic society in which traditional standards of marking and recognising social boundaries were increasingly obsolete. The general realisation was a need for some sort of method of distinguishing various social groups and individuals, but within the traditional hierarchical framework so as to maintain social cohesion and stability.



Figure 4: Gothic Temple - a “folly” rooting the garden and England’s democratic traditions to the age of the Saxon Witan