

GARDEN DESIGN

BOOKS

Resurrected Landscapes

THROUGHOUT THE PAST 20 YEARS, THE HISTORY of American landscape design has been retrieved from near extinction by several extraordinary books, two of which are *The Golden Age of American Gardens*, by Mac Griswold and Eleanor Weller, and *Pioneers of American Landscape Design*, edited by Charles Birnbaum and Robin Karson. Suddenly the unmarked graves of hundreds of gardens and their designers had a name and a date and a story, and the revelations ushered in the awareness of America's landscape legacy and a new category of American studies. It's altogether delectable stuff, as Robin Karson's newest book, *A Genius for Place: American Landscapes of the Country Place Era* (December 2007), makes abundantly clear. Karson's work, coupled with Carol Betsch's black-and-white photographs, takes us back to the gardens during the period of their making.

As a writer and the executive director of the Library of American Landscape History, which co-published this book with the University of Massachusetts Press, Karson has generally focused her passion on the gardens of the Country Place Era, as she does again here. Dating from 1890 to 1940 — from Olmsted's retirement some years after completing the design for New York's Central Park and creating the groundwork for an American landscape aesthetic to the end of



the Depression — the period also coincides with the first flush of wealth after the rise of big business. Karson approaches her subject like a literary critic, elucidating the intentions, the trials, the ingenuity and brilliance that went into the making of seven American masterpieces, from Stan Hywet Hall in Akron, Ohio, to Val Verde in Montecito, California. With money and time on their hands and a landscape tradition to rely on, garden owners of the era often played a central role in the landscapes that they commissioned, and the stories that Karson tells of the dynamic duos (and trios) of landscape architect and client make wonderful reading.

Unlike literary masterpieces, even great landscapes are perishable, but each of the gardens Karson explores has survived the ravages of time, just as her book will, too.

— DONNA DORIAN