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Art and Nature in a Garden: Book Review

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The Muses of Gwinn: Art and Nature in a Garden Designed by Warren H. Manning, Charles A. Platt and Ellen Biddle Shipman. Robin Karson. Sagapress in association with The Library of American Landscape History, 1995. 204 pages. Hardcover. \$39.95

Gwinn, five miles east of Cleveland, on a amphitheatre-like bluff overlooking the shores of Lake Erie, is the result of a unique collaboration: a house and garden that involved the design talents of three of the leading lights of the American country place era, the architect Charles Platt (1861–1933) and the landscape architects Warren Manning (1860–1938) and Ellen Shipman (1869–1951). Robin Karson, author of *Fletcher Steele, Landscape Architect*, has structured her book on Gwinn not only to describe the evolution of a beautiful and evocative landscape but to reveal the creative process that wove three very different points of view into a coherent whole.

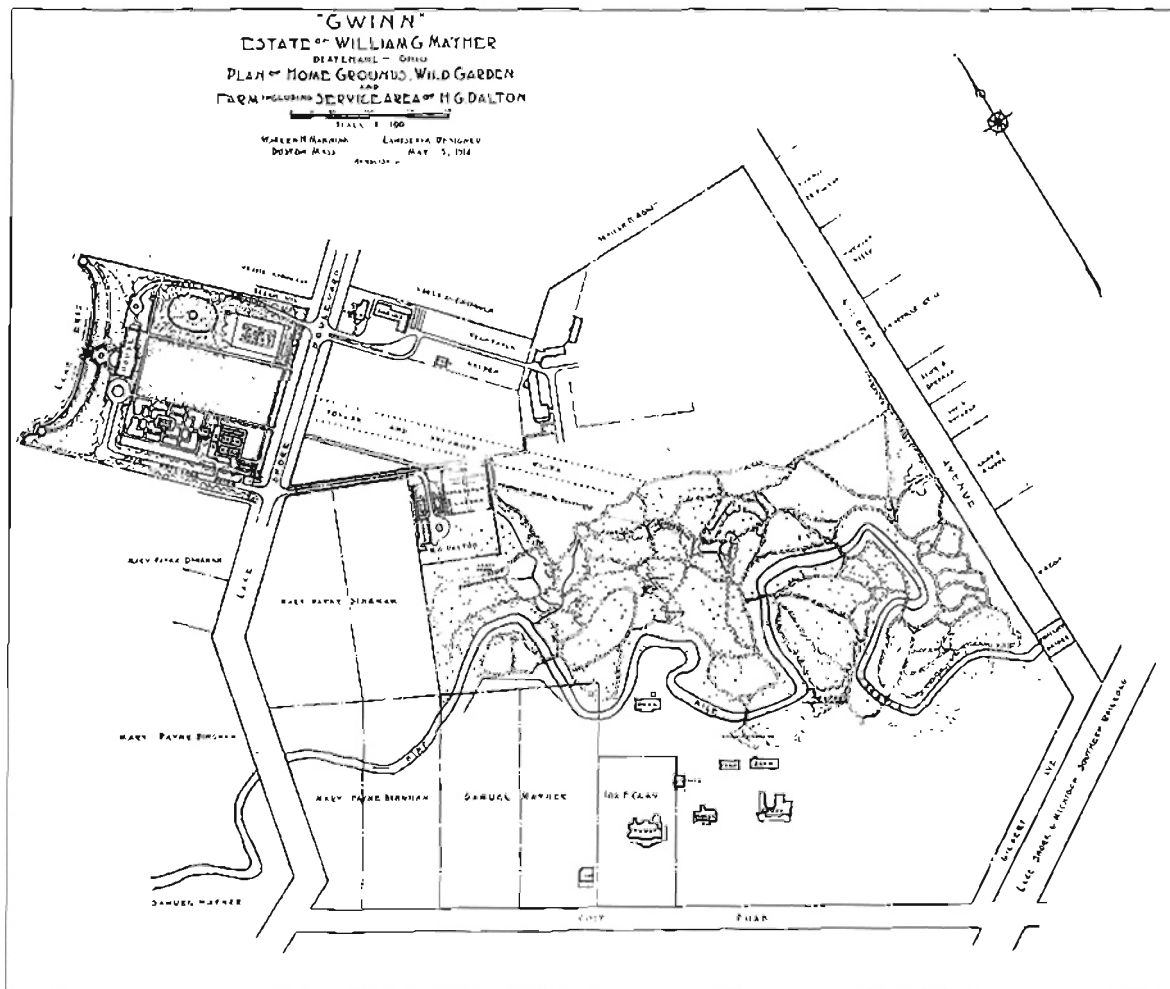
Manning, Platt, and Shipman – the Muses of Gwinn—would have been a rather unruly lot without the disciplined hand of the client, William Mather (1857–1951). Mather, whose fortune was based on Great Lakes shipping, had a consistent vision of his country place and like a true patron gave his designers the opportunity to work out their ideas within a disciplined framework. Inspired by travel and by his indulgence in the collecting impulse that seems to affect most estate build-



CAROL BETSCH

A view through the lilac arch. From The Muses of Gwinn.

ers, Mather continued to refine his view of Gwinn over forty years and, to his credit, kept his designers personally engaged with the quality of its effect. Like that of many other founding families of Cleveland, the original Mather family home was built on Euclid Avenue. (In 1868 Samuel Clemens called it one of the finest streets in America!) In 1905, at the age of 48, Mather felt the need to leave the city for a



COURTESY OF GWINN ARCHIVES

Estate plan of Gwinn showing home grounds and wild garden, 9 May 1914.

country house and garden suitable for the expansive life and entertainments that a maturing fortune allowed. Role models included John D. Rockefeller and his Cleveland estate, Forest Hill, and the Cyrus McCormicks and their country home, Walden, in Lake Forest, Illinois. Mather, aided by his wife, Elizabeth Ireland, guided the ongoing design and refinement of Gwinn with the firm, gentlemanly deportment that characterized his business dealings and philanthropic endeavors.

Karson relates the story of Gwinn using the extensive correspondence between Mather and the designers (none were based in Cleveland), the many extant historic plant lists and photo-

graphs, and the extensive coverage Gwinn received in architectural and garden design publications in the second and third decades of this century. The subtle tensions between the formal and naturalistic elements at Gwinn added greatly to the quality of its design. In her introductory essay, Karson reveals the artificial nature of the intense polemic that pitted formal against informal and permeated the writing about architecture and garden design of that period. Current renderings of garden history can also be faulted for relying too strictly on this dichotomy (a legacy of art historical determinism) to categorize designs. In detailing its historic roots, Karson notes that the argument

gained momentum in the late nineteenth century when the work and ideas of Frederick Law Olmsted, who extolled the cultural and environmental superiority of the pastoral landscape, were pitted against the theories of beaux-arts trained designers who were committed to a deliberate symmetry that tightly controlled the house and garden spaces. The Olmsted legacy was championed well into the twentieth century by Manning, Jens Jensen, Wilhelm Miller, and, most visibly, by the writings of Mariana Van Rensselaer and J. Horace McFarland. The formalist camp was filled with architects: McKim, Mead and White, William Welles Bosworth (the architect of the M.I.T. campus), Charles Platt. One of the most influential among the latter was Guy Lowell, the architect and son-in-law of Charles Sprague Sargent. Lowell's book, *American Gardens* (1902), traced the history of the formal garden and highlighted such showplaces as the Platt-designed Faulkner Farm in Brookline, Massachusetts. Gwinn was clearly admired for its blend of the two approaches by designers who chose not to take sides.

Karson then gives brief biographical studies of the three designers. Here she draws on a recent confluence of biographical work already completed by other scholars, confining her descriptions to facts relevant to their work at Gwinn. Charles Platt, whose career has been documented by Keith Morgan in *Charles A. Platt: the Artist as Architect*, 1985, is described through his country house work. Ellen Shipman, whose work is soon to be available in a forthcoming book by Judith Tankard (*The Gardens of Ellen Biddle Shipman*), is given credit for her extensive residential work both in concert with architects and as an independent designer. Warren Manning produced a significant body of work that spanned two generations of landscape architectural practice. He is the only figure in this group still lacking a full biographical treatment.*

From his early association with the office of Frederick Law Olmsted to his estate design work in New England and the Midwest and

on to his innovative work in environmental planning, which predated Ian McHarg's design-with-nature methodology by some sixty years, Manning was an important figure who connected the worlds of ornamental horticulture, planting design, and town planning. Like Olmsted's, the Manning office operated an apprentice program that nurtured the careers of many young landscape architects. Some, like Fletcher Steele and Dan Kiley, would go on to form the core of a modernist approach to landscape design.

The Gwinn complex centered on the house designed by Charles Platt in the Italian villa format he adapted so well for American clients. He tied the house to the dramatic site by a series of terraces and stairs and by a long curving seawall. Platt was also responsible for the structure of the formal garden, for its geometric relationships, its ornaments, and its controlled views. Manning, who was brought into the process early to consult on site selection and later returned to consult on planting design, became, in fact, a full partner. He and Platt agreed on the selection of the site, a sheltered cove with a spectacular view of Lake Erie. Manning evaluated the existing vegetation, a not very promising community of elm, beech, and maples on poor clay soil. He worked with Platt on the planting of the formal garden. Through what Karson calls "dialogues," Manning and Platt proved that planting design is not incidental to architecture but integral to forming the character of a garden. The correspondence to the client from Platt, the refined New York-based architect with European training ("Platt is all taste"), and from Manning, the nurseryman's son from Reading, Massachusetts, who trained through apprenticeship, is very revealing of their backgrounds and training. Mather's responses in mediating a solution between two slightly diverging views is a lesson for all clients of large projects. Karson suggests that the creative tension between the two designers resulted in some of the most refined parts of the landscape, especially in the transition zones between formal and natural—in the main drive with its double row of American elms underplanted with a

* For the best treatment of Manning's life and work, see Lance Neckar, "Developing Landscape Architecture for the Twentieth Century: The Career of Warren Manning," *Landscape Journal* 8 (Fall 1989): 78–91.

continuous mass of *Viburnum dentatum* and in the lilac arch that created a boundary between the formal garden and the lawn.

Manning's great contribution to Gwinn were the wild gardens, the first a small bosque adjacent to the formal garden and the second created out of twenty-one additional acres across Lake Shore Boulevard purchased by Mather in 1912 with a view to developing it as "a species of wild garden." The irony, of course, is that the wild gardens were not wild at all, but plantings carefully manipulated by Manning, whose knowledge of plant communities can be dated to his youthful botanizing and to his work on the *Flora of Middlesex County* [1888]. The dense plantings, replaced and realigned over the years, featured masses of rhododendrons, wildflowers, and ferns. Mather used his Great Lakes steamers to transport crates and crates of wildflowers from the upper peninsula of Michigan to Cleveland (iron ore and violets as Karson puts it).

Ellen Shipman was brought in as a planting consultant for the formal garden in 1914 and again in the 1930s and 1940s. She produced her characteristic lush and dramatic planting plans, captured here in period photographs. Like much of Shipman's work with herbaceous plants (which are so vulnerable to change), her plantings at Gwinn are no longer extant. However, her extensive plant lists and nursery orders are in the Gwinn archive, making restoration possible. To Karson's great credit she not only documents the work of the designers but that of the gardeners as well. Gwinn's first superintendent, George Jacques, born and trained in England, played an important part in the

gardenmaking process. When Jacques died in 1923, Lillie Jacques, George's daughter, was hired on Mannings' recommendation and became the only woman garden superintendent in the world and the only female member of the American Gardeners' Association. She continued her work on the estate until the mid-1930s.

As someone who grew up in Cleveland (albeit on the banks of the Cuyahoga River rather than the shores of Lake Erie), I have a distinct picture of Gwinn in my mind's eye despite never having been there. The famous fountain terrace was photographed so often by the local press as the site of social and cultural events that Clevelanders came to identify the term "garden party" with Gwinn. Mather died at Gwinn in 1951 at the age of ninety-three. His widow, Elizabeth, died in 1957. Before her death she made arrangements for Gwinn to become a small conference center for nonprofit activities. Hence Gwinn made the transition from private to semipublic use almost forty years ago. The integrity of the garden has been preserved although some of the more labor intensive parts are no longer in their original form. Karson began this work as a case study to guide the present staff through their preservation activities. As a case study the book is a great success, but it is more than this: because of the vividness with which the story is told, Karson renders Gwinn as a living entity—not just another icon in the history of American gardenmaking.

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