

landscape architecture

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS

11/96 US\$7/CAN\$9

Communications

A Lakefront Legacy

ROBIN KARSON

THE MUSES OF GWINN. ART AND NATURE IN A GARDEN DESIGNED BY WARREN H. MANNING, CHARLES A. PLATT, & ELLEN BIDDLE SHIPMAN

In this impressively researched and heavily illustrated volume author Robin Karson traces the fascinating history of Gwinn, iron magnate William Mather's estate on the shores of Lake Erie in an eastern suburb of Cleveland. Gwinn is exceptional for two reasons: It is one of the best-preserved examples of the "Country Place" aesthetic that flourished in America between 1900 and World War II, and the breathtaking landscape design is the result of a collaboration among three major talents (the "muses" of Karson's ti-

tle): Charles Platt, an influential designer of both houses and landscapes; the prolific Warren Manning, a founding member of ASLA; and Ellen Biddle Shipman, one of the few female landscape architects of her time and, in Manning's opinion, "the best flower-garden maker in the country."

Karson, who also received an ASLA Honor Award in 1990 for an earlier monograph, *Fletcher Steele: Landscape Architect*, examined nearly one thousand historical documents—letters, drawings, plans, planting lists—in order to piece together the story of Gwinn while at the same time using it to illuminate the design principles of the era that produced it. One of the most interesting aspects of the narrative is the creative tension between Platt, a formalist, and Manning, who strongly advocated naturalism and informal planting designs. Karson convincingly argues that Mather's hiring of Platt and Manning, two of the best-known landscape architects of their time, was hardly accidental: Ever the canny business manager, Mather believed that a collaboration uniting these two opposing viewpoints would result in a more creative design—and it did. As Karson writes, "Gwinn offers an especially rich case study for the student of aesthetics since it embodies a

debate between formal and informal landscape principles, one of the key theoretical arguments of the period." One of the rewards of *The Muses of Gwinn* is the author's ability to weave the story of a single garden into the larger fabric of history.

Another is the wealth of illustration. Historical photographs are supplemented with contemporary black-and-white images by Carol Betsch. Additionally, Platt's wonderful sketches and Shipman's detailed planting plans are reproduced.

From the time the house was completed in 1909 until the 1930s, Gwinn was regularly featured in such influential publications as *Architectural Record*, *American Country Houses of Today*, and *Country Life*. It thus helped set the style for the Country Place Era and inspired countless imitators. In recent years, as Karson points out, Gwinn has once again set an example—this time, of how important landscapes can be successfully preserved through the transformation of private estates into nonprofit cultural institutions.

PUBLISHER: Sagapress, Inc., in conjunction with The Library of American Landscape History, Inc.