

Judith B. Tankard

**THE GARDENS OF  
ELLEN BIDDLE SHIPMAN**

Sagaponack, N.Y.: Sagapress, Inc.,  
1996, xix + 230 pp., 208 illus., 8 in. color.  
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Robin Karson

**THE MUSES OF GWINN: ART AND  
NATURE IN A GARDEN DESIGNED BY  
WARREN H. MANNING, CHARLES A.  
PLATT, AND ELLEN BIDDLE SHIPMAN**  
Sagaponack, N.Y.: Sagapress, Inc.,  
1995, x + 204 pp., 115 b. & w. illus.  
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Scholarship in the realm of American landscape architecture and garden history is a relatively new endeavor. Until recently, it has focused primarily on Frederick Law Olmsted, the towering figure in the field, whose career spanned the second half of the nineteenth century and whose large-scale public projects had an impact throughout America. Olmsted's influence is of such magnitude and endurance that for many years the lives and works of his contemporaries, and those of subsequent designers, remained obscure, waiting for scholarly attention, professional reevaluation, and general recognition.

Happily, that situation is changing, thanks to recent books, articles, and traveling exhibitions. Figures such as Calvert Vaux, Andrew Jackson Downing, Beatrix Jones Farrand, and Fletcher Steele are now more commonly known and their professional contributions more appreciated because of recent scholarship. While deficiencies may still exist in our understanding of the lives and works of other important figures—Warren Manning, John Nolen, and the Olmsted brothers come to mind—these two excellent books on the work of Ellen Biddle Shipman add a major chapter to the history of American landscape design in the post-FLO period.

Both books were published in association with the Library of American Landscape History, which was established in 1992 to “participate in the publication of writings of lasting value about landscape history in the United States.” Both were produced to accompany exhibitions organized by the library: “The Gardens of Ellen

Biddle Shipman, 1869–1950” (traveling the country through 1998), and “Gwinn: A Portrait of the Garden” (organized for the Cleveland Botanical Garden). Similar in size, design, and format, these books are best considered together. Information in one complements discussions in the other; the reader is likely to have each open at the same time, moving as I did from one to the other.

Born in 1869 to a branch of an influential Philadelphia family, Ellen Biddle grew up in outposts of the frontier Southwest, where her father was a career soldier. Returning to the East Coast for finishing school, she drew “house plans and garden plans of all descriptions” before undertaking a brief and undistinguished academic career at Radcliffe (Tankard, 7). In Cambridge, however, she became friends with the Nichols sisters, Marian, Rose Standish (a landscape architect and garden writer), and Margaret (later the wife of landscape architect Arthur Shurtleff). There she also met a young writer, Louis Shipman; they married and, in 1894, moved to Cornish, New Hampshire, where they lived among influential artists and creative spirits. In residence were the architect Charles Platt; sculptors Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Daniel Chester French, and Paul Manship; painters Kenyon Cox, Stephen Parrish, and his son Maxwell; and various other writers, critics, musicians, composers, and dancers. This physical and social environment proved influential. The rural setting was beautiful, residents were serious about their artistic endeavors, and creative collaborations flourished.

Gardens in this artists' colony were composed as if they were paintings, and plants were used to create interesting combinations of textures, colors, and seasonal effects. Reflecting English Arts and Crafts ideals, these Cornish gardens were an extension of the house and an expression of domesticity. Straight lines of colonial houses extended into adjacent gardens with direct paths, giving simple frameworks to loosely planted beds. Hardy and familiar plants, not exotics, were used. The English flower gardens of Gertrude Jekyll and William Robinson found their American counterparts here, and in Shipman, the English style found an American champion. From living and working in this setting, Shipman developed design concepts

that would characterize her later work: simple layouts of her gardens, outdoor rooms, an artist's approach to using plants, and the notion of a garden as a private world.

Shipman's association with Platt was pivotal, and by 1910, at age forty-one, she decided to become a landscape architect under his tutelage. Her husband had left her with three children to support (they divorced in 1927), and she had developed an affinity for spatial design and a facility with plant material. Landscape architecture, a new field often associated with domestic endeavors, was one of the few professions that women could easily enter; it was a logical choice. She began her apprenticeship with Platt and was soon working with him on large-scale residential projects for wealthy clients. Collaborations with Platt and other architects continued, and by 1920, Shipman opened an office in New York City. Like her contemporary Farrand, she employed women exclusively in an effort to provide them with career opportunities in the profession. Shipman worked almost entirely on residential design for wealthy industrialists and their wives; often, clients became personal friends as well.

In *Design on the Land* (Cambridge, 1971), landscape architect and historian Norman T. Newton called the early twentieth century the “country place era,” referring to lavish spending by the newly rich on large residences, grounds, and interiors. (Curiously, Newton fails to mention either Shipman or Farrand as landscape architects working in the milieu of the “country place.” He does, however, mention “Miss Marian Coffin” and “Mrs. Annette Hoyt Flanders,” landscape architects even more obscure today than Shipman.) Designs inspired by European—particularly Italian—examples often were collaborative efforts among major talents of the period, and many architects and landscape architects built national careers on these sizable residential commissions. Cornish colleagues of Shipman contributed influential books: Platt wrote *Italian Gardens* (1894) and Maxfield Parrish contributed illustrations for Edith Wharton's *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (1904; both books have recently been reprinted).

Judith Tankard's study, *The Gardens of Ellen Biddle Shipman*, documents Shipman's

career, drawing primarily on plans and on over 200 period photographs by Marie Edwards Hewitt, a landscape photographer whose own work deserves further attention. Other sources are not available: her personal and professional correspondence was destroyed and her office files were discarded; although articles were written about her, she wrote little herself; and present evaluation of her work is impossible because few of her designs have survived. While this lack of detail may prevent an in-depth consideration of precisely how she worked, extant sources are sufficient to establish Shipman's importance in American garden history. Her skills with plant materials are evident in early comments by both Platt and Manning, who noted that Shipman was "one of the best, if not the very best, flower garden maker in America" (3). One senses in her work an affinity for plants and an understanding of how exterior spaces—her "outdoor rooms"—could be designed and used, sometimes in conjunction with the design and furnishing of interior spaces (although this interesting aspect of Shipman's career is not completely explored here).

Initial chapters are concerned with a chronology of her life and with the initial stages of her career, followed by thematic discussions of the formal characteristics of her later work. A client list, annotated with locations, collaborating designers, dates, archival references, and subsequent owners, is provided in an appendix, and a selected bibliography is included. An afterword by John Franklin Miller, "The Restoration of the English Garden at Stan Hywet," is particularly noteworthy for providing insight into problems faced in a recent Shipman garden restoration. Since historical investigations rarely address such practical applications, this short chapter should be a useful guide to organizations such as Longue Vue in New Orleans that are currently wrestling with the stewardship of Shipman gardens.

Tankard's text is concise and engaging. Frequent illustrations follow the text closely (but are not referenced in it). If anything, one wishes the plans could have been featured in a larger format. Shipman's manner of delineation included extensive textual notes and thumbnail sketches of

garden features. When these details are too small to read, readers lose an important opportunity to learn more about her designs.

Shipman's career declined after World War II, and the "rooms" she designed for wealthy clients became victims of changing tastes and shifting fortunes. According to Tankard's accounting, between 1914 and 1946 Shipman designed over 650 gardens in twenty-seven states and Washington, D.C. Her *New York Times* obituary in 1950 called her "a leading landscape architect," yet her place in the history of American garden design has, until now, been largely unrecognized. In her concluding chapter, Tankard notes this lack of professional and public recognition and attributes this obscurity to the disparity between Shipman's goals and those of the male-dominated professional society, the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA). Clearly Shipman's interests were aligned less with those of the ASLA, an organization she never joined, and more with those of the Garden Club of America (GCA), a women's group that emphasized horticulture, aesthetics, taste, community service, and the environment. In fact, much of Shipman's work came through GCA connections. Tankard's observation that the ASLA "deemphasized gardens and residential work in favor of larger, public-scale work" is a provocative subject that merits future objective study (177).

Tankard's observation touches on a web of complex issues and highlights the difficulty of untangling the relationship between gender roles and historical reputation. Doubtless sexism existed in landscape architecture, as it did in architecture and other professions in the early twentieth century. Nevertheless, women often excelled in landscape architecture, particularly when they focused on residential projects. Indeed, Leslie Rose Close's thoughtful introductory essay to Tankard's work provides ample evidence of women's active participation in this profession: Beatrix Jones Farrand was a founding member of the ASLA in 1899; by 1916 there were three schools in America devoted exclusively to teaching landscape architecture to women (who often went on to find work with Shipman and Farrand); and the works of women landscape architects, while al-

most always residential, regularly appeared in professional publications and popular magazines of the day. Yet the extent to which women were associated with the design of residential projects also means that their work has been particularly vulnerable to destruction. Residential gardens that are private in character and labor intensive are ultimately quite fragile, dependent upon the individuals who commissioned them to devote human and financial resources to their maintenance. Today, many large-scale residential gardens of the early twentieth century are lost, and with them the opportunity for first-hand study of their designers' work.

One of Shipman's works, the result of a collaborative design relationship, is explored in Robin Karson's *The Muses of Gwinn*. Begun in 1907, Gwinn was a large residence outside Cleveland built for wealthy industrialist William Mather. Through Karson's investigation, this project becomes a case study for the aesthetic debate between formal (European) and informal (American) landscape principles in the post-Olmsted era, the critical first decades of the twentieth century when the profession of landscape architecture was defined, its directions were established, and its leaders became known.

Karson's examination is thorough and scholarly, aided substantially by surviving correspondence, historical photographs, and plant lists. Ostensibly, *Muses* is about one project that involved Platt, Shipman, and Warren H. Manning (Gwinn's "muses") over about thirty years. Yet the work's first part includes penetrating and illuminating essays on the period's personalities and landscape design philosophies. This is a rich period about which little has been written, and Karson provides welcome new insight.

The book's second part is a straightforward discussion of the project's elements. Chapters devoted to site selection, house design, and garden design are informed by correspondence and illustrated with period plans, drawings, and photographs. The closing chapters trace development through the late 1930s, discussing how the owners, the gardens, and the designers weathered the Great Depression and how they responded to the changes it brought. An epilogue brings the history of the property into the present.

Thanks to books like these on Ellen Shipman, we can capture the essence of the period before it entirely disappears. With more accessible information on the

work of one of this century's leading designers, we acquire the opportunity to learn more about our country's landscape architecture heritage as well as models for re-

search and presentation that should illuminate and inspire future investigations.

— William Lake Douglas  
New Orleans