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*Sunken parterre with exotic specimens at Missouri Botanical Garden c. 1890.*

# Sorting Aesthetics

## Henry Shaw, the Picturesque and the Gardenesque in St. Louis

CAROL GROVE

***The nineteenth century saw a proliferation of competing theories in every field – and landscape gardening was no exception, as proponents of the picturesque approach clashed with those who favored the gardenesque. Read on to find out what the controversy was all about and how one prominent philanthropist and landscape enthusiast resolved it, at least for himself.***

Henry Shaw (1800-1889) is best known as a philanthropist and the founder of the Missouri Botanical Garden (1859) and Tower Grove Park (1872) in St. Louis, Missouri. He is also remembered there for a lifetime of good deeds, as he contributed to a variety of hospitals, churches and orpbanages, helping to establish the Missouri Historical Society and the St. Louis Mercantile Library and single-handedly founding the School of Botany at Washington University. But fewer people realize the passion he had for the subject of landscape.

Coming to America from his birthplace, Sheffield, England, at the age of eighteen, Shaw spent two decades totally immersed in the import business, rarely stepping far from his account books and overseeing every payment and deposit. But by the time he was forty, he was wealthy enough to trade his dealings in saws, dishware and axes for more civilized endeavors. After three Grand Tours to Europe and a decade of reading the most up-to-date publications on horticulture and aesthetics, Shaw was transformed into a dedicated advocate of landscape and an avid plant collector. Then, with age, he turned these personal interests into public institutions meant to educate, improve, and civilize the citizens of St. Louis. His enthusiasm for landscape and the joy of sharing it with the public never ceased. Even late in life he would greet visitors to his country villa, Tower Grove, by hanging decorative red lanterns from trees

*Portrait of Henry Shaw by Emil Herzigr, 1859, the year the garden opened.*

and spelling out *Salve* in vibrant red flowers as a sign of welcome.

Henry Shaw's life literally spanned most of the nineteenth century, yet figuratively he stood with one foot planted in the eighteenth. He in fact represented both periods of history. From the eighteenth century, Shaw inherited many of its sensibilities and traditions: he was a gentleman in demeanor and way of life, educated and well read; he acquired art, furnishings, clothing, and fine wine on tours of Europe; he developed an interest in architecture; and he became a deeply engaged advocate of landscape. When having his likeness painted he chose the tradition of eighteenth-century portraiture that incorporated objects within the composition to reveal the sitter's interests, having himself depicted with his favorite plants and his new conservatories, while clutching rolled planting plans. In the management of his estate he embodied a kind of noblesse oblige and a commitment to accountability and productivity. He was well-suited to the image of the eighteenth-century gentleman gardener, a role that combined privilege with specialized knowledge.

But Shaw was also very much a man of his own century, as evidenced by his interest in innovation, education, and improvement of the landscape and of society as a whole. He represents the moment in history when aristocratic privilege made way for middle-class interests, and in his transferring of garden responsibilities to professionally trained gardeners he represents the nineteenth century. Attuned to the concerns of the working class as well as the middle class, and to democratic aspiration, he believed the enjoyment of nature to be a path to societal reform. He embraced technological progress and improved methods in gardening, choosing contemporary models and writings, rather than historical ones, to guide him.

Shaw's decision to create a public garden and park went far beyond an interest in providing St. Louis with pleasant surroundings. He viewed the botanical garden and "park keeping" as key instruments in making citizens more discriminating and more civilized. His goal was that the public garden and the park would contribute to civic improvement, that they would serve as vehicles for elevating the taste of its citizens. Foremost in Shaw's mind was the belief that the cultivation of taste – the appreciation of nature, art, and beauty – could act as a powerful instrument of reform. Taste could shape a person's judgment, and the development of critical perception could raise the level of society as a whole. He understood that addressing taste was as important as considering economics, practicality, and the needs of the future in a given project. Shaw believed the combination of art and science at his botanical garden would aid in attaining "higher tastes and manners," would benefit "all classes of society."[1] Likewise, Tower Grove Park would not only ornament the city, but would be conducive to health and happiness and would promote "the advancement of refinement and culture."[2] Discernment and the cultivation of taste could successfully be learned through the combination of the science of plants and the art of design. In the terms of the day, the crucial decision became how best to employ aesthetics, be it the picturesque, on the one hand, or the gardenesque, on the other.

*Picturesque landscaping at Missouri Botanical Garden; the Willow Pond in the Arboretum.*

**The Picturesque**

Shaw's consideration of aesthetics is best understood against the backdrop of a longstanding discussion about the concept of the picturesque.[3] His familiarity with the idea of the picturesque derives from the late eighteenth-century debate in Britain that defined the subject, and through his readings and his observation, especially during his travels, he came to understand what the picturesque looked like and the moods it evoked. He sought out the picturesque first-hand, engaging in tours of the countryside while in England and Wales. And he consulted the copious writings of the period that advocated it.

The term picturesque, first used in William Gilpin's *Observations Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty* (1776), began as a reference to a view or object suitable for framing. It was added to two existing aesthetic categories, the sublime and the beautiful, that had been defined in 1757 by Edmund Burke.[4] In spite of its relationship to painting (and vision), it would come to permeate the arts – architecture, literature, and landscape. The earliest discussions identified the picturesque as an aesthetic counterpart to untamed ephemeral nature, to wildness that appeared not to have met with the hand of man, but it would come to be understood in a broader sense as the discussion unfolded.

A concept of beauty defined by theorists in didactic poetry and essays, and a movement of taste rather than a precise style, the picturesque contrasted with established perceptions of the beautiful (that which is small, smooth, and soft) and the sublime (the vast, obscure, and terrifying). This new third category was characterized by variety, irregularity, roughness, intricacy, and movement (and additionally, surprise and anticipation). Such characteristic elements could be arranged in any number of ways and be inherent in a variety of objects: clumps of shrubs, shaggy ponies, mossy crags, rushing water, filtered sunlight. In picturesque imagery, objects and compositions are various, flickering, uneven. When assembled in the viewer's mind they create an image of varied surfaces, textures, intricacies of light and color (and sometimes sound). As a mental construct, the picturesque is a composition, a picture or a series of pictures, drawn from nature.

As a mode of vision, a way of seeing, the picturesque emphasized pictorial values that could be used as tools for analyzing nature. More than a set of discrete characteristics, the picturesque was understood as a sensibility that could be perfected by the act of looking. Once the viewer could appreciate the picturesque in paintings (the seventeenth-century artists Claude Lorrain and Salvator Rosa were cited as examples to study) one could appreciate it in nature. The British theorist Uvedale Price, whom Shaw cites among his list of influences, contributed to the definition of the aesthetic in his *Essay on the Picturesque* (1794), in which he was precise and clear about how elements such as water, trees, grass, curves, and distances should be "disposed" in order to be picturesque. Friend and fellow theorist Richard Payne Knight responded the same year with a didactic

*Picturesque gardens at Tower Grove Park with sailboat pond and ruins, c. 1880.*

poem, *The Landscape*, which was a dialogue on landscape aesthetics that advocated irregularity and intricacy, and identified the proper ingredients for correct picturesque effects. Picturesque theory became explicit in William Gilpin's guidebooks, including *Observations on the River Wye* (1782) and *The Lake District* (1789); having read Gilpin, one could travel to the region equipped with the proper sensibilities and record knobby tree trunks, gnarled roots, and rocky outcroppings through drawing, painting, or writing.

By 1820 the picturesque aesthetic had made its way to America, and for the next fifty years it would be widely appropriated into American sensibilities and landscape.[5] The meaning of the picturesque was learned, altered, and applied to suit a democratic country in the process of refinement. It framed the discussion of a range of topics including art and literature, and in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau the picturesque embodied the spiritual. In America as in Britain, it was accessible and easily adapted by the common as well as the refined citizen, and it cut across geographic boundaries as well. By the mid to late nineteenth century it had become the status quo – a way of seeing the country and appreciating it in both visual and written form. American artists such as Thomas Cole, Albert Bierstadt and Frederic Church painted the rocks and creeks of the Hudson River Valley or the majestic mountains of the West, picturesque landscapes which evoked commentary on complex issues such as national identity, social harmony, and Manifest Destiny. It was, then, through the picturesque handling of nature that many Americans came to learn about their country and about art.

Henry Shaw clearly understood the picturesque as an

aesthetic and its ability to communicate. While on his British travels in the 1840s, he participated in the fashionable act of touring the countryside, visiting the waterfalls of Wales's Mt. Snowdon on horseback and the scenic village of Matlock, Derbyshire, known for its mountainous terrain, cascades, and the winding River Derwent and its gorge. There he would feel, in Gilpin's words, "the imagination take fire." His impressive library contained the major works dealing with the picturesque aesthetic, including those by John Ruskin, William Gilpin and Uvedale Price.

Shaw applied his knowledge and appreciation of the picturesque at his country estate, for instance along its private drive where he composed charming vignettes of rustic pavilions set by mossy streams and views half-draped with willows. His picturesque sensitivity is clear in his description of Tower Grove Park, when he evokes for the viewer the experience of the place, taking us on a stroll passing bridges, ornamental seats, and the evergreen walk, someday to be "shady and agreeable." Using poetic language, he characterizes the contrasting light and dark tints of trees elaborating on their varied placement and effect "with reference to shade in lines, groups, and single, and with regard to verdant tints and autumn colors." Shaw composes the scene with the eye of an artist, admiring variety of effect in the placement of trees, envisioning a broken, irregular play of light and shadow in autumn (defined by advocates as the most picturesque of seasons). He had a remarkable ability to view the whole in pictorial terms and a rare capacity to think and see in a picturesque way.

**The Gardenesque**

But, despite the power of the picturesque, Henry Shaw knew that in "matters of taste" there were alternatives – in particular, a newly defined approach to planting for gardens and parks called the gardenesque. Defined by British horticultural author John Claudius Loudon in the December 1832 issue of *Gardener's Magazine*, the gardenesque appealed to the popular taste for botany and horticulture.[6] Newly discovered exotic plants from South America, China and Australia posed the need for new methods of organizing and planting grounds in order to effectively display their characteristics. Loudon had begun thinking about how to plant open spaces as early as the 1820s when growing cities created the need for "lungs" or "breathing places," and the parks, walks, and greenbelts he advocated had specific stylistic and functional issues to address. His Derby Arboretum (1839), considered to be the first example of a this new category of outdoor space, was a "living museum," with shrubs and trees as the objects for viewing, all arranged using the gardenesque method. Since the gardenesque was so well suited to displaying plants, it was applied at botanical gardens being established in Britain including Shaw's hometown Sheffield Botanic Garden where Robert Marnock, curator of plants, was an expert in this method of organization. At Sheffield another of Loudon's favorite organizational devices was also used, that of dividing spaces into three "grand" parts of arboretum, fruticetum and garden proper.

*Gardenesque plantings at Tower Grove Park, c. 1876.*

(Shaw would repeat the tripartite plan in his garden in St. Louis.)

The gardenesque – not a style but a method of planting and display – dictated that plants, shrubs, and trees be treated individually, as specimens. Discrete placement allowed specimens to grow to full capacity without crowding and thereby to develop their natural characteristics completely. In Loudon's words,

> According to the Gardenesque School, on the contrary, all the trees and shrubs planted are arranged in regard to their kinds and dimensions; and they are planted at first at, or, as they grow, thinned out to, such distances apart as may best display the natural form and habit of each: while, at the same time, in general point of view, unity of expression and character are aimed at, and attained, as effectually as they were under any other school.[7]

By definition, this method of separation and control emphasized the individual plant, each a unique botanical statement, while still maintaining unity of the overall composition. Besides allowing viewers to observe, up close, a plant's leaves, seeds or bark, this museum-like approach showcased plants as if they were freestanding sculpture, which heightened the reference to art. Loudon believed that exotic plants contrasted more with the surrounding landscape did than local native plants, and their use most clearly communicated to viewers that gardens were works of art rather than nature. In both cases – in the showcasing of individual specimens and the reference to art – the gardenesque was the antithesis of the picturesque aesthetic, where variety, irregularity, and massed groupings crowded together blurred the boundaries between the park or garden and nature at large.

In general, flowers were of little importance in the gardenesque. Although there was some agreement that

a "blaze" of flowers was an effective means of grabbing the attention of the uneducated (thereby providing the opportunity for instruction), contemporary writings suggested that worthy parks should consist of impressive collections of trees and shrubs, with flowers limited to specific areas such as entrances and junctions of pathways. In arboreta, flower gardens were rarely incorporated, or were considered as objects "detached and distinct from the general scenery of the place." Critics considered the improper use of flowers to be an assault to the sensibilities – unnecessary, frivolous additions that interfered with the serious mission of a public park. Instead of a scattering of flower beds, parks were ornamented with vases filled with exotics from around the world, such as New Zealand flax. At Shaw's botanical garden flowering plants were organized in "botanical sequence," a reference to science that presumably gave them greater importance, and in ornate beds made up of thousands of a given plant whose varied colors created dramatic patterns. Walks were flanked with urns filled with giant sculptural century plants or other imports chosen for their unusual shape, foliage, vivid color and large size.

*Gardenesque and decorative plantings including moon-shaped beds, at Tower Grove Park c. 1890.*

The gardenesque emphasis on specimens as subject matter and as the elements in a work of garden art made the choice of plants critical. Collectors viewed new exotic plants as the symbolic reward for a century of scientific discovery. Just as connoisseurs valued works of art for their intrinsic beauty and unique characteristics, plants could be collected and valued for the same qualities. Their arrangement and care was overseen by a curator, as in a museum; in fact, in many cases, staff in charge of botanical gardens and arboreta in the nineteenth century assumed the "curator" title. Even working class Americans were drawn to plant collecting and display, such "botanizing" became a popular pastime in the nineteenth century, but it was the wealthy few who could collect on a grand scale. One example was Henry Winthrop Sargent who was intrigued by the variety in nature – especially weeping, cut-leaved, dwarf, and variegated forms of conifers and trees – and bought exotics from nurseries all over America and Europe, planting a huge collection at his home in the Hudson Valley. Shaw, too, was drawn to obtaining and nurturing bold specimens of *Aracaria imbricata* (similar to the Victorian favorite, the "monkey puzzle" tree) and *Cedrus deodara*, oleander, fuchsia, *Brugmansia*, and camellias. Passiflora vines and the skinny beanlike pods of catalpa trees added variety to the grounds. Masses of anemones sprang from Shaw's "showy border," and picotee carnations were pampered in the nearby plant house. Nurseries around the world supplied Shaw's plants, from Holland, France, Scotland, and Germany and closer to home, from Ellwanger and Barry of Rochester, New York, and Robert Buist and Thomas Meehan, both of Philadelphia (to name only a few). A passion for such plants – not at home in the extremes of Missouri heat and cold – meant wheeling hundreds of giant pots out of plant houses each spring, coaxing buds to bloom beneath the shade of arbors, plunging pots and lifting thousands of bulbs and cacti with the changing seasons.

**The War of Garden Aesthetics**

The two approaches, picturesque and gardenesque, were distinctly different and each had appropriate uses depending on circumstance and intent. The contrast between the two was illustrated in the *The Suburban Gardener, and Villa Companion*, and the distinction was explained in the *Encyclopedia of Gardening*:

> To understand the difference between these styles, it must be observed that the picturesque style [is known] by that irregularity in forms, lines, and general composition which we see in natural landscape, while in the gardenesque style all the trees, shrubs, and plants are planted and managed in such a way that each may arrive at its highest state of individual perfection, and display its beauties to as great advantage as if it were cultivated for that purpose alone, while, at the same time, the plants relatively to one another, and to the whole scene or place to which they belong, are placed regularly and systematically.[8]

John Claudius Loudon believed in going beyond established concepts and methods saying that "mere picturesque improvement is not enough in these enlightened times: it is necessary to understand that there is such a character as the gardenesque." His goal was to build on existing theories of beauty which had been adopted by landscape advocate Humphry Repton creating an approach that at once paid respect to prior aesthetic theory yet was distinctly suited to the needs of the nineteenth century. According to Loudon, the gar-

denesque was "calculated for displaying the art of the gardener," in contrast to the picturesque which was a "constant reference to what would look well in a picture."

The use of exotic plants, and by extension the gardenesque, was not embraced by all. Some critics condemned the use of non-indigenous plants, considered by then to be horticultural oddities and freaks, for a variety of reasons ranging from the practical to the esoteric. They claimed they were inappropriate in American gardens and that their use implied a reference to artifice rather than art. Writers such as Thoreau wrote of the reverence, purity, and truth of nature and the cultivation of native plants was one manifestation of this belief. Critics believed plants from jungles and deserts appeared gaudy and failed to harmonize with the North American context and that the dramatic size and showy patterns of exotic specimens constituted a "museum of costly curiosities." This school of thought acknowledged that since such plants failed to adapt to our climate, hardy native hardy plants were preferable. What had begun as a question of plant choice evolved into a debate with political and moral overtones with critics chastising exotics for being fake, foreign, and un-American. (In the twentieth century their use would even be considered "effeminate."[9]) Despite protests, and even as the century drew to a close, popular and professional opinion was split on the strict use of native plants and the use of exotics. Although prominent landscape advocates including Frederick Law Olmsted, Warren Manning, and Jens Jensen occasionally relied on non-native plants to add variety to their designs, the pastoral effects they preferred were achieved using few "imports."

Not only did proponents of the picturesque dislike exotic plants and the gardenesque's "aesthetic of scatter," they also denounced the overall effect created by other popular methods of planting.[10] Ribbon and carpet bedding, as well as massing and "jeweled" effects, were belittled for their over-the-top excess and the impression that the eclectic and multi-patterned nature of Victorian interiors had spilled out into the garden. Such elaborate effects had a great number of critics: William Robinson defiantly claimed he was a flower gardener not a "spreader of bad carpets," and Frederick Law Olmsted attacked "high bred marvels" and the fretted leaves of decorative gardening, valued for variety and elaboration over unity of composition and soothing effects. Olmsted believed that such gardening constituted a mania sacrificing "natural scenery to coarse manufactures of brilliant and gaudy decoration under the name of specimen gardening."[11] For him, embroidery beds, carpet bedding and the like were "suitable to the house furnishing and millinery trades."

Strict adherence to one single approach to design, although a practical solution, was not in keeping with the interest in rich display that characterized the nineteenth century. Landscape gardener Edward Kemp promoted a sort of "official" combination of the picturesque and the gardenesque in what he defined as the "mixed style" but in most cases the chosen approach was a more casual mingling of the two. For example, the polychrome intricacy of the Stephen Hammond residence knot garden in Geneva, New York, credited to Calvert Vaux, was surrounded by an eclectic display of potted bananas and palms; and landscape architect Samuel Parsons, Jr., spoke kindly of the "jewel-like effect of bedding and the same charm of trees and shrubs." A. J. Downing, earlier in the century, had embraced a version of the gardenesque, combining picturesque pleasure grounds with botanical specimens at his own home, and in a plan, with Vaux, for public grounds behind the White House and along the Mall in Washington. William Robinson, who raged against the Victorian methods that created the "ugliest gardens ever made," in fact published writings on the use of subtropical plants in England, and even Arts and Crafts proponent William Morris believed that gardens should be both orderly and rich.[12]

It is in keeping, then, that Henry Shaw would celebrate this rich nineteenth-century aesthetic and combine sunken parterres of exotics and the order of botanical sequence, and gigantic century plants, paisley and moon-shaped beds within the context of a park that was likened, by contemporaries, to a "gem of sparkling beauty." Such highly decorative effects were displayed in a multitude of public gardens, and favored by visitors, well into the twentieth century in spite of the debate for or against.

**Shaw's Resolution**

Both the picturesque and the gardenesque existed as options in the landscape design of the nineteenth century and the tug over which was best suited to place and purpose was an on-going process. Shaw included picturesque passages at the garden and park but ideologically he sided with Loudon and dismissed the picturesque as a style best suited to painting rather than design. "Wild nature," Shaw said, was not the intention of the landscape gardener. The harmonious unfolding of pastoral views and sheets of foliage clinging to rough stone appealed less to him than the emphasis on specimen plantings that celebrated a century of discovery and displays that could educate and cultivate. The gardenesque was the ideal approach for improvement in the countryside because it not only suited Shaw's intentions but because it most clearly contrasted with the surrounding scenery. No gentleman would be flattered having his grounds mistaken for uncultivated countryside and the gardenesque best communicated that "art had been exercised," revealing the hand of man in its clearly identifiable artistic conceptions and arrangements. Shaw called the gardenesque the "cultivated style," claiming it did not outrage nature with abrupt curves or distorted forms, but instead united "utility, variety and beauty." He chose to be "the artist of the graceful and cultivated style" who pursued a middle course between the picturesque and the formality of what he considered the purely artificial. It was within this rich context of nineteenth century landscape aesthetics that Henry Shaw shaped his garden and park.

**NOTES**

1. "Henry Shaw," *Gardeners' Chronicle*, 11 January 1890, 46.
2. David MacAdam, *Tower Grove Park* (St. Louis: R. P. Studley and Co., 1883), 10-11.
3. Christopher Hussey, *The Picturesque: Studies in a Point of View* (London: Putnam's Sons, 1927; reprint, London: Cass, 1967) remains the most important reassessment of the subject as it applies to the arts and landscape.
4. In *An Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke broadened the ways art could be appreciated and expanded aesthetic perceptions by defining emotional counterparts to visual entities. In his theory, fear and beauty were as valid in art as history and myth.
5. For discussion of the picturesque in America see John Conron, *American Picturesque* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000).
6. That John Claudius Loudon was a monumental influence on Shaw is suggested by the number of Loudon publications that Shaw owned. These included the British editiou of the eight volume *Arboretum et Fruticetum Britannicum* (1838), *The Suburban Gardener, and Villa Companion* (1838), *On the Laying Out, Planting, and Managing of Cemeteries* (1843), *Encyclopedia of Cottage, Farm, and Villa Architecture* (1833), the opening day pamphlet for the Derby Arboretum (1840) and many editions of *Gardener's Magazine*. From Shaw's inventory it is not certain which edition of the *Encyclopedia of Gardening* he owned; citations here are from the 1850 edition.
7. John Claudius Loudon, ed. *The Landscape Gardening and Landscape Architecture of the Late Humphry Repton* (London: A. Spotiswood for the author, 1838), viii-ix.
8. Loudon, *Encyclopedia of Gardening*, 487.
9. Wilhelm Miller, *The Prairie Spirit in Landscape Gardening* (1915; reprint, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press and the Library of American landscape History, 2002), xx.
10. For anti-gardenesque commentary, see T. H. D. Turner, "Loudon's Stylistic Development," *Journal of Garden History, no. 2* (1982): 175-88 and A. A. Tait, "The Return to Formality," in MacDougall, ed., *John Claudius Loudon and the Early Nineteenth Century in Great Britain* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1978). For twentieth century anti-gardenesque viewpoint, within the context of the Midwest, see Miller, *The Prairie Spirit in Landscape Gardening*.
11. Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. and Theodora Kimbell, eds., *Forty Years of Landscape Architecture: Being the Professional Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr.*, (Bronx, N.Y.: Benjamin Blom., Inc., 1970), 143.
12. William Robinson, *The Subtropical Garden* (London: J. Murray, 1871).