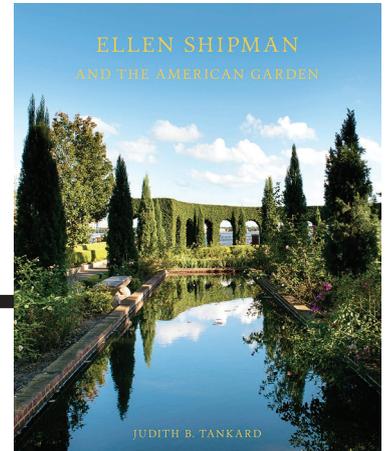


BEYOND HER BORDERS

ELLEN SHIPMAN AND THE AMERICAN GARDEN, REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION

BY JUDITH B. TANKARD; ATHENS, GEORGIA:
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA PRESS, 2018; 310 PAGES, \$39.95.

REVIEWED BY JANE GILLETTE



Ellen Shipman and the American Garden was originally published in 1996 (under the title *The Gardens of Ellen Biddle Shipman*), “among the first [books] to apply art historical methodology to an American practitioner,” says Robin Karson, Honorary ASLA. Reissued in conjunction with the Library of American Landscape History, it now begins with a preface by Karson, the founder and director of that imprint, and a revised introduction by Tankard that reveal how important the original publication was both in establishing Shipman as a consequential figure and in leading to the restoration of a number of her gardens. Subsequent chapters reveal why Shipman’s reputation as well as her work needed to be restored.

Shipman’s story is riveting. She was born in Philadelphia in 1869. Margins of notebooks from her teenage years are filled with drawings of house and garden plans, evidence of an early interest in residential design. Shipman did manage to attend Radcliffe (then known as Harvard Annex) for a year. But she made an unfortunate marriage and soon found herself living in the remote artists’ colony of Cornish, New Hampshire—a location that, however, proved fortunate in several ways. For one thing, she experienced a garden created by the Cornish resident Charles A. Platt that was so beautiful it inspired her to become a landscape designer. Tankard depicts architecture and landscape architecture as the continuing expression of a male/female cultural divide, noting that landscape architecture

was one of the few professions open to women. But how could Shipman learn to be a landscape architect in her straitened circumstances? Although several schools that trained women in landscape and horticulture had already opened, Shipman’s finances were too constrained for her to attend. And she was at this point the single mother of three children. Cornish again provided an answer in the architecture office of Platt, with whom Shipman began working in her early 40s. Reading along, we may from time to time experience an uneasy feeling that there’s a story hidden behind this narrative. If so, it shall remain hidden, in part because of the problems, repeatedly expressed by Tankard, of depicting an artist and her work when much of the documentation has disappeared.

In any case, there were definite limits to Shipman’s education. Platt, a landscape painter turned architect, was not an accomplished landscape designer and so he was willing to collaborate when a talented woman came his way. Nevertheless, the Platt-Shipman partnership was less collaborative and “rather more reflective of the traditional, gendered division of labor in this country by which men oversaw architectural tasks and women tended to planting design.” When considering Shipman’s later career, Tankard is particularly critical of the professional organizations (none of which Shipman belonged to). For example, she quotes the historian Diane Kostial McGuire’s description of the American Society of Landscape Architects

of the time as an organization that welcomed white male graduates of eastern colleges and emphasized larger public-scale work over residential gardens. In the course of her career Shipman did create a number of successful public projects. But Tankard suggests that this work was limited because she had not acquired, in her “short apprenticeship” with Platt, the necessary technical skills in large-scale planning, grading, and natural resource management.

Shipman divorced in 1927 and reputedly never found another emotional partnership. Still, there were good aspects to her life as well as her career. She was close to her daughters, if not her son. She created and ran an all-woman office eventually based in New York City. She was tightly connected to the Garden Club of America and the chain of clients created by its female membership. Throughout her life, Shipman also learned a lot from books as well as “a tide of sophisticated gardening magazines,” which Tankard describes for our delight. Shipman also profited from extensive coverage in these magazines, which advertised her skill and promoted her work.

Nevertheless, as time went on, things got darker. During the Great Depression, clients for smaller projects disappeared and rich clients wanted more elaborate gardens. Shipman was able to rev up her style by incorporating more European elements, especially after her trips to Europe in 1929 and the early 1930s. Travel was a source of inspiration she had previously experienced only in books. But during World War II she suffered unmitigated financial stresses because “lifestyles had changed dramatically, and so had garden fashions.” In 1946, Shipman had to move from her New York residence and office. She began a book about her career (*The Garden Note Book*), but it was never published—a poignant reminder of the way landscape designers have depended on publications to enhance their reputations. The book’s epilogue briefly describes the Shipman family’s difficulties in persuading a reputable library to accept the gift of her papers, which were finally acquired by

ABOVE
Detail from the ink-on-linen preliminary plan for the flower garden at the Philip B. Jennings estate in Bennington, Vermont, August 1914.



Cornell University. At her death in 1950, Shipman’s gardens were falling apart and her reputation was on the wane.

Tankard emphasizes throughout that “domesticity, intimacy, and sensual seclusion characterized the best of Ellen Shipman’s landscape designs, distinguishing them from the grander, self-consciously European schemes many of her colleagues created.” Her basic approach was to “keep the plan simple—almost always rectangular, in axial relation to the house—and make it interesting with plants and garden architecture.” In part this simplicity reflected the rustic influence of Cornish, where people were interested in doing their own gardening, frequently with hardy plants. Shipman also benefited from the popularity of traditional Colonial Revival spatial layouts and the influence of Gertrude Jekyll’s “drift-style plantings.” Included are examples of Shipman’s charming pen-and-ink illustrations for clients, which depict the “prim layout and profligate planting” hallmark of her style as well as her belief that “design need not draw attention to itself to be exquisite.” Simplicity pervaded her practice.

COURTESY CORNELL



LEFT
Pool vista at Avalon,
the estate of Mrs.
Robert S. Brewster Jr.,
in Mount Kisco, New
York, circa 1923.

RIGHT
September borders
at Penwood in Mount
Kisco, New York, in
the late 1930s.



In describing Shipman's career, Tankard refers to many small gardens and gives us amusing, enlightening accounts of Shipman's work at larger estates, for example, Chatham in Fredericksburg, Virginia; Rynwood in Glen Head, New York; and Longue Vue in New Orleans. She also discusses Shipman's office and her way of approaching landscape design. Shipman took an active role in every aspect of a project, providing both a design and alternative design solutions, watercolor renditions for larger estates, site visits to monitor the garden's condition, extensive horticultural instructions, and "an annual discretionary sum to purchase plants."

All gardens are fragile because they are created with living things. Shipman's were especially so because of her emphasis on plants rather than architectural components. "Her responsiveness to place and to the wishes of her clients led her to create gardens whose sensuality and delicacy depended on an evanescence that made their eclipse almost inevitable," Tankard writes. This preference for plants also had its bright side. Shipman

had more frequent contacts with women clients than did her male counterparts, and she paid a lot of attention to her clients' wishes. Women "who were often extremely knowledgeable and informed gardeners themselves, almost certainly helped to shape her collaborative design approach." Shipman knew what women wanted and set about providing it.

Women, even rich women, liked to interact with their gardens, "planning, planting, cultivating, cutting, and arranging flowers for meaningful experiences beyond aesthetic appreciation." The most amusing and conceivably the most telling story in the book involves Shipman's work for Henry and Clara Ford in Dearborn, Michigan. Clara did not like the scarcity of flowers in the Fords' Jens Jensen garden—for which Henry had presumably been the dominant client. She wanted "big, bold flower borders" and "intimate horticultural contact," and in 1927, when Shipman arrived on the scene, her work "led to garden spaces that enriched her clients' lives. At a time when women's expressiveness was not encouraged—at home or



in the world generally—flower gardens provided female clients with sensuous havens and a grounding link to seasonal rhythms and cycles.”

Over the years Shipman’s plant palette became more limited as her design confidence grew. She moved to more subtle color harmonies in her most telling design trait: the creation of flowering borders, to which Tankard devotes one of her most interesting chapters. Borders were extremely popular during the period because homeowners, especially women, loved growing flowers. Shipman’s intuitive understanding of the emotional importance of lush borders would prove crucial to her success. To some degree we experience the beauty of these borders because the book includes wonderful photography by artists in their own right. Most are in black and white, thus emphasizing the formal attractions of Shipman’s work.

ABOVE
The dovecote at Rynwood, on Long Island’s Gold Coast, in 1935.

The photographs also reveal to the modern eye a world that has passed away, a revelation that encourages imaginative explanations. Because Tankard includes the names of clients and occasionally tells where their money came from, she draws attention to something that was particularly relevant. Because Shipman made a point of deferring to her clients’ wishes, this means that her gardens can tell us something about the America of almost a century ago. Who, I found myself wondering, were these rich folks who loved flowering borders and a pond or two? Children of the Gilded Age fleeing the extravagance of their parents? A High WASP ascendancy flaunting typical WASP modesty? Magnates of the Industrial Revolution keeping their heads down? Privacy was certainly one of the most important aspects of Shipman’s work, the “most essential attribute of any garden, whatever type or period.” A certain sort of privacy has always appealed to the rich, and we can easily imagine its appeal for women clients. Garden Club ladies were sociable, but only with each other. And although the exciting new garden magazines advertised the living spaces of the rich, these were, after all, paper representations and hardly an encouragement to actual visits. Indeed, experiencing the beautiful gardens of the wealthy in a magazine might have provided vicarious pleasures for people who would never own one, as photographs still do today. Happily, Tankard provides a long, intriguing list of clients organized by state, clues that could provide a solid starting point for an intriguing examination of America’s ever-changing client class.

The new edition also offers us a solid bibliography as well as a list of 19 Shipman gardens that we can now visit. The Tregaron Estate in Washington, D.C., is at the top of my list. I can hardly wait to begin. ●

JANE GILLETTE IS A FORMER FEATURES EDITOR AT LAM WHO CURRENTLY SPENDS HER TIME WRITING SHORT STORIES. HER COLLECTION, *THE TRAIL OF THE DEMON* (MISSOURI REVIEW BOOKS, 2017), IS AVAILABLE ON AMAZON.

PHOTO BY HARRY G. HEALY, COURTESY CORNELL