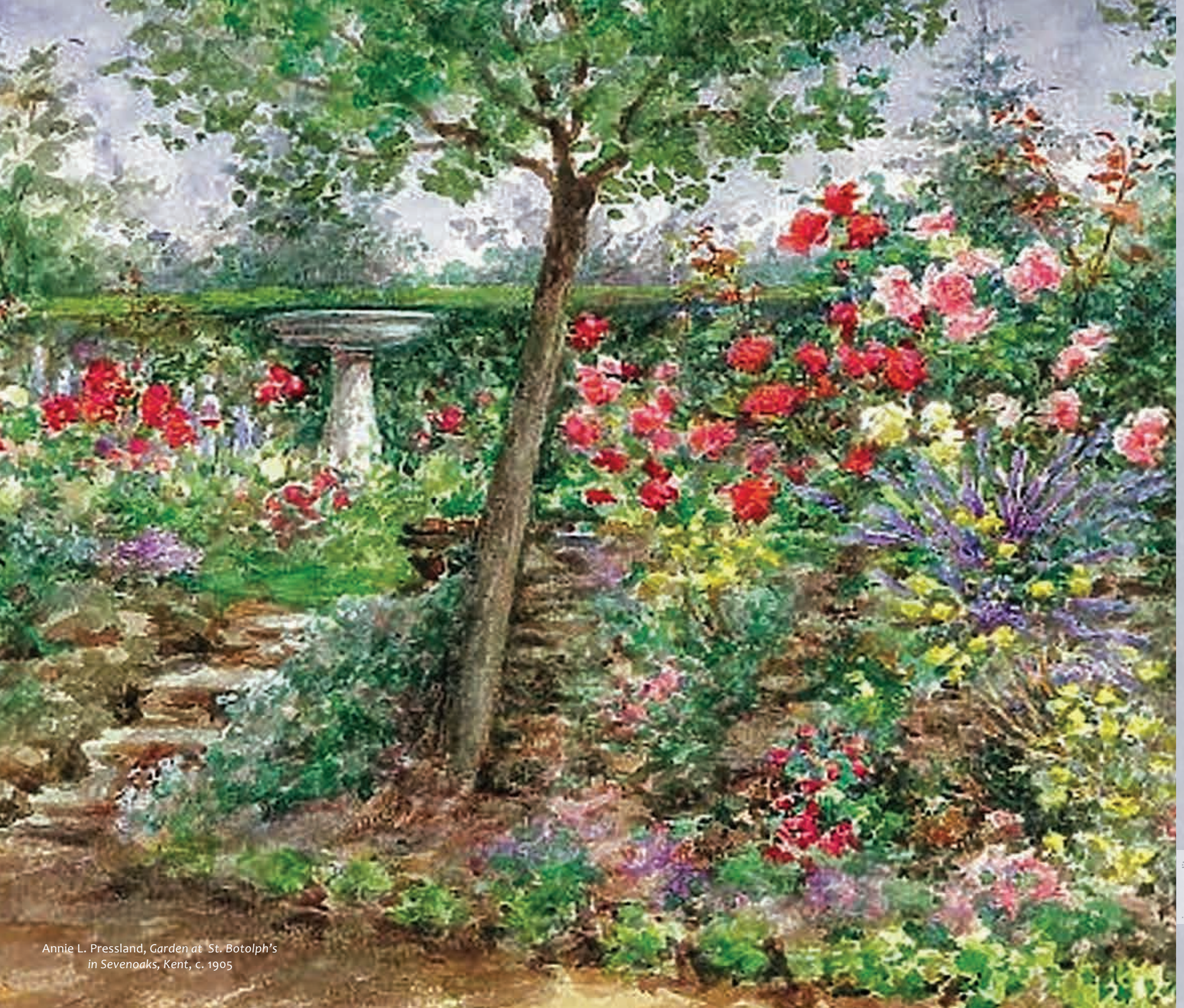

Annie L. Pressland, *Garden at St. Botolph's in Sevenoaks, Kent*, c. 1905

image credits

THE VINTAGE GARDEN

Mara Miller

When I picture vintage gardens, it is mostly their components I see. The white picket fence from *Tom Sawyer* figures prominently, along with various white arbors covered with red roses. Immense and stately deciduous trees, the elms, the chestnuts nearly wiped out by blight. And especially certain flowers: the larkspur of Nancy Drew's *Password to Larkspur Lane*, and the delphiniums, hollyhocks, sweet Williams, bachelor's buttons, cornflowers, and forget-me-nots.

But aren't these things just old-fashioned? Don't they just arouse nostalgia, the bittersweet pleasure of yearning for the past? The pleasures of vintage seem distinctive. Vintage is something more and something quite different. Its pleasures deserve

special attention on their own. Philosophers call the pleasure from physical things—be they objects, performances, or environments—aesthetic.

This would seem to make vintage a category of the aesthetic. Yet putting it in this category poses some problems. At least until recently—recent by philosophical standards, which in both Europe and Asia go back 2,500 years—philosophers of aesthetics have concerned themselves primarily with art and, during some periods, nature, and with feelings they call pleasure. Over the past thirty years or so, the field of everyday aesthetics has developed into something in which vintage would seem to fall quite easily. In *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary: The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, philosopher Thomas Leddy introduces the notion of aura, an understanding of aesthetic as an experience in which the aesthetic object takes on "'aura' within experience," a phenomenological characteristic of the object-as-experienced, "an almost inexplicable mixture of significance and pleasure." Although vintage is a special kind of everyday, the pleasure we get from vintage is more than just aesthetic.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that vintage means "relating to or denoting wine of high quality." This makes sense, given other words related to wine: vine, vineyard.

Although not many gardens grow wine grapes, interior design magazines and movies love to feature gardens with luscious purple grape vines draping from arbors, glistening in sunlight that dapples an al fresco dining table in Tuscany or California. So it would seem we are off to a secure start for vintage gardens.

The Oxford definition goes on to note several factors for wine: high quality, being grown and produced in the same year, and coming from the same place. But outside a wine store, this is not how we usually use the word *vintage*.

For our nonwine purposes, the *Cambridge Dictionary* gets closer to the point. It says vintage is "used to describe clothing, jewelry, etc. that is not new, especially when it is a good example of a style from the past."

Not new is crucial; business usage specifies twenty years old or older, differentiating it from *retro*, which some say designates items less than twenty years old, but which I suggest also refers to items and styles deliberately chosen for their noncurrent and, in some sense, renegade connotations of rebellion against fashion and commercial interests. When something identified as vintage has been valued continuously since its first appearance, either through its continuous use (Barbie Dolls), storage and preservation (Wedgewood), or its reissue (The Regal Beagles), it is more likely to be thought of as *classic* or *traditional*.

Vintage differs also from *antique*, which U. S. Customs officially regulates as one hundred years old or older. Oxford also says antiques are collectible, which gardens rarely are. Russell Wright's original dishware was immensely popular, suggesting that many found their design and bright, cheerful colors pleasing. It also points up one of the differences between vintage and antique: the latter are not only older but more rare, largely due to less mass reproduction in earlier periods, but also to the ravages of wars, fires, and simple breakage. Good design is good design, though, and people have loved this dishware enough that California's Bauer Pottery is now making them again, by hand, in both the original and new colors. Whether such reissues can be considered true vintage is debatable.

When you are trying to sell something, vintage sounds so much better than *used*. But why? What is it about vintage things that makes them superior to second-hand items? The term *used* can refer to anything—whether good or bad design, a good or bad example, in good shape or not, fifty years old or two months old—without implications of quality. Used or the slightly more reassuring designation, *lightly worn*, found in some consignment shops, can include the shabby, the shoddy, or merely out-of-date.

As with wine, vintage in regards to clothes or housewares carries a sense of inherent value; they are not just useful but enjoyable for some reason, often aesthetic, whether for the gustatory and olfactory pleasures they give or for their color and design. Hence we have styles from a previous era that are reissued commercially, whether by their original company (Russell Wright dinnerware) or newcomers, and, in spite of being new, are dubbed vintage in their ads or by design magazines.

The Cambridge definition stresses the object's age, but it, too, seems to miss something important. Design aside, vintage suggests a sense that something is highly valued for more than aesthetic reasons; vintage items are highly valued now because they were highly valued in the past. Yet vintage goods differ from what we usually mean by antique in being newer than an antique; less elite and therefore less expensive; representative of a specific era but now ignored, such as a fabric once popular—seersucker, taffeta, voile—or a type of decoration no longer popular—appliqué, cross-stitch, or smocking; by being more likely to be handmade as opposed to mass-produced; and less rare, therefore, less collectible.

Abbott Fuller Graves, *In the Garden*, c. 1900

Vintage, Time, and the Past

Vintage also carries sets of connotations regarding not just the quality of the design but the pleasures of the past. This past is complicated. Its pleasures may seem relatively superficial, but vintage of many different eras douses us in visual and tactile enjoyment that may have become rarer today, such as visual delight in the colors and styles themselves: the joy of a swirl of neon colors from Cream's album covers, the paper dresses, and the Peter Max era of psychedelics; the translucent sea-green of the jadeite glass cups and saucers, made by several companies and popular from the 1930s through the 1960s; or the intimate blend of similar shades of purples, lilacs, and wine reds in a paisley shawl. In this sense the past is the vehicle for access to the peculiar pleasures of that time.

The result is that in some cases one might not even like the aesthetics of the vintage items, yet like it, enjoy it, crave it for its past, which brings different kinds of pleasure. In the 1960s, I disliked my Aunt Grace's drinking glasses with stripes of forest green, chartreuse, and maroon; I still do. But I very much liked certain aspects of being in her home. Today when I see glassware with those stripes, I feel heart-warmed.

Like the antique, vintage establishes associations with the original users or their era, linking us to them. If this is often in an impersonal way, as opposed, for instance, to inherited items, it is the more powerful for that, embracing us within a wider world, one we may or may not have ever experienced but of which we are now, somehow, a part.

Before moving on to the subject of gardens, it is worthwhile discussing another example of an entire environment that is vintage—diners. Both their original designs—counters with swiveling stools allowing fast access for servers, long Formica counters, leatherette booths—and business concept were ultramodern at the time, and they offered convenience and a variety of both fast and comfort foods. A few still survive in their original form; others, like that in King's Alley, Waikiki, are created anew. In either case, they revel in what feels at our current distance like up-to-date modernity and innocence—including no worries about trans fats and red meat—and summon a lively sense of joy. Eating at a diner today places us with those feelings and a camaraderie with our forebears as well as our co-diners.

But they are not always only positive. Edward Hopper's 1942 painting *Nighthawks* takes advantage of our shared familiarity with diners' exuberance to show us another side, reminding us of the utter existential aloneness of each human being, perhaps especially during war time. In spite of the physical closeness of the couple seated at the counter and their apparent conversation with the counterman taking their order, it conveys one of the most vivid depictions of loneliness in visual art.

The fundamental composition asserts a conflict between the dark-green diner and the red-brick building across the street. The curved front corner of the diner suggests a trolley car in motion, and it juts across the midline as if set to collide with the red-brick building. It establishes a coterie of loneliness we can all identify with via its empty streets, the razor-sharp lines and repeated verticals, and the right angles of the architecture being sabotaged by the dangerous slant of the diner that has it sliding down to the lower right corner and almost out of our presence. The loneliness here (not solitude!) is not limited to the four people in the diner. In spite of the woman's red dress and the brightly lit interior—but such harsh lighting! such bare walls and cold décor!—the loneliness leaks out to the street, past the frame of the painting to the viewer. Not all vintage is warm and cozy.

Helen Allingham, *Cottage Garden*, 1894

Summing up, we can identify these essential components of vintage:

- It is "a good example of a style from the past"; the design itself was and remains good;

image credits

John Leslie Breck, *Garden at Giverny*, 1890

- It was used previously, but not continuously;
- Its use was widespread;
- It was cherished;
- It was enjoyed, in a whimsical, spontaneous way—not coercive, enforced, or subject to social pressure; and
- It bears positive connotations of various kinds and historic reverberations from the past.

On to Gardens

The Cambridge definition suggests a problem for gardens: must vintage refer only to things that are manmade? Although they are rarely completely artificial, gardens by definition have been shaped by human beings. They are thus *third nature*—hybrid environments combining nature and human intervention—distinct from *first nature*, which is untouched landscape, and *second nature*, agricultural or industrial landscapes. I suggest that vintage gardens function much like other types of vintage items; if they are to some degree old or replicate gardens of a previous era, we can imagine that they might be classified as vintage.

image credits

Marie Spartali Stillman, *A Lady in the Garden at Kelmscott Manor, Gloucestershire*

Types of Vintage Gardens

Surely, vintage gardens would employ design that is both good and from the past. But vintage gardens have much to do with the kinds of plants, and although they are most typically those of the temperate zone—roses, sunflowers, daylilies—for those in tropical climates or deserts, it is the birds-of-paradise, bougainvillea, coconut and royal palms, jacarandas, and mango trees, or pencil cactus, yucca, and Joshua trees that are more relevant. Items other than plants might adorn a garden, as wicker, Adirondack, and wrought-iron chairs serve to evoke the past in gardens on the east coast, and ristras of drying chiles and woven blankets do so for those in the southwest.

Design is also important. Flowers may be confined to beds along winding paths, in front of houses, or skirting grass. Small urns on stoops and hanging baskets along porches belong, as do trellises with climbing roses or cascades of bridal veil spirea. Flower boxes, whether in Saugatuck or on Mackinac Island, Cape Cod, or Whidbey Island, also fit in. But English cottage gardens, flower boxes,

Berthe Morisot, *Roses Trémières*, 1884

and hanging baskets, like those photographed for travel brochures for European cities, suggest that gardens are a more international form of vintage than some other entities.

Like antique furniture and art, gardens may be prized for their craftsmanship, their age, and the individuality of their design. But unlike grand gardens such as those at the estates in Newport, Rhode Island, vintage gardens are cherished for their ability to be recreated almost anywhere, by almost anyone. They do not require exorbitant amounts of financial investment or professional artists to design. They should have been popular (to at least some extent), widespread, and loved during their time, wherever that time took place.

Gardens differ from many other categories of vintage in being so multi-sensual. It is not only the visuals—the flowers and trees—but the fauna, the hummingbirds, robins, jays, cardinals, or mourning doves and their songs, the crickets and cicadas, the squirrels, chipmunks, deer. When they inhabit our vintage gardens, they create a whole world, if only in miniature, which is less easily created with the fully artificial objects of our normal vintage items. We have less control over the presence of birds and insects.

Another component of the appeal of the vintage garden is that it summons up a shared past rather than the personal past of individual memory. The value of vintage sometimes lies in the way it characterizes its era, offering a specifically temporal experience of the differences in our lives between then and now, or in ourselves, what we experience, how we feel, what we are aware of, what we know now.

The vintage garden may be the garden of one's own home or childhood, or other personally beloved place, or a garden one knows only from illustrations in old books like Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses*, Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, and the animal stories of Beatrix Potter. A passage from Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* would make a good model for a vintage garden:

> [Mole and Rat] disembarked, and strolled across the gay flower-decked lawns in search of Toad, whom they presently happened upon resting in a wicker garden-chair, with a pre-occupied expression of face, and a large map spread out on his knees.

Occurring toward the opening of the book, this passage illustrates several of our themes so far: the agreeable flowers and grass, the comfortable accessories (wicker chair), the potential for both convivial social sharing and personal engagement, as well as the suggestion of the exotic and adventure to come.

Władysław Podkowiński, *Children in the Garden*, 1892

Problems for Gardens: The Complexities of Time and Temporality

Gardens, however, have a particular problem for vintage in that they change so much—both continually and continuously. My mother's kitchen dishes during my elementary school years—after she had forsworn the yellow-and-brown plaid Organdy

image credits

pattern and we replaced them, piece by piece, with a blue-and-white set whose wide rim borders and center designs were taken from Currier and Ives lithographs of nineteenth-century village life—like the former, broke piece by piece and were eventually replaced by a set of more modern design. Each set fit into a particular period of my life.

Gardens, on the other hand, change constantly. They change through the seasons (in most climates): fall colors, the grays and whites of winter, then delicate early snow drops, spring beauties, and narcissus, giving way to the brighter, bolder tulips, hyacinths, roses, poppies, and eventually to black-eyed Susans and chrysanthemums. Those lucky enough to have fruit trees see a similar rotation. And all these changes are repeated, cyclically! They take our emotions on a ride with them.

And many gardens, especially in regards to flowers and birds, change throughout the day. The mourning doves in Ypsilanti, Michigan, and in Honolulu cry only in the mornings; later in the day we might get crows. Fireflies and crickets emerge in the evenings.

Then there are the changes we make—changing species when one doesn't work out well, or moving or pruning to increase shade or the number of blossoms. When I once moved a rose bush from one corner to the edge of a fence, it went in one year from six flowers to eight hundred, and from lavender to bright red. That house was over a century old, but its small wooden deck recalled California of the 1970s. The arbor a local artist created for us was brand new, though of rustic design. The stone pavers we put down reminded us of the eons of the earth's existence.

Rocks are relentless time-keepers. New England yards and gardens retain the stone walls built when earlier householders cleared their fields of stone for crops. Chinese and Japanese gardens inscribe rocks with literary and historic quotations that may be either vintage or antique. Gardens of modern design in places as diverse as Honolulu and Washington, D.C., employ local rocks for their gravitas, reminders of the age of the earth.

A final temporal dimension of vintage gardens is the style. Knot gardens, peristyle gardens of abbeys, paths meeting at right angles in the middle with a fountain or sundial carry atmosphere similar to the vintage.

Given gardens' enormously complex relation to time and the near impossibility of recreating one existing garden elsewhere, it may be silly to argue that such things as vintage gardens even exist. Although we often lose track of changes that weather enforces and that on-the-ground gardeners must make, all gardens change over time. While they may bear resonances of vintage, completely vintage gardens may not be possible.

image credits

Edvard Munch, *Garden in Kragerø*, 1909

Vincent van Gogh, *Flowering Garden with Path*, 1888