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HISTORIC GARDENS

Review



CONFUCIAN GARDENING
IN KOREA

VOLUNTEERS ARE RESTORING
AN OLD CALIFORNIAN ORCHARD

THE VOICE OF HISTORIC PARKS AND GARDENS WORLDWIDE

The Gardens of Bunny Mellon

By Linda Jane Holden

Vendome. 308 pages. £45.00/\$60.00.

ISBN 978-0-86565-351-1.

If the Olmsted Brothers are busy about your father's estate, that's quite a spur to growing up with an interest in gardens – and Rachel 'Bunny' Mellon (1910-2014) did indeed become one of the US's most respected horticulturalists.

Best-known for her designs for the Kennedy White House, she also worked in France, firstly on the garden of couturier Hubert de Givenchy, and then, with him, on a project to restore the dilapidated Potager du Roi at Versailles.

But she will be longest remembered for her own gardens at Oak Spring in Virginia, and almost half of this enjoyable

book is, rightly, devoted to that estate.

Linda Jane Holden describes the creation and plantings of its formal and informal areas, the terraces, the allée, the rose garden and the vegetable gardens. And the Butterfly Garden – well in advance of its time. All have a charming and timeless air, reflected in Roger Foley's imaginative photographs.

The estate is now the seat of the Oak Spring Garden Foundation, dedicated to supporting the study of horticulture and garden design, and the chapter on Mrs Mellon's library (above right – an undated archive



photograph) emphasises that she was no rich socialite, playing at garden design, but an intelligent woman with a serious interest in the historic background to her chosen subject.

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Mater Florum: Flora e il suo Culto a Roma

By Lorenzo Fabbri

Leo S. Olschki. 294 pages. €34.00.

ISBN 978-88-222-6619-4.

On the heels of my somewhat light-hearted look at the tutelary deities of the garden ('Gods of the Garden' HGR 38), comes a serious and scholarly study of the deity most commonly associated with horticulture, Flora. She was never one of the Olympian Twelve – the principal deity of nature and the vegetable world was Ceres (Demeter in Greek) – but her cult played a major part in the life of Rome, not least because, as Lorenzo Fabbri points out, Flora was an early soubriquet

for the City of Rome, no doubt from the era when it was a small country market town surrounded by farms.

The book concentrates on her major festival, the Floralia, a six-day event from 28 April to 3 May. Fabbri teases apart the long and detailed description in Ovid's Fasti (8 AD). Led by her own dedicated priest, the Flamen Florialis, on the first five days plays and competitive games took place in the environs of the Temple of Flora, which had been built in the 230s BC after consulting the Sibylline Books.

The sixth day saw wild beast shows in the amphitheatre followed by a distribution of vegetables and other produce to the public. Interestingly, Rome's prostitutes played a significant part in the celebrations, emphasising Flora's concern with 'the common people'.

Fabbri also analyses the images of Flora both in Antiquity and thereafter. From Roman times to the Victorians, the goddess has been depicted as a beautiful young woman wearing a flowing, sometimes florally decorated, robe and often holding a bunch of flowers or a cornucopia, as in the fresco (left) from Pompeii. Later, we learn that Botticelli's 'Primavera' contains over 160 plant varieties of which only 100 have yet been identified.

This book gives a fascinating insight into the beliefs and attitudes of the classical Roman world.

Richard Mawrey

Gardens of the National Trust of Australia (Victoria)

By Anne Vale

National Trust of Australia.

200 pages. Aus\$49.99.

ISBN 978-0-646-98806-1.

Also available direct from the author. Contact annevaleheriscapes@gmail.com

The National Trust of Australia, like its UK equivalents, owns and manages historic properties of all kinds across the country. This book only deals with Victoria, the state which includes Melbourne. Here, its best-known sites are two 19th-century houses, Rippon Lea and Como, both with interesting gardens.

It also covers older places, including estates owned by pioneer families. Today, those gardens may be smaller than in their heyday, but Dr Vale's clear prose and wide research makes their past – and the often hard lives of their owners – come alive.

As Vale admits, there is still much to be studied with regard to the Aboriginal cultural heritage of these landscapes, which were much more developed than the settlers realised when they took them over. But she does deal with the rare still-wild remnants of ancient forest known as Endeavour Fern Gully.

Well illustrated with archive photos and excellent modern ones, many by the author herself, this is a book to treasure.

Mira Stowell

