

Historians of British Art

British Country Houses: Architecture, Collections, and Gardens

Thursday, 13 February 2014, 12:30–2:00, Hilton Chicago, 3rd Floor, Williford A&B

As late as last December, I announced a Call for Papers for a session at this week's conference of the College Art Association. As one of Thursday's lunch panels, the session had already been reserved for the Historians of British Art, and in my announcement I referenced "a spirit of nimble experimentation." Well I'm thrilled to have three promising papers, the abstracts of which are available below (they obviously won't be available through CAA). For anyone in Chicago this week, please turn up. The session is intended to be a productive opportunity for feedback and discussion. And as a midday session, it is open to the public without the usual CAA membership or conference registration fees (it's entirely free).

Many thanks,
Craig Hanson

William L. Coleman (University of California, Berkeley), 'Both instructive and pleasant': The Country House Garden in *Vitruvius Britannicus*

The Scottish architect Colen Campbell is best known not for any of his buildings nor for the influential offices he held during his lifetime but for his collection of engraved views of British country houses: *Vitruvius Britannicus, or the British Architect*. This project, issued in three volumes from 1715 to 1725 with nearly 300 folio plates has been called "the most ambitious publication of engraved material yet attempted in Britain."¹

While the mission of *Vitruvius Britannicus* is clear enough—the advancement of Palladian architecture in Great Britain as an alternative to Roman ecclesiastical influence through a direct appeal to those in a position to commission new country houses—there are major differences between the contents of the volumes of the book. In contrast to the first two entries in the series, which consist exclusively of plans, elevations, and occasional sections of noteworthy buildings, the 1725 third volume of also includes birds-eye views and elaborate perspectives of country-house gardens. Here, for the first time in the book, Campbell shows detailed information about the form of the grounds of the country houses he celebrates, often to the detriment of the architectural representation that has been central until this point. The garden images have rarely been com-

mented upon in the literature on *Vitruvius Britannicus* despite the fact that Campbell alerted his audience to the significance of this material in an advertisement for Volume III, in which he wrote "the Author has made a great Progress in a Third Volume containing the Geometrical Plans of the most considerable Gardens and Plantations with large Perspectives of the most Regular Buildings, in a Method intirely new, and both instructive and pleasant."² If these plates are not merely "pleasant" but "instructive," in what do they instruct?

This paper will argue that Campbell's garden views should be understood as integral to his overarching goal of reforming British taste, rather than as decorative adjuncts to it, and that these plates suggest a new way of understanding a period in garden history that has proven problematic in the past. Christopher Hussey and John Harris, among others, have recognized that many English gardens built from about 1715 to 1730 differ from the Anglo-Dutch style that came before in their gradual departure from bi-lateral symmetry and their embrace of elaborate, classicizing outbuildings to create interesting perspectives, but do not yet reject geometric construction in the way the better known work of Capability Brown would later in the century.³ Rather than treating the gardens Campbell describes and represents in his book as aberrant or merely transitional, it will be productive to consider how they relate to his architectural project. Just as Volumes I

and II of *Vitruvius Britannicus* argue for a British Palladianism to counter perceived Catholic decadence, so does Volume III make a case for what can be called the Neopalladian garden. While damning others with faint praise, Campbell held up as exemplary gardens that, by means of their citations of Palladio in buildings and their allusions to laborless Arcadian bounty, constituted an alternate horticultural modernity.

1. E. Harris, "Vitruvius Britannicus before Colen Campbell," *The Burlington Magazine* 128 (May 1986), p. 340..
2. Campbell, *Vitruvius Britannicus* II, p. 8.
3. C. Hussey, *English Gardens and Landscapes: 1700–1750* (New York, 1967), p. 132; J. Harris, "The Artinatural Garden" in C. Hind ed. *The Rococo in England: A Symposium* (London, 1986), pp. 8–9.

**Jocelyn Anderson (Courtauld Institute of Art),
From Stowe to Mount Edgcumbe: Touring Collec-
tions in Gardens**

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as country-house tourism became increasingly popular, guidebooks for specific houses and gardens were published. Indicative of houses having thoroughly established themselves as destinations for polite tourists, these guidebooks provide critical evidence as to how these sites were presented to and remade for visitors. Many guidebooks focus on the art collections of houses, cataloguing pictures and sculptures and explaining them for readers. Several guidebooks, however, describe gardens, and close examination of these texts sheds new light on the public significance of these places. While garden historians have usefully analysed these cultivated landscapes from the perspective of designers and owners, guidebooks demonstrate that tourists' experiences of these places would often have been quite different. This paper explores the guidebooks for three gardens and considers the significance of how these texts describe and comment on these sites.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, Viscount Cobham's gardens at Stowe (Buckinghamshire) spread over 200 acres and contained over forty temples. They were among the most famous in Britain, and they had become a popular tourist attraction, complete with an inn for tourists' convenience. Stowe's first guidebook was published in 1744, and over the following sixty years, over twenty editions appeared. The gardens at Hawkstone (Shropshire) were not as famous, but the estate also had an inn for visitors, and ten guidebooks to its grounds were published between 1766 and 1811. It was known for its rugged natural landscape, which included a sharp ridge of sandstone hills and a deep ravine, along with an exceptionally eccentric collection of ornamental features. In the former aspect it was similar to Mount Edgcumbe (Devon), whose coastal site had inspired a garden which incorporated panoramic views of the ocean and walks along cliffs. Mount Edgcumbe was celebrated in the later eighteenth century, but it wasn't until the early nineteenth century that its first guidebooks were published.

What these three gardens have in common is the approach guidebook authors took when they described them for visitors. The first, and most prominent, device adopted was the circuit, which organized both the guidebook and the garden itself. The circuit was the itinerary tourists were meant to follow while visiting the garden, leading them through both locations in space and descriptions on the page (depending on the garden, it was not necessarily circular). The circuit in all three of these guidebooks is constructed by a progression of entries about specific temples and locations; these are, in effect, descriptions of gardens written as chains of descriptions about destinations within them. Within this structure, the guidebooks provide detailed entries about each place where visitors were expected to pause during their tour. Many of these entries are extraordinarily attentive to detail, supplying information about everything from the architect who designed a temple to what might be visible on the distant horizon. Through these guidebooks' approach, visits to these gardens are constructed as collections of close examinations and responses,

similar to those which might be had touring the art collection inside a country house.

Laurel O. Peterson (Yale University), Art, War, and Politics in William Kent's North Hall at Stowe

In the late 1720s, Richard Temple, viscount Cobham, commissioned William Kent to design and decorate the interior of his north entrance hall at Stowe House. Kent had established himself as a leading artist in Britain, and he created a room for Cobham in the latest fashion. While only the grisaille and gold ceiling remains of Kent's scheme, it is the oldest surviving interior at Stowe. This paper considers Kent's and Cobham's intertwining artistic, social, and political aims in the decoration of the North Hall, and argues for an interpretation of this space as representative of a vital artistic culture found in the early eighteenth-century country house.

The North Hall celebrates Cobham's military career. The central allegorical ceiling panel portrays the young Cobham receiving a sword from Mars, and commemorates the date in 1702 when he received his own army regiment from William III. Cobham rose through the ranks, eventually serving as a lieutenant general under John Churchill, first duke of Marlborough, in the War of Spanish Succession. Cobham's military career enabled his political and social rise; he served in the ministries of George I and ultimately was elevated to a viscountcy in 1718. While the expression of Cobham's Whig ideologies through garden architecture is well known, this paper draws attention to the interior as a central part of his project. By representing a moment that celebrates his connection to William III, Cobham chose to emphasize his commitment to the Glorious Revolution of 1688, a political statement that aligned with his Opposition Whig politics. Other parts of Kent's original decorative scheme, such as Christophe Veyrier's marble relief of the *Family of Darius before Alexander* (c. 1680), reinforced the military theme.

The North Hall—the point of entry for any guest to Stowe House—formed one part of a larger temporal

and spatial viewing experience. This paper suggests ways in which Kent's decoration worked in dialogue with other spaces and works of art in various media in the building, such as the set of the *Art of War* tapestries (ca. 1706–12), woven by Judocos de Vos after designs by Lambert de Hondt.

This paper not only explores how the North Hall was invested with political meaning, but also examines the stakes in play with this aesthetic project. Contextualizing this space within a larger continuum of other interiors highlights the specific aims of both Cobham and Kent. Blenheim, the preeminent contemporary military palace, built for and decorated in honor of the Duke of Marlborough, Cobham's former commander, is a particularly salient comparison. In addition, examining Kent's ceiling in relation to his work at Kensington Palace and at Houghton Hall, as well as in relation to continental models, situates the artist's work both within ambitious and distinguished artistic traditions and on the forefront of innovative design. Artistic production and ambition within the country house must be understood as concomitant with developing political roles of the landed elite. This paper suggests how a space such as Stowe's North Hall must be considered a key site of artistic production, part of a dynamic artistic culture thriving in early eighteenth-century country houses.