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New York Pairidaeza, Back in Bloom

By LEE LAWRENCE



Jonathan Wallen

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Untermyer Gardens

www.untermyergardens.org

Yonkers, N.Y.

Step inside a walled garden, and the cacophony of daily life gives way to the soothing splash of fountains and the sweet scent of flowers. This conceit was the starting point for Beaux Arts architect William Welles Bosworth when, sometime between 1912 and 1915, prominent New York lawyer Samuel Untermyer hired him to design "the finest garden in the world" for his estate here. Untermyer was determined to outshine John D. Rockefeller's gardens, some 10 miles up the road at Kykuit.

By the time Bosworth finished, 30 gardens spilled across Untermyer's sloping 150-acre site,

offering glorious views of the Hudson and the Palisades. It required the work of 60 gardeners and flora from his 60 greenhouses. Until his death in 1940, Untermyer added a fountain sculpture by Isidore Konti (famous for work at turn-of-the-century World's Fairs), bronzes by Paulanship (once highly acclaimed, today he is little known except for his gilded "Prometheus" at New York's Rockefeller Plaza), other statuary and such idiosyncratic touches as a floral sundial.

Much of this has not survived. To raise money, the city sold more than half the acreage and most of the statuary was dispersed—Manship's bronzes are in the Hudson River Museum; some works were sold and others lost, possibly during restoration work in the 1970s.

Happily, the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy, in a fledgling partnership with the Yonkers Department of Parks, Recreation and Conservation, is bringing 43 acres back to life. With the expertise and vision of Marco Polo Stufano, who transformed Wave Hill's 28-acre gardens into a horticultural jewel, along with the talents of his former student Timothy Tilghman, the conservancy is helping re-create the gardens' original glory through judicious plantings, massive clearings and relentless research.

According to a 1918 article in *Architectural Review*, the need for a privacy wall along what is now North Broadway dictated Bosworth's approach. Rather than looking to European and Japanese models as he had for Rockefeller, he drew inspiration from the world's oldest-known lineage: Persian gardens, which began with King Cyrus in the sixth century B.C., then spread and evolved through Arab and Islamic rulers. Think Spain's 13th- to 14th-century Alhambra or India's 17th-century Taj Mahal.

Sheltered by a crenellated wall with octagonal watchtowers, this upper garden remains the centerpiece of Bosworth's design. Its layout and governing principles are Indo-Persian, its structures and embellishments Greco-Roman. The relief by Ulric Ellerhusen above the entrance, for example, depicts a reclining woman holding a quiver of arrows. She is Artemis, goddess of fertility—which makes sense for a garden—but also of the hunt. This is puzzling until you ponder the etymology of early gardens. When Persia's Cyrus the Younger hosted a Spartan general in 407 B.C., he showed him a *pairidaeza*—or an enclosed park where a prince could hunt. Only later did the word migrate into Old Hebrew and Greek, attaching itself to the Garden of Eden and giving rise to the notion of enclosed gardens as reflections of heaven.

Inside the gate, twin weeping beeches create a thick canopy beneath which a water channel runs straight up the center, fountains bubbling every few feet. It is intersected at midpoint by a shorter channel, dividing the rectangular space into quadrants, a hallmark of Islamic gardens. On either side of the channel, beautifully spaced evergreens create a single-point perspective, directing the eye to the far end, where pairs of Ionic columns topped by Manship sphinxes rise before a Greek-style amphitheater. On the left and halfway up, a circle of Corinthian columns beckons. On its floor, a mosaic portrays Medusa staring up at the sky. Since Bosworth's drawings are lost, we can only speculate that he was capturing Medusa's defiance of Athena's orders by looking at the sun. Athena punished her by turning her hair into snakes.

Interestingly, Untermyer sometimes deviated from Bosworth's plan, refusing to cut down existing trees even when they encroached on a path. Photographs from the 1930s and '40s show what Stephen F. Byrns, founder and chairman of the conservancy, calls "a tension between a symmetrical formality and a randomness, whether Bosworth liked it or not." The original trees have since died, but in keeping with Untermyer's spirit, "we've planted some young ones that will bring back some of that randomness," says Mr. Byrns, an architect who served as a New

York City Landmarks Preservation Commissioner from 2004 to 2010.

Also unusual is the lack of a fourth wall. The garden's western edge is instead demarcated by a drop-off, rather like an English ha-ha, which marks a boundary without blocking the view. And what a view, not just of the countryside. The rotunda overlooks a grove of trees and a swimming pool, its mosaic floor enlivened with circular designs and sea creatures, perhaps copied from Hadrian's villa near Rome. Here, as in parts of the amphitheater, the mosaics are in desperate need of repair after decades of neglect and vandalism.

"We need to continue to invest in the park and its infrastructure," says Mike Spano, the mayor of Yonkers, "but the city can't do it alone; we don't have the money." Enter the conservancy. Established in 2010, it has brought new energy and, for the first time, private dollars, which the mayor hopes could be matched with city, state and federal funds. To consolidate the relationship, he adds, the city and the conservancy will soon sign a memorandum of understanding.

In terms of both hardscape and horticulture, massive work lies ahead—20 years' worth, says Mr. Byrns—and it is hard not to cheer them on. Already Parks Department staff and dedicated conservancy volunteers have cleared enough of the encroaching jungle to help us imagine water cascading from the Temple of Love, a small round temple perched on a manmade rocky outcrop. They have also hacked away vines engulfing the back entrance near the river to reveal a magnificent lion carved in high relief, traces of graffiti on its belly and a trail of ivy framing its luxurious mane. Strolling down the steep, 250-foot walkway to an overlook above the Hudson, we can imagine how much more dramatic it will be when it is once again lined with tall Japanese cedars. And how enticing it will be to hear through the trees the splash of water coming from secluded, color-themed gardens.

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