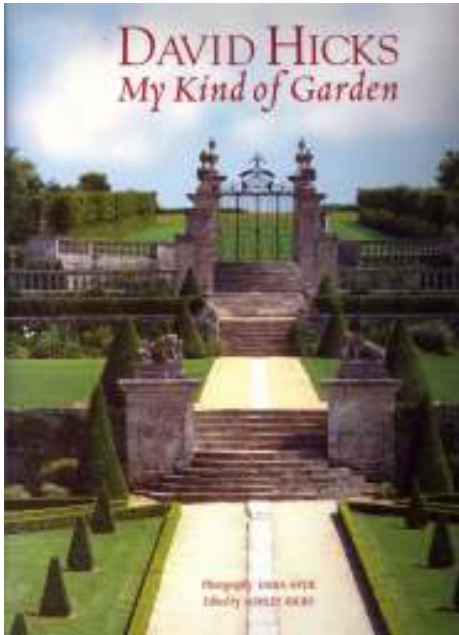


BOOK REVIEW SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2010



My kind of garden

by David Hicks

Antique Collectors' Club. new edition, £29.50
hardback

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I remember the name David Hicks from Sunday newspapers and glossy magazines read in hairdressers when I was (a lot) younger. The book's blurb says that Hicks was one of the best-known designers of the twentieth century, but he only impinged upon those with money; his work had not a lot to do with those of us furnishing bedsits with junk furniture and lamps in Chianti bottles. However something of his style must have rubbed off for I recall wanting

desperately to have an all white room, which is what he advocated in his interior design at one point. This book is a new edition of 300 photographs by Dana Hyde of Hicks's favourite gardens worldwide. It is beautiful: full of formal gardens and geometric planting which is what Hicks' himself designed. His comments on the gardens are interesting and illuminating. Such as (of Palais Seteiz, Sintra, Portugal) "The utter simplicity of this geometrical play on spheres and rectangular solids cut in topiary has, for me, lasting appeal. It is another example of small-scale stylish gardening that will always be successful, regardless of location" and , of Barnards, Sible Hedingham, Essex: " Dorothy Ratcliffe's 'Mondrian' garden, named for its geometric design.... I find the crisp regularity of it ... immensely self-assured and sophisticated in the midst of the Essex countywide of my own childhood". The garden he admired range from that Essex garden to Florida, Australia, South Africa and many points West. There is a section on his own designs, which range across a similar list of countries, and a final section of detail: furniture, water features, garden ornaments

A major principle of his, that in all "visually dominated activities, quality, form and innovation are always of vital importance to produce style." This book gives an idea of the style he admired, past, his then-present, gardens often magnificent, sometimes quirky. It in itself is a collection of visual essays on garden history of the formal kind, seen through his eyes:: 'My approach to and appreciation of gardening with straight lines... is very personal. ...I tend to pay particular attention to the way gardens relate to house. Buildings tend to be based on straight lines, so I have a decided preference for straight lines near the house.'

So the gardens in the book are formal, most are large, and all are either actual renaissance, baroque or arts and crafts or influenced by them. (Although it is rather irritating to find one of my own favourites, Hestercombe, without a mention of

Gertrude Jekyll, who had as much to do with the design as Lutyens: but in Hicks early life, it was generally thought that Jekyll had to do with only the plants.) However, the gardens he designed often have a simplicity that seems to point the way to modern minimalism. Hyde Park, Johannesburg, has a simple rectangular pool headed by a clean-shaped building with pediment (white - no frills) and geometric bed and pools either side. His comment on one design shows how aware he is of small spaces;" the success of a garden design can often depend on finding exactly the right balance between wide open spaces and smaller, more personal ones" . Although his designs are all for large spaces, perhaps he could design a small garden for today's market.

The style of the writing makes it a surprise that he talks of the 1950s as the time when he was a student. He seems to belong to the era of the thirties, a blend of deco lines, topiary and the new modernism, although he might not like that remark.

The book throws a light upon someone who did not live to see the intense interest in show gardens and TV garden shows, and would most possibly have distained that lot. But I don't know... what would he have thought of the steel, concrete and minimal designs in the current copy of Garden Design Journal which has just arrived on my desk? He would have liked the geometry, the white walls, certainly, he might also have liked the steelwork. Whatever he might have thought, he would have made sure we all knew what it was.