

Gardens of Divine Imitation

Book review by Twigs Way – Essex Gardens Trust

**Bella Darcy 2009 *Gardens of Divine Imitation* Published by Gardens and People
Soft cover: 216 pages, illustrated throughout, £25
Review by Twigs Way**

Most books on garden history are written by garden historians. This book is an exception, as Bella D'Arcy is not only a garden designer, but has consciously approached her subject as a designer rather than a historian. It is the process of design and the influences on the designer which fascinate her. Focussing on the influence of classical Roman architecture and design on later periods she traces the concepts of Classical design as they appear again in the Renaissance, and the influence of both Classical and Renaissance design on Edwardian gardens. But this is not merely a search for antecedents, so long a favourite pastime of garden historians. Instead the author attempts something rather more complex: examining the inspirations, aspirations, concepts and visions of the designers of these periods. Having given herself this remit, to look at the past differently, to explore and imagine through the eyes and mind of the designer, the author has then the difficulty of taking the reader with her on what must become a structured journey forged out of historically 'unstructured' vision. Bella D'Arcy imposes this structure with chapters that concentrate on individual sites which are associated with particular designers: Pirro Ligoria with the Villa Pia and Villa D'Este, Gertrude Jekyll and Hestercombe, Thomas Mawson and Foots Cray Place. Within these chapters the influences on each designer are examined, whether contemporary fashion, colleagues or travel. In between these are 'interludes' or smaller sections which bridge the chapters in the way that paths and passages lead from one garden room to another. These provide the opportunity to discuss concepts or contexts which do not 'fit' into the main discussion. Whether this arrangement is purposely modelled on the gardens it describes or not, one can sense the garden design background of the author in both the structure and the actual text. Phraseology is also more often that encountered in garden design rather than garden history. Gardens are described with enthusiasm but also judgementally in what is a very personal approach. On Aldobrandini 'it offers a new slant away from the solidly egotistical', on Versailles and Vaux le Vicomte 'they veer towards sheer bad taste and show a vacuity in their designs'; on the Italian Garden at Easton Lodge 'the visitor . . . enters a space whose sense of intimacy and security increases as he or she descends [the steps]'. The gardens are presented both as planned and as experienced, both in the past and present, and sometimes as imagined. But does this approach work? Is garden history open to a more conceptual approach or are we hidebound in our love of formal structure and passive text? Well the answer lies in the reader as much as the writer. There are some who will find this exploration of influences too fluid, too serpentine in its route, and informal in its style. In common with some gardens, it can be difficult in places to keep track of where one is or where one is going. For many however this approach will prove refreshing, especially those who feel the formal path of the historical approach produces too narrow a vista. The fact that I longed for an index probably says more about me than about the book! Whatever your personal response to the style of the work, the author should be applauded for carrying out an enormous amount of research, drawing in subjects and topics to provide context to the work of the designers, as well as travelling to most of the sites discussed in order to provide that very personal insight of a garden designer that is the hallmark of this book.

FROM CORNWALL GARDENS TRUST by PAM DODDS

Book review (2)

Gardens of Divine Imitation: A garden design timeline from the Renaissance to the Edwardian era via ancient Rome by Bella D'Arcy

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The author's sequence of careers as musician, performer, director, project manager, community arts administrator and scriptwriter, preceded retraining and launching herself as a garden designer. The background informs the content to this well-illustrated book.

As the title suggests, D'Arcy aims to trace the historical influence and links in garden design, adding her own insight. One of many examples she describes is a pebble design at the 16th century Villa D'Este in Tivoli, which reminds her of a similar circular pattern at Easton Lodge in Essex, designed by Harold Peto in 1902. She finds both schemes have their origin at the second century Roman villa of the Emperor Hadrian.

D'Arcy sums up her investigation into the process of garden design as follows:

For the gardens in the book, while a complete vision in the mind of the designer, were not always finished, and in some cases not even started. Here, these visions are interpreted by a garden designer whose interpretation may, or may not, be the reality. It is all after all, in the mind.

So, for whom is the book intended? It would obviously appeal to garden society and garden trust members, especially those who have toured Renaissance Italian gardens, Edwardian 'Italian' gardens in the British Isles, and those who have such travel in mind. For them it provides detailed accounts of the gardens' development. But for me, it is above all a reminder of personal experience of past delights. Bella D'Arcy reminds the reader that garden and architectural design should form parts of the same whole. Context is all.' The lack of an index is compensated by a detailed 'Contents' summary at the beginning. (Pam Dodds)