THE ART OF FREDERICK LAW OLMSTED
BY ARTHUR SPENCER

Pope, who loved formal luxury in nature as well as in verse, took great pleasure in laying out the famous garden at Twickenham. A friend expressed regret that having completed everything he would find nothing more to engage his attention. "I have nothing left me to do," said Pope, "but to add a little ornament or two at the line of the Thames." On each side of the landing place he intended to put a swan, in the attitude of flying into the river, and behind them, on the bank, the statues of two river gods; then there were to be two corner seats or temples, with urns bearing Latin inscriptions, in the niches of the grove busts of Homer and Vergil, and higher up those of Marcus Aurelius and Cicero.

Similar preciosity marked the treatment adopted by Walpole at Strawberry Hill, and even, in a slightly less degree, that carried out by Shenstone on his rural seat of three hundred acres at Leasowes. Such examples of the artificial-natural belong to the first stage in the evolution of informal landscape gardening in England. Gradually, in the course of the eighteenth century, the art lost its pseudo-classical barbarity, and grew more dignified and sincere. Sir Humphrey Repton and J. C. Loudon in the early nineteenth century substituted art for artificiality, and Downing, the greatest American landscape architect of his time, successfully applied the principles which they had developed. But the art of Repton, Loudon, and Downing, though it glorified nature, was consciously technical and perseveringly sophisticated. It was an art which concentrated itself largely upon details, and lacked the humane breadth requisite to adapt it to the wants of a democratic community. To point the way to the higher possibilities of an art whose goal should be nature, and whose means of attaining that goal should be adaptable to every conceivable condition of humanity, there was needed a new master, greater than his predecessors, who should deal with the art of landscape in the manner of the statesman and the lover of his kind.

Bred in the bustling commercial environ-
THE BACK BAY FENS

"A salt creek bordered by salt meadows and low, wooded, gravelly ridges."—Olmsted.

ment of the nineteenth century, Frederick Law Olmsted was an unsophisticated child of his age, permeated by its utilitarian and practical spirit. At a time when society was less tainted with sordidness and luxury than now, his character matured without losing any of its native simplicity and purity, and as it developed, resisted the enervating influences of fashionable and sophisticated artificiality. Without fear of innovation, he created a new art and gave it a new name—a name that could not suggest dilettantism, a name that substituted serious design for mincing exquisiteness. A dignified architectural conception of the art of unfolding to men the beauties of nature took the place of the less straightforward, gardenesque ideal which to some extent had influenced even the best of his predecessors. With striking ingenuity and abundant common-sense inherited from a thrifty and practical ancestry, he laid before his countrymen the merits of the new art. His forceful arguments won an attentive audience. Everywhere from the Atlantic to the Pacific the aid of his fine discrimination was sought, and the greater portion of his life was spent in designing the public parks with which his name will forever be associated in the minds of the people.

In the dedication of the fifth volume of Professor Sargent’s “Silva of North America,” Olmsted was described as the “great artist whose love for nature has been a priceless benefit to his fellow countrymen.” From early youth he had been possessed of a passion for natural scenery. It had led him to spend many days in the open, to make distant pilgrimages to nature’s most beautiful spots, and to read with avidity all the works that he could obtain on the sub-
ject of landscape. Before he was fifteen he had read the chief books on landscape gardening that had been written. Yet it was the beauty of Thomson’s “great simple country,” rather than the tutored elegance of the garden, or the rugged picturesqueness of the wilderness that he chiefly loved. The reposeful, pastoral scenery of his native state of Connecticut, rich in the beauties of meadow, orchard, stream, and lane, he loved not less than the charms of the great mountain and mighty rivers. “No gravel paths,” he wrote, “are half so charming as the turfed wood roads of New England farms, no shrubbery so pleasing as that which nature rears along farmers’ walls, no pools so lovely as those which, fringed with natural growth, fill and drain away according to the season and the supply of rain.”

That a man with this delicate artistic feeling for landscape should have been able to impress the stamp of his individuality on the entire public park policy of the United States seems wonderful, till one comprehends that the secret of it was the sentiment of human brotherhood which prevented him from professing any taste which the uncultivated might not share. Instead of permitting a gulf to separate him from his clients, he adopted their own point of view. Nature, he confessed, had never appealed to him in quite the same way as to the botanist or the naturalist, nor did he claim intimate companionship with nature in the same sense as Thoreau, Bryant, or Burroughs. In this unsophisticated way, professing no closer acquaintance with birds and trees, no more cultured connoisseurship of landscape, than the generality of men living in cities, he invited the untutored common people, greatly his inferiors in aesthetic perceptions, to foster a delight in nature which might be utterly free from affectation or hypocrisy. This fact accounts for the marvellous impetus and inspiration which the American park movement received at his hands. Cities entered cordially into coöperation with him, and there were few recommendations that he made which they did not adopt. This result was brought about through his own modesty and sound judgment. A trained man of affairs, disciplined, as he had been, by such great undertakings as the supervision of the construction of Central Park and the organization of the work of the Sanitary Commission, he was able, through his knowledge of his fellows and his faculty for sane and convincing argument, to achieve what no avowed champion of a novel cult, hiding from plebeian ridicule behind a screen of professional sanctity, could ever have accomplished.

As for the art of Frederick Law Olmsted, one of its methods may be said to have consisted in substituting the simplicity of utility for the ornateness of artifice. Cleveland, an American landscape architect, whose ideals had much in common with those of Mr. Olmsted, wrote of Mr. “Capability” Brown, the English gardener, as falling into one fault in his zeal to avoid another. For geometrical angles Brown attempted to substitute graceful curves, so that it was remarked of his serpentine curves and canals that “you might walk from one end to the other, stepping first upon zig, and then upon zag, for the entire length.” Similar scenic effects, at least with respect to ingenuity, must have characterized the extraordinary fortifications in Uncle
Toby’s garden. Invariably will they be encountered when the fundamental importance of utility is forgotten.

All of Mr. Olmsted’s work was designed first of all with a view to utility. With that principle as his starting point, his aim was to reproduce the beauty of nature. The materials of his art were primarily, with only casual exceptions of minor significance, physical rather than formal, and his art itself was an adaptation and arrangement, rather than a counterfeit or modification of those elements. If the norm of his workmanship did not exist in nature, approximations to it were to be found everywhere; not simply in the forests of Maine or on the rock-girded shore of Cape Anne, where nature retained much of her primitive aspect, but on the charming hillsides of Lenox, and the broad farming lands of Connecticut, where man had left the marks of his husbandry. Open meadow, even though at a remote period it may have been produced by clearing away the primeval forest, supplied him with material not less legitimate than the unbraggish dells and ledge-capped highlands of the Adirondack wilderness. He did not adopt a scientific formula, and aim simply to reproduce the normal processes of nature. So he did not scruple to substitute a gentle slope for the harsh contour of a moraine, or to remove stones from a gravelly field and resurface it with loam. The artificiality of the town was mainly what he wished to avoid.

Remarkable as were the effects which were secured in the treatment of forest, seaside, and stream, probably the most delightful work of Olmsted—at all events that
which daily furnishes the greatest enjoyment to large throngs of pleasure seekers—is to be found in such ample park meadows as he designed for Central Park in New York, and Prospect Park in Brooklyn. The same treatment, which is essentially a transcript of the broad fields of the New England farm, is to be enjoyed in the beautiful Ellicot Dale of Franklin Park, in the city of Boston.

These beautiful park meadows, however, with their charming vistas and broad expanses of turf, could not have been produced from the crude features of the landscape in its original condition, had not Olmsted been true to Loudon’s doctrine that “the recognition of art is a first principle in landscape gardening.” Refraining not less from a mechanical imitation of nature than from the use of superadded ornament, he endeavored to give his work the stamp of a common idea. If a landscape gave the lie in one place to what was said in another, the delightful impression would be destroyed. So he was always careful to avoid the presence of incongruous elements. At Easton’s Pond in Newport, he remarked to Charles Eliot—who was destined afterward to follow this advice at Revere Beach near Boston,—that any large structure, like a bathhouse, would look wholly incongruous on the gravelly beach close to the open sea. Likewise he insisted on the necessity, in public parks, of screening plantations to shut out from view the objects of the town, and whatever might be unfavorable, in his own phrase, “to a continuous impression of consistent sylvan scenery.”

Of the art of Olmsted,—of which public parks afford, if not the most excellent, certainly the most notable examples,—the park system of Boston embodies perhaps the most satisfying expression. In its innumerable contrasts of form and arrangement, in its variety of scenery, in its manifold opportunities, on the one hand for an exquisite treatment of limited areas, on the other for broad effects of composition in large tracts of woodland and field, it is quite unlike the public grounds of any other city. Such a combination of seashore, streamside, meadow, and forest scenery is doubtless to be found nowhere in quite the form in which Mr. Olmsted arranged it in Boston. Later his disciple, the lamented Charles Eliot, continued the work which his own failing health compelled him to relinquish. Olmsted’s treatment of the Marine Park at City Point furnished Eliot with a suggestion for the Revere Beach and Nantasket reservations. Often the elder architect, as in the case of the improvement of the shores of Charles River, began work which was to be carried forward by the younger to a termination which could come only after many years. It was the park system of Boston, however, which furnished the pattern for that metropolitan system which has, more than once, been declared the model park system of America.

The Back Bay Fens, the Riverway, and Olmsted Park, are chiefly remarkable for the beautiful effects which were secured, notwithstanding a radical transformation of many acres of the region. Difficult engineering problems confronted the architect, and were solved by the same skill in dealing with artificial drainage which was shown at Belle Isle Park in Detroit, and at the grounds of the Columbian Exposition in Chicago. In the Fens, every square yard
of the surface was entirely changed. The ultimate appearance of the park, as it looks to-day, was thus forecast by its creator: “It is designed to appear a fortunate preservation of a typical bit of New England seashore landscape, including, as it will, a salt creek bordered by salt meadows and low, wooded, gravelly ridges. There will be in it no shaven lawns or pastured meadows, the planted ground above the salt marsh being occupied by trees, underwood, and low, creeping, flowering plants in a

condition suggestive of natural wildness.”

Here, as elsewhere in the parks of Boston, we see the true American landscape. No American before Olmsted, not even the eclectic and elegant Downing, had clearly perceived the necessity of heeding the demand of his native land for worthy artistic treatment. Olmsted loved the broad meadow, richly carpeted with turf, and the great tree standing in stately solitude in the midst of the gently undulating, wood-bordered field. He realized that in those parts of the country which have long undergone cultivation, and are in certain features similar to sections of the Old World, the broad, open treatment, with views of striking isolated objects like trees or boulders, might be appropriate. Nevertheless, in designing parks and laying out private estates he was extremely loath to introduce any elements of landscape which would seem foreign to their region. While he was familiar with the technical principles of English landscape art, he was never, in any sense, a mere imitator of the English style.

If he had a theory of landscape, it was a simple one, as free from artifice as the art that he practised. “Mainly,” he said, “the value of a park depends on the disposition and quality of its woods, and the
In the national reservations of the Yellowstone, Niagara, and Yosemite, where nature had done all that was to be done, Mr. Olmsted's work consisted in little more than in suggesting how to make their beauty available for public enjoyment. In the designing of municipal parks, he was in a province which was distinctly his own demesne, wherein his talent could have free play. But his achievements in the frequently slighted field of domestic architecture must not be forgotten. Here he did much to foster a taste more robust and more American than that which tolerates the imported Italian garden and reenudescent pergola. He threw aside the technical rules governing "appropriation of ground," and recognized what might be called an application to landscape art of Ruskin's saying, "architecture does not begin until the utility of the structure has been provided for." If this rule was valid, the importance of defining clearly the line of division between what belonged to the home, and what did not, was greater than that of forming a beautiful prospect in which the relation of the house to its surroundings should be permitted to become confused. The treatment without the house, he believed, should conform to the treatment within, and should adapt itself first of all, to a pure and refined domestic life. He revolted from the Old World methods that Parmenter had practised, and gave the art of domestic gardening an entirely new character.

Throughout the country he left memorials of his taste and skill: in the grounds of colleges and public buildings, railway stations and private residences, in sumptuous country estates, and in the gracefully out-

relation of its woods to other natural features," thus showing his belief in the fundamental importance of trees as a principal source of beauty. The character of his work renders apparent his preference for the dull, cool colors of the forest, rather than the warm, striking hues of the variegated flower garden. Potted plants, formal flower beds, and closely trimmed grass he thought suggested the town, or at least the suburb. In Franklin Park is to be seen precisely that sort of scenery that he loved—broad, slightly hollowed expanses of open country, set off by a background of dull, cool-colored woodsides, the top of the forest presenting a gracefully undulating sky line. Here is to be found, in his own words, "a leafy screen which hides the town, a breadth of view, an openness, a peculiar kind of scenery, which in spite of necessarily broad roads and gravel walks, is very refreshing, interesting, and beautiful in a high degree." Broad vistas and glades have been opened up by the removal of knolls and other obstructions, and trees and shrubs have been planted where the effect of shadow would enhance the charm of the sunny meadow. In the woods a thicket of low, sturdy bushes adds to the picturesqueness and harmoniousness of the perennially interesting scenery. Here, perhaps, we find the type of his ideal. Simplicity of treatment was for him the key to the problem of the reconciliation of beauty and utility. Roads, walks, and all formal and architectural elements he admitted into the park design only to the extent to which they were necessary to enable people to enjoy the best views, and to obtain rest and nourishment; they were the impediments of out-of-door art rather than its essentials.
lined roads of suburban settlements. But his name will always be chiefly associated with the public parks of America. His love for his fellow men, his ardent interest in the welfare of society, his courage in facing the ridicule that the Central Park undertaking at first encountered, as well as the patience and foresight with which he was content to do work which only the hand of time could bring to completeness and retouch in mellow colors—all these things made him the chief support, as well as the principal inspiration, of the park movement. Art with him could exist only for man’s sake, and must be dedicated to the object of producing not merely new pleasures, but new powers and new perceptions. He saw the dangers of the bustling, artificial life of commerce, and the need of a strong force to counteract a perverted exercise of the instinct of self-preservation. Yet to check the spread of a sordid materialism nothing could be so effective, he knew, as the development of new habits, new tastes, and new capacities for action and for enjoyment. Simple and noble pleasures, substituted for wasteful and degrading luxuries, could better man’s condition, and such pleasures were to be found in the very forms of activity and recreation which contributed most to his physical and moral well-being. This was the ideal which Olmsted sought, with laborious earnestness, to inculcate throughout his professional career. With a manly continuity of purpose, he never forgot its importance. The faculties of an acute and vigorous mind and a virile and humane character wore themselves out in the splendid task of popularizing this ideal among the American people. He possessed, in a way, much the same sort of conviction regarding the vital needs of man’s higher nature, as held men like Morris and Ruskin in sway. While he little resembled them in temperament, he was one with them in thinking of life as far greater than art. He sought to impress upon his age, with the judicious calculation of the man of affairs, rather than the impetuous zeal of the reformer, the highest ethical teaching of those who choose to worship art at the shrine of nature, and wish to bring about the awakening of men’s souls to the beauty of the world about them.

Bacon wrote in his curious essay on gardening: “When ages grow to civility and elegance, men come to build stately sooner than to garden finely—as if gardening were the greater perfection.” To the mind of Olmsted, landscape art was worthy of a nobler use than that of the fussy and elaborate ornamentation to which Bacon was accustomed. It deserved to rank with poetry, music, sculpture, and painting, not with perfumery and costumes. So he re-created anew the art of landscape gardening, giving it a form preeminently adapted to his own land and epoch. Working with nature’s own materials, he sketched the outlines of an infinite variety of compositions of heroic size, leaving her to fill in the colors. Every summer she retouches them, ever and anon adding strokes which bring them closer, year by year, to the result that he intended; and with the coming and going of every season, the illusion of the absence of human design steadily grows more complete. It is even as he would have wished—to obliterate himself utterly, that the art which he loved might be glorified.