

Cleveland's Fine Arts Garden

Kathleen Quinn, MGV 2016

Each year over 700,000 visitors enjoy the art within the Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA), but far fewer walk the surrounding Fine Arts Garden or know its history. A book entitled *Gardens: The Cleveland Museum of Art*, published in 2016 on the occasion of CMA's centennial, tells the story of the gardens surrounding CMA through essays and photos. Both gardeners and historians of Cleveland would enjoy this book.

The story begins in 1882 with the donation to the City of Cleveland of 63 acres along Doan Brook by Jephtha Homer Wade, co-founder of Western Union Telegram, to create a public park which became known as Wade Park. This donation of land was made as part of the public park movement which began in the 1830s to promote the importance of open public spaces. The goal was to improve city residents' health as a counterbalance to the crowded living spaces and poor work conditions of industrialization. Wade Park became such a site -- with up to 5,000 daily visitors. (p. 20)



In 1891, J.H. Wade II, his grandson, donated an adjacent parcel of land for an art museum. CMA was opened in 1916. Its inspiration had been a related progressive movement called the City Beautiful Movement, which promoted efforts to beautify the industrial cityscape for urban dwellers.

The new CMA was a grand neoclassic marble building facing south to the Wade Lagoon. In contrast, the stately museum was surrounded by a neglected park and muddied construction site. Efforts to improve the landscape stalled for eight years. Finally, the women of the Garden Club of Cleveland sought to address the problem. Garden Club members were Cleveland's social elite -- married or related to the male entrepreneurs of the region -- with names familiar even now to Clevelanders. The families represented included the Hannas and Mathers (iron ore), Squire (law) and White (automobiles).

Ultimately the Garden Club was able to hire Frederick Law Olmstead, Jr., son of the prominent landscape designer of Central Park and our Emerald Necklace parks. The plan for the Fine Arts Garden unfolded in stages, with the first site planning aimed to unite the museum building and the surrounding land, which was achieved by the installation of a terrace outside the museum doors and a sloping series of formal garden beds crisscrossed with connecting paths. Just before his death in 1926, J.H. Wade II funded the building of the terrace.

Initial plantings were of trees and shrubs -- including American elm, common linden, native hawthorn, weeping cherry (*Prunus subhirtella*) and Japanese flowering cherry (*Prunus serrulata*). (pp. 29-30) The women of the Garden Club participated in every step. For example, the Club planted thousands of spring bulbs that first bloomed in early 1933. (p. 33) The ladies of the Garden Club expressed strong opinions about proposed plantings, with one Mrs. Howell expressing fears that the perennial borders might not be properly maintained, resulting in the demise of preferred plants, and leaving behind "salvia or some other such hideous (in her mind) planting." (p. 33)

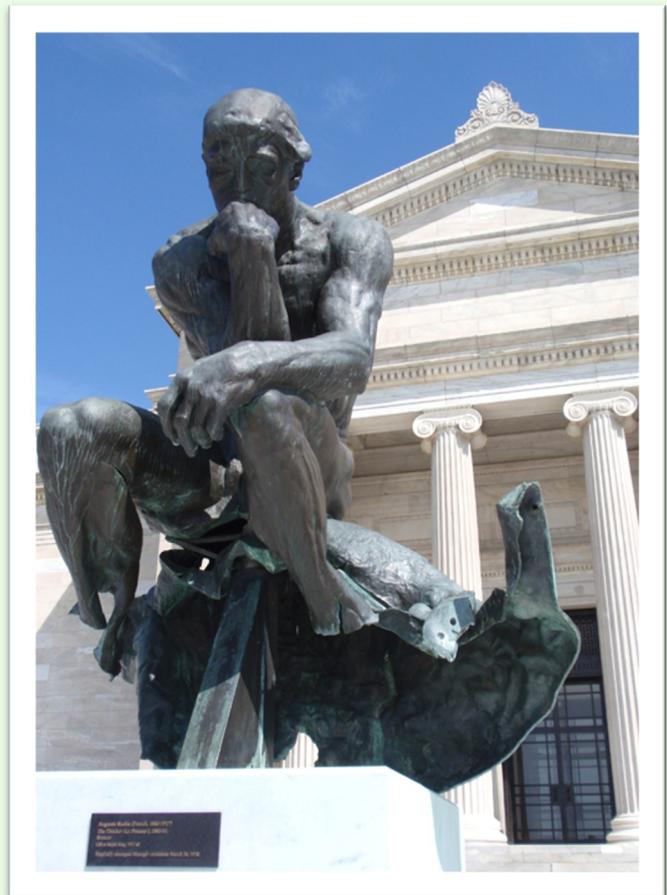
The last stage was the installation of sculpture to enhance the public's experience. As it was a public garden, two drinking fountains were installed, and the garden was lit by lamps donated by the Cleveland Electric Illuminating Company. (p. 36) The Fine Arts Garden was dedicated on July 23, 1928, the 132th anniversary of Cleveland's founding. (p. 45)



Night Passing Earth to Day by Frank L. Jirouch (3 March. 1878 - 2 May 1970), above the lagoon, south lawn of the Cleveland Museum of Art

During the Great Depression, the city of Cleveland could no longer maintain the Garden, which was at risk of returning to its previous neglected state. Once again, a Garden Club member, Mrs. Frances Sherwin and her husband, John, stepped up and created a \$250,000 endowment for the Fine Arts Garden to support the garden's maintenance by the City and created a Fine Arts Garden Commission which was responsible to oversee the Garden or any proposed changes.

Today, we owe much to our gardening forebears, the women of the Garden Club of Cleveland, for their vision and appreciation of the power of public green spaces.



The next chapter of the Garden's history is about to be written as the CMA works on a Landscape Action Plan to promote further improvement in the museum grounds and to inspire greater use of CMA's outdoor spaces.

Reference:
Bradley, B.J., Mills, K. (Eds.) (2016) Gardens: The Cleveland Museum of Art. New York, New York: Scala Arts Publishers, Inc.