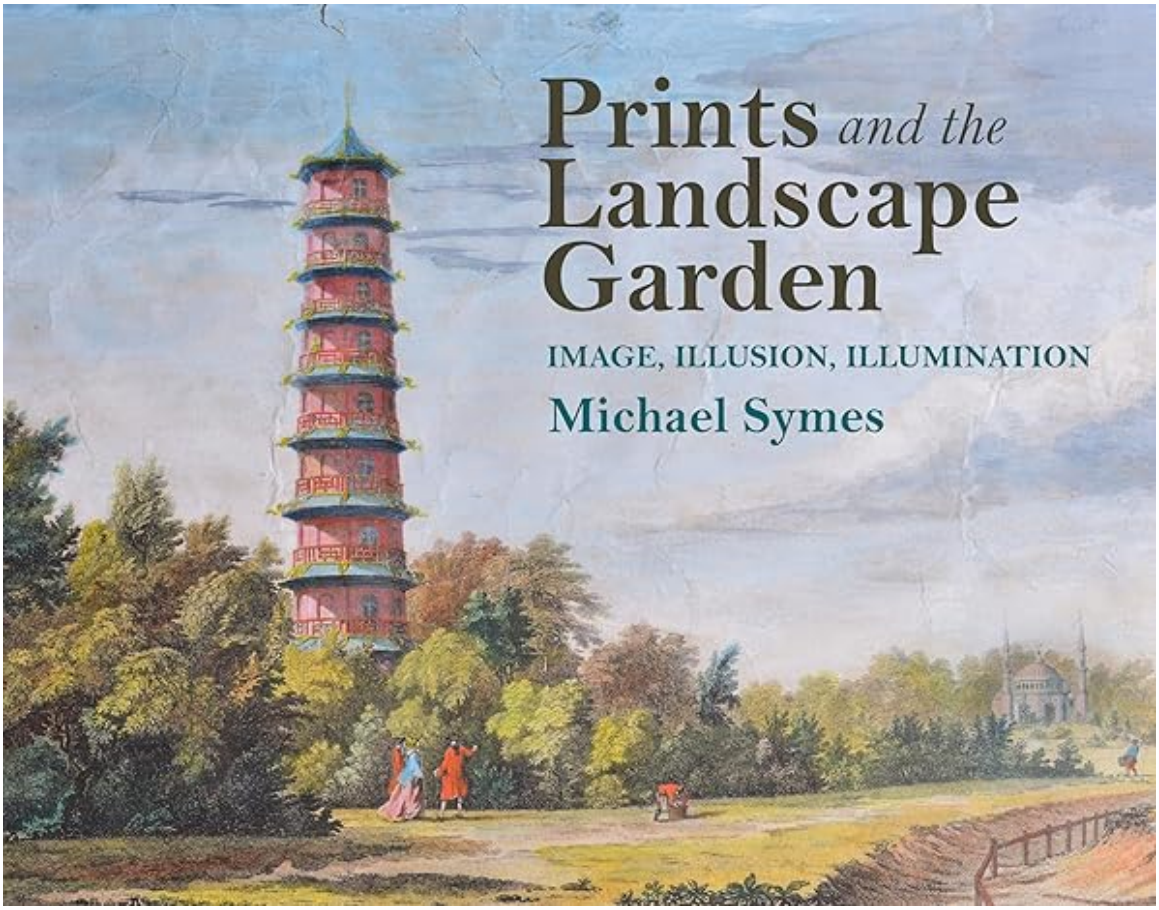
Landscapes of allusion and illusion



Cover of Prints and the Landscape Garden showing a detail (1763) of the Wilderness at Kew Gardens, with the Chinese Pagoda (1761-2) by Sir William Chambers (1723-96), engraved by Edward Rooker (1712-74) after William Marlow (1740-1813).

by James Stevens Curl

Two books have recently landed on my desk which deal in differing ways with images of the Landscape Garden: one is *Prints and the Landscape Garden: Image, Illusion, Illumination* by the distinguished historian Michael Symes (London: John Hudson Publishing, 2024, ISBN: 978-1-7398229-6-5), and the other is *Architektura Rekreacyjna* by the equally distinguished Polish academic, Jolanta Polanowska (Warsaw: Instytut Sztuki Polskiej Akademii

Nauk, 2024, ISBN: 978-83-66519-76-3).

Cover of Architektura Rekreacyjna showing a view of the gardens of Góra and Książęce by Zygmunt Vogel (1764-1826).

The former is a study of the prints commissioned by owners of 18th- and early

19th-century landscape gardens to represent (or misrepresent) their proper

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rd en was disseminated internationally via a widely available prints. The latter

deals with the extraordinary recreational architecture of the princes and magn

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developments, but going even further into the realms of meaning, fancy, and allu

sion, much strongly influenced by Freemasonry. Such a lurch towards reform, inde

pendence, education, and freedom of thought caused alarm-bells to ring in Russia

, Prussia, and Austria, with the terrible consequences that led to the disappearance

nce of Poland from the map until 1918.

Symes points out that prints “chart the progress and development of garden design, but, perhaps more importantly, they also indicate how gardens were perceived at the time and how owners or artists wanted them to look … While the designed landscape grew in richness and complexity, the techniques of printmaking developed to rise to a higher standard of reproducing garden scenes. This resulted, particularly in the mid-18th century, in many images that are exceedingly attractive in their own right as pictures. Garden prints can, at their best, be highly atmospheric and give real aesthetic pleasure. And even where the visual quality is not so pronounced a print can still have much to tell.”

Prints ensured wide circulation of an image and were readily available, so were an important element in mass-communication, thereby disseminating ideas and taste. Symes correctly points out that whether a print merely reflected fashion or helped to create it is a moot point: prints might illustrate a narrative

of the evolution of the landscape garden, but they could also act as drivers of that historical story. It is interesting that prints of the same garden at different periods are useful records of changes in style and taste: Symes tells us that the aims of his book are to show the range of depiction of gardens in the mid- to late 18th century, to “read” gardens from prints, and to attempt to determine what they reveal or tell us about attitudes to the landscape garden. “The element of illusion looms large in the landscape garden, things appearing to be what they are not” (“ruins”, for example, recently erected as an eye-catcher, might not be just there for æsthetic reasons, but to give an aura of antiquity to the “landskip”, and thereby a suggestion that the current owner’s family had been in possession of the estate for centuries [which was often not the case]): how better, Symes asks, “to convey the deception than by presenting it in pictorial form, giving apparent substance to the illusion?”

View of the Grotto at Stowe, Buckinghamshire (1753), by George Bickham Jr (c.1706-71) after Jean-Baptiste-Claude Chatelain (c.1710-70).

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A View in Virgil’s Grove, at the Leasows, in the County of Salop. The Seat of W. Shenstone Esq. (c.1750), engraved by James Mason (1710-c.1780) after Thomas Smith (c.1720-67).

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Grand Walk, Orchestra, and Turkish Tent at Vauxhall Gardens,

London (1751), engraved by Johann Sebastian Müller (c.1715-92) after Samuel Wale (1714-86).
All in all, Symes's book is well produced, and the prints are for the most part attractively and clearly reproduced, although it is 285 cms wide x 225 cms high, a shape unaccountably favoured among garden historians (the *Journal of Garden History* is 270 cms wide x 210 cms high), so one has to have very deep shelves to house such a volume with comfort. He mentions a few Continental gardens *en passant*, including those at Ermenonville, Schwetzingen, Wilhelmshöhe, and Weimar, but his illustration of the "Grecian Arch" and "Temple of Diana" at Arkadia in Poland, an aquatint by John William Edy (1760-1820), after "R. Norbelin" (presumably Jean-Pierre Norblin de la Gourdaine, *aka* Jan Piotr Norblin [1773-1830]), produced in London in 1786 is not accurate, as Symes himself acknowledges. Indeed, the coverage of Continental gardens, many of which are actually far more interesting than the English gardens which were the catalysts for Continental developments, is cursory in the extreme, which is a pity.

This is where Polanowska's book comes into its own, although the reproduction of the prints and other illustrations in her book leaves much to be desired, as they are very small, and often rather murky. In my travels in Germany and Poland I was struck by the importance of literary allusions to gardens, especially in that heartrendingly tender novella by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (Elective Affinities) of 1809, where there are clear references to the wonderful *Gartenreich*, an "England-by-the-Elbe", created for Leopold III Friedrich Franz (1740-1817), reigning Prince of Anhalt-Dessau from 1751 by his architect, Friedrich Wilhelm, Freiherr von Erdmannsdorff (1736-1800), and his gardeners, Johann Leopold Ludwig Schoch (1728-93), Johann Georg Schoch (1758-1826), and Johann Friedrich Eyserbeck (1734-1818). From the start, this Garden Kingdom, extending over 300 square kilometres, and including Wörlitz, was intended to have an educational programme, all

the designs following the advice of Horace to combine the “useful with the beautiful”, and the place was enormously influential, not least in Poland, where certain German architects, such as Simon Gottlieb (transmogrified as Szymon Bogumił) Zug (1733-1807) designed several enchanting gardens for the Polish landed gentry and aristocracy, some with amazingly inventive *fabriques* associated with Freemasonry.

Goethe’s *Elective Affinities* contains a passage relating to

The Rousseau-Insel at Wörlitz (1782), alluding to the original at Ermenonville in France (© James Stevens Curl).

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Christoph Hesekiel (1732-1818); and various waterways and Classicall temples.

The Ionic Nymphæum at Wörlitz (1767-8), designed by Freiherr von Erdmannsdorff, a favourite place of resort by Friedrich von Matthisson, whose lovely Adelaide was set to music by Beethoven (© James Stevens Curl).

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The Eiserne Brücke at Wörlitz, with rock-work abutments (1791): a scaled-down version of thr celebrated Iron Bridge over the River Severn in Shropshire, designed by Pritchard and erected 1777-9 (© James Stevens Curl).

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Party, Soviet Communism, Vichy France, the Papacy (the Craft was attacked in 1738

in an Act of Condemnation commencing *In eminenti* under Clement XIII [r. 1730-40])

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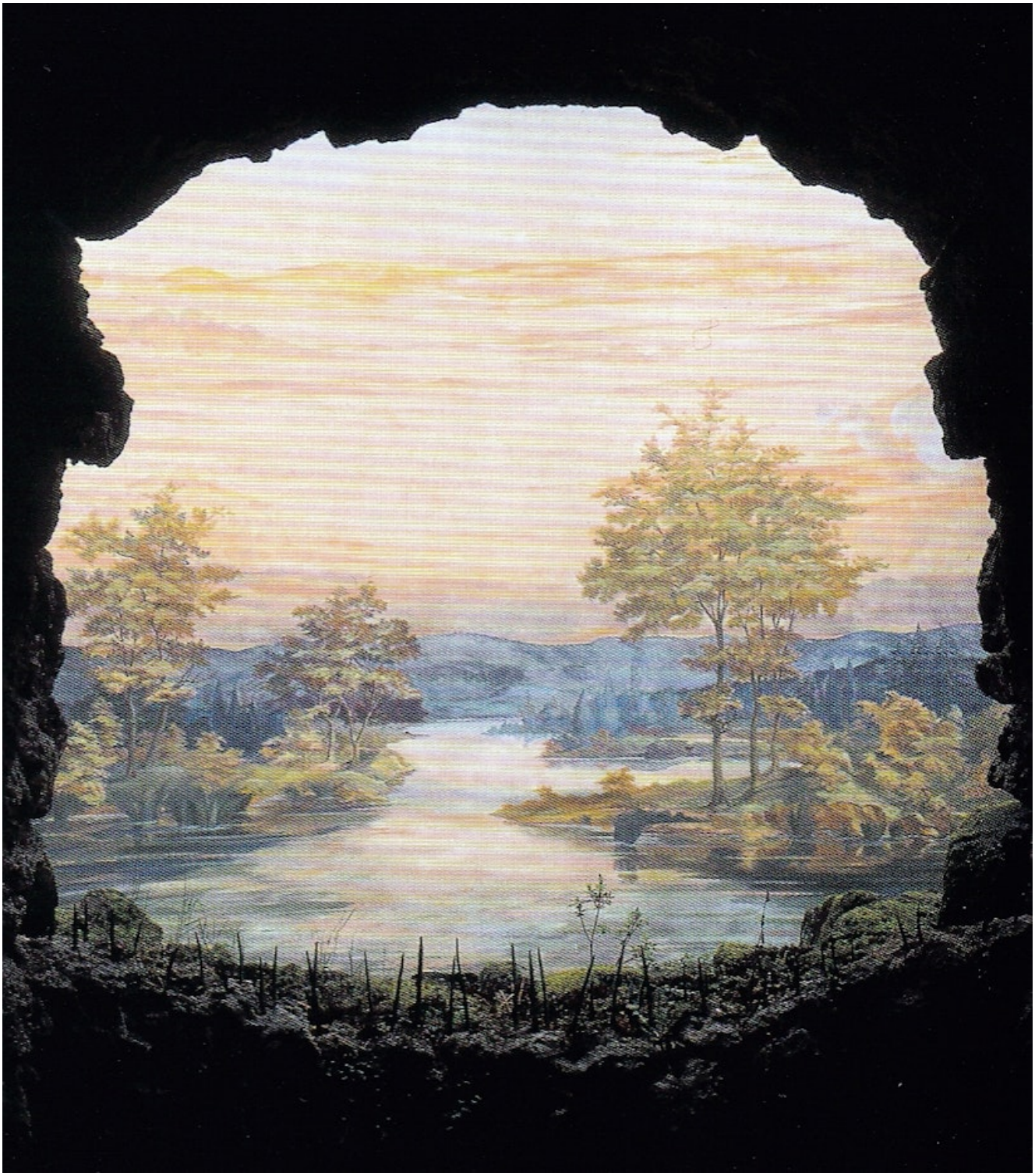
The Poles have not been so leery about Freemasonry, and indeed their investigations into that brief yet fascinating period into their nation’s tragic history have acknowledged the influence of aspects of the Craft on the design of several gardens during the short yet remarkable time when the young King, who worshipped Reason yet was led by his Heart, who professed Catholicism yet believed in Providence, who flirted with esoteric ideas and with the ideals of Freemasonry which had flowed eastwards through Europe in the course of the 18th century despite denunciations from Rome, who spent fortunes on education, art, and cultural projects, who was stymied politically (largely by Russia), and who put all his energies into a national social and artistic regeneration that was extraordinarily symbolised in the design of gardens. It

should be remembered that Saxon influences in Poland were considerable, for the Prince-Elector (Kurfürst) of Saxony, Friedrich August I ("The Strong"), became Augustus II, King of Poland in 1697, and although deposed in 1704, was restored in 1709, and reigned until his death in 1733, being succeeded by his son, who reigned until 1763 as Augustus III of Poland and as Friedrich August II, Kurfürst of Saxony. Although neither Elector did much for Poland, some gifted architects and artists from Saxony settled in Poland, adapted their names to Polish forms, and made a considerable contribution to Polish architecture and garden design, none more so than Szymon Bogumił Zug, who lived in Poland from 1756. There were others, too, who did much to add lustre to architectural design during Poniatowski's reign, including Ephraim Schröger (1727-83), who is sometimes referred to as Efraim Szreger: his contributions are mentioned in Polanowska's fascinating tome. What is of particular interest is Polanowska's treatment of the complicated sequence of houses, gardens, and *fabriques* at Powązki, Mokotów, Solec, Góra, and Książęce created for members of Poniatowski's "Young Court" during those few years of idealistic Polish Renewal when the English landscape garden was transformed into something very rich but strange, stuffed with symbolism, and fecund with new ideas.

All gardens require perambulation in order that their complexities and delights can be fully enjoyed, so are suggestive of longer journeys, even a lifetime of searching, and it was often the purpose of gardens to trigger memories in educated minds, to suggest new thoughts by means of allusion, and to stimulate, enlighten, evolve, and propose. At Schwetzingen, once the summer palace of Karl Theodor, Elector Palatine from 1742, the gardens are among the most pleasing delights of a rich geographical area, but the climax is the journey via the Bath House out of which the visitor, washed and enlightened, could proceed through two *in-antis* columns along a magical route defined by paths and trellis-work, the vista emphasised by theatrical perspective. He or she would

then come to a sunlit elliptical space in the centre of which is a pool and an eagle-owl attacking a frightened bird, but all around are birds as fountains, in attitudes of protest, showing compassion for the victim of the eagle-owl. The *berceau en treillage* then leads down to a distant view, a dramatic and theatrical element called The End of the World: it is painted on a wall and illuminated from above.

So the visitor, cleansed, passes through transformed nature to a vision of unspoiled natural loveliness, where all appears “inexpressibly rare and delightful”, and all things are “spotless, pure, and glorious”. The climax of this great garden is in fact a Garden, a paradise, a lost Eden.



Diorama showing ‘The End of the World’ at Schwetzingen, Germany (from James Stevens Curl [2022]: Freemasonry & the Enlightenment [Holywood: Nerfl Press], 234).