For the Curator of Trees and Teacups

The Landscape as Artifact

Renee Friedman

The word "interpreting," used to describe how we get our message across to visitors, is such an odd word, isn't it? Most people outside the museum field find it confusing, and responses to our "help wanted" ads for an interpreter elicit many inquiries from bilingual applicants.

General use of the word "interpret" in a museum or historic site has come about since the 1960s and early 1970s. Prior to that time, visitors to our sites were "guided" or "docent-led." This change—from guiding to interpreting—is significant. It points to a decided shift in the way we look at communicating history. It changes our role from "leading" people through a house and garden to engaging in a dialogue that draws its inspiration from objects, yet responds to our visitors' interests. With interpretation, the "set talk" and memorized itinerary are gone.

Interpretation also involves the revelation of connections among objects, people, activities, and ideas. Schools have begun to realize that forcing students to memorize dates, names, successions, and battle configurations is not teaching history. Museums and historic sites are seeing that a tour based on identifying objects—"Note the Chippendale chair in the corner, the Jacobin sofa to our right, and the silver bowl made by Paul Revere"—is also not teaching history. History explores the "whys," not just the "whats." It goes beyond identification. It looks for connections and patterns. The kitchen yard at Sunnyside, the home of Washington Irving, is not important because it is a square plot fenced in by wooden planks, but because that space and that fence tell us something about mid-19th-century culture—about the need to separate utilitarian areas from aesthetic areas, about class systems and the separation of classes, about work, about gender roles. The orchard at Montgomery Place, one of the properties at Historic Hudson Valley, is not important for the specific varieties it produces, but because those varieties tell us something about the culture of the people who lived in the region. Native versus imported varieties tell us about trade systems and economics. The orchard itself tells us about private ownership and entrepreneurship and a democratic system of governance in American society. From this grove we can learn about owners and workers, be they slaves, as they were when it was first planted, or tenant farmers, or local community residents, or migrant workers from Jamaica, as they have been subsequently.

The pattern in the land

We draw inspiration from objects—but only inspiration. We work hard to preserve our artifacts, our manufactured as well as natural collections, but not as ends in themselves. Our goal is to grasp an understanding of the thinking patterns of the peoples who produced them and those peoples' social, religious, economic, and political identity—in a word, their culture. The objects in our collections are the keys to understanding culture. And that is what we as museums and historic sites are in the business of doing—transferring culture from one generation to another, from one culture to another. For this reason we are so concerned about the authenticity of presentation. The vigorous discussions that take place at historic sites about authenticity, intrustions, and accuracy of presentation do not deal with **things** but with the thinking patterns—the culture—that led to what those **things** were and the way they were use. That is what we need to preserve. To change a landscape or any part of a site by removing original material, by adding different material, or by changing emphasis alters the thinking pattern that produced it, negating what we are in the business of doing.

I would suggest that the recent interest in historic landscapes results directly from the social history movement. As historic sites began to explore the relationships of groups and people to each other and to their places, it was inevitable that curators would recognize the importance of the relationship between people and their environment, be it farm, natural landscape, clearing, or formal garden.

Philipsburg Manor, now part of Historic Hudson Valley, was originally sited to reflect a culture based on a complex system of trade, that rewarded enterprise and organization, and that was hierarchical, descending from owners to tenant farmers to slaves. At the mill of Adolph Philipse, the tenant farmers' grain was ground, then transported on a sloop that slaves operated to New York City. The Hudson River provided water power and transportation to market. The owners arranged the landscape to achieve the greatest degree of use and the most profit as farm land, frontier trading post, and commercial center for a remote area. All energy went into production for subsistence and for markets, and the landscape reflects that.

Almost 100 years later, the valley was no longer frontier, and families like the Van Cortlands made their permanent homes along the river. Farming remained critically important, but now there was time both to tend a formal garden and to arrange the flowers that came out of it. The landscape at Van Cortland Manor reflects this. By the mid-19th century, markets, trade, and the American economy rewarded people like Washington Irving the leisure to carve their landscape and vistas into patterns and curvilinear lines that please their Romantic spirits. Like Marie Antoinette playing at being a dairy maid, they played at being farmers. If the crop failed, they simply bought potatoes and cabbages and tomatoes in the nearby town. The landscape reflects this.

Seeing the site whole

At Montgomery Place we have the challenging and exciting opportunity of telling at one site the story of these types of changes. Since its beginning, Montgomery Place has been a combination of farm, orchards, woods,

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vistas, and pleasure gardens. How the emphasis shifted from one to another reflects those patterns of change that teaching history—or interpreting—must reveal. Colonial Williamsburg sums up the concept in three words: "Change over time." Communicating an understanding of change over time is the purpose of interpretation.

Landscape, including trees, plants, shrubs, and walkways, are comparable to cups, chairs, tables, paintings, and candlesticks. All are part of the collections of a historic site. They are all among the objects that museums, by definition, agree to preserve, collect, research, and interpret. A historic site's collections comprise the entire site—what's inside the house, what's outside the house, and the house itself. But historic sites have traditionally emphasized the house. Rarely is the relationship between the house and its setting interpreted. Rarely is there discussion of how the people associated with the site shaped the land to serve their needs and reflect their culture.

This fact struck me when, several years ago, I visited a historic site in the West, where a change from open to fenced grazing had once taken place. All the outbuildings looked intact, as though the cowhands would return at sundown. The vast acreage in the visual distance belonged to the site so the visitor saw flat pasture against distant mountains. Clearly, the land was the most significant element at the site. But I was greeted at the front door by a guide who showed me through the house. She competently described the appointment and European furnishings and related the history of the family, concentrating on the mistress of the household. The cattle business had not been mentioned when my visit ended at the back door. The tour should have included an interpretation of the ranch, a stop at those outbuildings, and time just hanging over the fence, coming to know what the change in the grazing of cattle implied in breeding, and markets, and work, and the settlement of the region.

Often we let our concern for the security of our objects determine what we interpret, rather than letting history decide that. Landscapes seldom contain collections that are priceless, and we can permit visitors to wander through them on their own. But if our purpose is to teach history, then we must begin putting the priority on what we want people to know when they leave our site. Rarely is this knowledge limited to the house and its contents; the landscape is equally, sometimes more, important. We cannot forget security. But we must expand our interpretation to include the landscape, even if it means decreasing the number of house tours we provide, shortening the house tour, or lengthening the visitor's stay with us.

The site at Sunnyside carries a major historical message. The landscape and the house were conceived as parts of one picture. Winding paths, gnarled trees, shifting light, textures of water, leaves, rocks, petals, framed vistas, deep glens, rusticated fences—all combine with the house in a three-dimensional painting, a Cole or Durand or Bierstadt come to life.

Until a few years ago, our interpretation focused entirely on the house. Visitors were encouraged to walk the grounds, but there was no interpretation of them. We have now expanded our visitors' experience by adding a landscape tour from April to October that emphasizes American Romanticism and Sunnyside as an expression of it. The tour concentrates on the characteristics of Romanticism; it connects Irving to the Romantic movement in England and America; it connects Irving's writings and the landscape; and it distinguishes, as did Romanticism, between the aesthetic and the functional, between the beauty of the walking grounds and the plain utility of working spaces, such as the kitchen yard.

We are creating an interpretive plan for Montgomery Place that treats all the elements of the site: the grounds, the gardens, the orchards, the house, the trails, the river, and the woods. Visitors will stop first at the visitors' center, where we will make available maps of the trails and grounds, the schedule for interpreter-led trail walks, orchard walks, and house tours. The theme of our interpretive message will be change and continuity over time. We will explore the fruit-growing industry in Dutchess County and the people connected with it, including growers, pickers, owners, and consumers. We will explore the changes in the house and property from the Federal period, through the Romantic era, to the modern age with its utilitarian spirit. We will interpret the gardens as they changed from ornamental flowers to wartime vegetable growing. We will pay attention to the culture that valued the natural world to such an extent that the objects of the interior of the house—wallpaper, furnishings, chandeliers—are decorated with motifs from outside.

Our visitors themselves present one of the challenges before us. We have long trained them to expect a walk through a historic house, then a friendly invitation at the back door, "By the way, if you have the time, you might want to wander through the grounds." For all of us to do successful landscape interpretation, historic sites will have to re-educate the public.

Orderly—or accurate?

Another challenge stems from our 20th-century notions of order and cleanliness **combined** with our concern that our visitors may not be comfortable in a truly period landscape, **combined** with the difficulty of finding and using period lawn and grounds maintenance equipment, such as sheep. In our time landscapes have even borders, the lawns are green and velvety and evenly clipped, and mud is rarely evident. The tendency to improve the landscaped and gardens of historic sites rather than to re-create the look of the period can be compared to adding new furnishings into a period setting so that the house "looks better"—more Federal or more Georgian or "typically" Gothic. The result is a landscape that never existed, and that is bad history. If our purpose is to help our visitors understand the patterns and connections of history, to grasp an understanding of the thinking patterns of the people who created those landscapes, then we must provide them with the physical evidence of those landscapes as close to reality as possible. Each time we substitute one type of tree for another, or add a path, or move a flower border from one location to another, or make even the lawn of a pre-1860 house, we are altering history. We are reflecting our culture, our patterns of thinking, not the culture that produced our site. When several of these changes are combined, what are we presenting? What can our visitors learn? We as

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banking or technological innovations like the invention of the washing machine. According to this view, the interpreter should concentrate upon the forces that changed everyday life. One problem with this approach is the tendency for it to acquire historicist undertones that promote the idea of inevitable progress and suppress the role of unplanned events in shaping the world. Nevertheless, it has been given backing by many museum curators and politicians who are conscious of their accountability to the taxpayer in their use of public money and will readily accept that sites and monuments should be more relevant to the person-in-the-street.

The United Kingdom government, thinking that this populism should translate into financial returns, made it a duty of English Heritage to be concerned with preservation following the National Heritage Act of 1983, and established the Historic Royal Palaces Agency a few years later. Apart from emphasizing the potential of marketing the "heritage product," the politicians gave no further guidance on what was important. But if politicians do not give their lead in the purpose of interpretation, who does? What were the important events of history? For whose benefit is the physical testimony of historic events preserved? Not only do interpreters themselves have to be aware that their work can be made to serve particular and partisan agendas, but they must concern themselves with the means of interpreting themselves have to be aware that their work can be made to serve particular and partisan agendas, but they must concern themselves with the means of interpreting. Should they lean towards simplification for ease and clarity of interpretation, and improvements of the "attraction"?

The temptation to provide a literal interpretation of some former preferred period by reconstructing its physical form, or at least tidying up a bitty site, is strong. There have been garden reconstructions, inspired by period gardens such as Villandry in France and Het Loo in the Netherlands. In 1993 English Heritage reconstructed the 1690s garden at Kirby Hall, and the Agency is restoring the Privy Garden at Hampton Court, due to re-open in 1995, to its state in 1714. These are intended to provide historical experiences, but they are problematic. Because they purport to be literal representations of the past, the slightest error or incongruity presents the risk of deceiving the public. Also, reconstruction often nowadays involves excavation, hence a loss of the archeological record, in addition to tampering with the later fabric and adaptations to deal with asynchronic surroundings. Wholesale "reconstructions" of gardens now seem less likely than they once did. More cautious repairs, with just the occasional, and very carefully interpreted, period piece reconstruction, is the emerging picture.

The truth is often fuzzier and more complex than interpreters might wish. Interpreters should be well advised to distinguish the imagination necessary for a mind-expanding interaction with a landscape from an intellectually idle fantasy encouraged by entertainers. The exercise of imagination is often the only hope of interpreting the complexity of a multiple overlay landscape to visitors. It can be stimulated by such means as education packs for schools, posters, children's books, guidebooks, artist's impressions, models and videos. The role of historians and interpreters could then be to identify the pertinent, and often difficult, questions raised through interaction with the landscape so that relatively unknowledgeable but interested parties can reconstruct events or scenes, and seek enlightenment through their own observation and reflection. Landscapes are evocative and useful templates for reconstructing the historical events and scenes of importance in the imagination, but often the best interpretation spans many sites, or uses many forms of interpretation to provide multi-media history on an economic or social theme.

By these means landscape interpretation would come full circle to a more didactic approach, though now with the benefit of far superior research and technology. The signs are there. Country house guidebooks are now often quite informative about the history of the garden and park; England's only interpreted battlefield, Bosworth, in Leicestershire, is widely thought to be very instructive; and the National Trust magazine tells its two million members much about pollard trees, field walls, and other landscape features in their control. Perhaps the most encouraging sign is the interest shown by schools. The new generation of visitors to gardens and landscapes appears set to have much more sophisticated expectations than their elders did in the 1960s.

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educators and interpreters in museums and historic sites learn about the past from period documents and artifacts. These should be our guides, not twentieth-century notions of what our site should have looked like or what we think 20th-century visitors would like to see.

It is not that historic sites have purposely avoided interpreting their landscapes; it is simply that they have been unaware of them. A long tradition has so emphasized the house and its contents that the wonderful messages in the grounds and landscapes have remained hidden. We can hope that attempts to raise the awareness of educators, curators, and visitors will lead to a holistic approach, the interpretation of the entire site.

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