Organized Chaos

As I travelled to Smith College on a rainy afternoon in November, I struggled to understand the purpose of a botanical garden. I had never been exposed to anything like it and was excited for my imagination to meet reality. Unfortunately, the aesthetic beauty of the garden was hindered by the combination of most plants not being in blooming season and the damage from the recent storm. The organization of the exterior gardens was still vivid, making the scientific influence on nature the main focus for those viewing the gardens. I was curious to view plant life that was more appealing than the exterior, so I entered the side door of the Lyman Conservatory. As I peeled back the large palm blocking the doorway, it felt like I was in the middle of the ‘jungle’. The visual order found in the outside gardens was lost beneath the density of such exotic plants. The array of plants in the garden conveys scientific information using a traditional evolutionary organization system, whereas the nature of the palm house is overwhelming and tough to follow.

An inferior feeling is cast over those entering the humid palm house due to the dominant nature of the foreign plants’ size, color, and texture. Stepan notes that in certain depictions of the tropical world, the plants “have a certain botanical plausibility but are also subtly exaggerated in scale and shape.”¹ Experiencing the paramount tropical setting created in the Lyman Conservatory first hand allows one to understand why an artist would subtly exaggerate the essence of each plant. One feels dwarfed by plants such as the prickly cycad (*Encephalartos*...
altensteinii), stretching to the ceiling, spreading its fern-like leaves that act as a canvas blocking the sunlight from travelling to those below. This part of the greenhouse shows that Smith College created an “idea of tropical nature in a particular kind of place or space, with its own characteristic ensembles of plants”, represented by foreign plants accumulated from all over the world that can immediately be identified as 'tropical'.

The classification of each plant represents the scientific purpose of collecting this assortment of plant life from the various tropical regions of the world. In an attempt to capture everything in front of me as I entered the palm room from outside, I noticed an allotment of plants that could have easily been overlooked due to their bland appearance. A keen eye would realize that a plant’s appearance has no correlation to its purpose. The rubber tree (*Hevea brasiliensis*) has no clear beauty but its bark gives off a milky latex extract that produces rubber. This material has a significant economic influence on today’s society. I began to gain knowledge I didn’t have about the botanical garden’s purpose that I didn’t have prior to visiting Smith College. The collection of plants were ordered scientifically, labeled, and maintained as an opportunity to gain knowledge about the aesthetic and scientific beauty of the plant kingdom.

Further botanical knowledge can be gained by contrasting the clash between the disarray in the palm room with the organized layout of the outdoor systematics beds. The systematics beds are gardens with various species arranged in a manner that reflects their evolutionary history. This order gives viewers an understanding on how the assorted plants have developed over time. It is much easier to follow the elliptical beds planted within the grass, one after another, in rows, than miss a species in the palm room that wasn’t easily visible at first glance. Smith College “strives to achieve a balance in their bed layout that reflects accepted theories but

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2 Stepan, p. 15
are also aesthetically pleasing." I believe that the aesthetically pleasing order of the systematic beds uses a structured educational layout that separates itself from the palm house.

I found myself thinking back to Professor Courtright’s lecture on the contrast between the gardening techniques of England and France. These regional systems were comparable to the palm house and the systematic beds in general terms. The French organized gardens in a geometric fashion that showed nature was shaped for the needs of human beings. Man’s domain over nature gave opportunity for patrons to create any landscape that they imagined. Smith College did exactly this with the design of their exterior gardens and ultimately the entire campus. The college’s first president, L. Clarke Seelye, had the vision in mind to develop the whole campus as a botanical garden in hopes that it might be both scientifically and aesthetically valuable. Turner discusses the developing motives of the design of college campuses and states that the, “transcendental notions of nature are inherently more beautiful and uplifting than cities”. It remains Smith College’s mission to maintain the Seelye’s vision for visitors to escape the business of the city and let the gardens enthrall its visitors with is aesthetically pleasing order and scientific beauty.

The gardening techniques of England placed no boundaries on nature’s limitless beauty. Similar to the palm house, this lack of structure maintains the landscapes natural authenticity. Thomas notes that, “neatness, symmetry, and formal patterns had always been the distinctively


human way of indicating the separation between culture and nature”5, but the uniform style of a natural setting became more appealing. The concept of the sublime isn’t a factor for the palm house because it projects a different kind of beauty to those who peel around the corners of each pathway. An invigorating feeling runs through one who is faced with something not seen before, such as the many exotic plants in the palm house. It becomes essential not to miss the littlest details of the plant life, but the cluttered alignment of the plants makes it impossible to account for the scientific significance as well as the plant’s aesthetic value.

The bounty of plant life to study on the grounds of Smith College can be a lot to handle during one visit. Although, the palm house is an adventure into the unknown, the tidiness of the systematics beds are a more effective way of placing both aesthetic and scientific beauty in unison. The systematics beds emulate the vision President Seelye had over a hundred years ago to foster the educational value of science’s beauty and importance of the plant kingdom. The systematics beds are a perfect example that the order of the botanical garden at Smith College will never be lost, even after the storm.