The Tropics of Western Massachusetts

When I first stepped into the Palm House at the Smith Botanical Garden, all of my senses were overwhelmed. My nose filled with a pungent, earthy smell, my brow felt the wet heat of the room and my eyes traveled right to the ceiling where large trees extended into the light. It certainly would grab anyone’s attention. I began to wind through the various paths of the room, and I felt as if I had actually traveled to a tropical place. The feeling I felt was similar to many Europeans during the 19th century, who had a newfound obsession with the tropics, as Stepan says “we expect somehow to come closer to nature in the tropics or to find that objects, or ourselves, achieve there a kind of transcendence.” However, as I began to explore, the uses of the gardens, plants within the Palm House, and the organization of it, I came to a much different conclusion. The nature as presented in both the Palm House and the Rock Garden outside are not scientifically accurate, as they do not portray the ecology of the environment. Instead, they are a created nature, designed and placed together by Smith College.

There is a lot to explore at the Smith College Botanical Garden, but when I first stepped into the Palm House, the aesthetics certainly took my breath away. Large palm trees reached up to the sky in the middle of the room, almost touching the ceiling. Leaves and branches of similar sizes but different shapes jutted onto the path in every direction. There were winding paths and benches to observe all of the parts of the room. It was almost as if the room was a painted picture of what the tropics looked like. According to Horace Walpole, this attention to aesthetics was part of William Kent’s “imagination bestowed all the arts of landscape on the scenes he

1 Nancy Leys Stepan, Picturing Tropical Nature (Cornell UP, 2001), 11
By describing Kent’s botanical designs as “art”, Walpole shows how even a garden can be an attractive object to view. However, the designers of the room evidently wanted to create a certain sense of nature, especially the tropics. The path inside the room had many twists and turns, and the lighting was rather dark. Vegetation seemed mysterious and had a sense of action. As Stepan describes when talking about paintings of the tropics “plants creep, entangle, overwhelm, spring, embrace, choke, strive and glow” as if they had a movement. The Palm Room felt very similar to the paintings of vegetation described by Stepan. In this way, the garden is meant to be a work of art, with a deep sense of mystery and movement.

The indoor rooms were not the only rooms that were aesthetically designed as works of art, but the outdoor gardens were also manufactured in such a way. The rock garden in particular reminded me of the palm room. Although height was not emphasized, the winding paths of the rock garden also evoke the mysterious, adventurous parts of the vegetation. Most of the plants are low-lying, but they are of many different colors and varieties. Similar to the Palm House, the rock garden was oriented with certain aesthetic inclinations. Even though it is outdoors, it still has artful orientation and presentation that remind me of a painting.

Although the aesthetics of the garden are beautiful, I also began to notice the extensive variety of plants in the gardens because of their nameplates. Each plant had a tag in front of it, listing its scientific name, origin and often its use. In the palm room, the plants were from exotic places such as Brazil and India. Although from all over the globe, the plants for the most part were used as some sort of medicine or food product. The fascination with medicinal plants and spices is not new. In Drayton’s examination of the botanical garden’s relation to power, he

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2 Horace Walpole, “The History of the Modern Taste in Gardening (1771/1780)” in The Genius of the Place, 314
3 Stepan, pg. 47
explains that exotic plants were put in gardens as “a means for the recovery of Adam's lost resources of food and medicine.” Botanists and creators of gardens were especially interested in the healing power of plants, which many plants in the Palm House displayed. Even though the room is beautiful, it still has a scientific element to it.

The rock garden also exhibits scientific significance. Instead of medicinal uses, the garden is in place for “the conservation of rare and endangered plants for both education and to maintain populations that may be useful in restoring the species to the wild.” Instead of using the plants for medicine, these are instead for restoration and conservation purposes. This is an example of a new kind of science described by Thomas Dunlap as “an ecological comprehension of the land” where Americans began to see “wildlife and natural areas…were more deeply or at least obviously-threatened” instead of medicinal science like the Palm House, the rock garden is evidence of new preservation science. However, they are both a scientific approach to the garden. Even though the garden attempts to conserve the various exotic plants from both the tropics and the arctic, there is still a discrepancy. None of these plants are adapted to the environment of Western Massachusetts. The temperatures, humidity and climate of the area are not the same as in the Amazon Rainforest or the tundra. In this light, it is scientifically inaccurate to place them there. The gardens were created artificially to showcase the plants, and are not true scientific nature.

After thinking about how the rocks and palm trees were not in the right environment, I began to look more into how the plants were organized. Aside from the beauty of the palm room,

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5 Dempsey, Brita, “The Rock Garden: The Botanic Garden of Smith College.” (Smith College Brochure, no date given)
7 Dunlap, p. 220
it also has a distinct humidity and temperature. It is hot, wet and steamy in the room in order to accommodate the growth of the tropical plants. As I walked around the room to look at the tags of the plants, they were from all over the world. Plants from Brazil, India and Indonesia all lay next to each other. There is no sense of an ecosystem, as these places are all far from each other and the plants would not actually be found in the same place. This phenomenon was visible not only in gardens but in paintings as well. Stepan notes “One picture would frequently place in one frame plants and animals from a tropical zone that could not possibly be seen together at the same time and place in reality.” Both the palm room and rock garden follow this idea. They are arranged according to biomes instead of actual ecosystems. This view is also consistent with Dunlap’s view on nature and climate. He notes “Anglos retained classical beliefs about the links between climate and temperament” therefore; it would be typical of a botanical garden to be organized by climate instead of ecosystem. The garden does not reflect a natural reality where all of these plants live in one area.

In any botanical garden, there is always a tension between the art of the garden and the science behind it. The rock garden and the palm room both exemplify this tension. On one hand, they aim to please the eye, while also helping the viewer to understand the relationships of the plant to a certain environment. However, the most unifying factor between the outdoor and indoor gardens is their creation. Neither room reflects a reality from the natural world. Instead, the garden is an artistic manipulation of what a nature should look like according to the gardener. The lack of real ecosystems in the garden was frustrating for me at first, but I realize now that the purpose of the gardens is not for accuracy. Through intricate pathways, and various lighting, the artistic elements of the garden really stand out. This creates an both enjoyable and educational

8 Stepan, p. 45
9 Dunlap, p. 5
experience for those who visit the Smith Botanical Garden, and personally, I can say it is worth
the trip.

Emotional Responses/Pitfalls

From Xiaoling

Introduction
Fascinated: I always like how you put your own experience into your essays. Through your
description of your first impression of the Palm House, I felt as though I was transported back
into the room. Your thesis statement is very concise and completely opposite of what I thought.
This in itself makes me want to read more.

Confused: The organization of the middle of the paragraph (“The feeling I felt… different
conclusion.”) was slightly confusing for me to read. While I did understand what you were
trying to say, it was hard to follow your train of thought with the length of the quote and the
combination of the quote with your own words. Also, what exactly is the Plant House?

Conclusion
Impressed: Your analysis of the artificiality of the gardens as a unifying factor was an
intriguing extension of your thesis. While you critique the manipulation in the gardens, it
was impressive how you, again, managed to relate your own feelings and experiences back
into your concluding sentence.

Unfulfilled: I feel as though the conclusion is very similar in your introduction in that it was
a repetition of your thesis. The addition was your own realization about the purpose of the
garden for enjoyment, but there was not really a supporting statement for that. What made
you come to the realization?

Issues to Address:
From your introduction and conclusion, it is clear that you do not believe the gardens to
be “accurate.” I hope you define what this “accuracy” entails and why the gardens do not fit
that description. It would also be interesting for you to add your personal input as to what
the Europeans considered aesthetically pleasing gardening. Perhaps you should also
mention why the College chose to put together such gardens. You have already used
Stepan but you can also consider Drayton, Thomas, Walpole and Scott.

Potential Pitfalls:
With such an ambitious thesis, it is easy to generalize your opinions. As with your
concluding sentences to your essay, hopefully you do not merely use your opinion without
any content support. It is also possible to leave out factual details and strive towards a
more conceptual analysis. Use concrete observation

From Aline
INTRODUCTION

Your introduction is very compelling. The detailed description of how you felt when you entered the Palm House grabbed my attention because the description does not only flow well, but it is also able to get across how you felt in a very clear and concise manner. However, I also felt overwhelmed by your sentences. Some of the sentences seem to run on, like the sentence with the Stepan quote. It might be better if it was two sentences or re-worded to be a little clearer. This sentence: “as I began to explore deeper the aesthetic nature of the Plant House, the uses of the gardens, plants within it and the organization of the Palm House…” listed characteristics of the garden and was a little choppy. I’m also confused by what “aesthetically or scientifically accurate” means. How is it not aesthetically accurate? But overall, your introduction sets a good beginning for your essay.

CONCLUSION

The first portion of your conclusion seemed a little dull. It is a little repetitive within the paragraph, and repetitive in comparison to your introduction, especially in the usage of “science” and “art”. However, the last two sentences are very enjoyable, especially in the last two sentences when you relate back to your experience in the garden. It sums up your experience while connecting back to your description in the introduction.

WHAT TO EXPECT/PITFALLS

Because you focus on the Palm House, I expect you used Stepan to describe the fascination people had for tropics. I think you might have also used Walpole’s History of the Modern Taste in Gardening to describe the design and inspiration of the gardens because you focus on the aesthetic appeal of these gardens. A potential pitfall might be that you have some contradictions. In your introduction you said that the garden was “neither aesthetically or scientifically accurate” but in your conclusion you dwell on how it is both pleasing to the viewers while showing the plants relationship to the environment (which I’m guessing means that it is somewhat scientific). Overall, your paper seems to take on a very interesting perspective, and I’m interested to read more!