



# Can a garden be a work of art?

‘Fine art is that in which the hand, the head and the heart of man go together’.  
John Ruskin

Conceptual art is intended to elicit a reaction from the viewer, can the same be said of conceptual gardens, which are being increasingly showcased at our Flower Shows. RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show appears to have attracted the biggest mainstream audience than in the past. Conceptual Gardens have been designed to demonstrate, for example, the tension between culture and nature, with themes to represent the disruptive effect of homophobic abuse on our society and the experience of depression.

Cleve West, gold medals winner at Chelsea Flower Show, says “I used to think that landscaping was the ultimate art form, but now I’m not so sure. Conceptual gardens are probably the nearest we can get to art, in that they side-track nature to focus on a feeling or a theme without always relying on plants”.

“You need artistic talent to be a good garden designer. The best gardens are a successful composition: a series of shapes, forms, colours, textures that work in harmony. Often, the actual drawing might be considered much more a piece of art than the finished garden itself”.

Conceptual gardens are intended to get a reaction from the viewer which is as much about the abstract artwork as the materials with which the garden is made. A philosophical debate to follow. But we know that gardens mature and change. Is it still the same art form when the flowers have seeded and the lettuces have bolted?

Art invites critics and there are many out there ready to give their opinions. Would Art critics be equally as cautious about criticising gardens? The late Brian Sewell said “- you dare not say anything about the garden, or the motor car, or their clothes. My advice is for God’s sake, stick to the status quo. Otherwise no one will send you any Christmas Cards”.

Not all gardens are works of art but then not all paintings are works of art either, but who’s to say? And should only conceptual gardens be considered works of art? The critical art forum, Thinking Gardens, ([thinkinggardens.co.uk](http://thinkinggardens.co.uk)) believes criticism and analysis vital to help any art form evolve. Though critics have found that their criticism is not always readily appreciated. Many years ago, the garden writer Anne Wareham wrote a critical review on the fascinating, eclectic East Ruston Old Vicarage Garden <sup>(1)</sup> here in Norfolk in the RHS journal and there was a shocked response.

Can we use sculpture in our gardens and consider our garden as an art piece? Look at the designs of the 17th and 18th century gardens that can be viewed as places of intellectual stimulation as well as places of great beauty. Statues and classical allusions were positioned in key positions to remind us of our moral weaknesses, temptations and frailties of the human flesh.

Should any aspiring garden designer not think of the garden as an art piece, but regard the art being in the process not in the finished piece? Cleve West again "I've often thought that David Hockney's garden in Los Angeles was about as close as it gets to a work of art as it had all the hallmarks of one of his paintings. Barbara Hepworth's garden in St Ives also benefits from the artist's work".

Perhaps when visiting gardens and even when in our own, we should begin to see them with our minds as well as our eyes.

<sup>(1)</sup> The Art Society North West Norfolk has had to cancel its visit to East Ruston Old Vicarage Garden in June due to COVID 19. It is hoped to rearrange for 2021.