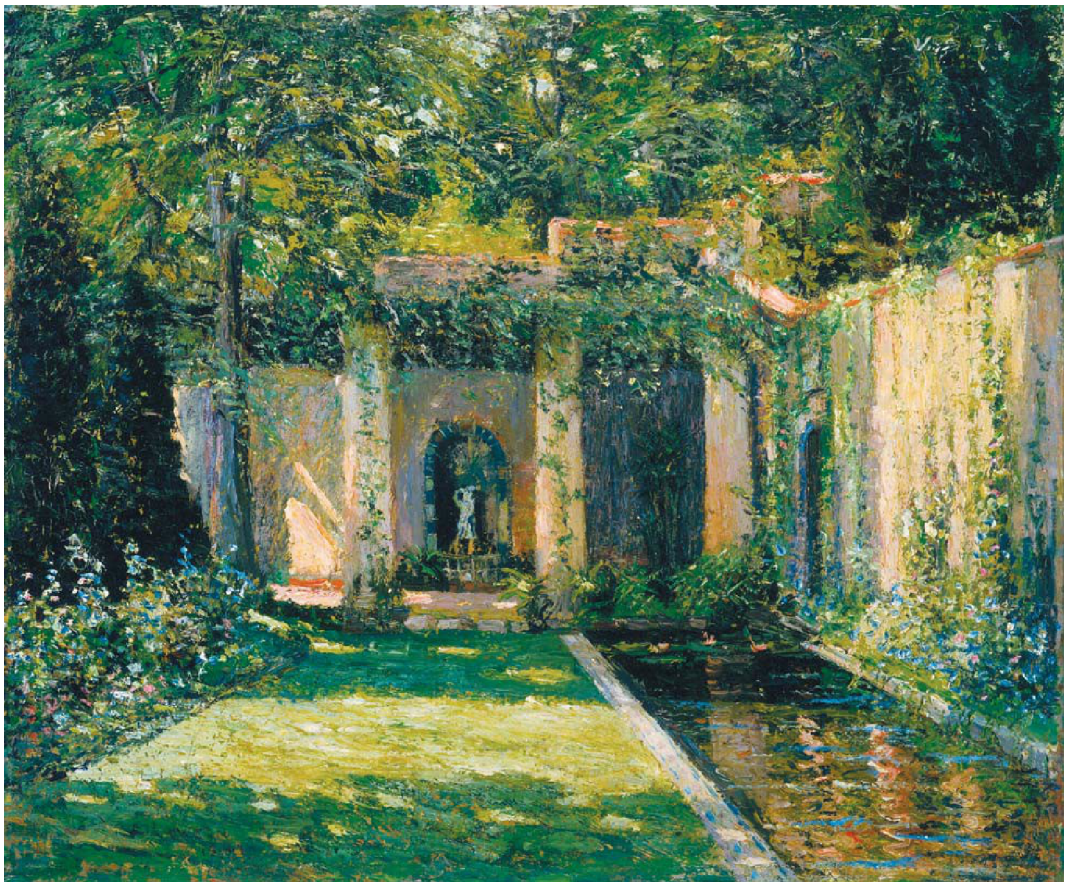

43: Ernest Lawson *The Garden* (1914)

Deirdre F. Cunningham

When Emily Sibley Watson, founder of the Memorial Art Gallery, saw Ernest Lawson's *The Garden* at the Gallery in 1916, and was moved to acquire it for her personal collection, she probably responded to Lawson's dazzling "palette of crushed jewels."[1] That palette is consistent in other works of Lawson, but the subject is not. Best known for his urban landscapes, Lawson on this singular occasion has painted an individual, partially enclosed Italian-style garden, built into the side of a hill overlooking a lake, with a rectangular reflecting pool alongside a central lawn panel and a teahouse at one end, complete with a garden sculpture, where guests might socialize, drink, and enjoy the panoramic view.

An American born in Nova Scotia in 1873, Lawson worked as a draftsman and studied part-time at the Santa Clara Art Academy while living in Mexico as a teenager. He moved on to the Art Students League in New York in 1891 and studied at the Cos Cob, Connecticut, summer school with American impressionists John H. Twachtman and J. Alden Weir. In 1893 he attended Académie Julian in Paris,[2] but left after a short time to develop his own personal impressionistic style. His American career began in 1894 with his "Harlem River period," which lasted for a decade or more, during which time he painted various landscapes around the New York City region.

Ernest Lawson,
1873–1939
The Garden, 1914
Oil on canvas, 20 x 24 in.
Gift of the Estate of Emily
and James Sibley Watson, 51.36

Although he depicted many aspects of the urban fabric, he focused on river views, which included human-made intrusions such as bridges, shipping vessels, and industrial sites. He was a member of "The Eight" that formed in 1908 to mount an exhibition of their work in protest against the current trends in art that failed to depict the harsh realities of urban life.[3] It was unusual for Lawson to affiliate himself with a particular group because he believed that a true artist must have a unique vision and way of working. In his personal credo, entitled "The Power to See Beautifully and Idealistically," he formulated his theories about art and painting, which coincide with those of the French artist Gustave Courbet, by stating, "It is the individual who counts with me, not the school of painting he works in."[4]

Because Emily Sibley Watson donated *The Garden* to the Memorial Art Gallery in 1951, it was long believed that the painting depicted Mrs. Watson's own garden at 11 Prince Street in Rochester, New York. Then in 1990 a letter arrived at the Memorial Art Gallery from a professor at the Troy State University System in Alabama. The letter asked for "a color slide of Ernest Lawson's *The Garden* (the lower terrace of the H. H. Rogers garden at Tuxedo) for use in my research."[5] A little sleuthing in the James Sibley Watson, Jr. papers in the Motion Picture Collection at George Eastman House revealed through photographs that Mrs. Watson's garden was typically Victorian. It consisted of island plantings of perennials and bedding plants that formed an embroidered pattern on the lawn in the backyard, which was open to the adjacent property owned by her family on East Avenue. The flower beds surrounded a sunken seating area accessed by a set of steps. In no way did her garden resemble the garden in Lawson's painting, which in fact depicts the Rogers garden in Tuxedo Park, New York. That garden, as represented in the painting, offers us a good example of an outdoor space designed during the Country Place Era.

The American Country Place Era (1894–1940) represents a period of unprecedented wealth in the United States due to the shift from an agriculture-based economy to one that was industry-based. The World Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893, laid out by Frederick Law Olmsted's landscape architecture firm, was based on French formalism, or the Beaux Arts style. This event is generally accepted as the catalyst for a proliferation of Country Place estates. Outside of

major metropolitan regions, along river valleys and surrounding mountains as in the Hudson River area north of New York, large privately owned tracts of land were subdivided and sold, often to people who had grown newly wealthy through land speculation, agriculture, and industry. With the advent of the railroad, which encouraged commuter travel, large country place estates and new suburban communities, such as the privately developed Tuxedo Park in the Hudson Highlands, were developed outside of urban centers.

Tuxedo Park, the location of *The Garden*, was established in 1886 sixty miles west of New York. One of the first planned communities in the United States, the mountain village was developed by P. R. Lorillard, an heir to a tobacco fortune, and laid out by architect Bruce Price and landscape architect Ernest Bowditch. Lorillard invited several friends who were part of New York's exclusive "Four Hundred" to join his Tuxedo Club and buy land on which to build a country estate. Tuxedo Park was primarily inhabited during the fall for hunting and fishing. The annual Autumn Ball, where the tuxedo dinner jacket originated, kicked off New York's debutante season. Invited to join this illustrious group, H. H. Rogers and his wife were coming to Tuxedo Park as early as 1904, and sometime before 1916 may have hired the firm of Walker & Gillette, Architects to design the garden for their Tuxedo estate.[6]

Often built and designed collaboratively between architects, landscape architects, and home owners, American country estates typically featured an eclectic mix of formal Italian and French landscape design with a naturalistic English pastoral or picturesque style, or an Asian-influenced design. Formal gardens were constructed adjacent to the house with garden paths mirroring its architectural lines. Utilitarian (vegetable, cut-flower) gardens were placed out of view of the house and informal, park-like lawns dotted with trees were installed along the property perimeter. These extensive residences reflected the wealth of owners such as the Vanderbilt and Rockefeller families. They had the means to travel abroad extensively and collect furniture, art work, and ideas to incorporate into the design of their new estates. During this time, a proliferation of books and magazines in the United States and Europe encouraged Americans to travel abroad and promoted interest in garden and landscape design. Gertrude Jekyll, a well-known British garden designer who partnered with architect Edwin Lutyens, wrote extensively about her gardens and planting designs. Her late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century publications continue to enjoy popularity in this country and Britain.[7]

The newly emerging profession of American landscape architecture drew its primary inspiration from Italian Renaissance villa design. This was due in no small part to an 1894 publication entitled *Italian Gardens*, by Charles Platt. The book was a contemporary photographic record of centuries-

Pool, H. H. Rogers, Jr., garden, 1917
From "A Hillside Garden," *The Architectural Forum* 27, no. 3, p.73

old villa landscapes. Ten years later in 1904, novelist Edith Wharton published *Italian Villas and their Gardens*. Illustrated by Maxfield Parrish, the book was immensely popular and influential among the well-heeled who used it as a travel guide. Several magazines also played an important role in developing more sophisticated home grounds, including *Country Life in America*[8] and *The Architectural Forum*.[9] Both publications featured articles about the H. H. Rogers Italian-style garden and helped to solve the mystery of whose garden was portrayed in Lawson's impressionistic painting, *The Garden*.

Garden, Tuxedo Park, New York, 2005
Courtesy of
Mr. and Mrs. Allen Yassky

Henry Huddleston Rogers, Jr. was heir to the Standard Oil fortune amassed by his father, H. H. Rogers. Colonel Rogers, as he was called, was, himself, an industrialist. He had a lifelong interest in the military, from his involvement as a youth in the Twelfth Regiment of the New York National Guard to his service with the American Expeditionary Force in World War I. In addition to his Tuxedo Park "cottage," he owned an estate in Southampton, Long Island, designed by Walker & Gillette. Until 1929, Rogers was married to Mary Benjamin Rogers, whose friendship with Mark Twain has been preserved in the book "Mark Twain's Letters to Mary." Twain also spent time in Tuxedo Park at a cottage near the Rogers home.

Ernest Lawson's depiction of the Rogers garden is a literal rendering of the descriptions of the garden found in contemporary publications. In *A Terrace Garden for Mr. H. H. Rogers at Tuxedo Park New York* the caption states: "The terrace is formed by a twelve-foot retaining wall of stucco which runs in color from deep orange to a soft gray-pink, and has a coping of brownish red tile. The vines on the wall are English ivy and blue morning glories which repeat the blue of the flowers on the other side of the grass path." The caption under another photograph says: "A blue-tile-lined pool runs the whole length of the retaining wall, and on the outer edge of the terrace is a ten-foot wide flower bed planted with blue and mauve flowers interspersed with black cedar trees."[10]

Fountain in tea house,
H. H. Rogers, Jr.,
garden, 1917
From "A Hillside Garden,"
The Architectural Forum 27,
no. 3, p.74

So close is Lawson's rendering of the garden scene to the published photographs that one wonders if he had actually seen the garden himself or if someone gave him a photograph to copy. His relationship with the Rogers estate remains a mystery. Although he was well-respected as a landscape painter and won several awards for his work during his lifetime, he did not reap much in the way of financial reward. He was impoverished most of the time and depended on the good will of wealthy art patrons, sometimes staying at their homes.[11] Possibly this was the situation in Tuxedo Park. However, if the painting originated as a commission, there may have been a falling-out between artist and patron, since *The Garden* came to Rochester for an exhibition courtesy of Daniel Gallery in 1916, was available for sale at that time, and was purchased out of the exhibition by Mrs. James Sibley Watson.

The Rogers "cottage" has long since disappeared, but happily the current owners of the property are aware of the adjoining garden's importance and have begun to restore it to its original formal beauty.

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