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The science behind the art of embellishing gardens

Revisiting the language of 18th and early 19th century garden treatises

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The question of the place of garden design in the hierarchy of the arts became most evident with the spread of the idea of the landscape garden, which was introduced to continental Europe as "jardin anglo-chinois" in the 18th century. The debate about garden art being distinct from other art forms was reflected in the growing field of European garden literature, or "garden treatises", called *sadovniki* in the Russian tradition. This article highlights some of the general features of the process which established the autonomy of garden art. Focusing upon the linguistic aspect of this process, it outlines the development of a specific language and terminology for describing gardens. Using examples from Russian and European garden literature, the study shows that at the same time as garden art achieved autonomy around the turn of the 19th century, the necessary conditions arose for its potential establishment as a scientific discipline as well.

Keywords: garden art, European literature, painting, theatre, translation

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Gardening in the early modern period aspired persistently, albeit with varying degrees of success, to attain independent status in the hierarchy of the arts. At least two reasons contributed to the unsettled position of "the art of embellishing gardens": In the first place, both the subject of creating gardens and its practical methodology were, on the one hand, distinguished by their inherently hybrid character; they included in their armoury both craft skills and branches of the sciences, for example botany, architecture and even geometry. On the other hand, the creation of gardens also depended on various forms of art, since the garden or park ensemble includes, alongside the natural elements (vegetation, water, etc.), sculptural and architectural components, and often pictorial, and sometimes also literary and musical elements. Secondly, the fact that the art of the garden depends on other forms of art to represent it and disseminate its achievements also gave grounds for doubting its autonomy. Evidently, there is a need for the garden as a work of art to seek additional documentation in written or visual form; this is due

in part to the garden's physical fluctuations and mutability as a result of the changing of the seasons, the maturing of trees, etc., and in part to the fact that it is anchored to one particular spot (unlike books or paintings, for example, which can be moved around and exhibited).

The question as to whether the creation of a garden is an art, or should be considered more as a craft or a science, depends to a large extent on whether a particular garden in any given historical period is considered as a natural phenomenon or as the fruit of human labour, craftsmanship or even genius. The system of coordinates of the concrete social-aesthetic paradigm determines the evaluation of the garden's position in the ranks of the other arts and the conception of the garden as a primary or secondary work of art in relation to its description or portrayal.

The quest for new ways of settling this question stimulated a heightened interest in creating gardens in English society at the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th century. It is worth mentioning that the majority of theoreticians and practitioners of the early landscape garden in Britain were not professionals in terms of traditional garden design. They were not architects, deploying refined design skills and the rules of geometry within the formal space of a so-called "French" garden, but poets, commentators and philosophers speculating about man's position in an embellished landscape. For a time, it was precisely the so-called "English" garden which began to be accepted as a specific space within which it was possible to develop a confiding relationship with nature – a relationship which revealed the possibility of a direct connection between human beings and their environment. Gradually the acknowledgement of nature as the model for any artistic work and changes in the social background of the contributors to the discourse on gardens led, in the second half of the 18th century, to a new wave of popularity for both practical garden creation and for literature about gardens. The phenomenon of the interdependence of gardens and written texts resulted in a marked increase in publications about gardens in various genres, both in England and in continental Europe, including Russia. Thanks to the socio-cultural effects of the discursive practice of garden-making at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century, the art of gardens and parks was able to consolidate its place in the hierarchy of the arts and even, for a short while, occupy a leading position.

In this article we highlight some of the general features of the process that established the autonomy of garden art. Focusing upon the linguistic aspect of this process, we primarily outline the development of a specific language and terminology for describing gardens with respect to its interdependence with other art forms and its distinction from them. Using examples from Russian and European garden literature we show that at the same time as garden art achieved autonomy around the turn of the 19th century, the necessary conditions arose for its potential establishment as a scientific discipline as well. But that process – a topic which

goes beyond the aim of this paper – was not straightforward, due to the reclassification of the sciences in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Thus, the question of the right of garden design to have its own place in the hierarchy of the arts remained current for the whole of the 18th century. It became most evident with the spread of the idea of landscape gardens, which were introduced to continental Europe as “jardin anglo-chinois”. The debate about *garden art* being autonomous and distinct from other art forms was reflected in the growing field of European garden literature, or “garden treatises”, called *sadovniki* in the Russian tradition.¹

What kind of garden literature was available in the Russian language during this debate? The translation of a fragment from William Chambers’ ground-breaking book about “Chinese gardens” was probably the first garden treatise about the innovative style of landscape gardening to appear in Russian in 1771 ([Čembers] 1771; see also Veselova 2008; Kross 2005, 419–421; Cross 1990, 1993). In 1773, an adaptation of Thomas Whately’s “Observations on Modern Gardening” was in preparation (Whately 1770). The Russian version of this book was at least in part completed, yet remained unpublished (Veselova 2008; Cross 1990, 1993; Schönle 2007, 55–64). An earlier work, George Mason’s “Essay on Design in Gardening”, which comprised a concise overview of the theory and practice of English landscape gardening, was made available to a wider Russian readership (Mason 1768; [Mejson 1776]; see also Cross 1993; Veselova 2013b). The translations of contemporary garden literature appeared against the background of the methodical development of horticultural literature in Russia, which had begun in the late 1760s, thanks to the appearance of periodical publications supported by the Free Economic Society. Alongside substantial works on agriculture and estate economics by Andrej Bolotov, Nikolaj Osipov and Vasilij Lëvšin, which were published by the end of the 18th century, descriptive poetry played a significant role in the formation of the modern garden language. So in the first years of the 19th century the most significant French poems about garden art were published in Russian, translated by Aleksandr Palicyn and Evstafij Stanevič: “L’Homme des champs, ou les Géorgiques françaises” (“Man of the Fields, or the French Georgics”) and “Les jardins, ou l’art d’embellir les paysages” (Gardens, or the Art of Embellishment of Landscapes) by Jacques Delille (1782, 1800; Delil’ 1804, 1814), and “Les Paysages, ou Essai sur la nature champêtre, en vers, avec des notes” (Landscapes) by Claude-François Lezay-Marnésia (1787; Lezaj-Marnezij 1805). Palicyn also undertook a translation in prose of an essay “De la composition des paysages” (“On the Creation of Landscape”) by René-Louis Girardin (1777; Žirarden 1804).²

¹ On the rise of garden literature see Ananieva (2010; Anan’eva 2010, 2012); for the definition of *sadovniki* and for more details on the development of Russian terminology of garden art see Veselova (2013a, 2013b).

² For an investigation of those literary transfers see Anan’eva (2005, 2006).

What were the particularities of garden treatises that made them attractive for the garden discourse in the 18th century and helped to form a specific literary genre of their own? Their first defining feature is plurimediality, based on the combination of word, image and space. The synthesis of two media types (i.e. printed text and illustrations) reflects the particular character of the work of art (i.e. garden) depicted. Then, the garden occupies a space while depending on a spatially and temporally extended experience, which cannot be fully reflected in a drawing but can be characterised in words. The garden treatise must simultaneously impress the reader with actual "prospects", which can be more easily shown visually, in illustrations. Interestingly, both media (verbal and visual) combined in garden treatises aspire to being considered as independent arts in their own right as well, aligning themselves with landscape art in painting and landscape poetry in literature. Thus, all of them (painting, poetry, and gardening) contributed to the competition between the arts centred on the idea of *imitation of nature*.

Secondly, the text of a garden treatise is characterised to a certain extent by imaginary elements aiming for pleasant reading, which relate it to fiction, i.e. literature reproducing an imagined but plausible reality. At the same time, garden treatises contain practical and even outright technical advice about how to create and cultivate one's garden, a fact which in its turn unites *sadovniki* with popular-scientific literature or, more generally, with scholarly works. This gives rise to the sharp stylistic contrasts which typify garden discourse resulting from the proximity of "artistic" expression and "technical" terminology (agricultural and botanical, in particular). This proximity of "high" and "low" styles of language is intrinsic to the very understanding of "gardening", including both the *idea* of garden and the *practical activity* involved in transforming the imagined garden into a physical reality.

Consequently, the garden treatises emerged as a unique source for studying the role of gardening in the hierarchy of arts as well as for illuminating its aspirations for a position in sciences. In particular, on the lexical level the garden literature of the late 18th and early 19th century demonstrates how the self-entitlement of garden art was established through the adoption of terminology from other fields of art.³

The language of the art of *painting* is the lexicon most frequently resorted to. In some cases garden creation is even regarded as a branch of drawing, which was considered as the foundation of art. So, the Russian readership of George Mason's "Essay on Design in Gardening" learns that "Рисунок есть обширная область. Садовничество составляет одну из его частей, которая столь переменный имеет вид, что оную в разные времена с трудом узнать можно" ([Mejson

³ In this article we focus on the linguistic aspect while illustrating a few examples of the more general development. With regards to the debate on the theory, aesthetics and poetics of garden art we refer to our previous publications on this topic.

1776], 3).⁴ A gardener is often called a landscape painter (“ландшафтный живописец”), for example in the essays on contemporary English gardens and the use of picturesque ruins adapted by Bolotov from German treatises in a series for his *Journal of Economics* (*Ėkonomičeskij magazin* 1786, XXV, 260; 1787, XXIX, 197, 302). The author of the Russian version of William Chambers’ admiration for Chinese gardeners simply referred to the expression “artist”, in the narrow meaning of the word: “китайский художник” ([Chambers] 1771, 7). The garden, in its turn, is likened to a “picture”, created with the help of woods, shrubs, and flowers, with plants compared to canvas and paint. In this context the verb *to draw* (*рисовать*) is also frequently used, along with terms for further techniques of drawing: “Есть искусство в учреждении садов, которое мало разумеют и которое может быть трудно исполнять. Оно похоже на то, что называется в живописи оттенывать” ([Mejson 1776], 35).⁵ Discussions of the way a garden should be “drawn” constituted a guiding theme in *sadovniki* literature, which was reflected in Delille’s popular poem “Les Jardins” (1782, 1801) and expressed by Aleksandr Voejkov in 1816:

Сад есть обширная и сельская картина:
Рисуй! Полянка, холм, ручей, гора, долина,
Оттенки муравы, деревьев и листов,
Отливы, яркой блеск и пестрота цветов,
Часы и времена, переменная погода,
И дневный малый круг, и круг великий года:
Вот краски, полотно, вот кисть, соображай:
Твоя Природа! Сам рисуй и поправляй.
(Delil’ 1987, 97)⁶

⁴ “Design is an extensive Province, – Gardening one of its Districts – a District of so various an appearance, as hardly to be known for the same country in different periods of time” ([Mason] 1768, 1).

⁵ “There is an art in the management of grounds, little understood, and possibly the most difficult to be accomplished: ’tis analogous to what is called *keeping under* in painting: by some parts being seemingly neglected, the succeeding are more strikingly beautiful” ([Mason] 1768, 47).

⁶ “Moins pompeux qu’élégant, moins décoré que beau, / un jardin, à mes yeux, est un vaste tableau. / Soyez peintre. Les champs, leurs nuances sans nombre, / les jets de la lumière, et les masses de l’ombre, / les heures, les saisons, variant tour à tour / le cercle de l’année et le cercle du jour, / et des prés émaillés les riches broderies, / et des rian[t]s côteaux les vertes draperies, / les arbres, les rochers, et les eaux, et les fleurs, / ce sont là vos pinceaux, vos toiles, vos couleurs; / la nature est à vous; et votre main féconde / dispose, pour créer, des élémén[t]s du monde» (Delille 1782, 11–12). – At this point, Voejkov’s adaptation is the third published translation of Delille’s poem in Russian (Anan’eva 2006, 73).

The comparison between the methods of gardening and skills of painting became topical⁷ and was also encountered in the garden literature of the 19th century.⁸

It is not by chance that the concept of the “picturesque”, which aimed for a variety of impressions, became one of the fundamental principles of the 18th-century landscape garden: “Питореск называются все те предметы, которые картину составить и большее действие произвести могут” ([Mejson 1776], 5). This explanation was an adaptation for the Russian readership, added to the translation of Mason’s text. The original English version only pointed out the importance of the *picturesque garden* for contemporary discourse.⁹ However, this formulation from 1776 conveyed the innovative aesthetic principle with the traditional means of expression in the visual arts on the one hand, and on the other, emphasised the new perception of garden art based on emotions. Thomas Whately (1770) made a significant contribution to furthering the concept of the picturesque when he introduced his idea about the *expressive* (*выразительный*) garden. The popularity of his “Observations on Modern Gardening”, which were translated into French (Whately 1772) and had numerous successors (Watelet 1774; Duchesne 1775; Morel 1776; Girardin 1777), resulted in the notion of “the picturesque” gaining the status of an aesthetic category. As such it was placed alongside the concepts of “the beautiful” and “the sublime” during the 18th century (Žirmunskaja 1988; Wolfzettel 2001).

A central word for the lexical transfers from the performing arts, and the *theatre* in particular, to the garden discourse was *scene* (*сцена*), which, like the term *picture*, was regularly used in the garden literature. The word *кулисы* (for curtain or scenery rather than wings) as a technical theatrical term ([Žirarden] 1804, 13)¹⁰ gained currency in Russian *sadovniki* as well. Introduced as a garden term, it described planted areas hiding something unattractive or, on the contrary, concealing something mysteriously interesting to be discovered during a walk. According to the garden literature of this period, well-constructed “scenes” were able to embel-

⁷ “Toute discordance dans la perspective, ainsi que dans l’harmonie des couleurs, n’est pas plus supportable dans le tableau sur *le terrain*, que dans le tableau sur la toile” (Girardin 1777, 9).

⁸ For example in the Russian translation of André Lefèvre’s book *Les parcs et les jardins*, where the soil is called “canvas” (“канва”) and water and vegetation are called “paints” (“краски”) (Lefèvre 1871, 166; Lefèvre 1871, 191ff.)

⁹ “By gardening, I mean that sort of it more peculiarly denoted by the epithet *Picturesque*: and this I thought necessary to premise, because of the more general import, not only of the word *Garden*, but of its synonymous term too in different languages” (Mason 1768, 4–5).

¹⁰ Cf. Girardin (1777, 15): “Un Décorateur habile tel que Servandoni, qui auroit été obligé de composer les coulisses de devant sur un fond de décoration qui lui auroit été donnée, eût été sans doute capable de produire dans le peu d’espace d’un théâtre, l’illusion d’une perspective très-étendue”.

lish the garden and therefore were considered an indisputable virtue of the place. On the other hand, the techniques and skills from the “art of construction”, i.e. architecture, were considered to look out of place and disfigure the garden. The very word *architectural* or its contextual synonym, *symmetrical*, was an unflattering epithet in the garden literature of the 18th or early 19th century. Fundamentally, the expressions *зеленая архитектура* ‘green architecture’, *садовый архитектор* ‘garden architect’, or technical terms like *чертеж* ‘technical drawing’, *план* ‘plan’, or *симметрия* ‘symmetry’ were applied pejoratively, in combination with adjectives with negative connotations such as *скучный* ‘boring’ ([Žirarden] 1804, VIII).¹¹

These and numerous other examples show that the comparison of gardening with other forms of art, aided by lexical borrowings, deployed a strategy of self-validation of its own status, which also served as a contribution to the debate about the “traditional” versus the “innovative” style of garden design. It is striking that on the level of language choices the confrontation between painting and architecture (as well as poetry and architecture) mirrors the aesthetic opposition of the formal garden and the landscape park that in the era of the “garden revolution” (Hirschfeld 1785, VIII) became part of the debate about what modern garden art should be. While aspiring to an independent position, the appeal to one or another established art allows gardening to be judged within the pre-existing framework of values in order to inform the work of *modern garden artists*, who should, as Girardin says, “не по примеру ни архитектора, ни садовника, но как пиите и живописцу должно составлять ландшафты, дабы привлекать вдруг взоры и разум” ([Žirarden] 1804, 7).¹²

Moreover, considering the fact that at the same time *nature* itself was recognised as the fundamental aesthetic criterion for *any* artistic creation, garden design seemed obviously entitled to a superior position compared to the other arts. “Сие искусство может однако ж учиниться из самых важных; оно в сравнении с поэзией и живописью так, как вещественность с описанием и подлинник со списком”, writes Palicyn, translating Girardin for the Russian audience ([Žirarden] 1804, X).¹³ Within the theoretical framework of the German philosopher Christian Cay Lorenz Hirschfeld, whose publications were disseminated in German and French editions as well as in Russian translations by Bolotov, gardening indeed deserved to be the first among the arts and therefore any comparison with garden art was considered as the highest praise for painting or poetry (Hirschfeld 1779, 145–153). A less competitive yet absolutely confident view on garden art was

¹¹ “Le majestueux ennui de la simétrie a fait tout d’un coup sauter d’une extrémité à l’autre” (Girardin 1777, 5).

¹² “Ce n’est donc ni en Architecte, ni en Jardinier, c’est en Poëte & en Peintre, qu’il faut composer des paysages, afin d’intéresser tout à la fois, l’œil & l’esprit” (Girardin 1777, 8).

¹³ “Cet art peut néanmoins devenir un des plus intéressan[t]s; il est à la Poésie & à la Peinture, ce que la réalité est à la description, & l’original à la copie” (Girardin 1777, xiii).

demonstrated by Stanevič, an expert in the field of French garden treatises. According to him, gardening, already acknowledged as equal in the ranks of the arts, is able to enhance artistic power by building a “friendly union” of all the arts and sciences: “Словесность, Поэзия, Живопись гордились многообразием богатств своих; садоводство к ним присосоединилось; все другие искусства и науки украшались, возвышались ими и составили между собой некое дружеское сословие” (Stanevič 1805, 32).

In this way, garden art reached the peak of its discursive power at the end of the 18th century, based on the advanced transfer of practice and theory adapted from different arts and combined with the contemporary idea of nature. These entanglements are also discernible in the development of the language of garden treatises. The recipe for the success of garden art lies in its capacity for providing an unconventional balance between “arts” and “sciences”.

Having freed itself from the shackles of architecture and demonstrated its artistic value with regard to nature, “the art of embellishing gardens” claimed autonomy within the art system: Garden art has a specific subject and field of action where it applies its practice, it possesses its own body of theory, it has a specialised descriptive language with its own terminology; it also develops its own ways of professional education transmitting specific knowledge and skills.

The autonomy of garden art creates the conditions essential to assert recognition as a scientific discipline as well. Tendencies towards scholarly status can be found in definitions of garden art included in European encyclopaedias, dictionaries and handbooks in the late 18th century, in particular in D’Alambert and Diderot’s entries in the *Encyclopédie*, in Johann Zedler’s *Universal-Lexicon* (*Great Universal Lexicon*), in Johann Sulzer’s *Allgemeine Theorie der Schönen Künste* (*Theory of the Polite Arts*) and, of course, in Hirschfeld’s *Theorie der Gartenkunst* (*Theory of Garden Art*). In the Russian context, the development of scholarly character echoing in the garden language began as a gradual process in 1770s and gained momentum at the end of the 18th century. Andrej Bolotov consolidated the theory, history and philosophy of gardening with the practical advice in his periodical publications, especially in *Journal of Economics* (see Veselova 2017a, 2017b). His efforts enforced to a large extent the development of a written language of garden art and laid the basis for the numerous treatises on this topic in Russian, which included dictionaries of garden terminology ([Osipov] 1791), original works as well as compilations about gardening (Levšin 1785, 1795, 1799; Osipov 1790, 1793). Most of these publications, in particular those by Nikolaj Osipov and Vasilij Lëvšin, were already in print at the end of the 18th century, when the scholarly language of garden treatises began to converge with the poetic language of sentimental nature writing.¹⁴

¹⁴ It is notable that in the 1790s Bolotov himself wrote two works in imitation of Johann Sulzer, which remained in manuscript form and were not published in his lifetime (Bolotov 1993, 133–203, 205–344).

As garden art grew more popular in the late 18th and early 19th century, there was a significant increase in information, which in turn gradually created the necessity for internal resystematisation. The search for additional ways of organising knowledge in the field of garden art paradoxically led to a weakening of the position won at the turn of the centuries, and gradually yet again called into question both the autonomy and the scientific validity of garden art. It should be noted that both the obvious utility and the excessive sensibility of perception in due course became the basis of Immanuel Kant's final judgement. He did not acknowledge the aesthetic autonomy of garden art and suspected the "decorated nature" of pleasures which were "not disinterested". (Kant 1977, §51, 261) Moreover, the very popularity of garden art and the complex nature of the artwork provoked a crisis: the dissemination of "the science behind the art of embellishing gardens" led to reproaches of dilettantism at the same time as the "friendly union" of arts deteriorated due to the specialisation of separate fields of knowledge.

Although the comprehensive work on garden design presented by Arnold Regel in St. Petersburg in 1896 incorporated the debate on artistic ideas and technical skills *into the concept of the science of garden art* quite confidently,¹⁵ the ruling tendency in the development of the new system of scientific disciplines in the 19th century was not integration but differentiation. Against this background, as is known, compartmentalisation occurred in various fields of academic scholarship, such as botany, agronomy, literature, the visual arts, and architecture. Within these limits imposed by science and the arts on the theory and practice of garden art, it no longer had a universal place, rather it was pigeonholed as an exclusively narrow specialisation (as part of the history of visual art, of the practice of landscape architecture, genre specifics of painting or literature, etc.).

On the whole, "the science behind the art of embellishing gardens" seems to reveal the dynamic of epistemological processes across the centuries. And if the plurimediality and interdisciplinary character of garden art caused the weakening of its position following the specialisation of disciplines in the 19th century, then precisely by virtue of its hybrid nature, garden culture once more attracted the attention of scholars at the end of the 20th century.¹⁶ In the course of changes to the scholarly paradigm, beginning in the 1980s, the subject of gardens attracted

¹⁵ "Предметом теории изящного садоводства служит изучение композиционных элементов, входящих в состав художественно исполненного сада; воплотить мысль художника, т.е. в действительности выполнить предначертания теории – дело техники. Таким образом, естественная грань между теорией и техникой определяется сама собой: первой принадлежит вся художественная часть создания, второй – практическая, чтобы не сказать ремесленная; или иначе: теория – создавая, в воображении или на плане, изящную картину сада – указывает, что делать, а задача техники знать – как это сделать" (Regel' 1990, 25).

¹⁶ See our overview Anan'eva & Veselova (2005).

the attention of researchers in various fields with new vigour, thanks to its complex character as an art on the border of science and science on the border of art.

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