



The Flowering of the Museum Gardens

The University of Pennsylvania Museum sits on a plot of land that had been reserved by the City of Philadelphia for a public park. At the urging of the University of Pennsylvania, City officials were persuaded to transfer the land to the University to be developed as a “museum and botanical garden and park, at no expense to the city.” The original design of the Museum by Wilson Eyre called for a total of six landscaped courtyards. Although only two were ever completed, two inner courtyards were subsequently created by the construction of the Academic Wing in 1971.

Eyre’s plan for the upper courtyard called for a formal, geometric garden, with low, clipped hedges, brick walks, grassy terraces, and symmetrically placed Lombardy poplar, red cedar, and arborvitae (see back cover). Stone benches and urns atop brick pillars echoed this formality. By the 1930s, however, the design had come undone: the trees were gone, ivy crept over the walls obscuring architectural details, and the aquatic plants in the pool had become gigantic. The new lower courtyard welcomed busloads of school children but remained unplanted. Funds for maintenance of the gardens were scarce and the plantings continued to deteriorate.

In the early 1950s, “disturbed at the condition of the gardens,” the Women’s Committee came to the rescue. Christine Rosengarten and landscape architect Fred Peck refurbished the lower courtyard, planting stately oaks and horse chestnuts, hollies, fragrant lindens, yews, and hawthorns in the barren space. The row of ginkgoes was installed in 1958, and over the years statuary and architectural elements from the Museum’s collections were added.

Nancy Warden was responsible for overseeing

the transformation of the upper courtyard, beginning in 1963. Faced with “mostly Privet and weeds,” she and University landscape architect

George Patton removed most of the boxwood hedges and selected elegant, textured trees and shrubs—magnolia, holly, pine, and yew—to set off the Museum’s fine architecture. Blue cedars and junipers, put in later, added a subtle note of color. While still formal, the garden took on a more welcoming aspect, and the varied plantings complemented Eyre’s eclectic architecture. In 1978 the courtyard was named after Mrs. Warden in recognition of her efforts.

The gardens continue to evolve. Once the East Wing is built, the lower courtyard will become the primary entrance

to the Museum, and the gardens will be re-landscaped once more.

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To learn more about the Museum building, see “Architectural Archaeology” in EXPEDITION 41[1].



The upper courtyard of the Museum shortly after construction, ca. 1899.