

Winterthur

Winterthur, Delaware

Photographs by Alan Ward 2025

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

The design of the gardens at Winterthur, located in the Brandywine Valley of Delaware, were a collaborative effort by the owner, Henry Francis DuPont (1880-1969), and landscape architect Marian Coffin (1876-1957). The one-thousand-acre site was designed during the Country Place era, the period from about 1890 to 1930 in America, when wealthy Americans engaged landscape architects for rural estates, such as Winterthur. The designs were inspired by both European gardens, as well as the classical influences of the Columbian Exposition in 1893 in Chicago. At the same, however, there were proponents advocating to make landscapes far more natural, retaining existing topography, while using indigenous plants. These two distinctly different approaches are evident at Winterthur, with extensive areas of the estate made decidedly naturalistic, while areas of the site near the house are more strictly organized along an axis, as an extension of the architecture of the Classical revival style residence. Why did DuPont and Coffin make a landscape with such contrasts and juxtapositions, a designed expression of nature for much of the site, along with a landscape more strictly organized along the lines of the architecture, in other areas?

Henry Francis DuPont (1880-1969) was the last great grandson of E. I. du Pont de Nemours, the founder of the large chemical company of the same name. During his professional career, H. F. Dupont was a

director of the company, as well as a director of the General Motors Corporation, so while he inherited wealth, including the family house at Winterthur, he remained engaged professionally in the industrial economy of the country. He also had a passion for horticulture, and met Marian Coffin in 1901 while studying horticulture at Harvard, which began almost five decades of working together on the landscape at Winterthur.¹ She was a follower of the Arts and Crafts Movement, which had originated in England in the 1880s, which was seen as a reaction to the mass production of industrial goods, emphasizing the craftsmanship of hand-made objects using natural materials. In landscape architecture at this time, similar sentiments were echoed by William Robinson and Gertrude Jekyll in England, who published extensively, aiming for a more natural design expression with the use of native plants in cottage gardens, borders, as well as wild gardens.

DuPont and Coffin were thus kindred spirits in making the landscape at Winterthur, with Coffin bringing forward her design approach, informed by the writings of Robinson and Jekyll. H. F. Dupont had visited Robinson and Jekyll on trips to England. He was from a family firmly embedded in industrial America, so making these natural appearing landscapes were likely an inspiration for him as well, a craft appealing to his love for horticulture, and importantly, an

1. "Henry Francis DuPont..." Obituary, *New York Times*, April 12, 1969

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antidote to his family's professional life involving the mass production of industrial goods. An idealized form of nature designed at his rural home would have been a sanctuary or retreat from business conducted in the boardroom. To reinforce the idea that Winterthur was a counterpoint to industrial America for H. F. DuPont, consider also that he put together the finest collection of American decorative art ever assembled. He collected American antiques from 1640-1840, considered the great age of hand craftsmanship, turning the house into a museum which became open to the public in 1951. This is a striking juxtaposition for an individual coming from a family with an industrial heritage, admiring the artifacts of hand craftsmanship.

In contrast to this naturalistic approach, the terraces, steps, and reflecting pool were designed by Coffin along a cross axis extending west from the house, descending a significant slope to a clearing in the woodlands. The reflecting pool, originally a swimming pool, is flanked by two symmetrically aligned bathhouses, reminiscent of Italian Renaissance gardens. This approach was popularized by Charles Platt in his book *Italian Gardens* published in 1894, that remained influential to designers of country estates. Platt illustrated precedents for an integrated approach between villa and garden with terraces, stairs, and other structures, such as arbors and pergolas, as an extension of the architectural spaces into the landscape.²

2. Charles Platt, *Italian Gardens*, 1894

3. Edith Wharton, *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*, 1904

American novelist and design writer Edith Wharton also admired Italian Gardens. Her 1904 book, *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*, provides the intellectual framework for understanding the compatibility of these two different design approaches effectively merged in the Winterthur landscape. She points out that Italian villas were almost always sited on hillsides, as was Winterthur, so the first requirement was that the "garden must be adapted to the architectural lines of the house." Secondly, terraces had to be made that were usable and accessible from the residence, and "lastly the larger enclosing landscape was naturally included." Wharton admired the comingling of an architectonic design expression, at the house and its environs, with a more naturalistic design approach in the larger setting, which also characterizes the Winterthur landscape. She calls it "Italian Garden-Magic...the blending of different elements, the subtle transition from the fixed and formal lines of art to the shifting and irregular lines of nature..."³

The sequence of images follows the route of arrival from the visitor center, to the museum and connected terraces, followed by paths through woodlands, glades, meadows. The photographs are in black and white to illustrate the spatial structure of the two distinctly different design approaches, as well as the texture of plants in this expansive and resplendent landscape by two masters of the craft.

List of Photographs

1. Path from visitor center
2. Path with a glimpse of the house, now a museum
3. View of the house from higher elevation on the site
4. Arrival court and entry to Winterthur Museum and Galleries
5. New exhibition building straddling Wilson Run
6. Peony Garden
7. View over March Bank to museum
8. Museum and south-facing conservatory
9. Path and entry gate to southwest terrace
10. Southwest terrace
11. Stone bench at southwest terrace
12. West terrace overlooking Glade Garden
13. Terraces at museum
14. Steps from museum terraces
15. View west down stairway to Reflecting Pool
16. View east of upper stairway from museum terraces
17. View east of stairway to reflecting pool
18. View of stairway from Glade Garden
19. Curving stair to terrace north of Reflecting Pool
20. Entry to terrace north of Reflecting Pool
21. Terrace north of Reflecting Pool and bathhouses
22. View west of Reflecting Pool and bathhouses
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24. View east of Reflecting Pool and museum beyond
25. Woodland path
26. Path descending to Glade Garden
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32. Garden Lane and herbaceous border
33. View to Oak Hill from Garden Lane
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35. Path at Oak Hill in Enchanted Woods
36. Columns and seating for children in Enchanted Woods
37. Stone circle in Enchanted Woods
38. Detail of stone circle in Enchanted Woods
39. Maze near Enchanted Woods
40. Garden Lane and Sycamore Hill

















































































Notes

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