



Metro

Gardner Museum unveils Monks Garden

Kept more to Gardner's spirit than to her vision.



WENDY MAEDA/GLOBE STAFF

The curving black brick pathway in the Monks Garden has the feel of the track in a labyrinth.

By Cate McQuaid

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Isabella Stewart Gardner never quite perfected her Monks Garden. From the time she moved into her palazzo in the Fenway in 1901 and began cultivating her museum and gardens, she tinkered with the green space inside the high brick wall on the building's east side. She

installed a hill and a brick walkway, added pergolas, and planted more and more annuals and perennials.

Now, as the final touch in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum's ambitious expansion and renovation project, the Monks Garden is complete. And landscape architect Michael Van Valkenburgh, whose new design for the garden was unveiled Tuesday, has kept more to Gardner's spirit than to her vision.

"Not to be mean, but she never got the garden right," Van Valkenburgh said. "She never liked it."

He took his inspiration from a tour of the museum given him by museum director Anne Hawley. "The museum is so casually organized — there are no period rooms, no collections of style — it's much more poetic," he said, standing along the looping black brick pathway that meanders through the new garden. "It's an intuitive and personal museum. That's the takeaway from being inside."

Flanking the east side of the original museum, a few steps from the Renzo Piano-designed new wing, the Monks Garden feels as ornate and rambling as the palace. Open to the public starting Wednesday, the garden makes a wonderful counterpoint to the clean lines and glass walls of the new wing, balancing that structure's transparency.

Van Valkenburgh — whose firm Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates Inc., is based in New York — lived in Boston for more than 25 years, and he is a professor of landscape architecture at Harvard University.

Although Van Valkenburgh has worked on a much larger scale, winning awards for his 85-acre Brooklyn Bridge Park, Hawley said her search committee chose him after they visited the designer's own garden on Martha's Vineyard, which is closer to the scale of the 7,545-square-foot Monks Garden.

She wrote him a letter with her own vision. "I was reading Proust, and I was so taken by his memories and his recollection of walking in nature — the lilacs, the hawthorn trees," she said. "Can it be a garden that triggers memories?"

The Gardner Museum itself offers up a Proustian feast of images and associations. That is what Van Valkenburgh sought to honor outside.

The curving pathway is key. With its many switchbacks, it feels like the track in a labyrinth, walked for contemplative purposes. Slithering here and there, sometimes out of sight, it hints that it might just go anywhere. Many people can walk it at once and still discover a sense of solitude. The walls that border the garden add to the privacy, yet the design, with its hidden places and quiet corners, feels spacious.

“Anytime you can’t see the entirety of something, it feels bigger,” Van Valkenburgh pointed out.

He called the design complicated and playful. “I’ve been walking through it since June, and I still have no mental map,” he said. “In a simpler or geometric landscape, you have it mapped.”

Only one flower blossomed in the newly planted garden Tuesday: a Bearsfoot Hellebore, low to the ground and pale green, easy to miss among the ferns and leaves. Like many landscape designs, the Monks Garden is a year-round art installation, from autumn foliage to spring blooms, with 66 trees, more than 7,000 perennials, and more than 2,000 bulbs yet to be planted.

“There are certain moments we’re emphasizing, like late winter,” Van Valkenburgh said. “The Lenten Rose, or hellebore, might be in bloom in January. By March 1, it will be crazy with blooms.”

Several touches echo details from the museum’s collection. Mica schist gleams from the dark brick path, inspired by one of the Gardner’s Venetian mirrors. Bark on trees such as the Paperbark Maple, the Japanese Stewartia, and the Gray Birch evoke the mottled quality of the monumental tapestries in the Tapestry Room.

There is even a piece from the collection in the garden: a first century AD Roman sculpture of Eros riding a vicious looking dolphin, cleaned and repaired for the garden’s opening. Holly Salmon, objects conservator at the museum, said it was once a fountain. Now that the garden has been redesigned, there has been talk of getting it up and running again.

“People have always loved the hidden garden,” Hawley said, glancing at the wall that guards the Monks Garden from the street. “I think it’s a civic contribution to foster people’s connections to their inner life.”

As for Van Valkenburgh, that connection is his art and his livelihood. Speaking of Gardner, he called the museum “the enactment of her imagination.” The garden, then, is the enactment of his.

Knowing how Gardner fumbled along with her own design, he said he felt both frightened and empowered working on his design.

“I don’t know that I’ve ever had more fun making a garden,” he said.

Cate McQuaid can be reached at catemcquaid@gmail.com.
