

The Painter's Garden: Design—Inspiration—Delight

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A heav'n on earth

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1674

Once upon a time, when the world was new, there was a wonderful garden.... We recall the words of the Bible: "And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there he put the man whom he had formed." Creation thus came to a happy end on the seventh day. The Book of Genesis describes the garden of paradise as a well-organized, harmonious ensemble. Grass and herbs flourished, there were cattle and creeping things, the lights of the heavens, calm waters. The garden was entrusted to Man, who was to tend and preserve it. Everything had its rightful order, and all was well with the world. We know now that this harmony did not last long. Tempted by evil, Adam and Eve partook of the forbidden fruit and were driven from Eden forever by sword-wielding cherubim. The gates of Paradise closed permanently behind them, and they stood alone and naked in an inhospitable wilderness. These were our ancestors. Through disobedience and selfishness, they gambled away a peaceful existence, a life in harmony with nature. Nothing is given to us outside the walls. We must till the ground from which God took us. We must now cope with fear, pain, illness, and death, and with our yearning for the lost idylls of Paradise. And thus we create sweet places of recollection and enclose them with walls to keep out sin and misery. Our backs bent, we dig and till the soil, conquering powerful nature on small patches of ground, sowing and hoping in spring, watering in the dry heat of summer, harvesting in autumn, protecting and praying in winter. We make safe places for our children, recalling our own childhood days when we played and read beneath the cherry tree, daydreamed in the grass, saw a small dead bird, or experienced our first kiss. There is much to tell about gardens. Memories of things past and fragile are inscribed in the garden, as is the hope of return one day far in the future.

In many cultures, the desire for the harmonious unity of humankind and nature that is said to have existed at the beginning of time and which we hope will return in a utopian future is concentrated in the image of the garden. The Qur'an defines paradise as the ideal image of the garden, in which the air is scented with camphor, ginger, and musk. In the Song of Solomon we read: "[T]hou south [wind], blow upon my garden that the spices thereof may flow out". Xenophon of Athens translated the Persian word for walled royal gardens as *paradeisos*. The wall is an important element. It isolates the garden as a place of retreat from an existence governed by outside influences. In all civilized societies, the garden represents an alternative to the rigors and the chaos of everyday life, a promise of happiness, a refuge within which the individual is free to live in accordance with God's original plan. We must regain this magical setting from nature through labor and with imagination, reflection, and respect. The knowledge of our loss remains, but the pain is soothed in the garden. Milton closes the twelfth volume of his epic *Paradise Lost* (1674) with words of comfort: "[I]n narrow room Nature's whole wealth, yeah more. A heav'n on earth."

Heaven on earth, a wood panel measuring twenty-six by thirty-three centimeters in the collection of the Städel Museum, transposes this longing for happiness into the medium of painting. Painted in the early fifteenth century, the *Little Garden of Paradise* unites the visions of harmony between humankind and nature within a very small space. So much garden is truly rare! A wall topped with merlon encloses the peaceful terrain. Distinct right angles create order. The inhabitants are content and well supplied with fruit, water, bread, and wine. The Archangel Michael listens as the divine child plays the cymbals. No threat of harm looms within these walls. Even the dragon lies on the ground, prostrate and powerless. Lucifer crouches tamely in the grass. Mary reads the Book of Books, thus calling attention to the source of these joys. Yet it is not only the Christian belief in salvation that speaks to us from this *hortus conclusus*. The heavenly harmony is grounded in splendid vegetation. Twenty-four different botanically identifiable plants flourish in this heart-warming scenery. The chorus of angels is accompanied by twelve distinct species of birds. This unusual