

PAINSWICK ROCOCO GARDEN

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The Rococo style belongs to the early 18th century and was particularly popular in France during the reign of King Louis XV, but it also spread widely throughout Europe; in Italy, Germany, Austria, Holland, Denmark, and even Russia. Although centred on architecture and interior design, Rococo affected many aspects of the arts, such as music, painting and sculpture.

Unlike the earlier Baroque, which emphasised the symmetry of architectural forms, Rococo incorporated asymmetrical designs and was light hearted, even frivolous. Artificial garden grottoes became popular from the mid-16th century, their interiors often decorated with shells, pebbles, mirrors and glass fragments. The name Rococo is probably derived from the French *rocaille* (rock) and *coquilles* (shell). Shell-like curves were also used as motifs in interior decoration at the time. Rococo was strongly influenced by Chinoiserie, in that its characteristic exuberance was based on a stylised subject matter focused on leisure and pleasure. Gardens became places to entertain and have fun, rather than just showing off the latest botanical acquisition. The end came swiftly in the 1760s as Voltaire and Blondel voiced their criticism of the superficiality of the art, castigating the 'ridiculous jumble of shells, dragons, reeds and palm trees' found in interior designs.



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Painswick's statue of Pan

Gardens in 17th century Europe, and France in particular, were designed with symmetrical elements and were intended to impose order on nature. Like the Italian Renaissance garden, with its parterres in geometric shapes, bordered by clipped hedges and paths, the garden *à la française* signified harmony and order. However, in the 18th century subtle variations began to appear. Jesuit priests returning to France from China described gardens planted in a more naturalistic style. The Chinese avoided rows of trees and formal flower beds, arranging the plants to create beautiful compositions that attracted the eye. In addition, goods were arriving from the Far East in the holds of ships belonging to the English, Dutch and French East India Companies. People were intrigued by exoticism, and the oriental style was considered to be a source of inspiration in art. In 1738 the first known Chinese building was erected in England, at Stowe, made of wood and painted on canvas inside and out. Later, in 1761, William Chambers, who had lived in China, built a Chinese pagoda in the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Gardens became less formal and the 'English landscape' form became dominant throughout Europe.

Painswick House stands within its park on the west side of the B4073 to Gloucester, just north of the historic town of Painswick. Painswick Rococo Garden lies behind the house in a secluded valley, or combe. In 1733 Charles Hyatt bought an estate called The Herrings, demolished an old farmhouse on the site and built a new house in Cotswold stone. As Charles was a severe asthmatic the rooms had very high ceilings, giving the house its original name of Buenos Ayres. On his death in 1738 the house passed to his sons: firstly Benjamin, under whom the Rococo garden was developed, and then Nicholas, who died in 1777.

In 1738 Benjamin Hyatt laid out his pleasure gardens. Ten years later these were painted by local artist Thomas Robins. It has been suggested that Robins may have designed the garden but there is no evidence to support this; he may have just painted what was already there.

The estate remained in the family and was renamed Painswick House in the 1830s, when the house was extended with the addition of east and west wings. In the 1940s it was inherited by the 1st Baron Dickinson (1859-1943), through a connection on his mother's side, and he, in turn, was succeeded by his grandson Richard Hyett Dickinson, (b. 1926).

The garden survived until the 1960s, albeit with little maintenance, when conifers were planted in the valley for a timber crop. In 1976 an exhibition of Thomas Robins' paintings at the Heinz Gallery, in London, created a great deal of interest in 18th century gardens. Gradually it was realised that Painswick House had such a garden, which could potentially be restored. Plans were made and the bulldozers moved in to clear the farmed timber in 1984, together with a mass of brambles and old man's beard (*Clematis vitalba*). Then the restoration of the garden began. Swiftly it became apparent that the cost of the project had been hugely underestimated, even though the garden was open to the paying public. The Painswick Rococo Garden Trust was established in 1988 with Lord Dickinson as one of the trustees, and later it became a Charitable Trust. Sadly, the house itself had to be sold in 1999.

From the car park the road leads past stables on the left - which date from the 1730s, (now converted into a house) - and the 19th century carriage house on the right (currently the tea room and shop). Slightly further on there is a statue of Pan, relocated from its original position near the plunge pool, and a view of lawns, borders and the main house. The path continues through an area of walled garden, with a new conservatory built in 2000, emerging through an arch by the gardeners' bothy and potting shed, which gives a glorious view over the garden. At this point a decision has to be made: go right or left? Attracted by the Eagle House, an octagonal, battlemented, gothic summerhouse, we chose left. Originally a folly, the Eagle House was rebuilt in 1991: it is an ideal spot for contemplation.

With views of the main house though the trees, the path winds down the slope towards the orchard and wildflower meadow. Towards the bottom of the valley there is a large fishpond, with ducks, brought in to control the weed. Abundant springs provide water for the kitchen garden and the water flows



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The gothic-style Eagle House



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Only the bravest risk a dip in the chilly Plunge Pool

downhill to feed the fishpond. It then overflows via a cascade through the wooded area to the left, which is covered with snowdrops in springtime, and onwards down into the Stroud valley. Passing through the tunnel arbour - an uncommon feature, but clearly visible in Robins' painting - the path leads to a plunge pool. The pool is fed by its own spring and maintains a constant temperature of 12° - slightly chilly for dipping anything but fingers or toes into, even on the hottest day. Perhaps the Georgian gentlemen were more foolhardy! Next to the plunge pool is a hydraulic ram; powered by water, it filled huge tanks in the attics of Painswick House itself.

Going back uphill now, many *Cyclamen hederifolium* have seeded themselves on the banks and under the trees. In the centre lies the productive kitchen garden. Archaeologists unearthed evidence of perimeter paths, so these were re-instated and bordered with heritage apple and pear varieties, trained as espaliers. The internal paths of sand would have moved each year, as the different kinds of vegetables were rotated to minimise the risk of disease. In the middle is small circular pond, now home to a colony of great crested newts. In autumn, surplus vegetables and fruit, mostly heritage varieties, can be found for sale outside the tea room.

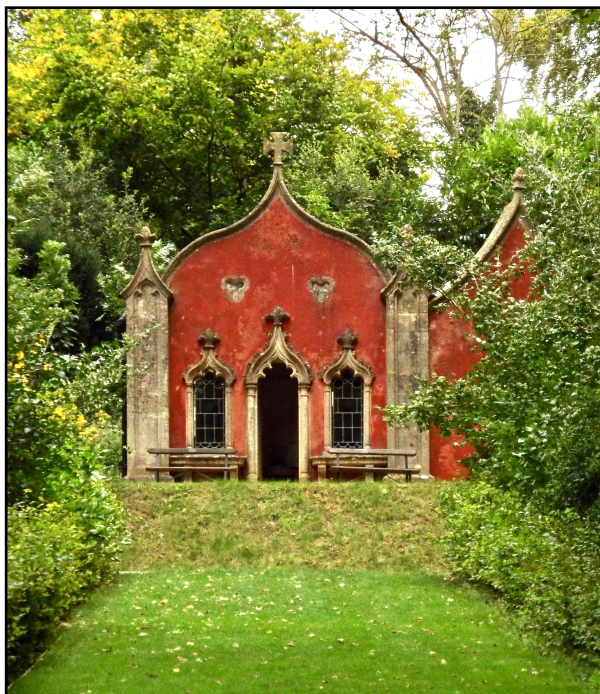
An exedra is a semicircular plinth, either freestanding or set into a building's façade. In its original Greek sense, it means a seat out of doors and was originally a place for conversation, opening on to a covered walkway. The free-standing or open air exedra was often sited along sacred ways or in the *agora* or meeting place. Much later, in the 18th century, it became a popular garden feature, a curved wall or screen to close off one part of the garden from another. It was often associated with a pool or fountain.



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Amaranthus caudatus, calendula and coreopsis
in the Exedra Garden in July

Again, archaeologists at Painswick found the base of a pond, so an exedra was constructed



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The Red House, Painswick's curiously
asymmetrical folly

next to it. The Exedra Garden, bounded by rope swags, contains plants which would have been grown in the 18th century. In late summer, although the heritage roses had finished flowering, was still colourful with calendula, love-lies-bleeding and helianthus.

Heading back towards the entrance, the Red House, which was saved from collapse in 2010, looks down over the whole garden. The inner room with its panelling and fireplace would have been a cosy and most agreeable place for afternoon tea on a fine but chilly autumn day. Latin inscriptions on the stained glass windows quoted from *The Song of Solomon*.

And so, with a sigh, we gratefully made for the tea room.