

Susie West - landscape gardens at Wrest Park

SUSIE WEST: My name is Susie West and I'm standing in Wrest Park in Bedfordshire. Behind me are sprawled acres of beautiful, highly designed formal gardens and an exceptional woodland garden.

I've come here today because I'm going to explore the theme of nature and its relationship to art and design. As we look at a few objects of this enormous garden - and there's a lot to choose from - I'm going to ask you to use your skills of close looking.

Designed landscapes usually include a mixture of hard landscaping, planting, of course, statuary, monuments, and architectural works scattered around, but hopefully brought together in a coherent design. At Wrest Park, we have 300 years of design. This has meant that Wrest has continually evolved, nothing has stood still. So when you come to explore a historic landscape, that's something you'll need to bear in mind.

Wrest park is dominated by its woodland garden, but nearer the house the planting changes significantly and it's dominated there by statuary groups. So as you move around the garden, expect to look for different effects achieved with different groups of objects and materials.

A great place to start to learn more about these sort of historic gardens is by finding a guidebook. I'll tell you here that it was the de Grey family who owned Wrest Park since medieval times. Right up to 1917 when they had to sell the whole property.

But that's the history. What we're doing here is about art and design, and doing some close looking at the objects around us.

There is nothing natural about a garden. Yes, it's got natural materials in it. Yes it's got plants. Yes it's got trees. But all of this is highly artificial. Generally, the closer we are to the house, the more it's obvious that the gardens are an object of high design. And a great place to see that at Wrest Park is just around the corner in the Victorian parterre.

This is the Victorian parterre from the 1830s, and it's gardening as pattern making. The pattern is achieved with the underlying design, but that's highly visible and it's simply filled in with the planting. So the plants provide form, pattern, colour, of course, and texture, don't forget.

I've got four, effectively, tiles in this garden. And so that tells you that the design can be found in other media as well, but it's applied here in three-dimensional, living forms. This highly controlled style of garden design relies heavily on controlling levels. You can see it's a very flat layout, and that makes a change in height all the more important.

In this particular design, it's achieved through the statue, which lifts our eyes up and also reminds you that the statue can look down and see more of the pattern than perhaps I can. If I went inside the house and looked through one of the upper floor windows, I'd have a much better view of the overall design.

An important design component of this particular garden is the conservatory, built of stone. It forms a really useful bridging component between the albeit highly artificial environment of this particular garden, but the even more constrained environment of the house interiors behind it.

As we move further away from the house, we also move further back in time. I've got back to the 1680s with this wonderful sundial. As an object, it's very site-specific. Sundials are quite a sophisticated piece of time technology and the plate, which would be here, that tells you about the time when the sun strikes it has to be made for its particular location in order to be accurate.

There's a big story about technology here. For us, the main interest is the stone form of the support for the dial. This is its pedestal and it uses elements from nature. Down at the base, you can see it's completely encircled by deeply cut leaves. These are a really standard type of ornament from ancient classical architecture known as acanthus leaves.

It's a real plant and you might be able to see it in a garden centre near you, and you'll see it quite frequently not just around Wrest Park, but on a lot of classically influenced statuary.

As we look further up the bulbous pedestal, we see these rather lovely swags. Again, elements from nature. Flowers and fruit are woven in together.

My last object at Wrest Park is this extraordinary monument called the Mithraic altar. A monument's a really useful catch-all term, something that looks like a sculpture, but also has architectural qualities. The clue is in the name. It's supposed to be an altar.

But immediately, this makes us think about scale for this particular object. Scale is really important in understanding it. As you can tell, it's enormous and that's really counter-intuitive because an altar should function like a tabletop. You should be able to see its surface.

Clearly, that's way up here and so scale elevates this object into something beyond the human. It literally makes my viewpoint far too low and it makes me look small, as I feel.

To analyse the form of this monumental object, we start conventionally by looking from the ground and working upwards. The altar itself sits on a substantial base made of flint topped with stone. But as we look at the pedestal of the altar, still made of flint, notice how the texture has changed because the technique of using the flint has changed. From rounded, natural pebble forms to cut surfaces.

As we look higher, we see a form of classical frieze, but it's wrong because it's actually made of brown pebbles, and yet it respects the classical language of architecture. And right at the top, we see the big stone cap. This is carved with what appear to be imitation folds of drapery. So there's a textile that has been laid on top of the altar.

Now, it's given extra architectural topspin by these very fine stone corner ornaments. These are made of enormous, shaggy lions' feet but topped with foliage. This is the acanthus leaf. Again, the deeply cut leaf form which forms such a common part of the classical grammar of ornaments.

So this is what gives this apparently almost local, almost vernacular form for the pedestal, something that elevates it to a higher design. So the total effect is monumental in scale and has this interesting tension between looking a bit rustic, a bit rough almost, and yet with this bit of high art added to it.

So what does it mean? Well, one clue is visible on this side, which is this large stone plaque. He is also known to have been ... This side is inscribed with ancient Greek letters. I can't read ancient Greek, but I believe it's a genuine inscription, it does mean something. But of course, it's only as old as this whole monument.

On the other side, there's a similar plaque. But it uses an even more ancient script, only just becoming known to the 18th century, called cuneiform. At the time, it was known as a script, but it hadn't been deciphered so it was merely a pattern of letters. And this gives us a clue as to why this monument is here in the middle of leafy Bedfordshire and who put it here.

So the monument was constructed in 1748, and it was added to these already old gardens by the generation of owners who were Jemima de Grey and her husband. Jemima inherited from her grandfather.

Jemima, unusually for her era, was a highly educated young woman and she married somebody who appreciated that in her. Together at Wrest Park they created a strong social circle, people who were actively interested in history, and literature, and the classics. And I think they added this monument to their inherited gardens as a kind of in-joke.

It's dedicated to Mithras, he's an ancient Roman deity associated with the sun and with light. He is also known to have been worshipped only in cult groups, and I think this refers to the tight group of friends in the 1740s at Wrest. That's the in-joke. It's their altar.

It refers, then, to a friendship group and part of that group was the known designer called Thomas Wright. He drew this up and organised its construction.

So in setting this monument in context, the history of it adds so much to its significance. Without adding that, it's very difficult to understand why this would be added to these gardens. But looking around the monument gives us a further understanding. We were essentially in the middle of a green room.

There are several of these open enclosures that are carved into the otherwise densely planted woodland garden at Wrest, and they serve to help with the visual organisation of the design here. They are resting points for the eyes as well as for the feet, if you will.

As you walk around the woodland at Wrest, you are tended to needing to follow great avenues, often rather dark and gloomy. And as you emerge into these light filled spaces, you can see that the experience of the design has some pace. It has ebb and flow in the speed at which you encounter the different layers of design.

This is where you really have access to the sky again. And I think that's all the more appropriate for the purpose of the altar and Mithras as the god for light and the sun.

So today at Wrest Park, I've looked at nearly 300 years of art and design in the garden. We've done some close looking at objects, but also noted that understanding their historic context makes them that much more interesting and gives them extra meaning.

We could think about world trade routes, women's access to education and literacy, ancient myth. It's all here. Wrest park has a significance today, however. It's a great area for just walking around and relaxing in, and it's open to the public.

So these sorts of historic designed landscapes also form part of our current debates about the public realm. How do we get access to high quality, designed green spaces like this and in our urban centres? Don't dismiss these historic designed environments as just being about history. They need to be full of people walking around them. They really are about living today.