

GARDENS FOR A BEAUTIFUL AMERICA, 1895–1935: Photographs by Frances Benjamin Johnston. By Sam Watters (New York, Acanthus Press/Library of Congress, 2012) 378 pp; illus. \$79.

This is an unusually sumptuous book that is a welcome addition to a small shelf devoted to serious, well-illustrated books about garden history. It's basically a scholarly study, but in the guise of a luscious coffee-table book; aficionados of early twentieth-century American gardens couldn't do better. The title, *Gardens for a Beautiful America*, is a tongue-in-cheek spin on *Beautiful Gardens in America* by Louise Shelton, first published in 1915 with state-of-the-art black-and-white photographs.

Sam Watters, who has written several books for Acanthus Press, has done a superb job of sifting through a collection of eleven hundred hand-coloured lantern slides housed in the Library of Congress. The images were taken by the renowned photojournalist, Frances Benjamin Johnston (1864–1952), who sometimes worked in collaboration with the equally famous photographer, Mattie Edwards Hewitt. Thanks to both of these women we have an incomparable record of American gardens in their heyday. The selection of Johnston's pictures in the current book reflects the ups and downs of American garden design from 1895 to 1935.

At the outset of his research, Watters found that many of the glass slides were unlabelled, which added to the challenge of selecting images for the book. His resulting research is tucked away in copious notes that are packed with information. For those who want to pursue the subject, there is an excellent bibliography and for the serious bibliophile, he includes a list of the 144 books on garden design that were in Johnston's library. But scholarship aside, this is a book to enjoy for its sheer visual appeal. The oblong format allows enlarged reproductions on facing pages and in a couple of instances there are gatefolds with multiple images of the same garden.

Johnston, who was born in West Virginia and died in New Orleans, began work as a photojournalist in the 1890s by selling

stories to magazines. She also did special commission work in recording African-American students and other subjects that gave her access to many places around the country. Johnston eventually switched to garden photography, which opened up another phase of her career, beginning with photographs she took at the White House. She was a long-time resident of New York City where she ran a studio in which she trained production assistants to hand-tint black-and-white photographs and slides based on the explicit field notes she kept.

Many of the gardens she photographed related to commissions or to thematic albums she assembled for the popular slide lectures she gave around the country to garden clubs and other organisations. Her first lecture in 1911 was entitled 'Our American Gardens', and from that she branched out to topics such as garden planning, small gardens, famous gardens, and the like.

The book is organised around five themes that Johnston classified for her lectures: Gardens of the East, the West, the South, the Old World, and City and Suburbs. Her images, which show the extravagant estate gardens of Newport, Long Island, and California, rarely include children or garden owners. Unquestionably these classically-oriented gardens make for more dramatic photographic compositions than informal cottage gardens that take on a chocolate-box effect with the effusive colours. Some of the best photographs appear in the Old World section with unforgettable images of Italian and French gardens that rival those taken by Charles Latham and Frederick Evans.

The reader can dip into this book as deeply as he wants, but most will enjoy just gazing at the photographs of the golden age of American gardens. As a tireless advocate of the beauties of American gardens, Johnston illustrates Gertrude Jekyll's comment that 'seriously good gardening' was, indeed, being practiced in America.

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