

Ellen Biddle Shipman (1869-1950)

Ellen Biddle Shipman, hailed as one of America's greatest "flower-garden makers," belonged to a generation of women landscape architects who were pioneers in a field that had been dominated by men up to the turn of the century. Daughter of Ellen Fish McGowan Biddle and Colonel James Biddle, she spent much of her youth on frontier outposts in Nevada and Arizona. When the uprising of a local tribe threatened their safety, Ellen, her mother and her brothers took up residence on her grandparents' farm in New Jersey. It was there that she first became acquainted with apple orchards, white picket fences, and old-fashioned flower varieties.

In 1893, Ellen Biddle left Radcliffe College after one year to marry Louis Shipman. In the summer of 1894, Ellen and Louis moved to an artist colony in Cornish, New Hampshire where she was exposed to gardens that rejected tight Victorian bedding schemes popular at the time. Shipman began gaining practical experience at their home, Brook Place. There she created a Colonial style garden with straight paths and fragrant, hardy plants close to the house.

After some financial difficulties and other conflicts, Louis went to London with another woman in 1910, leaving Ellen and their three children -- Ellen, Evan, and Mary -- without support. It was at this time that Shipman's career as a landscape architect began. Many of the women in Cornish worked in design-related occupations, and landscape architecture was one of the few fields open to women.

Shipman and other women were able to enter the profession of landscape architecture largely because of stereotypes of women and gardening. Images of women tending to home gardens had become very popular by the turn of the century and pointed to a larger, gender split in domestic responsibility. This division originated with the notion that women were nurturers, providers of beauty, and nest-builders. As such, women were thought to be temperamentally suited to horticulture and endowed with "natural talents" in the field. These widely held beliefs allowed women to enter this professional field at a time when others were still off limits to them.

Charles Platt, a landscape painter who later became an architect, admired Shipman's practical experience, self-taught knowledge of plant materials, and design sensibilities. He said that he "liked the outcome of [her] efforts at Brook Place," and asked her "to do the planting for the places he was building." Platt had an assistant train Shipman in professional drafting, and then hired her to design flower gardens.

Between 1912 and 1919, Shipman moved from cautious competence into her own personal style of expression. She adopted the principles that had led to Platt's success, including axial layouts, carefully proportioned relationships between house and garden architecture, and strong visual and physical connections between a house and its gardens. Shipman's collaboration with Platt sharpened her design sense, established a base of contacts and clients, and helped her master architectural skills and intricacies of large-scale planting. Shipman favored the Colonial style she had become acquainted with in Cornish over the European models which Platt and other landscape architects were using.

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In 1920 Shipman moved to New York City and opened her own office. During the almost 40 years she practiced landscape architecture, Shipman would only hire graduates from the Lowthorpe School of Landscape Architecture, Gardening, and Horticulture for Women. Although there is no documentation of the reasoning behind this employment policy, it is likely that Shipman wanted to help women in the field. Females were generally refused apprenticeships in male offices, and male applicants to female-run offices were probably scarce. An all-female office like Shipman's ultimately led to the success of a generation of female landscape architects.

Shipman's client list primarily included wealthy industrialists interested in creating a "country place" that symbolized their status. She dealt mostly with women, as wives were often gardeners themselves, and generally more knowledgeable. Shipman allowed their horticultural interests to play a role in the design saying "I feel strongly that each garden that I do is like a portrait of the person and should express their likes and dislikes."

Throughout her career, Shipman stressed the importance of privacy and enclosure in her gardens: "...privacy is the most essential aspect of any garden, what ever type or period." Shipman's garden designs gave her women clients what many of them wanted -- a walled and secluded area for retreat. Her gardens provided areas of quiet domestic intimacy for women to escape from the "trials of life" and their hectic public schedules.

Much of Shipman's acclaim arose from her borders. She discovered that borders impacted her female clients emotionally. Borders allowed for intimate interaction with the garden because they required the domestically based activities of planning, planting, cultivating, and arranging flowers. They also provided a simple and effective means of growing many different kinds of flowers. Shipman used old-fashioned plant varieties to create the feel of the "grandmother's garden" like the ones she had been exposed to on her grandparents' farm in New Jersey and in the Cornish artists colony.

After 1929, Shipman earned most of her income from a few extremely wealthy clients who had weathered the stock market crash. Work was scarce during World War II and her business lost money. When post-war residential work declined, Shipman sold her New York residence, office, and furnishings in October 1946. During her final years, she divided her time between Brook Place and East House, a home she had purchased in Warwick West, Bermuda. It was there that Ellen Shipman died of pneumonia on March 27, 1950.

Of the more than 650 gardens that Shipman designed between 1914 and 1946, few remain intact. And yet, her accomplishments are still with us today. At a time when landscape architects and other design professionals were looking to European models, Shipman championed the American style. Perhaps more importantly, Ellen Shipman helped to open the door for women into a male-dominated profession. She overcame many obstacles before finding success as "the dean of American women landscape architects."

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The walled English Garden, originally designed by the Seiberlings' landscape architect Warren Manning in 1912, was one of Gertrude Seiberling's favorite places to reflect, compose, and meet with her children. However, she quickly grew tired of its original harsh color scheme and haphazard layout. Her dissatisfaction with this part of Manning's work might be explained by the fact that he generally preferred large scale planning to small-scale gardens.

In 1928 Warren Manning reported to the Seiberlings: "I should be pleased to have you call Mrs. Ellen Shipman for this garden as I consider her to be one of the best, if not the very best Flower Garden Maker in America." Ellen Shipman presented Gertrude Seiberling with a planting plan to redesign the walled English Garden at Stan Hywet with a blue, yellow, pink, white, and lavender color scheme. Historic photographs reveal that Mrs. Seiberling followed Shipman's plan soon after 1929.

The walled English Garden contains many elements typical of Ellen Shipman. The garden has the feel of an outdoor room isolated from its surrounding landscape. Its high walls and the change in level emphasize this feeling after entering the garden. Its axial layout and the dropped-level pool lead the visitor's eye to a garden sculpture, a figure group by William Paddock entitled "The Garden of the Water Goddess." Straight paths are surrounded by flower borders reminiscent of the "grandmother's garden" and its old-fashioned plant varieties.

The English Garden at Stan Hywet underwent many changes since 1929. Over the years it grew into a shade garden and in 1990 work began to restore it to Shipman's original design. What visitors to Stan Hywet Hall and Gardens now see is the garden as it was designed for Gertrude Seiberling in 1929. It is one of the only remaining, historically accurate gardens by Ellen Biddle Shipman open to the public today.

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