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The New Norton Simon Sculpture Garden

PAMELA WATERMAN

Color sequences varied with the progression of each season accentuating the changes in light and weather.

Elizabeth Murray, *Monet's Passion*

Located on a dramatic piece of land near the Arroyo Seco on the western edge of Pasadena, the Norton Simon Museum is a California treasure. Constructed in 1969 on the site of Carmelita, one of Pasadena's famous early gardens, the Pasadena Art Museum was reorganized and renamed in honor of its generous benefactor, industrialist Norton Simon, in 1974. His newly installed collection of art catapulted the museum into the top tier of smaller art institutions.

For the next two decades, Simon's extensive outdoor sculpture collection was displayed in an area sandwiched between two wings of the museum building. Although the sculpture was first rate, the space housing the collection had a sterile appearance, often described as "corporate functional," with its flat rectangular pond sitting in the middle of an uninspired grassy space. Few museum visitors were compelled to venture outdoors, even with the promise of works by Henry Moore, Jacque Lipchitz, Barbara Hepworth, and other world-famous sculptors.

When the museum began a \$6.5 million renovation in 1996, architect Frank Gehry recommended that the daunting task of giving life to the sculpture garden be given to Nancy Goslee Power & Associates, the Santa Monica-based design firm with whom Gehry had worked on several projects, including his own garden.

Norton Simon's widow, Jennifer Jones, a powerful force as head of the board of directors, requested a sculpture garden with a feeling like that of Claude Monet's garden at Giverny in France. Power's first thought was "How can I get Giverny out of this?" Monet's masterpiece exists in a totally different climatic and aesthetic setting from that of the Norton Simon Museum.

Author of the recently republished *The Gardens of California* and winner of the first Henry Francis du Pont Award for Excellence in Garden Design (1999) presented by Winterthur Gardens, Nancy Goslee Power and her staff have designed nearly two hundred gardens, mostly in California. She is best known for

The central pond at the Norton Simon Museum, with star sedge (*Rhynchospora latifolia*) in the foreground, backed by yellow flag iris (*Iris pseudacorus*), waterlilies (*Nymphaea* cultivars), and sculptures by Aristide Maillol and Henry Moore in the distance. Author's photographs

In the strongest reference to Giverny, water lilies (*Nymphaea* hybrids) float *en masse* at the pond's edge



her relaxed style, ingenious use of plants, and strong sense of structure and color. Clients have only to visit her own garden in Santa Monica to see how successfully she blends plants to create a private garden world in a small space.

The Design Challenge

Power welcomed the assignment of creating a garden for an entire community. Her challenge at the Norton Simon Museum became one of creating a space that would entice



museum visitors to enter the garden and enjoy the art outside. Large expanses of newly installed glass in the central entrance hall reveal the basic garden composition. Where access before had been less obvious—and the draw less enticing—new glass doors now encourage

free and easy passage into the garden.

In addition to drawing museum visitors outside, Power needed to create a garden that would complement the choice art collection—the best in Los Angeles. At the same time, she was being asked to address the wishes of

board members who looked toward France for inspiration.

Loosely influenced by the design of Giverny, Power and project designer Laurie Lewis envisioned a free-form pond that would reflect the sky and clouds. The flow of the pool and the placement of plants around it is driven by the existing trees and the necessity for showcasing seventeen large works of art. With the body of water as the organizing principle of the design, Power began to plan individual sections of the garden, each combining a dramatic palette of plants with the established trees. Interestingly, nature cooperated during the design. A large fig near the entrance blew over in a windstorm, thereby enabling the designers to bring the pond even closer to the glass walls of the museum entry.

Today the pond is a large, sinuous, shimmering body of water, alive with plants and wildlife. Teeming with water lilies, sedges, iris, and other water plants, it curves around one end of the building. Not everything is visible at once. A strolling path of decomposed granite leading around the pond permits visitors to leisurely discover the sculpture arranged throughout the garden

The Spring Walk

Power demonstrates her flair in using color and unusual plants from the first step into the garden. The path through the Spring Walk weaves between a collection of small flowering trees including yellow trumpet flower (*Tecoma stans*), *Tipuana tipu*, and gold medallion tree (*Cassia leptophylla*) underplanted with masses of daylilies (*Hemerocallis* cultivars) in shades of yellow. At the pond's edge are bog plants such as golden-eyed grass (*Sisyrinchium californicum*), California gray rush (*Juncus patens*), and star sedge (*Rhynchospora latifolia*). Pond plants here include yellow flag iris (*Iris pseudacorus*) and yellow and white water lilies (*Nymphaea* cultivars).

A few steps down the path the color palette shifts to plants that make a statement during the warmest months. Here Power has arranged orange hibiscus (*Hibiscus rosa-sinensis* 'Cherie'),

lion's tail (*Leonotus leonuris*), kangaroo paws (*Anigozanthos flavidus*), montbretia (*Crocasmia* hybrids), *Rudbeckia* 'Sonora' and 'Indian Summer', yarrow (*Achillea millefolium* 'TerraCotta'), and *Gazania* 'Aztec Queen'. To provide a contrast to these bright flower colors, she used *Euphorbia characiās* subsp. *wulfenii*, with its chartreuse flowers, and succulent aeoniums in both green and black.

To assure that each piece of sculpture would blend harmoniously with the plants and trees surrounding it, museum staff made full-sized paperboard cutouts of the works. Before the heavy granite bases holding the sculpture were moved into place, the designers were able to visualize how each piece would relate to the others as well as to the garden setting.

Power found the large granite blocks used in the garden in a Fresno quarry, where they had languished since 1929. She was able to choose the perfect stone to fit each sculpture and found pieces to create the fountain at the rear of the garden. Additional stones are used as benches.

Somewhat obscured from the garden entrance, one of the most striking pieces of sculpture becomes visible in the Summer Garden. Called La Montagne (The Mountain), the work depicts a large goddess-like creature in repose, her hand reaching across the pond. This and other sculptures by French artist Aristide Maillol are cast in lead. Because the soft gray of the casting material and expressive modeling of the female figure gives the piece great dignity, Power placed La Montagne in a prominent spot. Other works in this section of the garden include Henry Moore's King and Queen. The two figures rest on their large block of granite, nestled in the curve of the building as if watching the activity about them. It is one of seven bronzes in the museum's collection by Moore, considered to be one of the twentieth century's most important sculptors.

Working With Existing Trees

At the point where the pond curves at the rear of the building, the existing trees are tallest

and create varying degrees of shade. Near a dominating Port Jackson fig (*Ficus rubiginosa*), a cooling moon garden was designed with primarily white flowers to brighten up the area. Power combined white agapanthus (*Agapanthus praecox* subsp. *orientalis* 'Albus') with white ginger (*Hedychium coronarium*), hellebores (*Helleborus* hybrids), calla lily (*Zantedeschia aethiopica*), and fairy lily (*Zephyranthes candida*). Henry Moore's flowing sculpture, Reclining Figure, was strategically placed near an undulating limb of the fig so that the viewer would see the relationship between man-made and natural curves.

Across the path from the fig, Power placed the stone fountain and surrounded it with sago palms (*Cycas revoluta*). The plants of the autumn border adjacent to the fountain include bird of paradise (*Strelitzia reginae*), heavenly bamboo (*Nandina domestica*), alstroemeria, cannas and euphorbias. A small hill behind the tree was terraced to create a sound buffer against the noise of a nearby freeway. A walkway on the hillside features large specimens of *Brugmansia versicolor* 'Charles Grimaldi'.

Continuing on the path to the far side of the pond, the visitor arrives at the "hottest" part of the garden where stands a spreading coral tree (*Erythrina crista-galli*). Like the hot spot in the center of English artist JMW Turner's dreamy waterscapes, the coral tree is a focal point in this garden. Beside it rests another of Maillol's works, La Rivière (The River). In nearby beds are plantings of equally hot *Alstroemeria*, *Libertia peregrinans*, aloes, and drifts of *Sparaxis* in spring.

A mature grove of lemon-scented gums (*Eucalyptus citriodora*) provides a striking backdrop to the western edge of the garden. Power planted a subtle but lovely combination at the base of the trees, incorporating woolly thyme (*Thymus pseudolanuginosus*) and snow-in-summer (*Cerastium tomentosum*). A curving line of baboon flower (*Babiana stricta*) enlivens the eucalyptus walk in spring.

A seamless blending of plants leads to the Kashmir Cypress Garden with two centerpiece trees, deodar (*Cedrus deodara*) and Kashmir cypress (*Cupressus cashmiriana*), a graceful

conifer seldom seen in gardens. An harmonic planting of pride of Madeira (*Echium candicans*) and *Lavandula* 'Goodwin Creek Gray' with honey bush (*Melianthus major*) forms a pleasing gray backdrop to a third Maillol sculpture, The Aire. The reclining statue seems to float on a cloud of lavender.

The final section of the garden features a newly planted grove of tulip trees (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), with green and orange, tulip-shaped flowers, in a setting clearly inspired by Parisian parks. As the trees mature, they will shade the portable seating intended for this corner of the garden while their trunks will provide interesting visual frames for views back into the garden or across the pond.

A Hint of Giverny in California

When the museum finished the lengthy remodeling, visitors came in the front lobby, looked out, and headed straight for the garden. The vista they now see through the glass wall is tantalizing and mysteriously enchanting. In the foreground they spot small pond plants and grasses. In the midground they can detect bright flower color and, through a filmy haze of plants, the outlines of sculpture. The background is dominated by the silvery trunks of the lemon scented gums. The plants and trees seem to be in motion, sometimes from the wind, sometimes from the rush of small dragonflies that feed at the pond. In spring ducks glide through the water and a great white egret flies in for a visit.

The new garden is a great success, providing a lovely setting for the art collection and a comfortable place for people. Attendance has doubled since the renovation of the museum and garden. The garden has become a romantic destination, whether for a simple stroll, a midday lunch, or to enjoy the magical light of dusk on a Friday evening. There have been so many inquiries about the trees and flowers that the museum has installed discreet plaques identifying the major plantings. A pamphlet on the gardens was quickly produced, and Power is now planning a book on the project.



Aristide Maillol's *L'Aire* floats above a cloud of lavender (*Lavandula* 'Goodwin Creek Gray')



Aristide Maillol's *La Montagne* with the bright colors of the summer garden beyond



The sculpture garden at the Norton Simon is not an imitation of Giverny, although it certainly inspires the same sense of peace and repose. It subtly reminds us of Monet's vision at the same time it reveals itself as an impressionistic garden true to its California setting and climate. 🌿

If you should like to visit . . .

The Norton Simon Museum is located at 411 West Colorado Boulevard, just west of the I-210 freeway in Pasadena, California (626/449-6840). Hours are Tuesday through Sunday from 11 am to 5 pm. An admission is charged.

The central pond with the Norton Simon Museum galleries beyond; Aristide Maillol's *La Montagne* sits at the left edge of the pond

The stone fountain with sago palms (*Cycas revoluta*)

