



Standing guard in the yard

Sculptures have a long, proud history for adding stately elegance – and surprise – to a garden

PHOTOS AND STORY BY DAVID HOBSON

I only caught a glimpse of the couple as I entered the garden. I followed the path around the lawn, past the pergola that gave shade to the bench below. The pair were in a corner, almost hidden in foliage.

As I approached, I felt I was intruding on an intense conversation between lovers that had fallen silent at that very moment. Had they declared their love? Had they quarrelled? What had she asked of him? Had he answered?

I tried to interpret their expressions, to imagine their thoughts. I wanted to hear them speak, but the silence continued.

But then, why would five feet of inanimate concrete have words for me?

The pair had been lovingly placed there when the garden was young; so many years ago that bright yellow lichen now adorned his jacket. The quiet presence of this piece of statuary enhanced the garden, perhaps evoking pleasant memories in the one who tended it throughout the seasons.



ABOVE: This pair appear to be having a private conversation in a garden in Portsmouth, U.K.

RIGHT: Glenn G. Smith's works are displayed in a small sculpture garden at the Homer Watson House & Gallery at 1754 Old Mill Rd. in Kitchener.

TOP PHOTO: "The Moon" is in the Yorkshire Sculpture Park.

LEFT: "River of Time," by Ukrainian sculptor Victoria Chichinadze, celebrates lace making.

ABOVE: A sculpture sets off Peter Beales roses at the Chelsea Flower Show.



ABOVE: Bronze girl, at the Chelsea Flower Show in London.

LEFT: Artist Dale Chihuly depicts plants and trees in blown glass.



philosophical or religious motifs and set on pedestals to be gazed at in awe.

During the Italian Renaissance in the 14th century, when gardens became larger with a symmetrical design, there was always classical statuary. The Italianate style found its way to Britain, particularly during the 19th century when travellers returning from a Grand Tour of Europe developed their own Renaissance gardens and filled them with statuary.

Travel to the great gardens of Britain today, built long ago by the aristocracy or early industrialists, and it's soon apparent statuary was big business in the 18th and 19th centuries. Materials had been traditional marble, stone or bronze, but now all garden owners of note wanted to enhance their estates. The need was met by the introduction of composite materials, though often of inferior quality — parts of Michelangelo's David crumbling away would be unlikely to inspire or impress anyone.

This was resolved about 1770 when

an enterprising businesswoman named Eleanor Coade invented a unique material to be used for moulding neoclassical statues and garden ornaments. It was of such high quality it was virtually impervious to the eroding effect of weather. It outperformed natural stone, but by the 1840s other artificial materials using Portland cement came on the market and the more expensive Coade stone was largely phased out.

Lost over time, the original secret recipe, a form of ceramic using crushed flint, fine quartz and crushed glass, was rediscovered and further refined by sculptor and stone carver Stephen Pettiifer. In 2000 he founded the Coade company in London, England, which continues to produce all forms of statuary. These days what may appear to be an original piece carved from stone could well be made from Coade stone.

By the start of the 20th century, the popularity of classical sculpture waned somewhat with the advent of modern sculpture, beginning with the work of Auguste Rodin, who exhibited at the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1900. Following this explosion of imagination, every form of abstract artistic expression produced in every possible medium has appeared in galleries, public installations and in gardens.

Just as the Greeks and Romans created places to display their sculptures, there are parks today created specifically to display sculptural works. Somehow, the placing of sculptures in a natural setting enhances the moment and is a way of introducing such works to the public.

Locally, Cambridge has its lovely Sculpture Garden on Grand Avenue South alongside the Grand River. At the Homer Watson Gallery in Kitchener, there are whimsical works by local artist Glenn G. Smith on display in the small garden there.

The Seattle-based blown-glass artist Dale Chihuly exhibits his revolutionary work in gardens around the world with multicoloured pieces that can be mistaken

for plants and trees of the natural world. At Kew Gardens in London, his work was once exhibited both in the gardens and inside the majestic palm house because, as he said, he always wanted to show his glasswork in a glasshouse.

His pieces have also appeared at the Desert Botanical Garden in Phoenix, Ariz. On my visit, I could easily have mistaken his spiky, chartreus cactus for a rare saguaro if it hadn't been sparkling so in the bright desert light.

I'd much rather wander a park or garden than a gallery or museum, and it was in those large stately gardens of Britain where I first kindled a love of sculpture.

Renishaw Hall and Gardens in the north of England is typical of the 19th-century style with its stunning Italianate gardens. Statuary graces the pathways, stairs, between garden rooms and within them, where they stand in the shade of topiary hedges five metres high. Sometimes the topiary works are sculptures in their own right.

In the south of England at Hever Castle, the childhood home of Anne Boleyn, the American millionaire and philanthropist William Waldorf Astor added a magnificent Italian garden. Beginning in 1906, he filled it with a collection of statuary from his European travels.

More a park than a garden, the Yorkshire Sculpture Park was developed specifically for the display of sculpture, including a number of Henry Moore pieces. Not sure how Moore would feel about sheep wandering around his art, although the park does honour his commitment to having his work placed in the open air.

It was in a more formal part of the park I discovered the "Moon," a piece I'd perhaps unfairly describe as a large-scale version of a Victorian gazing ball. Hand-blown glass garden accents were first recorded as being produced in Venice in the 13th century. In the 16th century, the English philosopher Francis Bacon commented that a proper garden would have round coloured balls for

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The "Fallen Deodar" on display at the Chelsea Flower Show in London.

the sun to play upon, and by the Victorian era they became a popular garden feature and still are. They are intriguing, reflecting and shimmering as the light changes, but I'm happy to gaze at them in someone else's garden.

The "Moon," however, by Swiss artist Not Vital (a confusing name in English) is something I'd covet if my garden were large enough to house it. "Moon" is a highly polished sphere in stainless steel replete with tidy, random dimples representing, I suppose, the more ragged craters of the moon.

Three metres in diameter, it sits on an expanse of lawn, and like the real moon's gravitational field, it draws viewers to touch, to marvel and to observe the distorted reflections of the tree-filled park. It now has its own Saturn-like ring, formed by the circling footsteps of a captivated audience.

One of the finest, though fleeting, exhibitions of garden art can be found at the Chelsea Flower Show held in London, England, in May. Here designers compete for gold medals in garden design.

The gardens are imaginative wonders, works of art in their own right, and typically contain sculptural pieces to complement and enhance the experience.

At the 2016 show, a garden by Russian

designer Tatyana Goltsova explored the complex relationships between Russia, Ukraine and the U.K., though not in the current political sense.

A work by Ukrainian sculptor Victoria Chichinadze embodied the spirit of the traditional lace makers of Eastern Europe and was allowed to beautifully dominate the garden. Crafted from 600 kg of aluminum, the white, lace-like form, in sharp contrast with the surrounding green, swirled through the garden to skim the surface of a water feature called "River of Time," culminating at a transcendent female figure.

Also at the 2016 show, a gold medal-winning garden by Chris Beardshaw prominently featured a haunting, contemplative face in verdigris bronze. Named the "the Fallen Deodar," it was one of a limited edition of six by sculptor Jilly Sutton.

At 1.5 metres across, the original was carved from, and inspired by, a massive Deodar tree (*Cedrus deodara*) that had fallen on bleak Dartmoor, not far from Sutton's home in Devon. The original work now resides in a garden somewhere in Tokyo, fittingly owned by one of the tree-leaping Japanese actresses who appeared in the movie "Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon." 

ON THE HOME FRONT ...

Given the historic association of art and gardens, it may be that a garden is not complete without a sculpture or piece of artwork. But ensuring each complements the other is the challenge.

Those who design both sculptures and gardens understand the importance of scale, texture and appropriate placement, and it's no less important in a home garden.

I've always believed a garden is a personal space, accepting of anything the owner chooses to place there. Garden gnomes, super heroes, well-dressed mannequins and even the many nefarious "Lord of the Rings" characters have all found a place in gardens. A monstrous orc, however, would be more suited to a huge gothic garden rather than lurching out of a flower bed, unless, of course, it happens to frighten rabbits.

Besides these outliers, an endless supply of decorative, often beautiful accoutrements awaits the browser at every garden show and gift store where there's something to suit anyone's taste. Smaller items are useful for punctuating an entrance or creating particular interest within a planting, but too many are . . . well, too many.

Plonk something in the middle of the front yard and it's on public display. That group of fake deer on a country property viewed through a morning mist can for a moment be delightful – or induce a moment of panic – but in the harsh light of midday . . . well, they're still plastic deer.

And massive concrete lions rampant at the foot of a suburban driveway somehow don't capture the essence of the veldt — they'd be far more effective lurking in the shrubbery.

Many an expanse of green lawn does indeed cry out for a focal point, yet it is so worthwhile to reflect on those masters of design when choosing a sculpture and the way they considered theme, scale, location — and the garden.

A graceful figure such as Aphrodite, framed naturally in an arch of trees, can be perfect. Position at a distance point to become a silhouette at sunset or sunrise and the effect is magical. When it has attained a rich, mossy patina and is revealed only when a breeze stirs foliage, it becomes an enchanting dreamscape, and sometimes startling feature of the garden.

— David Hobson

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