

Learning from Elysium

Tom Stuart-Smith takes a closer look at the elements that make Rousham in Oxfordshire one of the country's great gardens



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TOP The Praeneste Terrace at Rousham, a garden that combines geometry with naturalistic planting. **ABOVE** Rousham's Vale of Venus is typical of the garden's design, which has a contemporary air despite being laid out by William Kent in 1738.

When I began making a garden at our barn home in Hertfordshire fourteen years ago, the site was completely bare, with not a single shrub or tree on the place. This was a daunting void - but also a wonderful opportunity to make sense of a blank. I planted a framework of hedges in hornbeam, box and yew which interlock and partially enclose a number of interconnecting spaces.

Now the hedges are mature, with the hornbeam about ten feet high and impressively architectural. In winter, they give the place some imposing and fairly stark structure, like the walls of an abandoned village. In spring, a gradual tide of herbage rises and almost swamps my underlying bit of rigour.

By June, when it's all flowering away, I sometimes feel apologetic for its blowsy excesses. My blushing garden with its effusion of roses, cranesbills and verbascums is so profuse that it's sometimes quite hard to see the lines underneath. It all seems far removed from the cool minimalism that I aspire to in more ascetic moments.

In July, as an escape from this head high herbaceous confusion, I visited Rousham for the first time in fifteen years. Rousham is the ultimate in understated elegance, and a lot more. The garden was beautifully empty



LEFT Hornbeam hedges delineate interlocking spaces in Tom's garden as sedums, asters and *Stipa gigantea* create an explosion of growth. **RIGHT** Verbascums, epilobium and euphorbias under tall standard bays.



and we picnicked in The Praeneste as the rain teemed down over the River Cherwell. The only blossoms in William Kent's magical, allegorical garden were the wild waterlilies in the river.

No question here of choking on floral excess. The wonderful effect was achieved by the creation of a series of exquisitely articulated spaces that are as clear today as they are in a plan of 1738. Horace Walpole said that 'the whole is as elegant and antique as if the Emperor Julian had selected the most pleasing solitude about Daphne to enjoy a philosophical retirement'.

The references to classical mythology may slip through our fingers nowadays, but the design seems almost modern. The structure develops from the grand, level bowling green in front of the house, which is entirely formal, to the sinuous and serpentine walks with views to the outer landscape or to temples and sculptures. There is a perfect balance between the naturalistic and the geometric, the grand and the intimate. But what especially interests me is the way in which the various parts of the garden are joined, so that there is no obviously prescribed way in which you experience it.

I think this is different from almost all designed landscape that came before. With William Kent, for the first

ABOVE AND BELOW In Tom Stuart-Smith's own garden, the excesses of a summer profusion of roses and herbaceous plants are kept in check by the structural lines of box hedging, which will offer their own charm come winter.



time, the garden becomes a place for individual exploration and revelation. A recent study showed that there were more than 1,000 potential routes around Rousham, none passing along the same walk twice. At many of our contemporary gardens the visitor's experience is more like a country house tour, with a rather predictable sequence of rooms, each decked out in a different style.

Rousham teaches us the importance of the overall composition, how the connections between the parts are as important as the parts themselves, and how, even in a highly structured garden, there can still be discovery and the individual can feel more than a pawn in somebody else's game. It is a highly controlled composition that maintains its position through the seasons and decades, perfectly balancing the geometric and the naturalistic. The lines may be clearer in winter, but the spatial experience remains. William Kent's creation was that of an everlasting Elysium populated by immortals, and 270 years isn't a bad start.

In contrast, my garden is three acres populated by two small dogs, several rabbits and one very irritating mole, and I don't really mind if it returns to a field in 50 years. The garden is also completely devoid of any classical reference. Instead, I have tried, within this comparatively small area, to accentuate the seasonal changes between the congested profusion of summer and the sparse architecture of winter.

The garden is therefore, on one level, a small essay in the transience of everything. But at a deeper level I have tried to draw on some of the lessons of Rousham: the relationship of garden to landscape, the essential liberalism of a design that never instructs and enforces, the multitude of opportunities for exploration.

I'd be hard pushed to find a garden that has more to teach us about how to beguile, soothe and enchant. Rousham is a truly great work of art and a source of endless inspiration. ■

Five times Chelsea gold medal winner Tom Stuart-Smith has designed gardens for RHS Rosemoor, Devon, and for the Queen at Windsor. He lives in Hertfordshire with his wife and three children.

Rousham, Nr Steeple Aston, Bicester, Oxfordshire OX25 4QX. Tel: +44 (0)1869 347110. The gardens are open all year, daily from 10am-4.30pm.