

GARDEN OF OBJECTS: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SUBJECT

O JARDIM DE OBJETOS – INTRODUZINDO A QUESTÃO

*Solange de Aragão
Euler Sandeville Junior*

ABSTRACT

It has become common in Brazilian gardens, especially in those cultivated by their owners, the use of ornaments and elements such as fountains, porcelain animals and little garden dwarfs. From this point of view one can speak of “gardens of objects”, sometimes with a ludic meaning, other times with a mystical meaning, and other times yet with a meaning of memory or with an affective meaning for their owners. A garden that, inevitably, integrates the current panorama of consumer society, although its origin goes back, in Brazil, to the nineteenth century. The text aims at discussing some issues related to this garden, such as the question of kitsch, the question of mass culture and the issue of simulacrum, from readings and analyzes of some examples of such garden areas. The intention is to instigate issues about this garden, participant of the landscape of the capital of São Paulo as well as of some other Brazilian cities, and to present some assertions on the subject. In general, one observes in this garden the creation of scenery framed by the vegetation and starred by those objects that constitute them, which endows to these spaces a greater complexity in their arrangement when compared to other gardens, simpler, cultivated by their owners. By introducing fountains, wind bells, colors and textures, their owners also work the sensory perception of those who observe them, arousing their curiosity and their imagination.

Keywords: Garden. Culture. Objects of Consumption. Simulacrum.

1 This research arose from the observation *in loco* of several of these gardens in the landscape of São Paulo and in other Brazilian cities, such as Belo Horizonte, Porto Alegre and Florianópolis, and from the lack of analyses specifically regarding this topic.

RESUMO

Tornou-se comum no jardim brasileiro, especialmente naquele cultivado pelos próprios moradores, o emprego de enfeites e elementos como fontes, bichos de porcelana e anõezinhos de jardim. Nesse sentido, pode-se falar em um “jardim de objetos”, às vezes com um significado lúdico, outras vezes com um significado místico, e outras vezes ainda com um significado de memória ou um significado afetivo para os seus proprietários. Um jardim que, inevitavelmente, integra o panorama atual da sociedade de consumo, embora sua origem remonte, no Brasil, ao século XIX. O objetivo aqui é colocar e discutir algumas questões relacionadas a esse jardim, como a questão do kitsch, a questão da cultura de massa e a questão do simulacro, a partir de leituras e análises de alguns exemplares. A intenção é instigar questões acerca desse jardim, participe da paisagem da capital paulista e de outras cidades brasileiras, e apresentar algumas asserções sobre o tema. De um modo geral, observa-se nesse jardim a criação de cenários emoldurados pela vegetação e protagonizados pelos objetos que os constituem, o que acaba por conferir a esses espaços uma complexidade maior em seu arranjo se comparados a outros jardins, mais simples, cultivados pelos próprios moradores. Seus proprietários, ao introduzir fontes, sinos do vento, cores e texturas, trabalham também a percepção sensorial daqueles que os observam, despertando sua curiosidade e sua imaginação.

Palavras-Chave: Jardim. Cultura. Objetos de consumo. Simulacros.

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1. GARDEN OF OBJECTS – INTRODUCING THE ISSUE

There are gardens of all shapes and sizes, with all kinds of designs and all kinds of arrangements. Gardens in which sometimes ornamental plants predominate, gardens full of flowers, gardens in which greater importance is attached to water, gardens in which stonework stands out. There are simpler gardens and more complex, bolder gardens. Some are designed with art; others simply reveal the taste and care of their owner. Within this wide variety of possibilities in conception is the garden of objects. A garden usually situated in front of single-storey houses, but sometimes extending around the side and to the back. The difference between this garden and the others is that, in addition to flowers and plants, it contains a series of objects and elements linked to consumer society (porcelain animals, wind chimes, industrialized toys, small artificial fountains), often aiming at creating a playful or mystical scenario that can refer to the idea of a miniature forest, in a kind of simulacrum.

2

The garden of objects is usually cultivated by its owner, who is also responsible for watering and adding plants. In these gardens you can find not only ornamental species, but useful plants - coffee plants, herbs, vegetables and fruits. The traditional mixes with the new: the garden with useful meaning and the consumer society garden in one single piece of ground.

In this same garden, it is also possible to find handcrafted elements - another contradiction of the garden of objects. The intention to impress a peculiar and personal feature on the garden as opposed to the consumer objects that are repeated in the garden areas.

Possessive alienation or kitsch attitude? Playful or mystical? Creation of simulacra or of a place of memories? What predominates in the object garden? In what sense can these garden areas also be defined as consumer society gardens?

Among the various modes of relationship between man and his material scenario, Abraham Moles mentions "possessive alienation" and "kitsch attitude." The former "transforms the being

into a prisoner in a shell of objects, so much so that he spends his life assembling it around him, in the intimacy of his personal space"; the latter corresponds to "a stable kind of relationship between man and his environment, artificial, full of permanent and ephemeral objects and forms" (MOLES, 1975, p. 21). In the object garden, both situations can be seen.

These gardens are assembled gradually, through the almost daily addition of new elements - as revealed by interviews with homeowners - in a way they spend their lives setting up the garden, not in the privacy of their personal space but rather in an area to be viewed by passersby. They are purchased objects, gifts received, objects brought from trips, all of which are incorporated into the gardens day after day, as if their owners were actually creating a quilt of objects around them - the garden becomes a place of dream, fantasy, playful, a place of memories. This aspect



Figure 1 – Part of an object garden in the city of São Paulo, located in the Vila Madalena neighborhood. On the wall and on the steps, vases with flowers and plants mix with the most diverse objects. Source: São Paulo, 2007.

often seems more important in the garden of objects than the search for artificiality of the environment, than the craving for kitsch attitude objects - even though kitsch attitude is in some ways imbued with "possessive alienation" and often reveals itself in these gardens, since some objects common to these spaces are *a priori* defined as "kitsch" by critics and art scholars, such as garden gnomes.

The manufacture of garden gnomes, as we know them today, dates back to mid-nineteenth century Germany, and this tradition continued in France and Alsace - the first manufacture of garden gnomes was created in 1872 in Germany by Auguste Heissner².

These iconic figures - part of mythology, Germanic legends, Grimm's tales, and literature - persist in contemporary culture, appearing not only in gardens but even in films such as *Amélie* by Jean-Pierre Jeunet.

"Amélie Poulain and her traveling gnome, archetype of the kitsch wave that makes garden gnomes emblematic characters that appear today in movies, advertisements, websites". (SALLES, 2007, our translation)³.

This kitsch wave has been in vogue since the late twentieth century, when the GGLF (Garden Gnome Liberation Front) was created in Paris and began to kidnap or capture the gnomes from garden areas, returning them to forests and woods or distributing them in unusual places, such as on the steps of the Church of Saint-Die-des-Vosges. This "front", which has been operating since 1997, has found supporters around the world. The impression is that everything related to these elements has a whimsical touch.

In addition to this front, the International Association for the Protection of Garden Gnomes was created, which likewise provoked general mirth (Normand, 1997).

² See the text by Frédérique Crestin-Billet, *Les nains de jardin: nous voici, nous voilà*. (Paris: De Borée Éditions, 2005).

³ In the original French: "Amélie Poulain et son nain voyageur, archétype de la vague kitsch qui fait des nains de jardin des personnages emblématiques que l'on retrouve aujourd'hui dans des films, des publicités, des sites internet."

In France, garden gnomes are gaining in popularity, spreading in the northern region and in front of the simplest houses. For some, they symbolize absolute bad taste - the result of a Germanic tradition inspired by Priape's ancient representations. On the other hand, they have appeared in "elegant" manifestations, such as "L'Art du Jardin", which currently "is not insensitive to these popular connotation characters" ⁴ (NORMAND, 1997, our translation).

In Brazil, the first garden gnomes appeared in the nineteenth century, through European influence. Gilberto Freyre noted the presence of these elements in lithographs of this period:

"From the nineteenth century we have lithographs of gardens of two story houses and farms, not only animated by water from fountains and the freshness of the spurts, but also populated by figures of bearded gnomes, naked little boys, bronze slaves, strong and respectful so as to serve as an example for the flesh and blood ones, beautiful women, representing the four seasons and twelve months of the year, some disappearing among foliage, others well in the sun, sporting Greco-Roman whiteness; some in solemn attitudes, holding torches which, at the end of the nineteenth century would become gas burners". (FREYRE, 2006, p. 319-20)⁵.

To this day, these "naked little boys" and statues of women representing the four seasons of the year and of strong men with "Greco-Roman whiteness" are commonly found in front of residences that have a certain luxury and refinement, as if these statues attributed status to the place they are located. But garden gnomes, although they can be found in front of more luxurious residences, are more common in middle-class townhouses and terraced gardens. These objects characterized many Brazilian gardens in the 20th century and are also part of the decoration of

⁴ In the original French: "n'est pas restée insensible à ces personnages d'extraction populaire".

⁵ The sociologist, in his observations on the house and the garden, highlights the existence of garden gnomes in the nineteenth century, a fashion that would spread in the twentieth century and would remain in vogue in the 21st century in Brazilian cities, such as São Paulo.

21st century garden areas, now accompanied by other elements. They indicate the permanence of late-nineteenth-century European influence and the taste for playfulness, or even a certain mysticism, considering the belief in their gifts of magical powers.

These elements can today be considered part of Brazilian popular culture, having become so common in the urban landscape that an established writer such as Lygia Fagundes Telles wrote a short story entitled "Garden Gnome", in which one of these figures - abandoned in the garden arbor of a residence to be demolished - appears as an entity capable of having memories and even reflections on human beings. The humanized object criticizes the man who values the object more than the relationship with his peers.

"I was made of fairly resistant stone, but there is a limit, my nose is ragged and ragged are the tips of these fingers that hold my little pipe. And I wonder now, if I were a flesh-and-blood gnome, wouldn't I (at this point) have these same cracks? They are not cracks but blackened holes like the holes of the weevils, erosion. So long exposed to wind and rain. And the sun. All in all, in my life where there is no (normal) life what was left for me was just this, gathering the memories of what I saw without eyes to see and what I heard without ears to hear". (TELLES, 1995, p. 188)⁶.

Of course, the writer transcends all expectations of a mere garden gnome observer or collector. She uses the object as a starting point for its ramblings about the human soul. But she also reveals, in choosing this object, the popularization of this figure. The garden gnome appears in legends and tales, settles in the garden and in the social imagination, and takes on new forms and meanings in art and literature, as an inquiring and unsettling figure.

Is this kitsch? Is it the "ordinary commodity"? Abraham Moles (1975, p. 20-1) states that the kitsch phenomenon is based on a "consumer civilization that produces to consume and creates to produce, in a cultural cycle in which the fundamental notion is

that of acceleration." According to Umberto Eco, kitsch "*identifies with the most striking forms of a mass culture, an average culture, and generally a consumer culture"* (ECO apud BOSI, 1972, p. 71). Would consumer civilization, mass culture, consumer culture correspond to the collection of objects, the kitsch, and, more specifically, the garden of objects?

According to Ecléa Bosi, kitsch is not an invention or discovery that will translate a new vision of reality. "*Produced from the innovations art has brought, it parasitizes art"* (1972, p. 71). Although they do not correspond to artistic production and are not produced as art, these gardens, or collections of objects, express a great deal of creativity in their arrangement. However, the objects of which they are made up are either the result of mass production or correspond to purely artisanal production.

Ecléa Bosi (1972, p. 71) draws attention to a principle that must be considered in understanding kitsch: "*A solid principle for understanding it is: kitsch is loved. It is difficult to resist its appeal as its messages, like those of advertising, touch certain motivations."*

Garden gnomes, porcelain animals, children's story characters seduce some garden owners, often not in the sense of collecting extravagant objects, but in the playful sense of affective memory, childhood memory.

Among scholars and literati, a critical view of these elements persists. In a text dealing with the architecture of the city of São Paulo from 1935 to 1962, Jorge Americano speaks of caves surrounded by children's characters with a certain irony:

"When I was a boy, the architectural fashion was art nouveau, very similar to a confectionery sponge cake covered with merengue mix [...].

Then came a kind of overlapping, unbalanced dominos that they called 'futurism' and, having no gutters for the rain, the walls blackened with fungus from the rush of dust on the northwest wind over the wet walls.

Then the Mexican colonials of sad memory, and in the new neighborhoods, the nouveau riche built dwellings

⁶ In the story by Lygia Fagundes Telles the protagonist is a garden gnome, denoting the dissemination of this element in the urban landscape and in the social imagination.



Figure 2 – Garden in Perdizes district at Christmas time - the little gnomes were replaced by ornaments and Christmas characters. Source: São Paulo, 2007.

like Byzantine basilicas on twelve-meter-front plots, neighboring rose and gold Alhambra palaces of fifteen in front, shoulder to shoulder with whitewashed Trianons, with a foot and a half of park in front, next to Norman houses with Our Lady of Lourdes grottos surrounded by Snow White and the seven dwarfs.

Is this what you want to continue when you rise up against modern architecture?" (Americano, [1963], p. 319).

The writer establishes a relationship between these garden elements and architecture of dubious taste. However, if this discussion can go beyond the question of aesthetic value or kitsch, seeking the reason for the use of these elements in the garden (which persist in the São Paulo landscape) in the social imagination and the external influences that lead to this form of conception of garden areas, also investigating what these gardens

simulate and the meanings of the simulacrum in these garden areas, it will be possible to move the discussion forward.

Based on the work of Jean Baudrillard (1981), especially the text *Simulacres et simulation*, Hygina Bruzzi Melo states: "In simulacrum, the icon replaces and dispenses with what it was representation of" (Melo, 1988, p. 32)⁷.

In essence, the garden is the very negation of the forest - for it to exist, the forest is destroyed. The forest is inhabited by the unknown, mystery, disorder, the mixture of genera and species. In the garden, most of the time, man disposes plants known to him in an orderly, or intentionally disordered manner; the diversity of genera and species is reduced. Therefore, the forest and the garden are antagonistic, although in the social imagination one can allude to the other. The forest can be imagined or seen as a large garden and the garden alludes to the forest quite simply, but full of symbolism, when it is "populated" by man-made elements that give this space a mythical or playful character. The presence of these elements makes the garden a "miniature forest", with the predominance of artificial components - these elements or icons replace and dispense with the forest of which it was a representation. The garden becomes simulacrum of the forest.

Garden gnomes, porcelain animals, fountains pouring water all day, decorations of all kinds, medicinal herbs and fruit trees mixed with ornamental plants, according to seemingly disorderly arrangements, make up the setting of these designed urban gardens. like simulacra of the forest.

These spaces give an idea of forest, but nevertheless they are gardens in their artificiality and urbanity. These are man-made spaces that usually have few tree specimens - as opposed to the dense forest. On the other hand, there does seem to be the intent to create a "miniature forest" in these spaces; the intent for the garden to be more than just a garden with something of mystery and enchantment, like the forest. There is the intent to attract the animals that come and go freely with the freedom of the forested areas - but the fruit that attracts a greater diversity

⁷ See the text itself by Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation*.

of animals are not those produced by the garden trees, which are few, but those distributed by residents themselves in the garden areas, at the hands of man.

However, it is not nature or the actual forest (which causes fear and wonder) that is intended to be simulated; it is nature or the imagined forest, safe and controlled. And this imagined, safe, controlled forest dispenses with the real one. That is why the garden becomes a simulacrum.

Several of the objects distributed in the gardens are mass produced, but it is not in the objects themselves that the simulacrum of the forest is perceived, but in the form of distribution and arrangement in the midst of the vegetation. Based on this assumption, what then would be the meaning of a garden produced as a forest simulacrum?

There is care taken on the part of those who cultivate these gardens, not only about plants or vegetation in general, but also about creating small settings, places that are sometimes worked on, thought of and imagined as miniature forests. To gardens featuring a large and varied number of elements, new characters are added almost every week. There is indeed interest, an intent to compose a setting, to create a fantasy place populated by garden gnomes, children's story figures, cartoon characters.

However, these images are predominantly imported, i.e., it is not beings from Brazilian children's stories arranged in the gardens, but rather fictional characters from Europe or the United States - demonstrating not only external influences, but also ignorance or the lack of appreciation of Brazilian children's stories, Brazilian folklore, Brazilian popular culture. These miniature forests are not inhabited by domestic or native beings, but by European or North American figures. Like the garden, the Brazilian social imagination is populated by foreigners.

The garden produced as a simulacrum of the forest represents, above all, the adult's freedom to create imagined or imaginary spaces, as if they could somehow participate in the children's universe. Hence its playful meaning. It also represents the possibility

of bringing, in a rather unusual way, some of the mystery of the forest to the garden - an area under the owner's control. The idea of the forest may be present as long as it is in a controlled area, because that is how city dwellers are able to "love" the forest - while the real forest continues to cause fear and wonder. The lack of order and symmetry in the arrangement of space, the mixture of herbs and ornamental plants, the trees that are allowed to grow are cultural characteristics of the Brazilian garden which, although they have a relationship with the forest, are practical rather than imaginative. The simulacrum garden no longer has effective links with the actual forest. Rather it is the myth of the forest that appears in the object garden.

2. CONCLUSIONS

The object garden arises in opposition to the artistic garden. It is a garden modified every day as opposed to a garden designed according to the artistic parameters to remain in the landscape; a garden cultivated and planned by the owner himself as opposed to a drawing board garden; a garden that promotes everyday interaction between the owner and the garden area as opposed to a garden designed to be seen; a garden-collection-of-symbols-of-affectivity as opposed to an impersonal garden. Often considered kitsch by academics, although it takes on other meanings of greater relevance when viewed from the standpoint of popular culture and social imagery, the object garden spreads across the landscape going against the verticalization process - which instituted the impersonal communal residential garden - and the spread of the automobile, which suppresses gardened areas of urban space (Marx, 1980).

These are indeed object gardens, but it is important to note that it is not the objects themselves, linked to the consumer society, that give them meaning and significance. Rather, they are established in the relationship of these objects with the plants and in the expression of their value to their owners. In this sense, it can be said that the garden of objects is also, and above all, a garden of affection.



Figure 3 – Detail of a São Paulo garden located in Vila Madalena - the forest simulacrum referenced in various garden objects.
Source: São Paulo, 2007.



Figure 4 – A garden populated with porcelain animals - some from children's stories. The owner of this garden, located in Vila Romana district, has added, in addition to playful objects, elements brought from travel, with affective value and meaningful memories.
Source: São Paulo, 2007.



8 Figure 5 – Pinocchio amidst the vegetation of a São Paulo garden located in Vila Madalena district, where the owner continued the garden cultivated by her mother, with coffee plants and other exotic plants. Photograph: São Paulo, 2007.

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Solange de Aragão
Associação Educacional Nove de Julho, Departamento de Exatas
Campus Memorial. Av. Dr. Adolpho Pinto, 109 – Barra Funda, São Paulo-SP, 01156-050
Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3605-8314>
solangedearagao@hotmail.com

Euler Sandeville Junior
Universidade de São Paulo, Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo
R. do Lago, 876 – Butantã, São Paulo – SP, 05508-080
Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3428-098X>
euler@usp.br

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