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Mappus Mundi:
The Portuguese
Immigrant Garden
in California
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Photographs by Travis Amos

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I **Topiary arch** suggesting a grotto on Pacific Street, San Leandro.

The Portuguese immigrant has one of the most distinctive gardening traditions in California, and conversations with Portuguese gardeners reveal that their gardens represent different expectations than those assumed by the design profession. The gardens published in the professional press such as *Ortho* books, or *House and Garden* or *Sunset* magazines, present the front garden as an empty theater, a border framing the house as parsley frames meat on a platter. The compositional arrangements used are still those of late modernism, that is, Mondrian's variable grid. The planting is usually a glaze of "native" grey-greenery, punctuated by an occasional reverent pause for a Japanese-style garden device. The Post-Modern, or down-scaled Baroque garden, which recalls that other relic of early Reagan-Era posturing, the down-scaled Cadillac, is not yet much seen. The professional back yard is defined and made significant by its provision for well-established middle-class social scenarios: outdoor cooking and eating, swimming and sun-bathing, playing games with the children.

The Portuguese are not part of this same web of social behavior, and their gardens symbolize their differing values through tactics that are a mixture of traditional Portuguese spatial preferences and experimentation with the new materials

and unfamiliar gardening traditions now available to them.

Their communities are dispersed throughout the state, but they are small, self-contained, and sufficiently well-established for their members to own businesses that can employ new immigrants, many of whom do not even need to learn to speak English. While they are not isolated from the dominant culture, their gardens serve not so much to emphasize well-established social values but as organizational tools to help in evaluation of the old, and assimilation of the new cultures that form the immigrant's world, on the way to a new working synthesis.

In this process immigrant gardeners update historic tactics. They often incorporate versions of the ancient memory theater to stabilize reminders of both past and present in a spatial continuum. They use the cabinet of wonders, a form of artifact organization popular from the sixteenth century onward, to direct the speculation of its maker towards the unknown instead of the known. Most often they operate from an understanding of the nature of work and of time-use based on intensity and perseverance that is still a vital part of their culture.

Most of these gardens serve as a form of learning for the

individual. The few private immigrant gardens that serve as lessons for the community are usually based on traditional religious memorials: Madonnas in grottos made from up-ended bathtubs or miniature chapels copying those from the homeland. (One such garden in San Leandro has two small chapels in a "sunken garden" to provide a resting place in an annual religious procession). Some religious artifacts are permanent: grottos or topiary arches with statues of the Virgin Mary. More often they are temporary displays, like the Portuguese-style creche incorporating many parts of the nativity story which a few families build in their front yards at Christmas.

But the immigrant garden is primarily a space in which to try out a range of tactics for personal spatial and cultural orientation. These include traditional labor practices, unification of ideas through collecting and cataloging material objects; defamiliarization and the encouragement of wonder achieved by tricks with scale and juxtaposition; spatial stability achieved through symmetry and ornament; and a sense of connection with past time by using souvenirs.

The garden is a place to work. The Portuguese in California are primarily blue-collar workers, and productive manual labor was

and still is central to their economy. Some became agricultural workers; many now own farms in the Sacramento valley. Those who now live in the cities often have elaborate vegetable gardens: fava beans on trellises are a sure sign of the Portuguese immigrant, as are taro plants in the front yard. Many came as sailors, and either settled in Northern Coastal lumber towns that relied on the sea for shipping, or as fishermen, stopping in Hawaii before coming to the Bay Area, where many now work and live in San Leandro, where their gardens contain many references to the sea.

Portuguese gardeners, both male and female, work the land themselves, and their garden designs develop gradually through the cumulative effects of a random sequence of small decisions made during the course of the work, such as pruning, cultivating, or weeding. The unprogrammed labor of handling materials, not preconceived plans, generate layout and form. The importance of labor is further reflected in the density, intricacy, and high maintenance of the special effects and scenarios built into the garden.

Work and Reverie

Garden labor consists of an ongoing series of small decisions directed toward an imagined but an undesigned goal. Work of this kind is not boring, for each action still shapes form, but as plants do grow back, the threat of irrevocable mistakes that underlies other kinds of work without templates (the workmanship of risk) is not present. Without the overriding fear of going astray, and with the gardener's knowledge that nature does not allow total human control anyway, the mind can lapse into reverie, a state of attentive dreaming that is the matrix of creativity. Reverie is a working dream in which both the idea and the skills and techniques used for achieving it are considered at the same time, making it a critical support for a life based on productive labor.

The Portuguese garden is both the place for, and the manifestation of, the process of reverie. The gardeners provide themselves with the opportunity for reverie by creating a continual outlay of small labors in their gardens, especially topiary work, patterning the ground with various nonorganic materials, and painting. These tactics control natural and nonorganic materials by making dissimilar surfaces into similar ones, substituting like texture or color for variation, but most importantly, such tactics require time, and many small decisions, encouraging reverie.

Topiary

The varieties of topiary in San Leandro range from narrative (a topiary dragon on Sibyl Street) and religious memorials (an arch and cross on Kelly Street) to more formal abstractions. Typically topiary emphasizes the borders of the house, the pathways or the lots by repeating those borders. If the hat-shaped topiary shaped by Mr. Silver in San Leandro is not typical, the layout of the topiary in the garden is: bushes trimmed into hundreds of brimmed hats follow the front path, border the house, and creep around the perimeter.

Repetition has been reduced to its most abstract in another front garden, by laying a continual grid of trimmed junipers over the entire area like a piece of polka-dot cloth. There are a few other gardens laid out on the continuous grid, but this is a new organizational strategy in San Leandro. The bilaterally symmetrical garden, with identical beds on either side of a central path, is much more common. Perhaps the sources for this garden are European, although even those Portuguese born in the United States could have seen this typical Baroque garden composition in large public gardens and, within the lifetime of the more elderly, at the world's fairs held at Chicago, New York, or San Francisco in the first half of the century.



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2 A new garden planting pattern in San Leandro, the infinite grid, marked with topiary evergreens.



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3 Mrs. Costelli's cabinet of curiosities combining natural wonders and man-made artifacts.

Painting

Painting does not need the same frequency of maintenance as topiary, but it allows the gardener to control the color of nonorganic surfaces. Many San Leandro gardeners have unified natural and man-made materials through the common application of paint. This transformation employs the reasoning used in older forms of cognition like fairy tales, or magic. Magic is the acceptance of a proposal, either mental or physical, that transforms the unlike into the like. Applied magic, or fairy tales, is a mode of instruction in which effort and success are joined around some wondrous talisman. The garden offers a good opportunity to display this symmetrical order. Its talismata, of unlike material transformed into symmetrical order, or of spiritual power symbolized by the Virgin Mary in a grotto, offer the hope of knowing how to succeed against all odds, which is an important part of the risky life of the immigrant.

The Cabinet of Curiosities: Accumulation Becomes Order

The Portuguese garden is often structured as a “wonder cabinet,” another historical tradition that is based on transformation by magic, or what Geoffrey Hartman calls “pseudo-causality,” of the incomprehensible into the understood. The wonder cabinet, developed by Renaissance princes and prelates, was the place in that their accumulated wonders, natural and man-made, were arranged in a spatial order that might suggest similarities and analogies useful for further speculation.

The process of generating or grasping meaning through wonder marked the beginning of the institutionalized organization of knowledge now called the Renaissance. Although by the first decade of the seventeenth century Galileo was already deriding the wonder cabinet as an inadequate tool for thought precisely because it incorporated everything, especially that which was then considered marginal or weird, the tradition did in some cases lead from curiosity to the development of the new mode of reasoning called the scientific revolution between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries. Most of these wonder cabinets have subsequently been separated into art and science collections or dispersed. The collection of the architect John Soane is one of the few to survive as more than a printed catalogue. But the

principle underlying the wonder cabinet as a mode of learning, random juxtaposition of physical categories connected by formal similitude, still survives in the works of both the intellectually sophisticated and the naive. The visionary city planner Patrick Geddes was still proposing a wonder cabinet, which he called the Outlook Tower and Index Museum, for various world’s fairs at the end of the nineteenth century. The dada artist Marcel Duchamp, the proto-surrealist Giorgio De Chirico, and the surrealists themselves all continued the juxtaposition of unlike categories as a tactic for new, or newly named, understanding. They merely switched the provenance of the wonders from nature and the products of skilled artisanry to the production lines of the industrial revolution, and the name of the understanding to be gained from cosmology to psychology.

Portuguese gardeners today still assemble natural wonders and commercial products into private collections, organizing them into personal dictionaries of meaning. Their collections are held in shape by geometric patterns and structures that assume the potential for organization to produce meaning. The Portuguese are not the only gardeners who shape their gardens into a sequence of rooms without walls, the practice seems to be

common in all the vernacular gardening in the Mediterranean tradition in California, and Italian, Spanish, and Mexican immigrants also create gardens that are architecturally divided into stages or passages between the inside and the outside world. But the popular image of the garden in the United States is still based on the traditional English garden, that is, on an image of the untrammelled out-of-doors; or on its Japanese cousin that also emphasizes spaces rather than the walls around or the objects within the garden. The vernacular Mediterranean garden tradition may stem from the fact that from the time of the Romans to the present day the domestic garden was frequently inside in an atrium or courtyard and more easily conceived of in architectural terms.

In a back garden in San Leandro, Mrs. Costelli has constructed her own wonder cabinet, moving from the collection of curiosities to the telling of stories. She divided the garden into ever smaller stages with different gravels, pavers, and edging materials. In each she arranged real and artificial rocks, shells, plants, large and small figurines, miniature Japanese bridges, and many different kinds of mirror, to make up tiny scenes of animals and people gathered around watering holes.

Now animals or humans drinking or bathing in water

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- 4 **Horseshoes and farm implements** from the Rubello family farm, combined into hand-made memorials. The name plate over the porch says that Mr. Rubello is the last surviving son.
- 5 **The island of Pico** set into a concrete sea with bas-relief whales.

at the spring of life is an element of many European fairy tales of birth, death, and regeneration, and spiritual transformation, like baptism, is also accompanied by water. The tradition of the seafaring Portuguese explorers is also recalled by images water. The quality of continual change in the life of the Portuguese seafarer is nicely suggested by one of the more startling miniature scenes in Mrs. Costelli's garden: trumpeting elephants charging over a red Japanese bridge. The symbolic image of the water-hole may be part of Mrs. Costelli's own understanding of an old mythic tradition, or it may be her recreation of scenes from the Walt Disney versions of fairy stories. But Mrs. Costelli made the garden to delight and refresh herself and to open a window onto curiosity and change for all.

Souvenirs

Mrs. Costelli's garden is filled with purchased souvenirs of the inexpensive type usually bought by children who have no memories of their own. Adults, on the other hand, can usually make their own souvenirs from the artifacts of their past. The garden of the Rubello family in San Leandro is a good example. The gate, fences, and ornamental frame around the miniature windmill were made by Mr. Rubello from welded horseshoes saved from the family farm. The other agricultural artifacts—plows, pumps, wagon wheels—are also remnants of the valued family past. This past, and the style of labor on which it was based, has become more precious as the style of labor has changed and as the family has died away.

Males are more likely to have souvenirs of their own property than are females. According to a United Nations report of 1980, females, who do more than 60 percent of the world's total work, own less than 1 percent of the world's goods. Mrs. Costelli's options were typically less tied to family possessions, and, using new and second-hand souvenirs she explored more abstract ideas, like defamiliarization through radical changes in scale.

Miniaturization

There is nothing miniature in nature; scale requires human beings for its definition. Our present response to the miniature is based on its past history; miniatures were once the precious province of the wealthy, who commissioned miniature models of their possessions. Now, despite the possibility for anyone to explore the cognitive exoticism of the miniature, climbing to the top of a skyscraper or making a miniature railroad, an aura of privilege still clings to reduced scale.

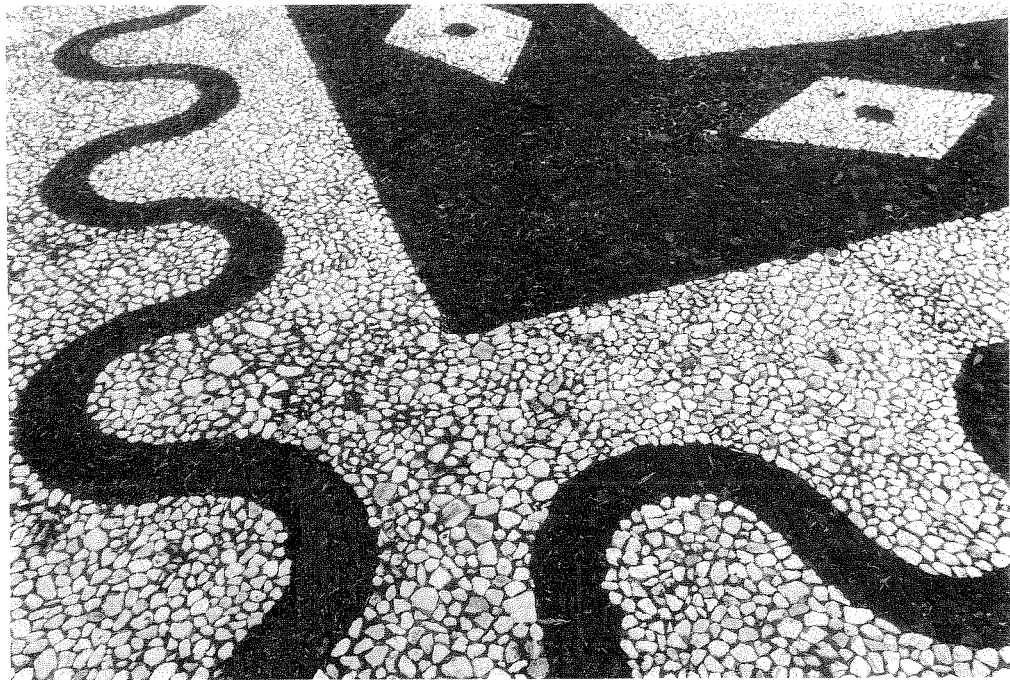
The scale of a garden is determined by many factors: the size of the house and its lot, the kinds of plants available, and the neighboring preferences in planting patterns. Most Portuguese immigrant houses and lots are comparatively small, and very few gardeners have chosen to grow large or bushy plants. Instead they prefer a horizontal garden, perhaps reflecting low or absent planting in Portugal, and make their patterns with gravel, very small plants, and figurines designed for interior tables and shelves, that become miniatures when used outdoors. Mrs. Costelli's placement of these miniature interior figurines on the ground rather than on a mantelpiece transforms the visitor into a giant who is too big to move among them and is forced to view them from far away.

Today miniaturization is a critical part of the com-

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6 Sunnyside Street garden using available red and white stones from California, hammered into sand, and set with mortar, in the traditional Portuguese manner.

7 Detail, showing the surface achieved by this paving technique.



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8 Gravel garden with Japanese-style corner.

puterization of memory and the production and use of maps. Whereas there is much of the miniature that is simply too small to see with the naked eye, one of the principal points of its use is that its outside edge is completely visible and therefore assumed to be controllable. That which is too big to be seen all at one time is miniaturized into visibility, and map readers then projects themselves first figuratively and then literally back into real space by imagining and then walking or driving through it. Miniature souvenirs and maps offer control of things or concepts too big or too ambiguous to buy, like Niagara Falls or a watering hole.

For the Portuguese gardener, miniaturization also offers a map of the past and a direct way to unite past and present geography. The memory of their homeland still occupies an important position in the San Leandro community, and many local families return frequently to Portugal, especially to the Azores. While memory of other cultural traditions is kept alive by institutions such as the Catholic church or the Portuguese clubs, memory of the shape of the land is generally kept by individuals in the shape of their private gardens. On Frederick Street in San Leandro, a man who was a deep-sea fisherman from the Azores made a central fountain in his rose garden in the shape of his

former quarry, the terrapin. His next-door neighbor, from Pico, built a miniature of his native island, outlined with up-ended sections of pine trunks in a Japanese style, surrounded by a concrete aggregate ocean in which swim two bas-relief whales with inlaid teeth of white rock.

The scale is inconsistent, the whales are bigger than the island, but the miniature can reconnect the viewer to real spatial scale as surely as can a road map. In fact, many of the motifs used in Portuguese gravel gardens recall the decorative borders and motifs used around maps that are so much a part of their seafaring past. The four-part star, possibly left over from the Etruscan and Roman city-founding device of the crossed *cardo* and *decumanus*, and used on maps to indicate the cardinal directions, is the single most common motif in Portuguese gravel gardens.

Patterned Ground

Despite the frequent use of miniaturization and other mapping conventions that encourage a sense of intellectual connection to the Portuguese homeland, many Portuguese gardeners simply reproduce what they can of their past as close to its real size as possible. Many Portuguese streets, plazas, and private courtyards are paved in mosaic patterns made of squares of grey and white lava. A small-scale version of this patterned plaza with a central fountain is a favorite garden subject for the immigrant gardener in California. One gardener on Sunnyside Street in San Leandro even made a patterned mosaic ground in the Azorean tradition, substituting local California materials for the lava blocks used in Portugal. The pattern composed of a six-pointed star and straight and undulating bands was made by pounding red and white stones into a sandy bed with a four-foot vertical mallet. When the stones were even, mortar was brushed into the cracks and water was sprinkled over everything to form a firm cement. The lava blocks used in Portugal are about 2.5 inches to a side and fit more regularly together than do the small, irregular rocks available in California, but even this Sunnyside Street version of the traditional plaza is much more precise than the more common gardens using loose gravel to reproduce the undulating white and black lines of homeland paving.

Conclusion

This garden also includes an element from the Japanese garden, the border of up-ended pine logs. Many Japanese families live in San Leandro, and their gardens have influenced an increasing number of Portuguese to combine geographical references to both Portugal and Japan. It may be that the immigrant gardener, who once operated within the traditional pattern of cultural diffusion, that is to say, only copied ideas that could be personally seen, which encouraged formal similarity within a small geographic area for a long time, is now considering the diffusion practices of popular culture, the widespread geographical diffusion of ideas by mass-media, with an attendant short life span. Of course, in San Leandro the example of the Japanese garden is right next door, but a shift from making a garden that reconnected one to the homeland half-way around the world to a garden that introduces one to an unknown land that is still, despite propaganda for the concept of the Pacific Rim, considered to be all the way around the world, indicates a major realignment of the cultural and cognitive values of the Portuguese gardener in California.