

Puck Brouwers

Review Exhibition Medieval Gardens: Earthly paradises in East and West

The National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden



The National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden hosts the fascinating exhibition *Medieval Gardens: Earthly paradises in East and West*, which will be on display from 2 May to 1 September 2019 and can be visited in combination with the Hortus Botanicus Leiden for only €12,50 (instead of €20,50).¹ The exhibition displays objects that are relevant to European and Islamic garden cultures of medieval times (1200-1600 AD). The main characters in this exhibition are plants, herbs and flowers and how they have been arranged, cared for and used symbolically in art, poems and stories during medieval times. The religious foundation of the garden is elaborated upon and uncovers the striking similarities between Christian, Islamic and Judaic practices involving gardens. Like in the Bible and the Torah, in the Quran, garden equals paradise. It is described as an enclosed space, usually walled, where man could enjoy eternal life (see fig. 1 and 2). This is significant to note, especially because of the etymology of the word ‘Paradise’, which is derived from the Persian word for garden: *paridæza*. What is interesting about studying the medieval garden, is that within the medieval representation and practice of the garden, the meaning and conception of paradise, and how eternal life in the Biblical sense is supposed to look like, is captured. For example, the garden possesses shade (no heat or cold),



Figure 1: Paradise gardens. This paradisiacal garden (jannat al-firdaw) from an Indian fortune-teller book shows two angels, two Islamic saints (as flames) and a pond. Collection: Wereldmuseum, Rotterdam. (dimensions 1,2 x 0,7 m, period: 1550-1600), see www.rmo.nl/collectie/tijdelijke-topstukken/paradijstuin/.



Figure 2: Maria with baby Christ in Hortus conclusus. In Western books Maria is pictured in an enclosed garden, the hortus conclusus, which symbolizes Maria's virginity. Medieval artists interpreted this garden as a safe playground for baby Christ. Collection: Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Den Haag. (dimensions 16,6 x 11,6 cm, period: 1480-1500), <https://www.rmo.nl/collectie/tijdelijke-topstukken/maria-met-christuskind-in-hortus-conclusus/>.

greenery and fountains of water in plenty. Trees always bear fruit (usually olives, dates, figs and pomegranate, symbols of soul, heart, mind and essence respectively), rivers of water, wine, milk and honey flow through trough the garden, and man can dwell and relax in the garden in eternity.

Medieval Gardens primarily features objects, such as medieval manuscripts, encyclopaedias (not as field guides, but to show the splendour of creation), herbaria, floral carpets, paintings and prints, garden tools (of which a very interesting one is a chantepleure), tiles and tableware with floral motifs. The main subjects that are exposed in the exhibition are ornamental, vegetable, herb and medicinal gardens, gardening as a practice, the phenomenon pleasure garden (illustrated most visually by the Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch, of which a copy of the middle panel of his famous triptych, The Garden of Earthly Delights is shown prominently, fig. 3) and



Figure 3: Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. In the exhibition a textile print of the famous painting is shown. The original is a triptych oil painting on an oak panel, painted between 1490 and 1510, it is housed in the Museo del Prado in Madrid since 1939.

more extensive. Notwithstanding, it is of perfect length in combination with a visit to the Hortus Botanicus, or any other temporary or permanent exhibition in the museum. While the range of objects on display is very diverse, and some digital tools are incorporated (e.g. a screen on which you can browse through a medieval encyclopaedia of herbs and plants), the interactivity of the exhibition is limited. This is still very much a conventional, and thus passive, historical exhibition. Nonetheless, there are two interactive elements worthy of mentioning, that also include a playful element, which the historian Steve Poole, specialized in digital media, game and history from below (and interested in transforming the visitor experience of European heritage sites), strongly encourages in educational environments.² There was a game where you were asked to smell, read about and recognize seven different

the religious significance of the garden, revealed in stories and myths about the Garden of Eden and the hortus conclusus (fig. 2), that are overflowing with symbolic meaning and references. However, also other functions of the garden are illuminated, as they were sources of food and medicine, but they were also ideal places for recreation, hunting and courtly love.

Although the museum claims the exhibition to be large (it does exhibit more than 200 objects), it felt rather small. It took about 1 hour to walk through it, and afterwards I wished it had been



Figure 4: 'guessing the herb game'.

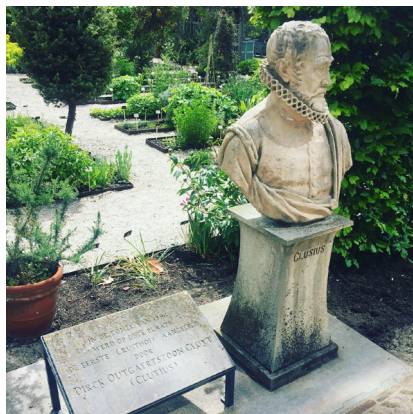


Figure 5: Charles de l'Écluse of Carolus Clusius (1526-1609) studied law and medicine. He travelled the world to collect, describe and cultivate plants, and was consequently one of the first real botanists.

'medieval' herbs and arrange them accordingly (fig. 4). This was one of the most truly engaging parts of the route, given that you had to use multiple senses, something which Poole would encourage, as he stipulates how the 'affective turn' in the humanities has "led us to rethink the frameworks of scholarship and research that have separated the mind from the body."³ Apart from that, there was the possibility to create your 'own' medieval garden, as a sort of puzzle, with geometric shapes on a panel. It needed to be symmetrical, as symmetry was one of the virtues of a medieval garden.

To visit the exhibition in conjunction with the Hortus Botanicus is a must. While Medieval Gardens triggers your interest in the various functions and symbolic meanings of the garden, one needs to experience the effect of a garden for him- or herself to be able to relate to the imagination of medieval communities and what a garden must have meant for them. What garden would be better suited to this endeavour than the oldest botanical garden, founded in 1590, in the Netherlands, arguably also the most historical green enclosure, and in proximity of only 270 m (a 3-minute walk) from the museum? What is interesting to note about the botanic garden, is that the Clusius Garden (fig. 6), to be found at the centre of the Hortus Botanicus complex, is an example of what the garden was like in 1600. The Hortus Botanicus, founded, amongst others, by the doctor and pioneering botanist Carolus Clusius (1526-1609) (fig. 5), announced a new stage of the garden and moved away, slowly and incrementally, from the

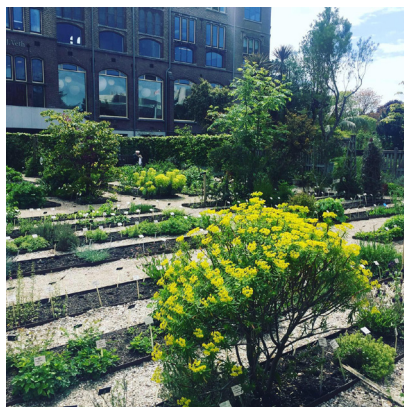


Figure 6: Clusius Garden. A model of what the hortus botanicus had been like around 1600.

medieval garden. The botanic garden would come to identify and embody the enlightenment idea that nature could be studied and therefore also controlled, modified and put to humanity's use. However, it also remained a search for the long-lost Garden of Eden, now recognized to be scattered all over the planet, and in need to be preconfigured as the perfect, enclosed garden in the botanic garden. In concurrence with the conquest of empire, was a scramble for plants and a wish to house them all in exemplary gardens all over Europe, including the botanic garden in Leiden.

The exhibition Medieval Gardens was developed in partnership with Leiden Botanical Gardens and it includes loans from other collections, including objects from the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, Leiden University Library and heritage institutions from various Dutch cities. The exhibition was conceptualized, and its objects selected by curator Annemarieke Willemsen. Medieval Gardens: Earthly paradises in East and West will be on display until 1 September 2019.

Notes

1. Students get a discount, they pay only 6 euros for the museum and 2,50 euros for the Hortus Botanicus, see The National Museum of Antiquities Leiden, Medieval Gardens, accessed May 14, 2019, www.rmo.nl.
2. Steve Poole, "Ghosts in the Garden: locative gameplay and historical interpretation from below," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 24, no. 3 (2018): 303, accessed May 14, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2017.1347887>.
3. Poole, "Ghosts in the Garden," 302.