

# FINANCIAL TIMES

How does your sculpture grow? Creating art for the garden  
*Designers, artists and homeowners work together to produce works in  
dialogue with nature*



September 9 2022 by Mark C O’Flaherty

At this year’s Royal Ascot, towering above the constantly moving architectural millinery, one of the most visually dramatic fixed points was a giant bronze ram’s head opposite the Garrick Club pavilion. As its sculptor David Williams-Ellis stretched on a ladder to brush wax on its horns 3 metres from the ground, he explained that the beast was actually a miniature of sorts.

“This is really a maquette,” he says. A 7.5 metre x 4.5 metre version is destined for a garden in Oxfordshire, “the biggest thing I’ve ever worked on”.

The garden designer wanted something that would have a lot of impact in a broad landscape, focusing the eye and then drawing your attention out,” says Williams-Ellis. A limited series of “The Ram”, smaller but still imposing, will end up in the gardens of other collectors.

Williams-Ellis is one of the sculptors that landscape designers turn to when they have the budget to add an accent to a project. Some of the most striking sculptures in the UK sit in private gardens, positioned to create a dialogue with the landscape around them.

Nic Fiddian-Green is best known for his sculptures of horse heads. An 8-metre-high piece he created for the Bamford family estate — home of Carole Bamford, the founder of Daylesford Organic Farm, and her husband Lord Bamford, the chair of JCB — in Gloucestershire in 2009 has become a benchmark for modern garden sculpture

“It turns my heart over every time I see it,” says Carole Bamford. “It gives me such pleasure seeing it in all the different lights.” Fiddian-Green made another similarly sized equine piece for garden designer Mat Reese, commissioned by the von Opel family for their Malverleys estate.

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“I felt compelled to work on site for that project,” says Fiddian-Green. “I completed it as a direct reaction to the English landscape surrounding me.” He describes the image of a horse as “the most prime example of man’s relationship with the natural world — something we have relied on for centuries for travel, work and warfare. I want my work to create a sense of wonder, nostalgia and urgency in a landscape.”

The very existence of garden designers underscores that many gardens are contrived, as wild as they may appear. There was a misconception in the past, when sculpture was classical in nature, right through the era of Capability Brown, that gardens were somehow entirely natural,” says sculptor David Worthington. He also lectures about his chosen medium, focusing on different aspects, from working with 18th-century French hahas in an extravagant garden to science fiction.

You can look at something like Hadrian’s Villa [in Tivoli], which I think of as the site of the first garden sculpture, and it’s clearly a private space,” says Worthington. “With Brancusi, Henry Moore and other sculptors in the 20th century, we started to see a shift to people being conscious of nature and the environment. There was abstraction, inspired by nature, and it was about opening up landscapes, private or otherwise.”

Context is an essential part of the work, he adds. “If it sits on an empty plane of green, it sticks out like a sore thumb. I recently had some work on show at the Glastonbury festival, and I loved to see people physically engage with it.” One of Williams-Ellis’s earlier projects placed a balletic figure of the Roman god Mercury in a long stretch of water, in the middle of a fountain, at the front of a grand house in Oxfordshire. It was a collaboration with the garden designer Angela Collins.

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“That was a difficult assignment,” says Collins. “The figure is a long way from the home, so it needed to have a presence, but the scale was a delicate issue — when you walk the length of the lily pool, you get a perfect reflection of the house behind, and we didn’t want to disrupt that. David’s figure is perfect, it is elegant and has the right density.” Williams-Ellis was amused on discovering, coincidentally, that the owner of the house used to have an airline called Mercury.

A piece has to interact physically and be visually and thematically harmonious with its environment to find a permanent home. It’s a tangible entity, not just a concept. In her own garden, Collins has a reflective obelisk by David Harber, which brings something sleek and futuristic, but also classical, into the space. By reflecting the foliage in the garden, it becomes invisible in a way, yet is still obviously present.

Harber has been creating sculptures since the early 1990s, initially selling directly to clients. Now, he says, more of the work comes from garden designers and art consultants. “Designers have the best interests of the client at heart, so they introduce us to them because they don’t want to see them choose an onyx dolphin. They want us to show them something original.”

Harber appreciates it when there is a strong three-way relationship between each party — sculptor, designer and client. “I like to talk to the client about their passions, because that usually shapes the project,” he says. There is, he adds, a heightened interest in the development of garden spaces right now, partly because of enforced reflection during the pandemic.

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“There has been a powerful reawakening in people’s feelings about nature, and they want to embellish their spaces with art, because it brings more authority to it. It is an investment, financially and emotionally.”

There is nothing gnomelike about the price attached to serious garden sculpture, and the price of raw materials, along with the difficulty of finding a foundry with a free schedule, is fuelling inflation. The nine editions of “The Ram” by David Williams-Ellis are priced at £178,000 each. But not every garden is a rambling estate, and not every sculpture is on a grand scale.

One of David Worthington’s works is in a relatively small, fenced garden in North Devon, designed by Paul Thompson and inspired by the houses of mid-century West Coast developer Joseph Eichler. A long cedar boardwalk runs along a selection of subtropical plants, with Worthington’s “Fountain — Axe”, based on the shape of a Palaeolithic stone tool, set into a grouping of them. “I don’t think a sculpture would work if it was underneath a tree,” says Worthington, “but it has to work next to the plants the designer has chosen.”

Art consultants can help forge a direct relationship between a client and a sculptor when a garden is already long completed. The way that conversation goes will help steer the client to something they want but might not have been able to imagine by themselves.

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“We worked with a collector who has a home in Greece and had a sculpture garden already,” says David Knowles, founder and creative director of Artelier. “She wanted something unexpected and colourful for a spot where there used to be a tree, so we developed something with one of our artists that is a 5-metre stainless steel version of what was there before, in bright blue.” When the sharp light of the Mediterranean sun hits it, casting long shadows, it’s a strong visual statement that bridges nature and modernity. It inspires a broad smile.

The more remote a garden is, the more powerful a sculpture tends to be. For example, last summer, a bright yellow polka dot pumpkin by Yayoi Kusama on the shore of Naoshima in Japan was washed into the sea by a typhoon. Now, Benesse Art Site — the company responsible for the art on the island — is preparing to reinstall it. Considering the omnipresence of the pop pumpkin on Instagram alone, it seems one of the most photographed, as well as remote, site-specific pieces of art in the world. If it was inside a gallery, it wouldn’t hold a fraction of the fascination.

When David Harber was approached to create a piece for a private island off the south coast of England, at first he proposed developing one of his “Torus” designs — a circular piece that stands vertically, with a highly reflective surface. But then Harber investigated aspects of the landscape into which the sculpture was to be installed, and how his client was going to engage with it.

“He created a kind of paradise on his own island,” says Harber. “He has a home that’s like a giant log cabin on steroids. I asked him what happens on the island, and he said he likes to have a lot of people come over for dinner, drink too much and wander around the grounds.”

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With that in mind, Harber wanted to create a destination for visitors with his two-tonne sculpture, but also a dialogue with the island’s plant life. A storm had recently blown down a forest of trees, so he envisaged “thousands of trees all tangled together” and produced “Ortus”, a circular eye-like design in which a mess of metal branches cross over one another within its iris. The sculpture can be rotated by hand and is embellished with a compass.

“It’s placed purposely on the east side of the grounds,” says Harber, “so you can align it with the precise point on the horizon to see the sun rise through it in the morning.”

As with many of the most notable contemporary garden sculptures, it is engaged in a perpetual, captivating dialogue with the landscape it sits in. It is a design that only achieves its potential outside, accentuating what is already beautiful. It makes the onlooker think about where they are.