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Major Johnston

As secretive as its creator, Serre de la Madone remains a hidden garden.

A couple of miles back from the sea, away from the hustle and bustle of the Riviera, Johnston's second and last work is in a world of its own. Famous for having created Hidcote Manor in the Cotswolds in 1907, a mecca for garden and plant lovers, Johnston was one of those American high society *rentiers* who were fascinated by the culture of the Old Continent.

He was educated in Paris and Cambridge, became a British subject and was duly possessed of that very English passion for gardens. After giving up the management of the farm which his mother had bought him, he proved to be the most audacious and influential gentleman gardener of his time.

He was a very reserved man however. He did not write and scarcely allowed any photographs to be taken of himself or his landscaping designs, revealing them to no more than a small circle of friends and connoisseurs.

He remains one of those shadowy figures whose work, which has received unanimous acclaim, is better-known than their person.

His first garden owes its fame to its being bought up by the National Trust, an organization which was determined to preserve the spirit of its designer and bring him to the attention of the public.

Thanks to the garden being preserved and opened to the public, many garden lovers have been able to familiarise themselves with gardening styles and ideas hitherto known to the lucky few.

They found that for forty years the garden had been a veritable laboratory in which the Major had succeeded in combining traditional structures inspired by the art of gardening in Italy and France with richly innovative planting: large monochrome splashes of flowers for herbaceous plants, combinations of flowering shrubs of various sizes, contrasting foliage colours in hedges to achieve a marbled effect.

Johnston had gradually acquired a profound knowledge of the plant kingdom. Having become a great plant hunter, he wanted to acclimatise the plants he had brought back from his expeditions to South Africa and China and which could not withstand Hidcote's harsh climate. In Menton he purchased a group of former agricultural terraces called Serre de la Madone.

Serre de la Madone

This property, where he lived with his mother, became his Riviera residence and the second garden in which he was to exercise his talent.

The work required the combined efforts of some twenty-three gardeners and stonemasons from 1924 to 1929, but the general shape was quickly established. The central section was given strong outlines by means of retaining walls for the terraces and the planting of box hedges, and the structure is characterised by a series of different moods where – in the same way as at Hidcote but with greater restraint - the intimacy of green rooms alternates with surprise effects and new perspectives.

The side views were treated with care and the outline merges smoothly into the surrounding landscape.

From the bottom to the top of the terraces, a range of different micro-climates makes it possible to accommodate a wide variety of plants.

For thirty-four years Major Lawrence Johnston devoted a considerable part of his time to this second garden, where twelve gardeners were employed until the Second World War, and then

'only' five after he sold Hidcote to the National Trust.

He then settled in Menton for good and died there in 1958, leaving behind a garden design that is rare on the French Riviera. Although Nancy Lindsay, the Major's friend and heiress who also burnt the archives she possessed at Hidcote, carried off a few sculptures, Anduze vases and rare plants, the general shape remains perfectly intact and one can still find botanical varieties of large plants that Johnston himself brought back from Asia and Africa.

Subsequent owners, the banker Mr Baring and Count Wurstemberger, aware of the property's value in terms of landscape design, kept the site maintained until 1986.

1982 : rediscovery of the Garden

During our search for forgotten gardens, we came across Serre de la Madone at dusk one day towards the end of March 1982.

A row of huge and disturbingly strange cypresses kept guard in front of a humble but elegant gate, which remained closed that evening. Beyond the wall oriental magnolias were beginning to deck themselves with enormous flowers. Not long after, we got permission to visit this garden like no other.

A solitary old gardener was toiling away, with love and a hint of sadness in his eyes, which for years had been the only ones to behold the garden.. Yet, thanks to his modest efforts, the place still bore the powerful and subtle imprint of its creator.

Most of the basic features and plants were still there: the greenhouse, the cobbled path leading up the hill, the winding, clematis-covered pergola, the former hothouse resembling an orangery and the pools, the box hedges at the feet of umbrella pines with their red, black-stripped barks, the steps leading up through six terraces, the circular arbour, the house nestling under luxuriant vegetation, the Spanish garden next to it, one or two vistas towards the coast, and some remarkable trees, shrubs, perennials and bulbs.

The whole place exuded a deeply serene atmosphere. One of us must have stretched out a hand to an invisible tap and water suddenly rose up from the patio fountain. There was nothing more to say; it was as if the world had stood still..

The following year, we contacted the regional director of the National Trust and suggested that Serre be twinned with Hidcote. As luck would have it, he had just returned from an unscheduled visit to Serre de la Madone and confirmed that 'the hand of the Major' was still visible.

The same year W. Ingwersen wrote, in a letter to Ernest Boursier-Mougenot, that when he was head gardener, from 1935 to 1936, "plants were constantly arriving from all parts of the world" and that "Serre de la Madone possessed a collection of rare trees, shrubs and an incalculable number of herbaceous plants and bulbs which rivalled those at Hanbury".

At the same time we were pleasantly surprised to discover that the plants taken away by Nancy Lindsay had been donated to the botanic garden at Cambridge, and we began to dream of their possible return to Menton.....

So many years on, thanks to the care taken by the those English botanists, most of the two hundred most interesting plants were still alive in the greenhouses of Cambridge.

And so a dream began to take shape and, despite a few dark hours, that dream is close to coming true now that the property has been bought by the Conservatoire du Littoral. The link between Serre de la Madone, Hidcote and the wonderful gardens of Menton and its environs is being restored, and Serre will be re-opened in order that people will be able, on climbing the gentle steps up through the terraces, to catch a glimpse, through his successors, of that image of Johnston so memorably evoked by Ernest de Ganay in 1936, "coming towards you from the depths of his terraces in his velvet suit, shaking soil from his hands, just like a gardener,...."