

As is sisterly  
with danced  
in the walled  
garden

## Essay by Laurie Cluitmans

Translated from Dutch by Jan Kortman

1. The Metropolitan Museum of Art describes the seven hangings known as the *Unicorn Tapestries* as "among the most beautiful and complex works of art from the late Middle Ages that survive. Luxuriously woven in fine wool and silk with silver and gilded threads, the tapestries vividly depict scenes associated with a hunt for the elusive, magical unicorn."

2. Its title is *The Unicorn Rests in a Garden* (image on p. 5)

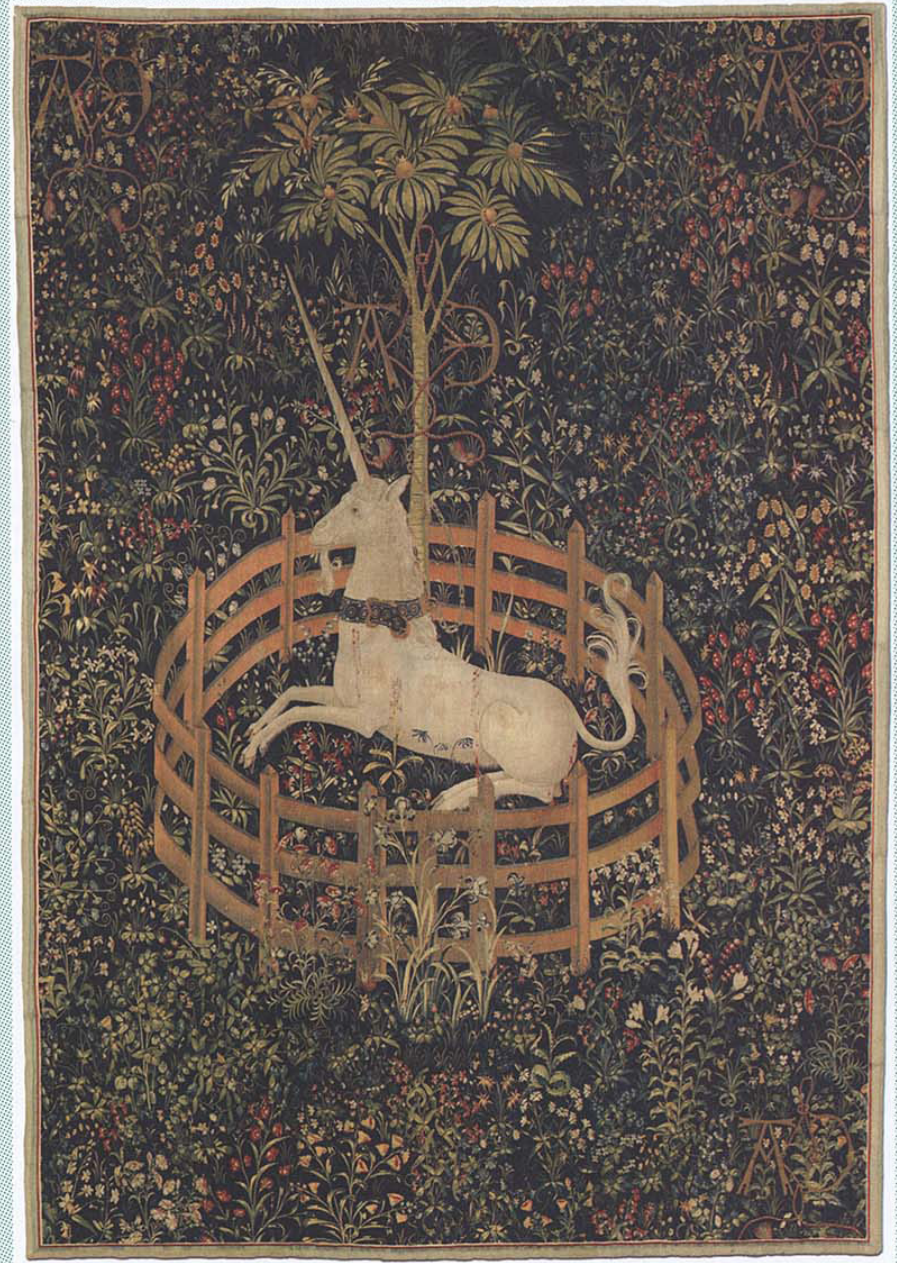
3. Aben, Rob, and Saskia de Wit. *The Enclosed Garden: History and Development of the Hortus Conclusus and its Reintroduction into the Present-day Urban Landscape*. Rotterdam: O10 Publishers, 1999



n receiving *Pleasant Place's* invitation to write about the walled garden a specific image immediately sprang to mind: a unicorn in a walled garden. I saw the image years ago in New York's The Cloisters, as part of seven late medieval tapestries, the so-called *Unicorn Tapestries* (1495 – 1505), depicting the hunt for a unicorn. The one I specifically remember shows a white, resting unicorn in lush vegetation enclosed by a close-fitting and simple fence.<sup>2</sup> The unicorn is chained to a pomegranate tree, which bears fruit so ripe its juice drips onto the animal. The pomegranates, the thistles, common bistort (*Persicaria bistorta*), and wild orchids are all references to fertility and marriage and at the time, because of its boisterous mating, even the tiny frog in the bottom right hand corner was seen as a reference to procreation.

In the depiction of the garden the fence often plays both a literal as well as a metaphorical role. This should not come as a surprise as the etymology of the word refers to the old-Dutch *tūn*, meaning 'fence' or 'fenced in space'. Also, the English *garden*, the French *jardin* and the Dutch *gaard* (as in *boomgaard* = *orchard*) stand for 'gate' or 'fencing'. Moreover, the word paradise is derived from Persian *pairidaiza*: *pairi* meaning 'surrounded by' and *daēza* meaning 'wall'. We literally find ourselves in a walled garden. 'Garden' therefore is both a reference to the enclosed space as well as the enclosure itself. The wall protects the garden from the wilderness outside, literally locking it out, while simultaneously enclosing and controlling nature – the wilderness it's so afraid of – within the perimeter of its walls. The fence is both the usurper and the protector.<sup>3</sup>

In the Middle Ages, the image of the walled garden as a refuge, safe and secluded, evolved into an emblem of Maria as a *hortus conclusus*, referencing her presumed virginity.



Artist unknown, *The Unicorn Rests in a Garden*, from the *Unicorn Tapestries* (1495-1505), The Met Cloisters, New York





4. Collection Museum Catharijneconvent (image on p. 7)

In *Triptych with Maria and Child, Joseph, Angels and Saints in walled garden* (1500) by The Master of Delft,<sup>4</sup> baby Jesus is standing on Maria's lap looking up at a vision in the sky. Maria in turn looks at the lady in the foreground on the right, who hands her a white flower.



5. As depicted on the tapestry *The Unicorn Purifies Water*, from the *Unicorn Tapestries* The Met Cloisters, New York →

A 15th century audience – as with the unicorn described above – would immediately grasp the message: Jesus was born from this *hortus conclusus* and, likewise a new Adam, brought redemption for our sins after the Fall. Gerrit Komrij, in his essay *On the Necessity of Gardening*, describes how the introduction of the unicorn in the *hortus conclusus* must have been an almost inevitable response to this emblem. According to tradition unicorns could only be captured in the presence of a virgin. The animal dips its horn into the fountain, thereby purifying the water which had been poisoned by the snake.<sup>5</sup> He then rests his head in the virgin's lap. A religious-erotic ambiguity in which the fountain represents rejuvenation and the unicorn is the phallic symbol that plows and waters the garden. Thus, we have the unicorn as disrupter of the garden's tranquility and deflowerer of the virgin.

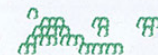
7. Augspach, Elizabeth in Leslie, Michael, eds. *A Cultural History of Gardens in the Medieval Age*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 105

8. Jarman, Derek. *Modern Nature*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1992

In this setting, as Mary receives the unicorn, she symbolises both a virgin and a Venus, a goddess of love, embodying, as Komrij states, “a sisterly witch dance of conflicting elements.”<sup>6</sup>

The association of gardens with the female sex or femininity has long historic roots. *A Cultural History of Gardens in the Medieval Age* delves into this assumed resemblance between the gardens and women. They are believed to share three characteristics. In the first place both are seen as mothers: they are associated with the earth and respond passively to the activities of men. The image of ‘Mother Earth’ has persisted over the years. Secondly, both are regarded as being decorative, serving to stimulate the senses. Thirdly, they are both ‘prone to wander’: gardens could turn into jungles, a woman could give herself to someone other than her husband. Sex, women and gardens became inextricably, though ambiguously and misogynistically, entwined through the pleasure they might generate. Ambiguously, since the pleasure they bring is two-faced: the suspect joy and the positive procreation.<sup>7</sup> Thinking back on the image of Mary in the walled garden, the fence doesn't safeguard the virgin, but turns into an inescapable and claustrophobic prison.

If ‘garden’ is synonymous with ‘fence’ it's surprising, to say the least, that artist Derek Jarman's garden has no fence at all. The defining element that's supposed to make a garden into a garden, is lacking. On the first page of his diary *Modern Nature* he meaningfully states: “There are no walls or fences. My garden's boundaries are the horizon.”<sup>8</sup>



9. Sandilands, Catriona. *Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies*. In *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics and Desire*, Catriona Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, eds. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010, p. 331 - 358

In the late eighties Jarman bought a tiny fishing cottage, Prospect Cottage, in Dungeness in the south of England. In the impossible context of shingle, salty winds and loads of sunshine he managed to create a garden in which plants and herbs go hand in hand with small improvised sculptures and stone circles. In the autumn of 1986, not even six months after having begun the works, he was diagnosed with HIV. The final stages of his life and his garden contrasted: while his garden started flourishing his health dwindled. He died in 1994. The absence of walls is meaningful for both Prospect Cottage and *Modern Nature*. Jarman's garden became a refuge in those days when homosexuality and HIV were taboos. Not just in the literal sense of being a place to unwind, but also as a critical response to a national,

conservative dogma about what a natural landscape should be. Jarman's garden vision and the flowers in it are sexually explicit. In his diary he reminisces about past lovers and blends these sexual memories and flower and plant associations with mythical, medical, historical and personal experiences. *Modern Nature* reads like a memorial to his friends whose lives, experiences and passing were not allowed a public place. Catriona Sandilands pointedly describes how this lies at the heart of Jarman's queer ecology.<sup>9</sup> His garden is a metaphor for queer potentiality and a source of hope. It is not without reason that *Modern Nature* has recently resurfaced as a contemporary reference point and remains a source of inspiration.



The Master of Delft, *Triptych with Maria and Child, Joseph, Angels and Saints in walled garden* (1500) Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht





Four Sisters' communal garden in Amsterdam © Four Sisters (2021)

The resistance Jarman and his garden offer creates an optimistic perspective in times of climate crisis and pandemic. Moreover, Prospect Cottage stands for an open and inclusive ecology, for a new relationship with nature.

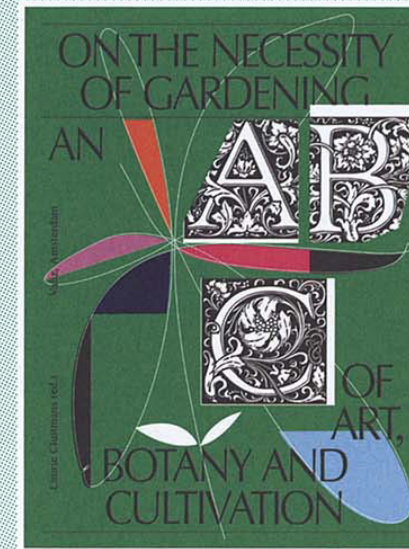
#### 10. From 2023 on, the project continues as Four Siblings

It reminds me of the garden of the Four Sisters collective in Amsterdam's De Tuinen van West which can be perceived as a contemporary interpretation of the garden's potential. As this garden arose from the question how gardens can contribute to a community in which support, care, and collective ownership are the guiding ideas, it too does not have a fence. Four Sisters is a collective consisting of Müge Yilmaz, Marija Šujica and The Beach in collaboration with Iris Dik. The name of the project is derived from a Latin American agricultural method – the 'Milpa' or the 'Three Sisters' method – in which maize, beans and pumpkins are grown in symbiosis. The beans are grown onto the maize and leave

nutrients in the soil, the pumpkins create shade and keep the weeds out. 'Four Sisters' added sunflowers to this concept to invite bees and also to shelter other crops from the wind – hence the name. In 2021, the Four Sisters managed a plot of land in De Tuinen van West. During the summer the garden provided room for social events and art and in the autumn the harvest was shared by everyone who worked on the project.<sup>10</sup>

Luckily, the Four Sisters garden does not stand alone and in spirit seems connected to other gardening initiatives that ignore fences, open up to everyone that is interested and pursue a more common good. Elspeth Diederix's Miracle Garden in Amsterdam's Erasmus Park for example, or the gardens of Bloei&Groei, 'guerilla gardening' strategies in public space and other green interventions in urban situations. Gardens without walls. Just like Jarman's garden was not just an open space but an open-minded space.

#### FURTHER READING



Laurie Cluitmans (1984, NL) is an art historian and independent art critic currently working as a curator of contemporary art for the Centraal Museum in Utrecht. She is also a hobby horticulturist.

Even though Cluitmans had always found it interesting how gardens can provide completely different art experiences, it wasn't until she learned about artists' gardens that her fascination with all things botanic arose. As she delved into the work of Derek Jarman and Ian Hamilton Finlay, Cluitmans' love for gardens continued to grow. In 2016, she received the Young Art Criticism Prize for the resulting essay on their respective gardens.

A long-term study into the development of the cultural-historical, philosophical, and social significance of the garden in relation to our current way of life followed, and after a research residency at CCS Bard, she compiled *The Botanical Revolution*

for the Centraal Museum – an exhibition exposing the garden as a fertile source of inspiration, and barometer of the times in which we live.

Simultaneously, Cluitmans released *On the Necessity of Gardening*, published by Valiz. While thematically related, this out-of-the-ordinary publication should be regarded as an autonomous project rather than an exhibition catalogue. Through an extensive abecedarium, it reflects on the garden as a metaphor for society, considering how gardens and gardening are not solely about plants, but also about history, politics, and our relationship to our surroundings. Based on the practice of contemporary artists and thinkers, it offers insights into the convergence of nature and culture, ecology, climate, and environmental care through concepts such as botanomania, guerrilla gardening, queer ecology and the zen garden. A rare find in the world of gardening books!

Text by Joline van Berkestijn

*On the Necessity of Gardening*

Editor: Laurie Cluitmans

Contributors: Maria Barnas, Jonny Bruce, Laurie Cluitmans, Thiëmo Heilbron, Liesbeth M. Helmus, Erik A. de Jong, René de Kam, Alhena Katsof, Jamaica Kincaid, Bart Rutten, Catriona Sandilands, Patricia de Vries

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