The Interwar Gardens Of Elsie Marion Cornish: A
Comparative And Contextual Analysis

by

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Abstract

Elsie Marion Cornish (1870-1946) was a prominent Adelaide interwar garden designer who greatly contributed to Adelaide's landscape design culture. Cornish's known landscape designs typically followed many of the precepts of the English Arts and Crafts garden style. This was a style of garden that was popular amongst the wealthy Adelaide social elite and that indicated the beginning of a shift away from the informal garden designs that had typically predominated in Adelaide during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Cornish began her landscape design career very late in life at the age of forty-six. Largely self-educated, Cornish drew upon a variety of resources to achieve that education. These included:

- a thorough basic understanding of the theory and practice of horticulture and garden design, developed during her childhood;
- practical professional expertise developed while employed as a 'jobbing' gardener;
- a complex understanding of landscape and garden design developed through study of the accessible period literature; and,
- when necessary, advice from prominent Adelaide architects Walter Hervey Eagot and Guy St John Makin via both personal and professional relationships.

Cornish's known design portfolio was comprised of twelve garden commissions. A description of each commission was developed from a variety of sources. The key elements of these designs, both built and planting schemes were examined in detail to provide a detailed picture of Cornish's design approach and philosophy.

A comparative and contextual base from which to undertake the analysis of Cornish's gardens was developed from an examination of the design styles and characteristics including the key built and plant components of a number of landscape designers or allied professionals from the period. These included the highly respected interstate landscape designers Edna Walling, Olive Mellor and Jocelyn Brown, and locally, Herbert S. Harshorne, Russell S. Ellis and Mary A. Parkhouse. A review of the writings of a selective group of local influential horticulturists was also undertaken.

From the examination of Cornish's gardens a detailed picture of her main built and planting design elements was constructed using a framework of key sub-headings. From that framework a detailed contextual and comparative analysis of her work was undertaken in relation to:

- the period garden literature that she had access to provide herself with an education in garden design;
- her interstate contemporaries, Walling, Mellor and Brown, who's design work is held in high regard; and,
- a comparative profile of her local contemporaries.
It was concluded that Cornish was a talented South Australian landscape designer who, mostly worked within Adelaide and its immediate surroundings, in an English Arts and Crafts garden style that was interpreted for Australian conditions and the needs of her clientele. Overlaid upon her stylistic designs was a philosophical understanding of the interconnection between house and garden and for the need for the space to be designed as an integrated whole. While Cornish’s influence was considerable within the socio-economic group from which her clientele emanated this was reduced but still relevant within the wider community. In terms of Australian garden design historiography, Cornish is as important as other landscape designers of the period, including Edna Walling, Olive Mellor and Joceyln Brown and deserves a similar degree of recognition and understanding of her work as has been attributed to those designers.