

# “Not in dusty darkness”

SPENCER W. STUART digs into the fertile collection of garden designer Bunny Mellon.

IT HAS BEEN FOUR YEARS since the passing of Rachel “Bunny” Mellon (née Lambert, 1910–2014), and, as with most public figures of her stature, definitions of her life are being shaped and solidified. There is the public persona of Mellon as a philanthropist, socialite and political influencer. She was also a private person, giving few interviews during her life and serving as a confidante to many prominent figures of the 20th century, including Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and the late Hubert de Givenchy. There is, however, a part of her life that is often glossed over or simplified to the title of “garden designer.” Indeed she was that. However, Mellon was also a major catalyst in the restoration of historic gardens throughout Europe and the United States.

These restorations resulted from a lifelong, self-directed study of lessons and perspectives derived from horticultural and botanical books of the past. Examining her life away from the fleeting view of celebrity, one is left examining the dedicated work of an individual interested in the preservation and creation of traditional garden design, a practice informed by precedents recorded in historic books and manuscripts. At the heart of these interests lay her book collection. It consists of more

than 16,000 items and now makes up the Oak Spring Garden Library on Mellon’s estate in Upperville, Virginia. Considered one of the most comprehensive collections on horticulture in private hands, this is one of her most enduring legacies and, indeed, offers a glimpse into a lifelong commitment toward the intersection of book history and garden design.



*A library is built during a lifetime, it doesn’t happen overnight.*

—Bunny Mellon

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## NURTURING A LIBRARY

As with many bibliophiles, Mellon’s interest started at a young age with her exposure to the collection of her father, advertising and marketing magnate Gerard B. Lambert. However, the unique approach to collecting Mellon developed connects most closely to her maternal grandfather, Arthur Lowe, a gingham manufacturer based in Massachusetts. Mellon spent her summers with Lowe, a Thoreau-like man with a deep love of the outdoors. Lowe



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*Oak Spring Garden Library.*

gave Mellon the book that would be the first in her collection, Chester A. Reed's *Flower Guide: Wild Flowers East of the Rockies*. She was 11 at the time. Identification books such as these, as well as the pantheistic tone Lowe assumed when corresponding with Mellon about his observations of nature, established the foundations for Mellon's approach.



*These books about the outdoors live not in dusty darkness, but behind simple, pale oak doors, easily opened to the world they tell about.*

—Bunny Mellon

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Prior to the creation of the Oak Spring Garden Library, Mellon's collection was stacked on floors and stuffed under beds on either side of the Atlantic (Paris, New York, Nantucket and Cape Cod, MA, Antigua, and Upperville, VA). The impetus for the library's creation was the wish to consolidate the collection in one place for efficient access as a reference library. To house the collection, Mellon hired architect Edward Larrabee Barnes, known for designing the IBM Building in New York City and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Mellon had Barnes expand an existing building on her Virginia



*View of an arcade at the Oak Spring Garden greenhouse framed by trompe l'oeil paintings by French artist Fernand Renard.*

estate, designed by H. Page Cross. The project broke ground in 1976 and was completed in 1981.

Then came the task of transporting and cataloguing the collection. To spearhead the effort, Mellon hired a young graduate student, Dita Amory, who went on to become a curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. During the intake, requiring some assistance with the herculean task, Amory hired Tony Willis, whose parents worked on the estate. Following Amory's departure as



*The garden at the Oak Spring Garden estate in Virginia.*

chief librarian, Willis became the collection's custodian. With financial assistance from the Mellons, Willis honed his skills as chief librarian through attending courses at the Rare Book School located on the University of Virginia's campus in Charlottesville. Willis continues to occupy this position and, if you were to call the library, there is a very good chance he would take your call (you are required to fill out an application to see the collection).

#### A GROWING PROFILE

The library as we know it today was not an objective sought out from the beginning. In the early 1990s the direction of the library could have taken a considerably different turn. At this point, Mellon approached the Smithsonian with the intention of donating her collection to the institution, but the administration declined the offer due to concerns that the endowment was not sufficient to maintain the estate in perpetuity. This did not deter Mellon though. Instead, as evidenced by the four catalogues of the collection published since 1989 (written by Sandra Raphael, Lucia Tongiorgi Tomasi and

Tony Willis—see list on page 17), there has been a considered effort to celebrate Mellon's collection. The first three catalogues are held at both UBC Rare Books and Special Collections and the Yosef Wosk Library and Resource Centre at Van Dusen Botanical Garden. The celebratory intent was further reinforced by the Oak Spring Garden Foundation's appointment in 2016 of paleobotanist Sir Peter Crane, who is endorsing a direction for the library to host more academic conferences that pertain to the collection, to digitize the collection, and to develop exhibitions such as its debut exhibition, *Redouté to Warhol: Bunny Mellon's Botanical Art*, at the New York Botanical Garden in the winter of 2016.

The changing profile of the library was the result of considerable planning on the part of Mellon near the end of her life and indicated a dedication to her collection. It is telling that during the five-day auction of her collections through Sotheby's, her horticultural collection was not offered. Instead, the proceeds of the US\$218-million sale (double the initial estimates) went to the Oak Spring Garden Foundation, which has the library at its core. With an endowment



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*The main room of the Oak Spring Garden Library, set amid 700 acres near Upperville, Virginia.*

secured, these books are being given a new life, and the legacy of Bunny Mellon lives on in their close study and appreciation by visitors.

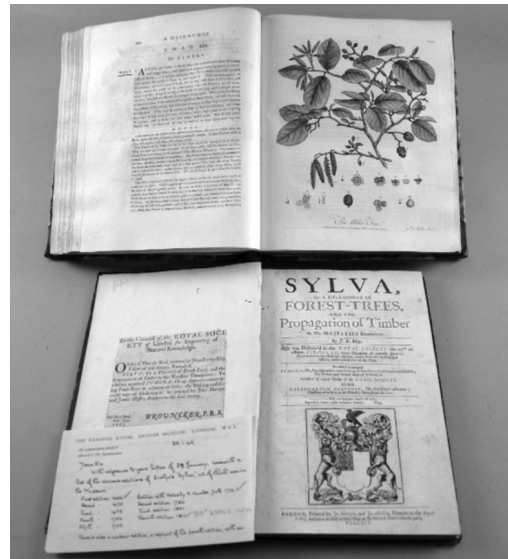
By way of a conclusion I would like to highlight three items from the Mellon collection. Of course, its holdings are a who's who of naturalist book history, from James Audubon's *Birds of America* to the lesser-known, scientific illustrations of Beatrix Potter. Instead I have chosen items that speak directly to Mellon's merging of practical knowledge and a larger, far-reaching relation to the history of garden design. For access to a larger survey of what the collection has to offer, readers can visit the Oak Spring Garden Library website ([www.osgf.org](http://www.osgf.org)) and view works staff have been able to catalogue and digitize, or visit the catalogues mentioned earlier. These are valuable resources not only for the history of rare horticultural and botanical titles, but also as an example of how a private collection can expand beyond the limits of its initial owner and gain a second life serving a larger readership.

#### COLLECTION HIGHLIGHTS

**Evelyn, John. *Sylva, or a Discourse of Forest-Trees, and the Propagation of Timber in His Majesties Dominions*. London: Jo. Martyn and Ja. Allestry, Printers to the Royal Society, 1664.**

Known mostly for his diary, which was published posthumously in 1818 and offers a detailed glimpse into the daily life of Restoration Britain, John Evelyn's *Sylva* is a significant contribution to what we know today as forestry and environmental science. Drawn from portions of his larger *Elysium Britannicum* (a seemingly endless unpublished manuscript made up of thousands of pages of projects and essays), *Sylva* was the work Evelyn considered among his most important. A portrait of him by Sir Godfrey Kneller in the late 1680s and later gifted to the Royal Society depicts Evelyn holding a copy of the book.

Published in 1664, just four years after the society's formation, *Sylva* was the epitome of the society's spirit at the time. Four editions were made during Evelyn's lifetime, each larger than the last. Although often associated with providing solid instruction for reforestation efforts of the time, the book is much more than this, offering a compendium of texts written by Evelyn and

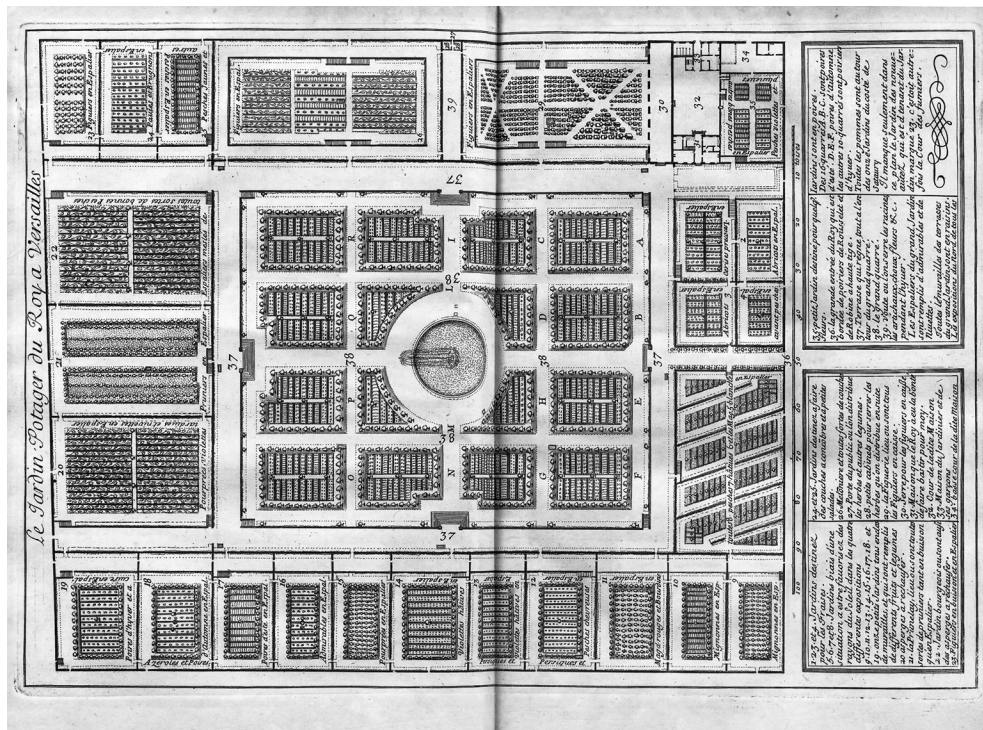


*Sylva, or a Discourse of Forest-Trees, and the Propagation of Timber in His Majesties Dominions* (1664).

other members of the society on soil science (e.g., “Terra, a Philosophical Essay of Earth, being a Lecture in Course,” included in the third edition, 1679) as well as an almanac (“Kalendarium Hortense: Or the Gard’ners Almanack, Directing what he is to do Monthly Throughout the Year”), which garnered great acclaim in its own right and went on to be published separately, in numerous editions. The language used by Evelyn was directed at wealthy landowners and sought to incite in them a sense of duty to dedicate portions of land to the growth of forests. Many of the forests plotted out during this period still stand in the English countryside and, indeed, have come to define a national sense of the “British Landscape,” a sensibility echoed in the acres surrounding Oak Spring Garden Library.

**La Quintinie, Jean de. *Instruction pour les jardins fruitiers et potagers*. Paris: Barbin, 1690.**

Starting his professional life as a lawyer, Jean de la Quintinie came to the study and application of horticulture relatively late in life. But once he was exposed to the study of botany, his ascendance in the field was rapid. In 1677, at age 51, Quintinie was named the head



Jean de La Quintinie, *Instruction pour les jardins fruitiers et potagers* (1690).

gardener at Versailles and, shortly after the appointment, undertook the development of the Potager du roi. This development was birthed of necessity, as there was a growing concern regarding food scarcity in the French court of Louis XIV due to the increasing population.

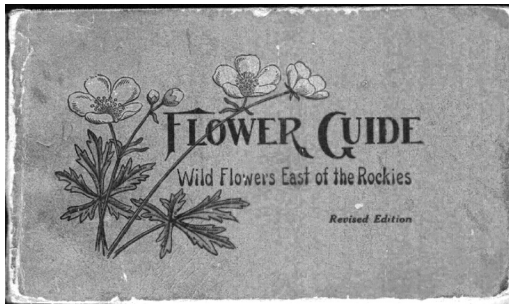
Published posthumously by his son, Michel, and Louis XIV's court publisher, Claude Barbin, *Instruction* was a significant work of its time, particularly in regards to the pruning and grafting of trees. Quintinie incorporated many insights observed while working with orchards and kitchen gardens to maximize their productivity. His demonstrations were of such interest that only a couple years after *Instruction* was published, pirated copies appeared in Amsterdam, with translations into Italian, Dutch and French. The first edition housed within the Oak Spring Garden Library is that of Philippe d'Orléans, Louis XIV's younger brother.

A further connection exemplifies Mellon's relation to source material and site. In the late 1980s, following his departure from the fashion world, Mellon's close friend Givenchy was

named president of the World Monuments Fund France. One of his first projects was to restore the 22-acre Potager du roi, enlisting the help of Mellon. She not only assisted financially but was also on the ground with restoration efforts. At the official reopening of the garden, Mellon was awarded La Croix d'Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the director-general of Versailles, Jean-Pierre Babelon. Perhaps more significant to her than the award itself was the standing ovation she received from the Versailles gardening staff upon receiving the honour.

**Reed, Chester A. *Flower Guide: Wild Flowers East of the Rockies*. Doubleday, Paige & Co., 1926.**

A revised version of the wildly popular book (originally printed in 1907), *Flower Guide* was a deviation from Chester Reed's better-known work in ornithology. Edited by his father, Charles K. Reed, who also held the majority of Chester's copyrights, the guide followed a similar structure to his bird guides, allotting one page for a drawing followed by descriptive information about the flower, its leaf design, and areas where it was most



*Chester A. Reed, Flower Guide: Wild Flowers East of the Rockies (1926).*

commonly found. In later years, Reed published several more regionally specific flower guides—for Mohonk, the Catskills, the Adirondacks, and New England—before his death in 1912.

The importance of this book to Mellon, as mentioned above, was its association with her grandfather. But it was also foundational to her education in garden design, which she began pursuing at about the same period she was given the book. This can be surmised from the primary organizational structure of the book being colour, something Mellon would become known for in her designs, employing impressionist compositions to create highly emotive palettes.

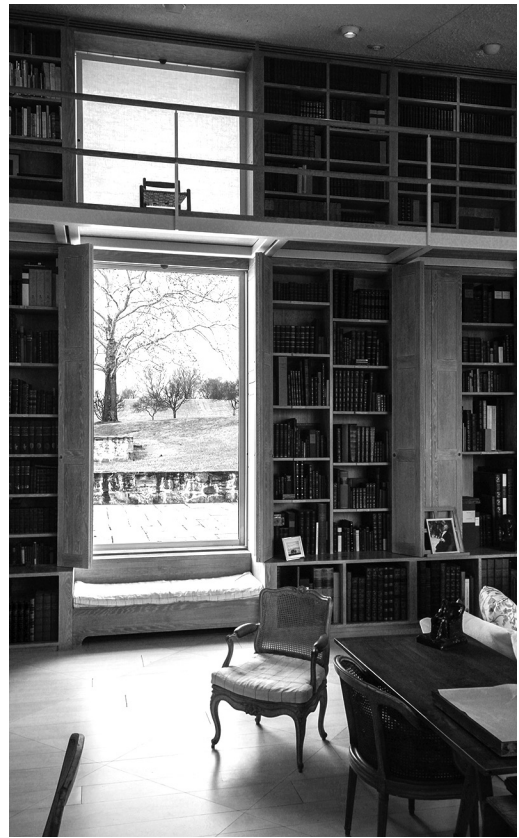
#### VISITING THE LIBRARY

To be granted access to the Oak Spring Garden Library, visitors must send a brief proposal outlining their interest and the goal of their work as it relates to plants, gardens and landscapes. For more information, visit [www.osgf.org](http://www.osgf.org).

#### FURTHER READING

Meryl Gordon, *Bunny Mellon: The Life of an American Style Legend* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2018).

Sandra Raphael, *An Oak Spring Sylva: A Selection of the Rare Books on Trees in the Oak Spring Garden Library* (Upperville, VA: Oak Spring Garden Library, distributed by Yale University Press, 1989).



*A view of the grounds from the Oak Spring Garden Library.*

Sandra Raphael, *An Oak Spring Pomona: A Selection of the Rare Books on Fruit in the Oak Spring Garden Library* (Upperville, VA: Oak Spring Garden Library, distributed by Yale University Press, 1990).

Lucia Tongiorgi Tomasi, *An Oak Spring Flora: Flower Illustration from the Fifteenth Century to the Present Time: A Selection of the Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Works of Art in the Collection of Rachel Lambert Mellon* (Upperville, VA: Oak Spring Garden Library, distributed by Yale University Press, 1997).

Lucia Tongiorgi Tomasi and Tony Willis, *An Oak Spring Herbaria: Herbs and Herbals from the Fourteenth to the Nineteenth Centuries: A selection of the rare books, manuscripts and works of art* (Oak Spring Garden Library, 2009).

Lucia Tongiorgi Tomasi et al., *Redouté to Warhol: Bunny Mellon's Botanical Art* (New York: New York Botanical Garden, 2016).

✚ The above is an abridged version of a lecture given at Van Dusen Botanical Garden on March 24, 2018. Both the Oak Spring Garden Library and Van Dusen's Yosef Wosk Library and Resource Centre are members of the Council on Botanical and Horticultural Libraries, founded in 1969.

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☞ Spencer W. Stuart operates a collections management practice in Vancouver. A graduate of the Courtauld Institute, he subsequently worked in Toronto and New York for Bonhams Auctioneers as part of its rare books and manuscripts division. He is currently engaged in a project interviewing rare booksellers in Europe and North America.



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*Oak Spring Garden Library at dusk.*

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## EVENT

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### *Designs of Excellence*

A TOTAL OF 235 books were submitted for this year's Alcuin Society Awards for Excellence in Book Design in Canada. Judges Sue Colberg, Shelley Gruendler and Frank Viva met in Vancouver on March 17 to examine, assess and ultimately choose 38 winning books in nine categories.

The books are now touring Canada and the world, with appearances at 15 different venues from Toronto to Tokyo. (Photos by Emma Novotny)

