



The Grande Dame of Garden Design

Violet Caldecott on gardening giant *Arabella Lennox-Boyd*, her storied career, and what keeps her moving forward.

Images of Gresgarth Hall by Val Corbett.

Arabella Lennox-Boyd needs no introduction; over the past fifty years, the Anglo-Italian designer has established herself as a horticultural icon. Born in Rome, Italy, in the late '30s, she grew up amongst the sprawling Sabine Hills before moving to England in the late '70s.

Since launching her studio in London in 1989, she has landscaped more than seven hundred gardens worldwide. Her public works include the gardens at the Serpentine Gallery in Hyde Park in London, Maggie's Centre in Dundee, and Le Bristol Hotel in Paris. Privately, she has turned her hand to projects all across the globe in the United States, Germany, Belgium, Italy, Spain, Austria, Mexico, Barbados, Canada, Ukraine, and Moscow. Her esteemed client list includes the likes of Sting, Sir Terence Conran and David Gilmour of Pink Floyd.

For Arabella, authenticity is key to the success of a garden. Never one to follow a trend, she "can't bear anything that isn't genuine," believing that things should never "pretend to be something they're not." This mindset is reflected in her approach to each new

project: her design process is both practical and creative, ensuring that gardens are not only beautiful but true to the terrain they occupy. First comes a thorough level of research into the land she is working with, whether it's understanding the soil, the wind patterns, or the historical context of the space. Aesthetics then follow. "A garden is meant to be *lived* in, not just looked at. I enjoy the challenge of working with what is in front of me," she professes. Arabella's upbringing in Rome instilled in her an appreciation for classical architecture and gardens—influences she carries into her designs. "I'm very keen on structure and proportions; they are incredibly important," she says. She takes great care to balance the more romantic, organic elements of a garden with a formal, structured framework that brings harmony and balance to her designs.

She has applied this meticulous approach to her own garden at Gresgarth Hall in Lancashire, where she moved with her husband Mark in 1978. She recalls her first impression of the Gothic-style house which was built in the 1830s: "It felt like something out of *Wuthering Heights*." Nestled in a valley exposed to



Images of Palazzo Parisi by Arabella Lennox-Boyd

harsh western winds, she faced the daunting challenge of creating a garden that could thrive in such an unforgiving climate whilst blending seamlessly with the dramatic landscape of the Lancashire hills.

Nowadays, Gresgarth Hall is considered one of the most remarkable gardens in England. Hosts of magnolias and hydrangeas, roses, and hostas are planted within neat hedges and herbaceous borders, which instill a sense of structure and cohesion whilst protecting the plants against the English weather. There is a chinoiserie bridge that crosses over the gushing waters of Artle Beck and an arboretum with a rich tapestry of trees and shrubs, many of which Arabella has grown from seed. An Eden amongst the Lancashire hills, the garden is an extraordinary feat—one Arabella never imagined she would be able to achieve when she first embarked on the project nearly fifty years ago.

At Palazzo Parisi, her childhood home just outside Rome, Arabella turned her attention to an entirely different landscape—one that required her to work with the dry, Mediterranean climate. The design of the garden surrounding the magnificent Medieval house is steeped in symmetry inspired by traditional Italian garden principles. Framed by avenues of cypress and olive trees, the majestic façade is softened by sweeping, informal beds in the surrounding lawns where Arabella was able to draw on her love of wild plants. “As a child, I loved the olive trees, but I was always more fascinated by the wildflowers,” she recalls.

When asked about her favorite garden, Arabella points to the Garden of Ninfa, outside Rome. She recalls visiting the garden during a difficult time in her early '20s: “It was like walking in paradise on earth,” she says, “the sound of water, the fragrance of roses and irises, and an amazing river running with trout... I thought, this is heaven.” The experience profoundly affected Arabella, revealing how a garden can move people to feel a certain way. The emotive power of nature is a core part of her ethos as a designer; “my gardens are to do with people’s lives and with telling a story. Emotions and feelings develop as you go round a garden.”

Aside from being one of the world’s top garden designers, Arabella is an avid collector of plants, a passion she has been able to foster in her role as a trustee of Kew Gardens. She has visited Kazakhstan, China, and Japan, amongst many other foreign terrains, to research and collect various botanical marvels. “A plant is no good unless you know the land it comes from,” she stresses.

Whether it be a garden at the Chelsea Flower Show, a private project, or an exciting botanical endeavor, Arabella’s approach remains the same: thoughtful, meticulous, and entirely committed to the craft. Her work will continue to inspire generations of landscape gardeners to come. After all this time, what keeps her moving forward? “My love for gardening—it is self-perpetuating. I don’t know what my life would be like without it.”