The guest speaker at the BSLA annual Fall Tea on October 24, 2000 was Julie Moir Messervy. Her talk focused on the theory and design process of her Toronto Music Garden (based on Johann Sebastian Bach's Cello Suite #1) and her collaboration with cellist Yo Yo Ma. This project was originally planned to become part of a redesigned Boston City Hall Plaza complex; but, predictably, local politics got in the way of its execution. And Toronto won out.

Educated in Art History at Wellesley College, Julie holds Masters degrees in Architecture and City Planning from MIT. While still at MIT, she went as a Henry Luce Scholar to Kyoto, Japan, in order to study with the eminent Japanese garden master, Kinsaku Nakane. Later, they designed and built a masterwork together for the Museum of Fine Arts—Tenshū-en—The Garden of the Heart of Heaven. She has taught at Radcliffe Seminars, the Harvard School of Design, MIT and the Arnold Arboretum. She lectures widely. Her books include Contemplative Gardens (1990), The Inward Garden (1995) and The Magic Land (1998). She is the mother of three teenagers and lives in Wellesley. Recently Heidi Kost-Gross spent time with Julie talking about her work.

HK-G: At this time, you are the undisputed leader of a new movement in Landscape Design: the personal, contemplative and, frequently, soulful garden. How much has your two-year apprenticeship in Japan contributed to your remarkable cognitive design sensibilities?

JMM: Japan was absolutely critical to everything I have done as a landscape designer. It exposed me to a set of design principles that no one had ever stated to me before. I had never read these in a book, for the books that are published on Japanese gardens are so poorly written and all the same; but being there, working with the master, watching what he did, reviewing with him and learning his way of thinking—all were very critical. Going to the gardens time and time again, just looking at them, sketching them and dealing with plants—all were needed in order to understand how they work. It allowed me to think about design in a very clear way because it is so plainly articulated in that culture. Had I been in Italy or France I would probably have had a similar experience but in a different vocabulary. However, it was Japan that really suited me and gave me what I was looking for at the time. I was so fortunate to have had that year and a half of living in a Zen Buddhist nunnery, participating in tea ceremonies with the nuns, which is all about placement of objects and a contemplative attitude toward life. I did a lot of Zen meditation. Working with the garden master, I realized that everything was about the same art, the same principles of design—spiring from nature. The Japanese always loved nature above all else, but had so little of it that when it came to their urban settings, they abstracted what they saw, made it pristine and worked with it. Because Japan was so urban, they always had architecture as one major influence with nature working against it so that the two had to marry in very small spaces, thus creating their beautiful designs. Layouts were orthogonal, paths were architectural, ponds flowed irregularly against both. The art lay in putting all together to become spiritually and emotionally satisfying. The Japanese really understood this and transferred the same ideas into all designed spaces, pond and island gardens, contemplative gardens (often only tennis court size) little tea gardens, residential gardens, even bathrooms and sake bars. The bigger picture isn’t always beautiful, but the details are so exquisite, so consistent. Spirituality was and still is a big influence. Confucianism, Taoism, the different strains of Buddhism, all influenced each other. For me, the spiritual was the personal. It was not an ethic coming as a structure from up high that I had to study and agree to. Rather, how I became a spiritual being...that’s what I like about Zen, and Taoism in particular. It is all about what I believe—a personal, inward religion, not an institution. Its iconography and its symbolism are like an onion with the outer layers obvious: the tiger crossing the water; the turtle in its solidity; plants that, in their irregularity, become the Yin and Yang in one form moving slowly across a vast sea. The elements are so symbolic, playing with feeling and psychological concepts. As you move inward, the design principles themselves become spiritual. Of course, they hark back to nature and since they are so finely wrought and always include the person who is viewing them, all become one and are drawn in as part of the landscape. Through Zen, the iconography is pared down to its essence, to the very breath (chi). Japanese gardens are not meditation gardens, but are purely contemplative. Though, in order to contemplate, you need an object to look at and through looking at it long enough, contemplation works. ...you space out, you transcend, you are beyond it, you empty your mind, you understand yourself. The object is the Sutra, the koan, the Buddhist riddle...unanswerable.

continued on page 3
HK-G: Kinsaku Nakane, your renowned mentor, was a remarkable man and educator. Can you summarize the essentials of his Eastern philosophy that nurtured his design sensibilities?

JMM: I have 250 pages of interviews with him and, of course, what’s always interesting when speaking with a Japanese master is that he always speaks in poetry. You cannot pin him down. I tried to lead him into specifics, for he was so well versed in Japanese history. He was so well steeped in the conventions of the Japanese garden. He researched, restored and built so many gardens, but was unable to abstract and teach the principles. It was up to me to find them. For instance, when asked why is this rock here and the water there – he couldn’t explain. You find frequently that Japanese scholars cannot elucidate their own philosophy, they cannot articulate it from a Western theoretical viewpoint. For me, as a thinker, I have to analyze everything and hold on to it. To him, the garden was nature, was tradition, was accuracy, was correctness.

HK-G: How much did Nakane shape your design vision?

JMM: He offered me the opportunity to work in his studio for a year and a half. In a sense, he was my father while I was there. He made me look at things, he watched over me. He put me in work crews, sent me out into the world and was always interested in what I was doing to go with the information I gathered. He always provided access to anything that I wanted to explore or that interested me. He would guide me. He did this to his other students as well. We all ended up playing different roles, using our experiences in different ways. David Slawson, a Japanese-speaking PhD student doing his thesis, consequently wrote the *The Secret Readings and the Art of the Japanese Garden*. Although, I frequently did not agree with him, his is still the best Japanese garden book in English. He was a scholar also ending up a designer. However, I became the interpreter, the one who had to bring the Japanese garden back to America in a newly conceptualized form, in a set of ideas that were universal.

HK-G: Who else gives you food for thought and inspiration?

JMM: The I Ching. For me each design project - big or small - is a huge opportunity to solve a problem in a new way, one that has never been tried before. My gardens may look like others you may know, but the thinking behind them is different. I really can not turn to anybody for inspiration. I read everybody and think that they are all important in their own right. I am influenced by many different people. In the children’s garden for the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, Mary Myers in Minnesota, a grass specialist whom I met and visited while lecturing there, certainly influenced my use of grasses. Gary Koller, Martha Schwartz, Oehme and van Sweden, Michael van Valkenberg, all do good work, but not one is more important than the other as an influence.

HK-G: How do you look at contemporary art and architecture?

JMM: I like the question; but, essentially, I am a conceptual thinker and problem solver. I listen to Christopher Lydon... words, ideas, literature and music inspire me. Certainly, nature is the biggest inspiration - influenced by the Japanese. Abstraction of an idea and of nature, married together to suit the client, is my basic aim. Sometimes gardens are all about the client. That’s why I wrote *The Inward Garden*. I like to look at contemporary art, although it does not speak to me as much as philosophy. Each garden I do is different. I loved doing the Music Garden since this was a time when I could be more involved with abstract ideas than with a client.

HK-G: For the Music Garden, in order to come to grips with J. S. Bach’s Cello Suite #1, did you need to understand 18th century Germanic musical form, mathematics and the early Enlightenment imagery that went with it? Did your architectural training help you in the physical translation of these abstractions?

JMM: No, I didn’t do any of these because I would have to stop in my tracks and do a historical garden. My job was to be inspired by Bach not to be accurate about the gardens of his time. I was to be an artist working with music in ways that were emotionally full. I could use theoretical structure here and there to express an idea, but I didn’t have to. The images that were implicit in the music were most important. Furthermore, there’s nothing in music literature that says that this suite is about nature or a garden. It is about how Yo Yo Ma hears and plays it. To him, though, it’s all about nature. Knowing that, while I worked with Yo Yo, I listened to it at his urging since he was convinced that it might be about nature for me as well. Since I am a garden designer, it was the perfect project to work on. Indeed, he was right. We do not know if Bach thought of it that way; we hope he did. However, our point was to interpret the suite loosely and to create a beautiful space that evoked its emotions and images. The beauty of that music conjures up gardens, form in time and space, and physical reality. Music is about flow, and so are gardens.

HK-G: Finally, how difficult is it to pursue a career as far-flung as yours is and to keep up with the demanding schedules of three teenagers?

JMM: It goes way back. One thing I chose long ago when the children were babies was that I would work for myself. Of course, this also meant that I couldn’t properly apprentice with an architect. I chose that path and let the career happen. Of course, all the problems of working at home can get a little crazy. At different times of the children’s life, it was hard to make it work. It is still important for me to be with the children and to work at home. That doesn’t mean that I don’t go out into the world a lot. I do, maybe too much sometimes. I lecture, I go to Columbus, or Kansas City. I am very busy. It’s all worthwhile because I do it the way I want to do it. I have wonderful projects, work with wonderful people, collaborate with great landscape architect friends all over, from Toronto to Kansas City. With my personality, I need to be independent and don’t need anyone to tell me that I have to work eight hours a day. I needed to go to the doctors when the kids were sick. Most importantly, I needed to be around my children in order to come up with my archetypes – they have been hugely influential on my work. For me, it surely was the right path. Perhaps in a few years, I will go back to teaching. But, for now, I will do my lectures that I love... get the ideas out, empower people and get feedback. I have the big ideas, but reality lies in collaboration. I need other people to create my work – the physical form – from the contractor through the horticulturist, the landscape architect, and the engineers. All are part and parcel of the process and necessary when you work on your own. My three books were the bonus for staying at home. And being there allowed me to work on the many layers of my profession at the same time.

Heidi Kost-Gross
The Artists’ Colony of Cornish, New Hampshire

A Place of Beauty: The Artists and Gardens of the Cornish Colony, Alma M. Gilbert and Judith B. Tankard, Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, CA, 2000. (Judith Tankard has taught at Radcliffe Seminars for many years; this fall she is teaching Arts and Crafts Gardens.)

The New England Garden History Society (NEGHS) presents a lecture and book signing by Judith B. Tankard at the Putnam Horticulture Building, Elm Bank on Thursday, November 30, 2000, 6:30-8:30pm. $10 NEGHS members, $15 nonmembers. Judith Tankard will also lecture on this topic as part of the Arnold Arboretum (AA) educational program on Tuesday, February 27, 2001, 7:00-8:15pm. $10 AA members, $12 nonmembers.

The Cornish Colony became a haven for artists and their families in the late part of the 19th century. The trend began when Augustus Saint-Gaudens decided to summer in the area during 1885. Saint-Gaudens is best known locally for his moving memorial at the edge of the Boston Common commemorating the Civil War service of the Massachusetts 54th Regiment of African American volunteers and their commander Robert Gould Shaw.

Saint-Gaudens and his wife, Augusta Homer Saint-Gaudens, came to love this part of New Hampshire, close to the Connecticut River with its stunning views of Mt. Ascutney and its beautiful light. For many residents, the light and setting were reminiscent of Italy, even though the climate could not oblige. In 1892, Saint-Gaudens purchased the old inn they had rented for seven summers, naming it Aspet, for a town in France where his family had lived.

Following Saint-Gaudens’ lead and encouraged by him, many artists settled in Cornish. At its height there were over seventy well-known summer and permanent residents. Among those who came were Thomas and Maria Dewing, both painters; Charles Platt, the landscape architect who wrote the American treatise on Italian gardens in 1894; Rose Standish Nichols, garden designer and author; and Ellen Biddle Shipman, garden designer. Illustrator Maxfield Parrish whose watercolors accompanied Edith Wharton’s Italian Villas and Their Gardens (1904) grew along with Cornish. His father Stephen was a painter and avid gardener. The social fabric and the daily life of the Colony revolved around the artists’ work, with mornings devoted to their professions, and afternoons and evenings spent in recreation and socializing.

Many of the artists were devoted gardeners. The gardens they created embodied their awareness of art and design. And, according to Tankard, it was the gardens of Cornish that brought the Colony into national awareness. Articles in popular publications in the first quarter of the 20th century pictured the wonderful flower gardens. In addition, the work of the artists included elements of their gardens. Indeed, the inspiration provided by these gardens seems essential to their art.

A Place of Beauty offers both a history of the Colony and detailed descriptions of twelve artists’ residences and gardens. The stories of the residents’ journeys to Cornish and their experiences in the Colony are woven into the accounts of how they shaped their houses and gardens. Letters, diaries, sketches and notes reveal how meaningful gardening was in the life of the Colony. The book is rich with the art of the residents; sculpture integrated into garden settings, paintings and illustrations inspired by the gardens. There is a wealth of contemporary photographs that convey the high style and luxuriant plantings. New color images of the restored gardens show us the beauty of the gardens today.

The essays on individual gardens give us insight into the creation of these very personal gardens. The artists built gates, walls, pergolas to their own designs. Sculpture, their and their neighbors’, was frequently used. Each chapter is an engaging glimpse into the homes and lives of Cornish. Taken together the essays point to the common themes that unified garden design in the Colony. Residents favored formal layouts with axial relationships to their houses. Terraces, paths, and clipped hedges emphasized this formality. Italian garden references are reflected in these elements along with the use of columnar Lombardy poplars. Many gardens also included a circular “mirror” pool that provided a central visual device for the garden room. Possibly the most striking feature of the Cornish gardens was their exuberant use of flowers. Photo after photo attest to the success of these gardeners, even in the face of the inhospitable northern climate of New Hampshire.

The Cornish Colonists turned their critical eyes on all aspects of their lives. Visits to nearby gardens offered an opportunity to exchange ideas; and the neighbors eagerly shared horticultural successes and failures. The challenges of the climate drove these gardeners to search for hardy varieties and solutions like the effective use of large but moveable potted plants. The hard work of gardening was elevated to an intellectual level that was, in turn, important in fostering a cultural appreciation for domestic gardens in America. The fame of the Cornish gardens helped fuel the early 20th century American revival of gardening and the rejection of Victorian ideas of garden beauty.

Gardening and design experiences in the close-knit Cornish Colony provided some of the first professional work for more than one famous resident. Charles A. Platt was responsible for designing many houses and their gardens in Cornish. Built early in his career, the country houses he did for Cornish residents are characteristic of his later, grander designs. His classical houses and the Cornish landscape were tied together by formal ter-