



Muscatine Art Center
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BACK TO THE PAST - THE REHABILITATED JAPANESE GARDEN

Three year project transforms historic Japanese Garden at the Muscatine Art Center

MUSCATINE, Iowa - Visitors who remember the Japanese-style garden at the Muscatine Art Center can now encounter an entirely re-made space that has the look and feel of the garden as it was in 1930 when Laura Musser McColm had it installed at her home on Mulberry Avenue.



A primary feature of the outdoor public spaces located at the Muscatine Art Center, the Japanese Garden went through a three-year rehabilitation process that was completed this fall.

Since 2020, the rehabilitation of the Japanese Garden has been an active project for the Muscatine Art Center and its team of consultants and contractors. Funded by the national Paul Bruhn Historic Revitalization Program and a grant from the Roy J. Carver Charitable Trust, the



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multi-year project has transformed the garden by bringing back historic features and improving accessibility.

The project began with Associate Professor Heidi Hohmann of the Landscape Architecture Department at Iowa State University examining archived materials held by the Muscatine Art Center and comparing these sources to existing conditions in the garden. The resulting document, the Historic Landscape Preservation Plan, became the foundation for securing grant funds, developing scopes of work for contractors, and modifying the landscape to match the historic features as much as possible.

Visitors to the rehabilitated garden will note the quantity of the stone and rockwork, the absence of the large white pine trees and yews, the choice of new plants like sumac trees and flowering groundcovers, and the combination of a stepping stone path and an ADA-accessible pathway.

The repair of the water features and the installation of a new pumping system have brought life back into the garden with the sight and sound of moving water. However, this feature will be winterized sometime in November or, perhaps, early December and turned back on in spring 2024. During the warmer months, visitors will be able to enjoy the water feature on a daily basis.

The rehabilitation project moved through many phases. After the completion of the study in 2020, Art Center staff transitioned to further research of the garden and similar gardens in the Midwest.

Funded by a grant from Humanities Iowa, Beth Cody, author of *Iowa Gardens of the Past*, was contracted to conduct a thorough investigation into what could be known about the garden as



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well as trends starting in the 1800s around American interest in Japanese-design and specifically Japanese gardens. Cody's research resulted in the creation of a series of eight papers connected to the garden and the inspiration behind its creation as well as its endurance as the only remaining Japanese-style garden in Iowa to be installed prior to World War II. From these papers, the booklet, "The Making of a Japanese Garden in Iowa," and the exhibition, "Captivated by Japan: Laura Musser McColm and Her Era," were developed.

The physical work in the garden began with an archaeological study conducted by Tallgrass Archaeology, LLC, with the report completed in June 2022. Staff continuously worked with the selected landscape firm, Aunt Rhodie's, to prepare plans for the Iowa State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) to review. Following approval by SHPO, tree removal took place in early 2023.

Starting in April 2023, Aunt Rhodie's turned the garden into a worksite. Temporary fencing prevented visitors from entering the area where the landscape was deconstructed before rebuilding the rockwork, re-grading the landscape, repairing the ponds and streams, installing cheek walls alongside each of the three sets of steps, and completing other hardscaping features.

The excessively dry and hot weather over the summer of 2023 caused concerns for attempting to transplant living materials. While work on the physical site took a pause, staff, Aunt Rhodie's, and consultant Hohmann continued to fine-tune plans and provide updates to SHPO.

Weather conditions improved in late August and into September, making it possible to plant new trees and install sod, shrubs, groundcovers, hedges, and flowering plants which are now well on their way to being established thanks to cooler temperatures and some rain in October.



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"It has been a thrill to see the garden evolve over the past half year," Melanie Alexander, Director of the Muscatine Art Center, said. "I am eager to see how the garden changes with the seasons and how the plants and trees mature to their full potential in the coming years and beyond."

In 1930, when Laura Musser McColm had her Japanese-style garden installed at her home at 1314 Mulberry Avenue, it became an occasional gathering space for Laura's clubs such as the Twentieth Century Club and the Muscatine Garden Club. After this rehabilitation project, the garden, in its function as a public space, is set to be a major contributor to place making in Muscatine and the location of many future events and programs.

More information about the Japanese Garden can be found on the Muscatine Art Center's website at www.muscatineartcenter.org/house-garden.

The Muscatine Art Center is located at 1314 Mulberry Avenue in Muscatine, Iowa. Hours are Tuesday through Friday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Thursday evenings until 7:00 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday from 1:00 to 5:00 p.m. Admission is free. Donations are appreciated. Visit www.muscatineartcenter.org for more information about programs and events and to download a quarterly newsletter.

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