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Lion's Gate

BY STEVE ZEITLIN

Wandering through the Garden of Eden, looking for the Temple of Love, Victoria and I strayed from the beaten path. Victoria is a friend of my daughter and was visiting from New Orleans, staying with our family in Westchester while she attended an art opening that included her work in Manhattan. She had a few hours to kill before her flight. She is a naturalist, and I decided to take her to one of my favorite places in all New York State, Untermyer Gardens in Yonkers.

Samuel Untermyer purchased what was then the Greystone Estate in 1899, and in 1915, he hired William Welles Bosworth, a *École des Beaux Arts*-trained architect and landscape designer, to create the “greatest gardens in the world.” The centerpiece is the Walled Persian Garden,



Walled Garden (“Garden of Eden”), Untermyer Gardens, Yonkers, NY. Photo by Jonathan Wallen.



The Lion's Gate, Untermyer Gardens, Yonkers, NY. Photo by Jonathan Wallen. All photos in this column are courtesy of the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy, Inc.

inspired by the Indo-Persian gardens of the ancient world, which, in turn, were inspired by descriptions of the Garden of Eden. The Biblical Eden includes four rivers (Pison, Gihon, Tigris, and the Euphrates) and two great trees (the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and the Tree of Life). The garden is divided into quadrants with four long rectangular pools representing the four rivers. Victoria and I walked between the two majestic trees at the entrance and marveled at the mythological pools, resplendent with water lilies and other elements from Greek and Islamic mythology. If an apple had been hanging from the tree, I am sure Victoria would have picked it.

Once we'd seen the Tree of Knowledge and wandered through the Persian Garden, I asked Victoria if she'd want to see the Temple of Love, which I had visited once before. It's a fanciful rock structure, once an elaborate fountain, capped with three stone bridges and topped with a tiny temple where John Lennon once had a now famous photograph taken, and where the Son of Sam



The opening at Lion's Gate, Untermyer Gardens, Yonkers, NY. Photo by Jonathan Wallen.

serial killer is said to have performed dark rituals back in the 1970s when the park was in disrepair.

Following a less-than-clear map, we made our way along seemingly endless winding pathways till we crossed over a brook. Victoria mentioned at this point that the ions were charged in a way that should improve our moods, which was a good thing since after wandering for

another 15 minutes we crossed right back over it from the other direction, completely lost. Victoria was increasingly nervous about missing her flight. We were hot and sweaty and needed to get back to the Garden of Eden, past the Tree of Life, to where our car was parked.

Suddenly, we came upon the heavily vandalized sculpture of a lion and a headless horse. On the brochure we learned that the piece may be attributed to Edward Clark Potter, the sculptor responsible for the famous lions, Patience and Fortitude, outside the main branch of the New York Public Library (1911). We wondered who had stolen that horse's stone head. Looking at the map, we now realized that the path we had followed did not lead to the Temple of Love.

The path back up to the Garden looked to be just south of the Lion and Horse Gate. We searched the underbrush and saw what looked like a pathway. We started up and ran smack into a wall of brambles. Definitely not a path. We studied the map once more—aha! the path was on the other side of the gate. We looked—started up again—till the trail disappeared. It's said that not all those who wander are lost. But we were truly lost.

Flummoxed, we stood in front of the Lion's Gate, between the carved lion and the headless horse. "Oh my God," I told Victoria. "Perhaps the pathway is through the Lion's Gate." I was reminded of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* in which Indy has to traverse a treacherous cave to find the Holy Grail. The clue to get through is the phrase, "Only the penitent man shall pass." We felt penitent, or perhaps just brave, but swept up in the mythologies referenced by the gardens. A eureka moment—penetrate the Lion's Gate. Would it be another dead end or the pathway to Paradise? With trepidation, summoning fortitude, between the lion and the headless horse we chanced it. Suddenly, just a small steep climb ahead, we could see the long set of stairs that



The Temple of Love, Untermyer Gardens, Yonkers, NY. Photo by Jonathan Wallen.

led back up. I took Victoria's hand to help her up the hill. We laughed our way back to the Garden.

Now, it's up to you, dear pilgrims, to stray from your own beaten paths to visit Untermyer Park. It may be Yonkers, but it's as close as you'll get to the Garden of Eden. ▼

Steve Zeitlin is the founding director of City Lore in New York City. Photo by Martha Cooper.



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