

# BOOKS

Modern American art, Victorian furniture, Topiary - growing garden sculpture, the Musée d'Orsay

## ENGLISH TOPIARY GARDENS

by Ethne Clarke and George Wright  
(Weidenfeld & Nicolson £10.95)

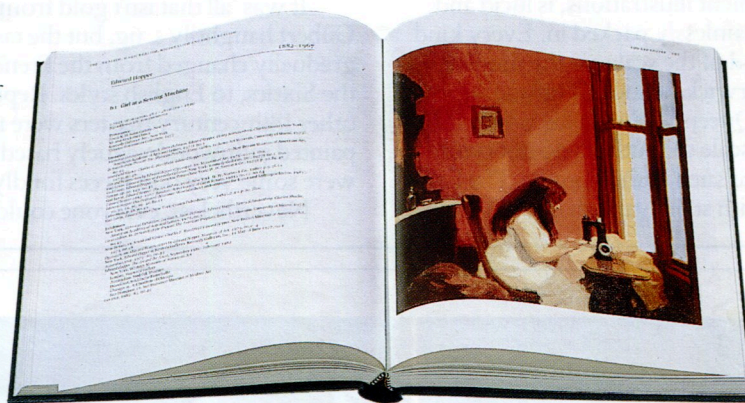
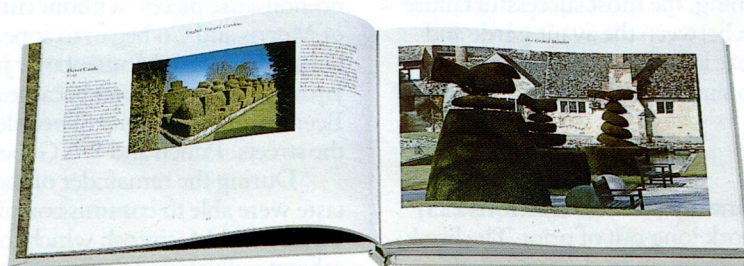
A little topiary goes a long way. Looking through these exceptionally seductive colour photographs is rather like eating a whole box of *marrons glacés* when one might really have preferred a square meal. With one or two exceptions the best gardens treat topiary as an incidental ingredient, subservient to some overall scheme. In too many of these pictures a large, billowing form is plonked down with no thought to scale or appropriateness. The awful thing, too, is that topiary grows. What starts as a little whimsy may end up a huge embarrassment. The result may quite often be fun but it is scarcely gardening.

Neat little clipped hedges and shapes are definitely in fashion. In small town gardens they can be immensely effective, giving a feeling of grandeur in limited space. It is tempting to think of it as the yuppie style - serious money's answer to serious gardening. Mysteriously, practically all the examples in this book are from country or suburban gardens. They tell no particular story and there is no obvious way of categorising them. Ethne Clarke writes useful notes on the historical background of topiary and her carefully written captions are full of interest.

Among the Loch Ness Monsters, teapots and wonky birds the really distinguished gardens stand out a mile. Athelhampton looks wonderful in glittering frost. Levens Hall makes of topiary its *raison d'être*. Nymans, Hidcote and Cranborne Manor (sadly misspelt) look as good as ever. But these are familiar delights. Less familiar are the remarkable Beckley Park in Oxfordshire and the wonderfully romantic Rous Lench Court in Worcestershire.

The problem with topiary is that it is not at all an easy way to add character to a garden. Its most effective use needs discipline, patience and restraint. But this very attractive book will seduce many gardeners into having a go.

PATRICK TAYLOR



## TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN PAINTING

by Gail Levin (Philip Wilson/Sothebys £49.50)

'What a nice pair of kids', wrote Stravinsky in his diary after dinner at the White House with John and Jackie Kennedy. Without describing America as adolescent in the Fifties and Sixties, when it comes to the arts over there nobody ever quite knows who's patronising whom. We are not so much patronised as compromised by this catalogue of more of the Thyssen-Bornemisza collection. Precision not passion has amassed not collected these 128

representative masterpieces of 20th-century American painting.

However, what it suggests is true: American painting of this period is multi-directional. Paris, the haven of the international avant-garde, had brought New York reluctantly to the party. New York responded, flirting like a debutante, but happy to go home. When the Armory Exhibition of 1913 opened American eyes to Cubism and Dadaism, panic set in. The early Modernists such as Ralston Crawford, Oscar Bluemner and Charles Demuth were caught trying to run down the up escalator, the xenophobic rantings of reactionary critics like Tom Craven ringing in their ears as wave upon wave of European stimulus hit the New York shores.

The search for a native style produced some embarrassing results, and terms like 'Precisionism' and 'Presentationalism' served only to dress mutton as lamb. A boom in art-collecting by Americans overseas in the Twenties and Thirties reinforced the sense of national inadequacy. Although Hoffman, Léger, Mondrian and many others sought refuge in New York, American artists responded only spasmodically to European constructivist influences deeply rooted in the horrors of war. Edward Hopper carried on painting as though he had never heard of Picasso, and he features on the dust jacket. Don't judge this book by its cover.

The American Artists Group formed in 1931 and the Federal Arts Projects of 1935-43 were geared to reverse the trend and, being typically American, this worked. A national school

of painting with its own identity arrived like the US Cavalry in the shape of Pollock, Gorky, De Koonig and AE: Abstract Expressionism, that is, not Absolutely Exhausting which it also was. Gail Levin interprets Lichtenstein and Pop, Agnes Martin and Minimalism as street backlash of the most conservative and realist kind once the permissive chic took hold. As the pulse quickened so painters like Rauschenberg returned to familiar American Regionalist iconography that verged on the homespun. So what had happened? The problem is one of interpretation and this catalogue wisely takes no didactic line. Selecting nothing, rejecting nothing, the most successful failure of this book is not to distinguish between the avant-garde and the kitsch. Still, it is one to squeeze into the small gap between coffee table and drawing-room ceiling. ANTHONY MOULD

### VICTORIAN FURNITURE

by RW Symonds and BB Whineray (Studio Editions £25)

This is a re-issue of a standard work long out of print. The book first appeared in 1962 and, although much has been written since, it remains an admirable introduction to the subject.

The text, supported by excellent illustrations, is lucid and witty and much information is painlessly packed in. Every kind of furniture is covered. At one end of the scale are the monstrous overcarved sideboards of the Warwick School. (The one at Charlecote Park was offered to Queen Victoria: she wisely refused.) At the other end of the scale the authors do not omit pretentious horrors turned out for such as the Pooters. The bad stuff of rotten wood disguised with stain, varnish and machine-

made carving must have long since fallen to pieces.

Much of the middling sort of furniture of the first half of the reign was well made from beautiful woods. It was not over-ornamented and was practical and comfortable. A group of such pieces made by Holland and Son is illustrated. These charming things ordered for a house in Devon were *still* in situ in 1962.

Queen Victoria so dominated her country that we tend to think of the Great Exhibition in 1851 as 'mid-Victorian'. In reality the great divide came in the decade following/the 1862 exhibition. Richard Charles (pre-dating Eastlake) was making no-nonsense pieces 'without curves', and the simple productions of Morris and Co began to appear. Most importantly Japan had been discovered. Momentarily just an aesthetic vogue, Anglo-Japanese furniture soon became all the rage, and by 1880 Max Beerbohm could write of people 'hurling their mahogany into the streets'. Punch and WS Gilbert lampooned with glee.

During the remainder of the reign well-heeled patrons of taste were able to commission pieces from such as Godwin, Voysey and Macintosh which foreshadowed the 20th century. A cabinet is illustrated designed by George Jack for Morris and Co which could have appeared thirty years later than 1893.

It was 'all that isn't gold from Gillows' for the New Rich as Gilbert haughtily sings, but the taste of ordinary people gradually changed from the Frenchified pieces, popular up to the Sixties, to English styles. Reproductions of Chippendale and other 18th-century masters were made in quantity along with painted satinwood vaguely based on Adam designs, and there were some very odd pieces fondly imagined to be Queen Anne.

Nevertheless, everyone could very cheaply buy the

