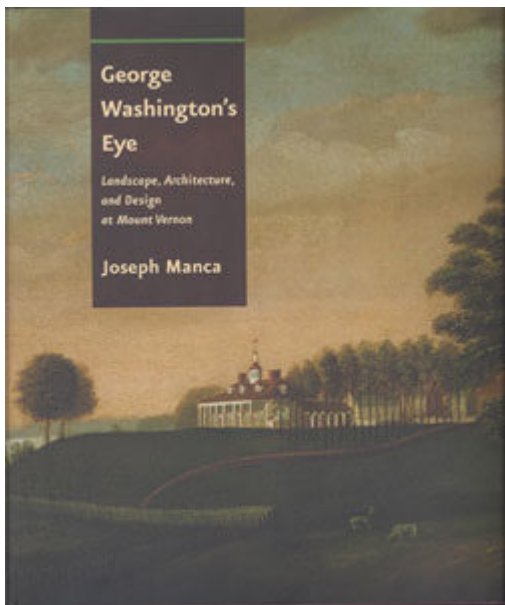
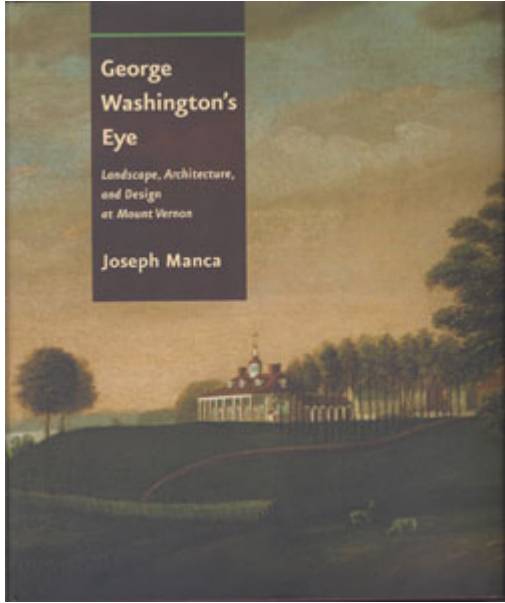


Introducing Artist, Architect, Collector, and Landscape Designer George Washington



Joseph Manca, *George Washington's Eye: Landscape, Architecture, and Design at Mount Vernon*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. 344 pp., \$49.95.

Since the last decades of the eighteenth century, Americans have understood Mount Vernon as a mirror for its illustrious owner and creator: George Washington. In the nineteenth century, patriotic pilgrims trekked through back roads and muddy fields to see its long piazza on the banks of the Potomac. Today, packed tour buses and minivans unload hordes of visitors daily, each seeking the gardens Washington planted, the rooms in which he lived and died,

and perhaps even the whiskey he distilled in order to better understand the real man behind the indelible myth.

And this is as it should be, since Washington intended his house to be understood as a reflection of his character. Over the past two decades, landscape and architectural historians like Robert F. Dalzell Jr., Lee Baldwin Dalzell, Allan Greenberg, and Mac Griswold have successfully proven that he carefully crafted the buildings and outdoor spaces at Mount Vernon to serve his needs as both a private planter and as a public figure. Even though the plantation was his private retreat and primary source of income, it was also a way for Washington to present himself as a man of high moral character, fit for leadership of the new republic.

With direct nods to these recent works, art historian Joseph Manca ups the ante in his *George Washington's Eye: Landscape, Architecture, and Design at Mount Vernon*. In this well-illustrated and meticulously researched book, Manca argues that Washington didn't stop with architecture when creating his public image. From the bookplate that marked his library's volumes to views of the house from boats passing on the Potomac, Washington carefully considered every aesthetic aspect of Mount Vernon. *George Washington's Eye* goes beyond Washington as patron and tastemaker to consider him as a designer and collector intent on creating a world that would not only represent who he wanted to be, but also the values of the new republic with which he was charged.

More inclusive than any previous study of Mount Vernon's architecture, decorative arts, or immediate landscape, Manca's book looks at the physical evidence as well as Washington's writings about art and taste in letters and other documents, drawings he made, and buildings and places he designed or had a hand in planning elsewhere. *George Washington's Eye* is organized into chapters that both provide thematic overviews and focus on particular elements of Mount Vernon: Manca expands from an explanation of the public persona Washington wished to project to a discussion of his design for the house and portico; then on to an exploration of his interests in gardening and landscape; his selections of art and other decorative objects; and finally the classical and biblical themes underlying many of these physical aspects of Mount Vernon. The book is, therefore, a comprehensive study of Washington's aesthetic choices, from their origins to the objects in which they resulted. While other scholars have catalogued the paintings in Mount Vernon, for example, Manca goes further to consider why Washington hung certain pictures in particular rooms or chose not to display others at all. In one instance, Washington did not even accept the gift of a portrait of Louis XV, knowing that it would be inappropriate for him to add a picture of a king against whom he went to war to his collection at Mount Vernon.

Manca provides a range of potential sources for Washington's decisions in art collecting, landscape design, and architecture: books he owned, places he was known to have seen, the opinions of those whom he encountered, and the particulars of his biography. While many of Washington's design inspirations

are well-documented and hard to refute, others are more imaginative. For the iconic piazza (which Manca rightly claims was “Washington’s greatest contribution to American architecture”), Washington might have looked to open loggias in Georgian architecture or porches he observed on Asian-inspired jappaned wares (56). The range of potential sources Manca considers reinforces his argument that Washington was deeply engaged in the aesthetic world; he actively sought information, objects, and opinions on what was fashionable and was confident in inventing his own designs.

George Washington’s Eye is the first study of the house and its contents to take full advantage of the digital editions of the [Papers of George Washington](#), relying much more on Washington’s words than previous histories of the house. The book cites seemingly every comment Washington ever uttered regarding painting, architecture, gardening, decorative arts, and aesthetic theory. Manca pays particular attention to Washington’s language in describing his physical world and his aspirations for it, finding significance in literary allusions and in the persistence of phrases. These observations tie Washington to his contemporaries in both England and North America, rooting him in a global social elite interested in matters of beauty and taste.

One of the book’s most comprehensive arguments is that Washington’s interest in land and his belief in its unique role in America profoundly shaped his choices at Mount Vernon. While Manca admits that Washington must have relied on the advice of craftsmen for the plan and details of much of the house’s architecture, he suggests that the landscape was the first president’s invention and passion. From the way in which he directed the visitor’s experience with views and paths to the prints and paintings of America he collected (rare in their number and range of subjects for the period), the aesthetics, meaning, and design of landscape gripped Washington. Rich descriptions of what the plantation looked like during Washington’s lifetime offer a vision of the place that no previous work (nor the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association’s current interpretation of the house and grounds) has achieved. For example, in his discussion of views at Mount Vernon, Manca reminds the reader that the untouched wilderness visitors now see across the Potomac River from the house is a “Colonial Revival creation,” and that it would have been a productive landscape peppered with farms and fields during Washington’s lifetime (161).

Although Manca’s discussion of Mount Vernon’s landscape is a tremendous and imaginative contribution, it often seems as if Washington were the only person undertaking such an extensive and thoroughly considered project in America and that the grounds were intended only for pleasure. Manca focuses on English country gardens and theories as the possible sources for Washington’s ideas. These were certainly the most logical inspirations for Washington and his contemporaries, yet America also provided a set of completely new contexts of which men like Washington and Thomas Jefferson were particularly aware. Manca rarely locates the house and grounds in the context of other Southern plantations, for example, suggesting that Washington considered Mount Vernon

less an active plantation and more along the lines of ornamental farms in England that he had never seen. Beyond recognizing their existence, Manca does not engage with the working parts of the landscape; he sets aside the smokehouse, dairy, quarters, and other buildings necessary to every Southern plantation for concerns more often associated with the fine arts. There is no reason to think that such a successful planter as Washington, keeping in mind his concern for every aesthetic aspect of the farm, wouldn't consider these features as carefully as he would the color of the dining room. Similarly, the book only briefly acknowledges the enslaved workforce that built and maintained Washington's vision, nor does it consider what or if Washington thought of the implications of creating an English-inspired landscape, made possible by African-American slaves, in the new republic.

The sum of Manca's careful and comprehensive analysis reinforces and expands conclusions made by biographers of Washington, as well as historians of Mount Vernon: Washington was ever-conscious of how his decisions and actions—as a leader or as a private citizen—would reflect on his public persona. Mount Vernon was a means for Washington to present himself as a man of high moral worth (defined by exhibited modesty and sobriety), yet also as a member of the fashionable elite. He considered Mount Vernon a semi-public place, a stage on which he could act out the role of the classical characters to whom the American public was so quick to compare him. Judging by contemporary visitors' reactions to the plantation cited throughout the book, Washington was successful; early Americans regarded Mount Vernon as a simple, beautiful, and serene retreat appropriate for a leader of a modern democracy. And we still do.

This article originally appeared in issue 14.1.5 (November, 2013).

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