

## HOME

## THE CALIFORNIA GARDEN

# Artistically grounded

A backyard provides a palette that is personal and ever-changing. Eleanore Berman has drawn inspiration there for more than 40 years.



## WORLD TRAVELERS

Photographs by WALLY SKALLI, Los Angeles Times

Eleanore Berman's works have circled the globe, but they started out in the same place: "I spend a lot of time in this garden. . . . I'm engaged in it, fascinated by it, stimulated by the light or dark."

By JANET EASTMAN  
Times Staff Writer

**E**LEANORE BERMAN knows her garden so well she can paint it in the dark. She has sketched its columns of bronzy bamboo, brick walls awash in red Virginia creeper and jade-colored hedges at night in her studio and even on cross-country trips.

Berman's backyard, which she has tended for more than four decades, has traveled the world in the form of at least 200 pieces it has inspired.

At an exhibit in Amsterdam, the U.S. cultural attaché announced to the opening-night crowd: "Welcome to Eleanore's garden." Her artwork is in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and UCLA Hammer Museum, galleries in London, Berlin and Amstelveen, Holland, and homes here and abroad.

In her Impressionist work, a black element in the background may look enigmatic, but it's really her garden gate. Dissolved mounds of soft sage are the way she sees shrubs.

One painting of egg-shaped stones from her path was reproduced on the cover of a psychology book because the publisher thought it represented the beginning of life.

"People ask me how I come up with ideas, and I tell them it's a mystery," says Berman, 70. "But I spend a lot of time in this garden that I love. I'm engaged in it, fascinated by it, stimulated by the light or dark, and I want to see it in a painting. Can you think of any greater gift nature has given us?"

Since 1967, she has lived in a Colonial Georgian in Beverly Hills, once owned by "Mrs. Miniver" producer Sidney Franklin.

"I fell in love with the house because it already had a studio and the bones of a great garden," Berman says. "I dig my hands into the ground, replace plants, prune roses. I even keep a compost heap in back, which is rare for a Beverly Hills lady."

Her backyard is a long rectangle, divided into sections. A jumble of pink daisies, bearded iris, sweet alyssum and lavender sways along the center flagstone path like crowds at a singalong. Standing guard are flowering cherry trees and clipped myrtle hedges. A thick mat of grass is on one side of the path, a pool area with a white marble sculpture from Italy on the other. Pink geraniums and red begonias bloom in terra-cotta pots.

Beyond the back gate is a formal garden, one with patterned brick walkways leading to manicured boxwoods and



**BEYOND NATURE:** Even the gate in Berman's backyard has appeared in her Impressionist work, as an enigmatic black element.

roses the size of pint-size paint cans. Her upstairs studio and gallery, separate from the house, benefits from this view.

For inspiration, she walks the slate paths, pinches off sprigs of lavender, inhales the scent and breathes it in. She observes spikes of new shoots, curves of clouds, blocks of moody shadows. Then she retreats to her studio and transfers the impressions nature has left with her onto canvas.

When Berman was growing up in New York City, she kept an easel in her bedroom and sketched lively expressions of Central Park — a flower, bridge or pond.

Later, she studied with modernist painter Josef Albers and sculptor Ossip Zadkine at the experimental Black Mountain College in North Carolina.

"We were fascinated by the European faculty, many from the Bauhaus [design school in Germany]," she says.

## Tips for budding garden artists

Eleanore Berman offers these tips for artists who want to paint their gardens:

**Take a good, long look.** Berman photographs her backyard first to study details of the way a leaf sprouts from a stem or the color of a petal. She also pores over botanical drawings.

**Take a drawing class.** Working with charcoal, pens and ink disciplines the hand, she says, adding, "People don't observe something until they have to put it down on paper."

**Watch the clock.** The best time to look at a garden is when there are light and dark contrasts, in the early morning and late afternoon.

**Have patience** and don't demand too much of yourself. "Stay loose enough to let the imagination guide the hand," she says. Doodles may not become a finished piece of art, but they may lead to an idea for one.

She practiced her art in the Paris atelier of French Cubist painter Fernand Léger and in New York with painter Manfred Schwartz and printmaker Robert Blackburn before marrying and moving to the Pacific Palisades.

Raising her four children became her priority, but Berman found a spare bedroom and time to paint, and she began to exhibit her work in Los Angeles.

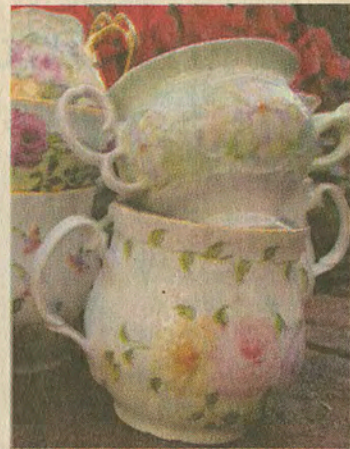
Her realistic paintings were often of the sea, rock formations and people. When she moved to this home, however, she, like a garden, was renewed.

"I used to do defined forms, but here I started looking at the body and not the outline," she says. "It's as if I took a camera and enlarged a detail."

Her most recent series of large paintings of hedges and garden paths is done in energetic, loose brushstrokes daubed with salubrious colors. She swirls brushes through puddles of yellow, pink and pumpkin to make succulent round petals. Thin slashes of gray, plum and cream imitate rain falling on stone.

"Perhaps I paint these paths as symbols of the journey we are all on," she says.

"And I, as the keeper of this garden, know this path well."



**PAINTED PORCELAIN:** Teacups by Lissi Kaplan.

## From one delicate balance to another

**L**ISSI KAPLAN is another artist whose garden nurtures her creativity. She paints buds and butterflies on porcelain, a surface so delicate that a speck of dust on it can ruin it before it's fired. And it's a surface so small that the wrong touch of her finely pointed brush can distort a tiny leaf or finch's wing on a dainty napkin ring or teacup.

Kaplan works from her window-lined home studio in Calabasas, which has views of her backyard, a lush palette of pink tea roses, white begonias, sunny-yellow lemons and metallic insects.

"I always have a subject to paint," she says.

Her garden has inspired her to create a line of hand-painted porcelain tea sets, pedestal cake plates, candleholders and crescent-shaped necklaces to adorn trees. Actress Fran Drescher pours tea from a leopard-printed pot Kaplan made for her.

When book publisher Judith Regan cradled one of Kaplan's teacups while dining at the Peninsula Beverly Hills hotel, it prompted her to ask Kaplan to write and illustrate "The Power of a Teacup: A Story of Art, Love, and Sacred Gardens" (Regan Books, \$15).

Catching the publisher's attention was this: Hand-painted porcelain is rare. Printed decals have been widely used on plates and cups since the 18th century. Kaplan uses ancient recipes to mix powdered pigments with lavender and clove oils; she applies the colors with sable brushes, then fires the pieces in a kiln. The process takes days.

A teapot sells for \$250; a platinum, diamond and hand-painted rose porcelain necklace is \$3,400.

For more information, call (818) 223-3209; [www.LissiKaplan.com](http://www.LissiKaplan.com).

— JANET EASTMAN



**NATURE'S ARTISTRY:** Inspiration in a leaf tunnel.

## The simple stroke of a genius

Impressionist painter Paul Cézanne had a simple philosophy about nature's ever-changing wardrobe: Let it be. His modest property in Provence, France, which inspired his oil and watercolor landscapes, was a wilderness of sycamore trunks crisscrossed in English ivy, hydrangea-filled archways and scattered fieldstone.

In "Cézanne Garden" (Simon & Schuster, \$35), photographs that capture the real scene of, say, rows of chestnut trees, are shown alongside the artwork inspired by it. Author, photographer and gardener Derek Fell also explains how to create a tapestry garden and leaf tunnel just like the great painter's. The 130-page hardcover includes color sketches of the garden layout.

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