

CLOISTER GARDENS

STORY AND PICS: SANDHYA SUNIL MAILDM

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San Giovanni: central fountain and four paths.

A LOOK AT CLOISTER GARDENS IN ROME

Derived from the latin *Clastrum*, meaning 'enclosure', a cloister is a rectangular open space surrounded by covered walkways or galleries with open arcades. These walks and galleries are built on the inner side of the building walls that form a quadrangle, with the arcades facing inwards.

The attachment of a cloister to a cathedral or church was to separate the world of monks from that of serfs. Cloisters often had colonnades like the Greek and Roman peristyle courts. They were contemplative spaces at the heart of monastic life and were used for teaching, sitting and meditating, or for exercise in inclement weather.

Monasticism was not practiced in christianity until the early 4th century AD, though the practice of retreating into natural landscapes was applied in other religions including hinduism, buddhism and daoism, and some other older religions. It is likely that the central square space used was a symbol of the earth, just as a circle was a symbol of heaven. If this hypothesis is correct, there is a powerful case for managing cloisters as green voids with grass and wild flowers.¹

FUNCTION

During the Middle Ages, gardens were thought to unite the earthly with the divine. The 'enclosed garden' was an allegory for paradise or

a 'lost Eden' and was termed the Hortus Conclusus. These medieval enclosed gardens featured an essential well at their centre, from which four paths divided the space into quadrants. The convention of four paths dividing the square enclosure was so strong that the pattern was employed even where the paths led nowhere. The well, apart from serving a practical purpose of supplying water for drinking and irrigation, was symbolic of the Fountain of Life.

The cloister garden's purpose was for quiet meditation or study. The cloisters gave access to adjacent buildings used for eating (the refectory), sleeping (the dormitory) and food storage (the cellar). Another door led to the church.

FORM

Typically a cloister is a square courtyard surrounded by a covered walk. The central green space was known as the cloister garth, from which derives the word garden. A perfect square with a round pool and a pentagonal fountain became a microcosm, illuminating the mathematical order and divine grace of the macrocosm (the universe).ⁱⁱ

There are no medieval records of them containing any plants except closely scythed grass. In the 19th century some became gardenesque with herbaceous plants and shrubs. Monasteries also had flowers, vegetables and orchard gardens.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT. San Giovanni: peristyle and arcade; Monks in the cloister; Garth with olive trees, grass and ornamental plants.





Fruit trees in Doria courtyard.

The cloister garth was barred to the laity and served primarily as a retreat, a place for contemplative life (or locus of the 'vita contempliva').

HISTORICALLY

Monasteries carried on a tradition of garden design during the medieval period in Europe. There wasn't just one method followed; but a range of horticultural techniques employed by the monasteries

in their gardens. As for gardening practices, limited records mean there are no extant monastic gardens entirely true to original form.¶

Generally, monastic garden types consisted of kitchen gardens, infirmary gardens, cemetery orchards, cloister garths and vineyards. Individual monasteries might also have had a 'green court', a plot of grass and trees where horses could graze, as well as private gardens for monks.

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Vegetable and herb gardens helped provide both alimentary and medicinal crops which could be used to feed or treat the monks and, in some cases, the outside community. In the kitchen gardens, fennel, cabbage, onion, garlic, leeks, radishes, and parsnips might be grown, as well as peas, lentils and beans if space allowed for them. The infirmary gardens could contain *Rosa gallica* (The Apothecary Rose), savory, costmary, fenugreek, rosemary, peppermint, rue, iris, sage, bergamot, mint, lovage, fennel and cumin, amongst other herbs.^{iv} Some cloister gardens also contained small fish ponds, another source of food for the community.

The herb and vegetable gardens served a purpose beyond that of production: their installation and maintenance allowed the monks to fulfill the manual labor component of the religious way of life prescribed by Rule of St Benedict. The orchard thus manifested as a natural symbol of the Garden of Paradise. This bi-fold concept of the garden as a space that met both physical and spiritual needs was carried over to the cloister garth.

Some scholars suggest that, though sparsely planted, plant materials found in the cloister garth might have inspired various religious visions.^v This tendency to invest the garden with symbolic values was not limited to the religious orders alone, but was a feature of medieval culture in general.

SAN GIOVANNI

The cloisters of San Giovanni's church in Rome, all that remain of the Benedictine monastery, date from the early 13th century. Their design, by Vassellectus and the Cosmati brothers, is an intermediate style between Romanesque and Gothic. They are surrounded by graceful double columns of inlaid marble and contain many early christian fragments from the basilica.

The garth was very introverted with the ideology being one of introspection and contemplation. Only in the 15th century, at first in Italy, did some European gardens begin to look outward. **LD**

NOTES:

- i. Asian gardens and landscapes by Tom Turner
- ii. <http://en.wikipedia.org>
- iii. www.gardenvisit.com
- iv. www.sacred-destinations.com/italy
- v. <http://en.wikipedia.org>

References:

- <http://blog.metmuseum.org/cloistersgardens/>
<http://www.herbcompanion.com>



LEFT. Doria Pamphilij cloister in Rome.

RIGHT. San Giovanni: view of the cloister and arcade.