

Oatlands

Leesburg, Virginia

Photographs by Alan Ward 2024

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

The presence of the past reverberates when walking through the grounds of Oatlands Plantation in Loudon County, Virginia. Oatlands is an example of the grants of large land holdings in colonial America, particularly in Virginia. The 3,400-acre plantation and home of the Carter family included agricultural fields, pastures for grazing, and mill complex, that all relied on the labor of enslaved people. Following the Civil War, the Carter family used the site as a farm, girl's school, and summer boarding house, until sold in 1897. The 4 ½ acre walled garden was built two hundred years ago and restored in the early twentieth century. The property was donated to the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1965.

These photographs were done in about three hours on a drizzly morning in September, which had a soft and atmospheric character of light. It was a relatively short period of intensive seeing. I had to work rapidly to take advantage of these favorable light conditions. By knowing the format of the frame and focal length of the lens, it is possible to locate precisely and quickly the ideal position for the tripod. If it takes too much time to compose an image, then it is probably not worth continuing. I set up each view at, or near eye level, because that corresponds to our horizontal orientation when walking through the landscape.

Each image was done with a wide-angle lens or panoramic view to depict, and in some cases exaggerate, the breadth of space in the landscape. It was overcast conditions, without sharp shadows that tends to flatten scenes, so how is depth and space best expressed in the two-dimensional plane of

a photograph? The same visual depth cues that characterize the psychology of perception can be used by the photographer to illustrate the three-dimensionality of designed spaces in a garden or landscape. If an image is composed with trees or plants in the foreground that cover other elements of the design, it must be nearer, and help create a deeper sense of space. If the edges of a path or planting bed are known to be parallel and seem to converge, they recede and amplify a sense of depth and perspective. Likewise, framing a repetition of trees or objects of a similar size, that appear progressively smaller in the view, reinforces spatial depth. And finally, a tactic used for centuries by painters, is to illustrate hills on the horizon with a softened, bluish cast, which is a perceptual phenomenon of everyday vision, that can be seen in these photographs of Oatlands on a misty day.

The entire scene in each photograph is in focus, from the nearest foreground elements to the distant horizon. This is distinctly different than human perception, which is only sharp and clear at the center, and becomes progressively blurred toward the edges of the perceptual field. This is so pronounced, that if you pause and consider this tendency, you will instinctively turn the eyes to focus on the less clear parts at the edge of your visual field. This is one of the fundamental transformations that occurs in the photographic image, as compared to everyday human vision, as it is quite a revelation to move the eye around a large photograph knowing that every part of the scene is in perfect focus.*

List of Photographs

1. View east of Little Oatlands Lane from entry
2. View west of fields along entry drive
3. Little Oatlands Lane
4. View north at entry gates
5. Oatlands Mansion and circular drive
6. Oatlands Mansion and front lawn
7. View south from portico
8. View from rear porch on north side to back lawn
9. Back lawn and Oatlands Mansion
10. Bachelor's Cottage along access drive
11. Greenhouse entry on south side
12. Path from east door of mansion to east-west axis of garden
13. Garden dependencies at north end of terraced garden
14. Gate in wall at north end of garden
15. Staircases parallel to retaining wall at west edge of garden
16. Fountain on garden terrace
17. View east of terrace and boxwood parterres
18. Terraces with boxwood
19. View of path on east-west axis of garden
20. Steps and path on axis from mansion through garden
21. Pool with young fawn on lower garden terrace
22. Pool, greensward, and hedges leading to teahouse
23. View east of teahouse
24. View inside the teahouse
25. View from teahouse to boxwood hedges
26. View from boxwood hedges to teahouse
27. Sundial and seat under arbor
28. South end of steps along retaining wall
29. Garden wall retaining the level front lawn
30. Terraces and well
31. Access drive around front lawn
32. Carriage house
33. View of north access from Oatlands Plantation Lane



































































Notes

* See *The Perception of the Visual World* by James J. Gibson for more on the psychology of perception.