

Läckö Slott at the round earth's imagin'd corner

Gareth Evans writes from Sweden

If the TV weather map is our modern *mappa mundi*, then Lake Vänern is at the north-eastern corner of our climatic region. Here the white castle of *Läckö* was built on what is effectively an inland sea and when the waters ice over it is perhaps the home of our winter blizzards, swirling over the castle's cupolas, sweeping across the low Swedish plain to bear down on the poor benighted sheep of East Anglia.

This is a serious castle, once owned by the most powerful of families of seventeenth century Sweden. Its wide stairwells and landings appear carved from living rock. In contrast, the rooms and halls have a style of decoration that is distinctive and theatrical. The interiors are completely painted in a rich *trompe l'oeil* decoration whose exuberance is restrained only by its palette of 'artemisia' greys and white. The style reaches a climax in the *Riddarsalens* (Knights' Hall) where the two-dimensional stucco bursts into life as thirteen painted cherubs hang from the flat ceiling like so many toy helicopters.

In recent years the head gardener, Simon Irvine, a British garden designer, has planted the long walled castle garden in a varied and engaging way. The garden lies literally at one's feet as a few square terraces fall way from the dramatic entrance door with a view ahead of the lakeside and the wilderness of pine beyond. If one smiles here it is because the garden is entertaining. The dry stone walls sprout red valerian (*Centranthus ruber*) and angelica that encroach into the pathways. In the beds other round-headed inflorescences, such as echinops and the streaming bubbles of *Verbascum olympicum*, make the borders effervesce. Hollyhocks will take over later in the season in front of a background of artemisia lined up against the castle's white walls.

At the lowest level fun is followed by formality as a large parterre is made up with potager plants. Visiting in July, I urged the red cabbage seedlings along, anxiously wishing them into the toddler stage at this part of the season. Yet although the Swedish summer maybe a little shorter than ours its fast and furious pace is set by successive hot

weeks and long daylight hours. Beyond the parterre a tunnel and pergola, covered with rose, honeysuckle and squash trained up through the lathes, are well-engineered to a traditional design. In this more intellectual third of the garden the planting changes every year. Following the current theme of hunting in art it has been conceived as 'The Garden of the Unicorn'. The legendary unicorn can only be slain with the help of a virgin and only regain life fettered by a golden chain, as in the familiar medieval woven tapestries of symbolic gardens. Here, in a coppiced hazel grove, the planting aimed towards the textures and warm colours of tapestry warp and woof. Clove pinks flower above thyme, *Viola tricolor* and pot marjoram. The familiar kitchen garden sight of curly parsley is used for its weft-like texture and colour. Clary sage and acanthus rises above the underplanting along with a purple form of good king henry (*Chenopodium bonus-henricus*). Among the recognisable subjects from the illustrated herbals is *smultron* or the wild strawberry hung over with Solomon's seal. Above the garden is the baroque chapel containing a company of gesticulating martyrs perched on the windowsills - life-size, they appeared to be set aside for the Last Judgement. As the afternoon came to an end I could hear from the deep inner courtyard musicians rehearsing for the evening performance. With dark clouds curling overhead, this cultured corner of our West European weather map, surrounded as it is by a vast landscape, could certainly make a viable bid to host the Last Trump. A bit of a poem tried to make itself remembered to me like a half forgotten tune: John Donne's sonnet now gives me a souvenir of that happy revelation when I found myself in a unique location full of baroque skill and invention.

*At the round earths imagin'd corners, blow
Your trumpets Angells, and arise, arise
From death, you numberlesse infinities
Of soules, ...*

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