

CITY

## Gardiner of Earthly Delights

Posted on August 12, 2016 by SCHUSTER GINDIN

[Leave a comment](#)

Last year, returning home to Toronto after an unplanned, long and trying stay in the U.S., I struggled to reclaim my place with family, friends and the city. Family and friends work with you. The city seemed less open, if not forbidding.

To stretch my wings and regain my footing with Toronto at large, I opted to go to the Gardiner Museum.



Always welcoming, the Gardiner is a place that houses many fond memories, never overwhelms, provides comfort, invites revisiting and always inspires looking at things more deeply.

I was vaguely aware that new things had been going on in my absence. The Museum celebrated its 30th anniversary and there was a buzz about a re-install of the second floor European Gallery masterminded by founding curator Meredith Chilton who, like Charles de Gaulle and Michael Corleone called back to their destinies, had been lured to the Gardiner to supervise this intimate yet monumental endeavour.

Chilton, who has been with the Gardiner since before the beginning, regularly recounts a funny and telling tale about working on the inauguration of the museum with its founders George and Helen Gardiner. Part of George Gardiner's fortune came from his hand in bringing Kentucky Fried Chicken to Canada. One intense evening in the home of George and Helen, ramping up for the museum's launch, pulling an all-nighter and eating while meeting the deadline crunch, a fatigued Meredith found herself in giddy amazement when she looked down to see that she was eating KFC served on Sevres porcelain. When worlds collide...

The developments at the Gardiner marked that perfect mix of sameness and change that one seeks in coming home after a long time away. A chance to see the new installation, and to hear culinary historian Ivan Day talk about his part in the re-visioning and the special table set up by Chilton with him and other consultants and creators, was just the thing to motivate me to get out of the house and re-engage with the greater downtown cultural core.

I've walked up to and through the front area of the Gardiner so many times that it's become more or less invisible to me. On this day, I froze in my tracks when, in the spot where previous gardens have come up short, I was confronted with rows and rows of pointed *rocks*, like shark's teeth, curving their way throughout the front area. This new addition and improvement was truly a WOW moment. The brilliance of a rock garden in front of a ceramic, porcelain and clay museum struck me as philosophically sound. It's all *earth*. This particular garden reminds us that rocks, clay and more, are the raw and pure forms of what ultimately become refined pottery, earthenware, ceramic, porcelain... which in fact became "refined" to the point of revolution. All those lovely decadent pieces owned by the Louis', their mistresses and toadies became symbolic of the difference between the classes, and somehow, part of what incited the French Revolution.



Advertisement

## MAKEUP MARIO

◀ MAKEUP BY M  
Master Mattes  
Eyeshadow Pal

But it's not to be written off as a "rock garden" ... and definitely not a Zen rock garden. This living, breathing, expressionistic battalion of sharp stone is a vision of confrontation and drama, not a place to meditate and 'defrag' your mind. A garden not to be tip-toed through or sat cross-legged in. A wake-up call. A clay clarion, and just what I needed.

*Click on any image to enlarge*



(<https://livingtorontojournal.com/2016/08/12/gardiner-of->

[earthly-delights/olympus-digital-camera-792/#main](#))



(<https://livingtorontojournal.com/2016/08/12/gardiner->

[of-earthly-delights/olympus-digital-camera-791/#main](#))

A short while after my first visit and view of the crags, I was lucky enough to attend, appropriately enough, a garden party. On one of the many patio vistas overlooking the host's lush greens, fountains and hedges, I was drawn to a couple, obviously in a great mood, and obviously in love and harmony. The man was diligent in gathering food from the passing wait staff for both of them, and saw that the woman's wine glass was refreshed a full minute before the refill was required. I couldn't hear the conversation but the laughter was regular and real. Clearly the people you want to be near when you really don't know anyone in attendance. I sidled up. Conversation was instant, easy and fun. The topic immediately jumped to music. Seems she was a singer, he played something, and they knew a great deal about the Toronto scene. More harmony. The punch line was that when I asked him where he played, there was another laugh and the truth came out. This was Neil Turnbull, the visionary behind the rock garden at the Gardiner, and his wife and true partner, Carolyn. At this, I waxed poetic and possibly incoherent in admiration of their rock garden. After all the talk of music (and the fact that music was so much a part of their being) I'm pretty sure I drew parallels to Thelonious Monk's *Brilliant Corners* and Lennie Tristano's (by way of Poe) *Descent into the Maelstrom*. My comments got a laugh, but were not dismissed. Neil explained that the rocky rows would indeed be that, rows. Living things of more traditional beauty will be planted between these rows. The arrangement, as a whole, will transform and mean different things to different people at different times of the year, something to constantly look forward to and be surprised by. As for my preferred take on the garden, I guess at the beginning of spring and at the end of fall, I'll still have that rough array of lone rocks that conjures up the Atlantic Coast off of certain parts of Maine. Here's the formal statement from the creator:

"The building's concrete structure and the stunning collections inside are all products of the same clay. The filigree pattern of the stone layers mirrors many of the pieces in the collection, and the violent volcanic forces that cause the sedimentary uplift make us think of the fierceness of the potter's furnace."

## The Interior “garden”

Finally inside the museum, I join a group and we make a beeline for the much-touted re-creation of a late 18th century dessert table “inspired by the recollection of a dinner with the Bishop of Norwich by diarist James Woodforde.” A rebuild of a feast, ripped from the pages of memory.



It is a sight to behold. Audible gasps accompanied the parade of entrants to the room. In keeping with the times (and in keeping *up* with the Joneses of the times) the landscape of the table goes beyond knives, forks and spoons. The decorations (flower arrangements real and re-imagined, sugar statuary and porcelain sculptures atop a mirror *surtout*) are intended to reflect a classical, fantastical garden. Sugar paste (not edible) pillars and lattice, porcelain nudes, hand-done artificial flowers molded petal by petal and rebuilt in wax by Charlotte Hepworth and Alyson Reynolds and their ancient “family secret” boggle the mind and wow the eye.

*Click on any image to enlarge*



(<https://livingtorontojournal.com/2016/08/12/gardiner-of->

[earthly-delights/med-shot-table-sm/#main](#))



(<https://livingtorontojournal.com/2016/08/12/gardiner-of->

[earthly-delights/nude-table-setting-from-behind-sm/#main](#))

The Derby (pronounced “Darby”) table settings further fuel the floral theme and reflect the “enlightenment” of the period and the mania for in-depth study and categorization of flora, fauna, mammals and insects. In the case of The Bishop’s Table, each setting is a study of a different flower or plant. The recreations of the desserts! Sorbets, cookies, “flummeries” (moulded milk jellies, in the case of this table formed in asparagus and fish molds) are so enticing that every time I’ve visited since, at some point the security alarm goes off as inevitably someone makes a grab for one of the faux delectables.





(<https://livingtorontojournal.com/2016/08/12/gardiner-of-earthly-delights/derby-table-setting-cr/#main>)



(<https://livingtorontojournal.com/2016/08/12/gardiner-of->

earthly-delights / marzipan-apricots-sm / #main)

More than a re-created table setting, it is also a reflection of the Enlightenment's other, less scientific, passion for a classical, Arcadian ideal. An ideal that is reflected in the gardenscape played out across the table. The sugar paste statuary, pillars and trellises and actual porcelain sculpture, are emblematic of the longing for a return to an idealized past that contrasts and compliments, the rising interest in the scientific and the detailing and categorizing of animals, plants and minerals on the aforementioned tableware. The world was truly expanding and the profound intersection for the longings for the classical, perhaps imagined, past, and a more here and now, categorical and scientific future represented a profound crossroad for humanity. All of this is evidenced in the many details and delights of this table.

## Advertisement

## Too Faced

Too Faced Born This Way The Natural Nudes Eyeshadow...



**\$73**

FAST AND FREE SHIPPING

BUY NC



Moving on from the exhibit and enjoying a break before listening to a talk about it, our group was led to a casual tea and dessert spread. The wheels of fortune found me lined up for danish and coffee with one of the architects of the table, Mr. Ivan Day. This was a bit intimidating. Although my love of food, its

history, and cooking in general knows no bounds, my practical knowledge of the historic details of these things has its limits. I was able to bandy about a few choice legendary cookbook authors (Mr. Day is a collector of antique and archival cookbooks) but I more or less burned-out after Scappi and Careme. Fortunately, and I'm not sure how we ventured down this path, we found real and significant common ground in our mutual love of Nordic Noir and the surprising wealth of crime and detective shows coming out of Sweden and other points north. After some casual and pleasurable chat, we mutually agreed that the wonderful everyman *Beck* was the best of all the Swedish television series. From here, Mr. Day was thrown in to the lecture limelight.

Slide shows of the architectural designs for sugar paste constructions were paraded out. Drafting these plans and executing the sculptures were fundamental skills for a master chef of the times. Mr. Day is not only in proud possession of such blueprints of splendour but also of the actual period-accurate wooden tools and moulds required to duplicate the intense labor, love and artistry required to build the finished sculptures and decorations.

## Food, giving, music

The time capsule of the historic table setting, paired with the raw here and now and ever transforming future of the vertical crevice garden creates a wonderful extreme of experience that enriches as it all unfolds. It sticks in the memory and invites revisiting. Solace for a solo visit and a wondrous shared experience to bring someone to. Summer is a good time to do both. (More on the museum can be found here (<http://www.gardinermuseum.on.ca/home>).)

Subsequent to my initial visit, I learned that not only did Neil Turnbull create the new and forever garden in front of the museum, but *donated* it to the Gardiner. In addition he has built many other oases in the city. A strong second runner is his garden on the 16th floor of the Princess Margaret Hospital, a space that is not only awesome in itself but a garden that provides a unique atmosphere for regular free jazz concerts. See more on Neil and his creations here (<https://hedgerow.ca/hedgerow-farm/>).

Ivan Day has a great lo-fi website (<http://www.historicfood.com/portal.htm>), laced with his passions, blogs and photos, and our own Toronto Public Library system has his book *Cooking in Europe, 1650-1850*, which contains his reprint of Frederick Nutt's 1789 recipe for Parmesan Ice Cream that is as easy to make as it is delicious. If that's not enough, our wonderful library system also has the complete Swedish Detective series *Beck*. So many things to fill the remainder of summer.

– Ambrose Roche

*Photos by Ambrose Roche, additional photos by Schuster Gindin*

This article can be found in WHAT'S HERE (<https://livingtorontojournal.com/whats-here-2/>) in the section The City (<https://livingtorontojournal.com/the-city/>).

We are @livingtoronto2 on social media. Follow us on  ([https://www.facebook.com/pages/Living-](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Living-Toronto/508199505896007)

[Toronto/508199505896007](https://www.instagram.com/livingtoronto2/))  (<https://www.instagram.com/livingtoronto2/>)

(<https://twitter.com/LivingToronto2>)

Bookmark the [permalink](#).

[Blog at WordPress.com.](#)

Advertisement



Advertisement



## Too Faced

Too Faced Born This  
Way The Natural  
Nudes Eyeshadow...



\$

BUY I

FAST A  
SHII



SE P

