

Barbara Israel

Can you share with us one of the childhood explorations that you believe inspired your current career?

There was one particular estate that we couldn't resist. We'd crawl over the wall to get a peek at the back because they had a collection of twelve nine-foot-high marble busts of Roman emperors. They puzzled me. I wondered why they were there. I was probably eight years old at the time, and the memory has stuck with me for all of these years.

In 1985, wasn't it equally statuesque sculptures that launched your present career in garden ornaments?

Yes. I went to look at 40 statues at an estate called Pleasance in Locust Valley, and I immediately realized that I could sell them all, so I bought them all in one day! The statues were in Adele Lovett's garden, which was illustrated in the book *The American Woman's Garden* the year before, so it was a timely find. Those statues were my first acquisition.

Why was it so important to you to write a book on garden ornament?

I wrote the book because I wanted to gain some attention for garden ornament as a decorative art in America, and to add to the academics in the field because it was becoming a very decorative field. I also felt it was important to provide people who are just beginning to collect garden ornament with a source guide. There is quite a bit of fakery, and people should



Barbara Israel has been in the antique garden ornament business since 1985. Her firm belief that historical accuracy and documentation are as important with garden ornamentation as they are with antique furnishings compelled her to publish *Antique Garden Ornament: Two Centuries of American Taste*. While her foray into the field began on Long Island, a passion for garden ornamentation was rooted in childhood when Israel and her sister explored sumptuous gardens near their home in New Jersey.

be careful. In cast iron, for instance, urns can be easily made to look old. I put a cast-iron urn in my book to show the horizontal casting line that goes through the bowl of it, so that it might help people discern the old from the new. There is nothing wrong with having the new ones, but you don't want to pay the price of an antique for a new one.

Any other books or special projects in the future?

I don't foresee another book, but I am thinking about casting some pieces and reproducing them on a very small scale. We just reproduced a bronze armillary sphere that is a phenomenal piece: It's a fine art piece by a 1930's American sculptor. I had it recast, and we sold five copies. But I feel very cautious about

THE ORNAMENTED GARDEN

by Saxon Henry
Photograph by Fran Collin

entering this new territory because I think it softens the antiques market.


Do you have a particularly exciting project currently going on?

I have a client who is creating the most fabulous secret garden with a ten-foot wall around it. Believe it or not, he's doing this on a plantation that my grandfather once owned. We discovered this by chance when I said that my grandfather used to have a plantation in that area. Suddenly, we find out that it was that plantation!

What are some popular garden ornaments right now?

We've been having major requests for huge stone fountains, though they are very difficult to find. Classical female figures are also very popular right now. Things come and go — last year we had tremendous requests for armillary spheres.

Do you spend a lot of time doing research when you acquire new pieces?

Absolutely. It's critical. I love the research and academic side of this. I bought some lead figures the other day that were painted — you never see lead figures painted — and I got very excited because I thought they were original 18th-Century Arcadian figures. But when I consulted an expert in England, I found out that they are late 19th-Century French, which isn't bad either. 

Design writer Saxon Henry of New York City is the co-author of Big Home, Big Challenge: Design Solutions for Larger Spaces.