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Inventing a Modern Sculpture Garden in 1939 at the Museum of Modern Art, New York

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Abstract

The sculpture garden built in 1939 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York by the museum's director, Alfred H. Barr, and its curator of architecture, John McAndrew, was the first modernist garden designed to belong to a museum dedicated solely to the display of modern painting and sculpture. Its designers had no built precedents to go by, and so they faced the task of determining what this new type of garden should look like. The article analyzes the history and the process of design, the formal qualities of the design itself, and the ways that Barr and McAndrew went about conceptualizing the project at hand. Foremost in their thinking were curatorial concerns inspired by direct observation of contemporary European museological trends that considered it daring to take modern sculpture out of indoor galleries and display it outdoors. However, they were also determined to provide a modernist garden for one of America's significant modernist buildings of the time, and their remarkable contribution takes its place alongside the early interest in modernist landscape design shown by Roberto Burle-Marx, Fletcher Steele, Garrett Eckbo, James C. Rose, and a few others around 1937-39. This first sculpture garden was altered in 1942 and replaced by Philip C. Johnson's sculpture court in 1953, for which it laid fundamental conceptual groundwork. A brief epilogue considers Johnson's very different elaboration of Barr's and McAndrew's typological contribution, based on his professional exposure to the forms and concerns of modernist landscape architecture.

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