

CATHEDRAL OF GREEN AND STONE

By Mary Ellen Hannibal

There are no stone features mentioned in Genesis, but then again, the Garden of Eden was divinely designed. Mortal gardens have always utilized decorative and useful stone components, either to create pathways, to differentiate beds, to provide a sitting surface, or to add a further contemplative element to the purview. The newly renovated Rhododendron Garden at SFBG marks a very special confluence of plants and stones. Designed to showcase a unique collection of rhododendrons, some no longer found in the wild, the centerpiece of the garden is a stone pavilion made from remnants of a 12th-century Spanish monastery—the so-called “monastery stones.”

“LET THE STONES SPEAK WITH TONGUES THAT TALK ALL TONGUES.”
—Dylan Thomas

Oakland-based Feyerabend and Madden Landscape Design reconfigured the garden to bring it up-to-date, emphasizing the sense of leafy enclosure and quiet provided by often towering rhododendrons and other woody, leafy plants. The stone pavilion designed and built by master stonemason Edwin Hamilton is at the epicenter of this quiet beauty. It provides a place to sit and observe the tracings of time evinced both by the stones and by the plants themselves.

We think of plants as more or less temporary, to be replaced by new growth when their life-cycles end. Climate change and encroaching civilization have in fact interrupted the cycle of regeneration for many plant species, among them some of the rhododendrons we have in the garden. Now some of these species will be propagated not by nature but by gardeners.

One of the most integral functions of a botanical garden is to preserve such plants, and it is part of our mission at the SFBG.

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RHODODENDRON MADDENI, Hook. fil.

R. MADDENI, BEAUTIFUL AND ENDANGERED

The word rhododendron derives from the Greek: *rhodos* meaning rose, and *dendron*, tree. A large genus of more than 1,000 species (part of the family Ericaceae), rhododendrons grow all over the northern hemisphere and even extend to Southeast Asia and northern Australia. The national flower of Nepal, the highest diversity of rhododendrons occurs in the Sino-Himalayan mountains. The *R. maddenii* so gorgeously rendered here is under serious threat of extinction, but specimens can be seen at SFBG. This illustration was scanned from an 1849 copy of *The Rhododendrons of Sikkim-Himalaya* by Joseph Dalton Hooker located in the Helen Crocker Russell Library's rare book collection.

Stones, on the other hand, represent something seemingly permanent. And indeed, despite the tumultuous history of the monastery stones, in which they have been assembled, disassembled, shipped, forgotten, pilfered, and rescued (story follows), in the hands of Edwin Hamilton and his stonemasons their honored place on an ancient continuum is again acknowledged. Edwin designed a circular seating area around a special stone set in the ground, a keystone that was once part of a vault. A rolled I-beam trellis mimics the arch segments of the vault that once emanated from this keystone.

Both Edwin and the Mexican stonemasons he works with have a reverence for the stone itself. Many of his workers are from Oaxaca, where stonework has been integral to the life and culture for hundreds of years, the art and craft passed from father to son. By contrast, when Edwin recognized his own affinity with stone, there were few places to go to learn his trade in the United States. In his early twenties, Edwin "sold everything I had" and traveled in Europe, apprenticing himself to master stonemasons in France and Scotland, where he helped build a stone bridge. "It has been a privilege to work with these stones," says Edwin, who utilized others of these stones to create the terrace around the Helen Crocker Russell Library. "Something happens when humans start working with this material and bring it

to a higher level," Edwin comments. "Cathedrals are about that." Come enjoy Edwin's work and the cathedral of green at the newly renovated Rhododendron Garden.

THE HISTORY OF THE MONASTERY STONES

By Jack Leibman

The story of the monastery stones begins in about 1200 AD, with the construction of the Santa Maria de Ovila monastery by Cistercian monks, on a hilltop overlooking the Tagus River in Spain, about 90 miles northeast of Madrid. Founded by King Alfonso VIII of Castile, the monastery originally included a refectory, a chapter house, a chapel, and a cloister. The Cistercians flourished there until 1835, when a royal decree eliminated religious facilities with less than 12 inhabitants. The monastery was sold and used briefly as a hostel and farm buildings. Eventually all the furnishings were sold, and the buildings pilfered. By 1930, only the ruined walls remained, and these attracted the attention of a roving American art dealer, who worked for William Randolph Hearst. Hearst bought the monastery for \$97,000.

Despite the financial crisis of 1930, Hearst was still going strong. His income was a reported \$15 million per annum. San Simeon



Master stonemason Edwin Hamilton (inset photo) has created a circular seating area for the Rhododendron Garden using stones from a monastery dating back to the 1200s. He has designed around a special stone set in the ground, a keystone that was once part of a vault. Opposite page: A closer view of these relics reveals the beauty that only time and history can create.



COURTESY OF THE HELEN CROCKER RUSSELL LIBRARY

Rhododendron arboreum

was almost finished. From the stones of Santa Maria de Ovila, he envisioned making a medieval castle near Mount Shasta to replace his mother's hunting lodge. Architect Julia Morgan oversaw a year-long process of demolition, packing, and transportation, which included construction of a special railway and road to get the stones to Madrid. From there the stones were transported to the port of Valencia, where they were loaded onto eleven German freighters that steamed across the ocean and through the Panama Canal, to finally dock in San Francisco. The cost of the project so far had exceeded \$1 million.

Hearst's dream castle was to include eight stories with 61 bedrooms; a movie theater, and a 150-foot swimming pool. Now he found himself unable to raise the necessary funds. Hearst's financial strictures forced the failure of the project, and rendered the stones superfluous. They languished in a warehouse at Fisherman's Wharf for ten years, at a cost of \$1,000 per month. In 1941, Herbert Fleischhacker, Chairman of the Board of the deYoung Museum in Golden Gate Park, arranged for the city to pay Hearst \$25,000 for the stones. Again Julia Morgan drew up plans for the stones, this time for a projected museum of medieval art in Golden Gate Park. The stones were moved to a gigantic rock pile behind the deYoung.

Almost immediately, a fire consumed the crates holding the stones, which had been marked for their reassembly at their new location. Then, as now, there was controversy over any new building in the park. Bureaucratic log-jams and lack of funding prevented any construction. In 1958, two more disastrous fires further damaged the stones. In 1960, the Department of Recreation and Parks took responsibility for the forlorn rock pile. Many of the stones were appropriated for various enclosure and wall projects, most prominently in the Arboretum and the

Japanese Tea Garden. A brief revival of interest in them was inspired by the Hearst Foundation in 1980-82, which sponsored an architectural survey and scale model to rebuild the chapter house. Funds for the project were never raised.

At the same time, another scenario was gestating. Father Thomas Davis, Abbott of the New Clairvaux Cistercian Abbey in Vina, California, had since 1955 pursued a claim on the stones, hoping to rebuild the chapter house at his Sacramento Valley monastery. In 1982, several truckloads of stones were actually sent to the Abbey, but had to be returned because of ownership uncertainty. Persistent inquiries by Father Davis finally succeeded in 1994, when the deYoung agreed to the transfer. Eventually, more than 20 truckloads of stones arrived in Vina. Computer modeling made it possible to simulate the original design of the chapter house, and reconstruction is well underway. Because the limestone is so old, the stones themselves are not used foundationally.

The stones have found their last resting place half a world away from their origins. A small part of their history remains permanently in our Garden. 🌸

Jack Leibman is a long-time docent at SFBC. A fuller version of his article can be found at: www.outsidelands.org. More information can also be found at www.sacredstones.org, the website of the Santa Maria de Ovila monastery, and in the Vertical File collection of the Helen Crocker Russell Library.



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