



INTERPRETING THE AUSTRALIAN LANDSCAPE

There is much discussion about the Australian garden, the Australian style. It is as yet – and may always be – impossible to describe a single Australian garden style. Chris Wallace-Crabbe suggests in his essay *The Escaping Landscape* that poets and painters do not offer one interpretation of the landscape but rather ‘their artifacts historicise it’.²⁷ In the garden the interpretations are not as permanent as the written word or paint and are not likely to be analysed or compared in the way of literature or painting. Landscape interpretations can be incisive yet are more likely to be of a particular region or place.

An Australian garden style might be a visual representation of the country, expressed by interpreting the most extensive landscape, the arid and semi-arid. Another approach might be to choose representative examples of the major plant genera. The upper canopy could include eucalyptus, acacia, banksia, melaleuca, myoporum, leptospermum, callitris or hakea with ground cover of widespread grasses and herbs. The Australian landscape is covered by plant communities that are often dominated by

one more of these species in different regions. Yet can the Australian garden ever capture the iconic Australian landscape, Dorothea Mackellar’s ‘wide brown earth’ and ‘far horizons of droughts and flooding rains’?

Australian gardens as we know them do not generally represent one zone of the country or one character of this diverse natural landscape. Following on from the ‘bush garden’ notion, Australian gardens have been perceived as impressions or interpretations of nature. Other countries, most notably Japan in their highly sophisticated garden design styles, also express their landscape, yet in a highly symbolic way. Form and materials are condensed to create a symbolic oneness: complexity in simplicity and simplicity in complexity. This is clear when visiting one of the earliest gardens such as Saiho-ji or the Moss Garden (see colour photo). Our flora is both those things: complex to understand yet simple in form. The designed representation of our landscape is not an approach exclusive to Australia.

Getting back to the idea of an Australian garden, spatial arrangement and personal and