

in the garden

by Stephen and Kristin Pategas



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Inspiration One Step At A Time

Whether climbing or descending a slope, the stairs travelled upon have an impact on the body and perhaps the mind. In the renowned landscape architect Fletcher Steele's

1964 book "Gardens and People," he briefly describes memorable staircases around the world. Intrigued by the dozen or so he named, we took up the challenge to remember favorites from our travels.

At the private garden Villa Noailles in Grasse in the south of France, dozens of water features take advantage of the gravity afforded by the steep hillside. We puzzled over the smooth trench set into the middle of a lengthy stone staircase. Was it an abandoned channel for water? Then we had the "aha moment." The trench was actually a clever solution for maneuvering wheelbarrows up and down the daunting slope.

Three notable staircases were designed by Fletcher Steele (1885-1971) at his signature garden, Naumkeag, in Stockbridge, MA. One set of stairs turns a corner and at the landing, a seating height niche is tucked into the brick retaining wall. Thoughtfully, the wood seat is sculpted for the posterior. We can assure you it provides a fine fit and an excellent overlook for the Rose Garden with its swirling beds of pink gravel.

Naumkeag's longest straight staircase is a combination of brick ramps and low risers that descends into a grove of birches at the top of a steep bank. Within the incline is a central spine of bricks set on their sides with corners jutting upward like the teeth on a saw blade. Almost imperceptibly, water trickles down this runnel providing a miniature waterfall over each brick. The shimmering rivulet is a subtle treat for the eye and the ear.

The pièce de résistance is without doubt – the Blue Steps. At the top of the slope amongst that same grove of sparkling white birches the brick ramp splits symmetrically to either side. Each



The Blue Steps – designed to safely negotiate a slope to reach the cutting garden.



A place to rest halfway up the stairs.

one elegantly switches back and forth down the slope in a series of steps and ramps. Meanwhile the water from the runnel secretly finds its way down the center of the staircase repeatedly appearing in a series of arched alcoves – painted bright blue. Once you arrive at the bottom; where the owner, prior to the steps, used to slide down the bank to harvest from the cutting garden; the grandeur and whimsy of the dueling stairs are revealed.

It's been said that the exercise gained from each step climbed adds a minute to your life. We find that along with building stamina they inspire us as they did Fletcher Steele. ■



A clever design for the gardener with a wheelbarrow.



Dozens of miniature waterfalls glisten.

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All photography by Stephen G. Pategas/Hortus Oasis