

# The Garden Conservancy News

PRESERVING, SHARING, AND CELEBRATING AMERICA'S GARDENS

Winter 2024

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# A Note from the President and CEO

Gardens and art share a profound connection. Both are expressions of creativity, born from careful observation of the natural world. As gardeners, we shape our landscapes, selecting plants, sculpting forms, and orchestrating color palettes. In doing so, we become artists, painting with living brushstrokes.

Just as a painter studies light and shadow, a gardener considers the play of sunlight on foliage and the interplay of textures. Both disciplines involve a keen eye for detail; an appreciation for the subtle nuances of form and color. But unlike a painter who captures a fleeting moment of beauty on canvas, a gardener seeks to create a tangible, ever-evolving masterpiece.

As gardeners, we can draw inspiration from the world of art. Whether it is the bold strokes of an abstract expressionist or the delicate lines of a botanical illustrator, art can spark our imaginations and ignite our creativity.

In recent years, we have seen a growing interest in the intersection of art and horticulture. Artists-in-residence programs, such as our new relationship with celebrated *plein air* painter Nancy Frieze, offer a unique opportunity to explore this connection. By inviting artists to immerse themselves in our gardens, we encourage new perspectives and inspire fresh interpretations of the natural world. You can read more about Frieze and her work on page 6.

We are also happy to announce that New York-based photographer Ngoc Minh Ngo will join us for our 2025 National Speaking Tour. Ngo, whose work gloriously explores the intrinsic beauty of plants and nature, shares with us her tips for photographing gardens on page 3. We hope they will inspire you to look at gardens in a new light.

Whether you are a seasoned gardener or a budding enthusiast, there is always something new to discover. We invite you to join us, through our Open Days visiting program, lectures, and workshops, to connect with nature and nurture your creativity in the new year.

James Brayton Hall  
*President and Chief Executive Officer*



## OUR MISSION

The mission of the Garden Conservancy is to preserve, share, and celebrate America's gardens and diverse gardening traditions for the education and inspiration of the public.

## OUR VISION

The Garden Conservancy will be the champion and steward of the vital role gardens play in America's history, culture, and quality of life.

**On the cover:** Oil painting by artist-in-residence Nancy Frieze  
**Image page 3:** Wave Hill, photo by Ngoc Minh Ngo



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## Introducing Our First Artist in Residence, *Plein Air* Painter Nancy Frieese

On a gloriously sunny October afternoon, landscape artist Nancy Frieese set up at the bottom of the formal garden at Wethersfield, the garden created by Chauncey Stillman in Amenia, NY, where the distant landscape had caught her eye. The colors had changed dramatically since her visit a week earlier, and she merged the new colors into her painting. A preeminent *plein air* painter, she is constantly noticing and responding to the living world around her, channeling that energy into her work.

In selecting a location to set up her easel, she gravitates to the edges of

gardens, where they meet the wilder landscape. She observes gardeners work in much the same way painters do—rotating colors, arranging contrasts, creating shapes, opening passageways.

"We're all doing the same things, except I'm compressing it on a flat surface," she says.

Frieese—a painter and printmaker on sabbatical from her role on the faculty of the Rhode Island

School of Design—has joined the Garden Conservancy as its first artist-in-residence. Frieese is currently completing a residency at The Mount, the house and garden of Gilded Age novelist and tastemaker Edith

Wharton. For the next year, she will follow up on her work at The Mount by focusing on two remarkable historic gardens with deep connections to the Garden Conservancy: Blithewood Garden at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, and Wethersfield Estate & Garden in Amenia, NY. The Garden Conservancy is



actively involved in preservation efforts at both locations, and Frieese's involvement will help draw attention to this work.

"Gardens and art have been closely linked for centuries," said James Brayton Hall, Garden Conservancy President and Chief Executive Officer. "For our first ever artist-in-residence, I immediately turned to renowned *plein air* painter Nancy Frieese, who I knew would be uniquely suited to capture these two very different and significant historic garden-landscapes."

Blithewood, a very architectural garden with distant views of the Hudson, was designed by Francis L.V. Hoppin, who was also the principal architect of The Mount. Wethersfield, a 1,000-acre estate, offers distant agricultural views, as well as famous formal and cottage-style gardens. During her residency, Frieese intends to paint at these locations in all four seasons. The hope is to present an exhibition of the completed works, and produce a series of prints capturing the landscapes as well.

With a Master of Fine Arts degree from Yale University, Frieese has traveled the world and exhibited her paintings and prints in 30 solo shows and 170 group shows. Among her honors and experiences around the globe, Frieese received two National Endowment for the Arts Individual Artists Fellowships; a six-month U.S.-Japan







*Last Light*, 2022, oil on canvas, 40 x 54 inches, by Nancy Friese. Courtesy of Cade Tompkins Projects

Creative Artist Fellowship residency in Tokyo, and a six-month Lila Acheson Wallace Giverny Fellowship at Claude Monet's home in France. Most recently, she was artist-in-residence at the Andy Warhol Preserve in Montauk, NY, administered by The Nature Conservancy.

Her works are held in more than fifty corporate, government, museum and private collections, including the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; New York Public Library;

Musée des Beaux-Arts de Brest, France; and Museo Biblioteca La Casa del Libro, Puerto Rico. Her art is part of corporate collections ranging from Memorial Sloan Kettering to Nordstrom.

Friese's work reflects a genuine, personal engagement with nature, says Maureen O'Brien, Curator of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Art at Rhode Island School of Design. "She's fearless," O'Brien says. "She just goes out there and she spends her time immersed in nature

while she does this." Her paintings can transport a viewer into the scene, feeling the elements of atmosphere, light, and temperature, O'Brien says, recalling a Friese painting in the RISD collection called "Under Brittany Skies."

When choosing a place to paint, Friese goes beyond the typically picturesque settings, says Amy Kurtz Lansing, curator at the Florence Griswold Museum in Old Lyme, CT. The Flo Gris Museum has always been a place that artists come to paint out of doors, and Friese carries on that tradition—in her own way. One time, to Kurtz Lansing's surprise, Friese discovered a tucked-away spot on the way to the loading dock and set herself up there.

"She can look at a landscape and see it in ways people haven't seen it before," Kurtz Lansing said.

Friese, who resides in Rhode Island and North Dakota, looks for safe, accessible

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— James Brayton Hall  
*Garden Conservancy President and Chief Executive Officer*





Watercolor by Nancy Friese, 11 x 15 inches. Courtesy of Cade Tompkins Projects

locations where she can easily bring her supplies—gardens, preserved places, and parks. One advantage of gardens is that other visitors are observing the landscape alongside her, and they are not surprised to see someone out painting.

Although she is an engaging educator, generous with her time, attention, and knowledge, Friese describes herself as being at home with quiet time—content to sit outdoors and paint throughout the day. That is critical to her *plein air* practice, which might look like serendipity and sheer enjoyment, but relies on careful focus.

"When you're painting, it's utter

concentration," she says. "You surrender to what you're looking at." By looking deeply, an artist can receive, translate, and expand the natural world forward for the viewer, she says.

At The Mount, she was noticing the way the upper branches of the trees had been pruned; how the bark had various textures, and how the ground cover changed from purple to blue, with light coming through the trees.

Her paintings often use "equivalent" color, trading gray for green, for example, to interpret the scene. She creates a painting over the course of multiple visits

to a scene, so every work is a composite. Working with "bravura," as O'Brien puts it, she sweeps across the canvas or paper, touching the entire surface during each visit.

Like a gardener, the artist relies on the viewer to receive it, as a dynamic experience, Friese says. Any of the arts parallel each other in this way.

Friese relishes this role, and her ability to communicate through art.

"Art has to have a viewer. So, it serves others, in a beautiful way," she says. "It may convey ideas without words, and I really love that."

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**— Nancy Friese**