Ornaments in the landscape

The Needle's Eye is based on a forty-six-foot-tall stone folly of the same name on the grounds of the Wentworth Woodhouse estate in Yorkshire, England. (Its exact date of construction is unknown, but it was possibly around 1720.) Why did we place our wooden version in a pond? Because we could! And we love the play of reflections on the water.
The Winterthur Museum in Delaware unveils an eye-catching exhibition of seven new garden follies

By Carol Long

Winterthur's first garden folly was a wooden lattice-sided pavilion that Henry Francis du Pont (1880–1969) purchased in 1929, along with other decorative structures, from the grounds of a nearby early nineteenth-century estate, which had become dilapidated and would be razed within a few years. He would go on to install five more, all of them architectural rescues and reconstructions. This year, for the first time since the 1960s, new follies have appeared in the Winterthur landscape—seven of them, as part of the exhibition Follies: Architectural Whimsy in the Garden, which will be on view until January 2020.

Historically, follies had their heyday in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While these structures could serve a useful purpose, their main function was to create a romantic aesthetic in the garden, as ornaments in the landscape. Follies based on Greek and Roman architecture were most popular, and regarded as symbols of virtue. Others, particularly picturesque ruinous examples, were modeled on the idyllic landscape paintings of artists such as Claude Lorrain.

All but one of the new follies at Winterthur were inspired, directly and indirectly, by a group of historic follies in England. The exhibition was originally conceived by our garden director, Chris Strand, when he was working on the Costumes of Downton Abbey show, which debuted at Winterthur in 2014. The following year, a colleague and I traveled to Britain and visited sixteen great estates. A list of folly styles and models was whittled down to seven, and the final designs were a joint effort among Winterthur staff and contractors, who included an architect and engineer.

You see the fruits of that effort on these pages—follies that charm and delight, and offer a fresh new way to view the Winterthur landscape.

Carol Long is the curator of the garden at the Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library.
The Green Folly was inspired by a rustic folly with log columns at Highgrove, the Prince of Wales's country house in Gloucestershire.
The only one without an English antecedent, the Mirrored Folly, with its reflective fish-scale shingles, is a surreal take on the porte cochere of Winterthur's train station, designed for the du Ponts in the 1870s by Philadelphia architect Theophilus P. Chandler Jr.

Gothic Tower follies are seen in many English gardens. Ours is built of Accoya wood planks with charred outer surfaces, following a traditional Japanese technique called shou sugi ban that makes the wood water-resistant and, paradoxically, less flammable.
Follies became standard features of the gardens of the British aristocracy at the same time neoclassical architecture was dominant. Consequently, numerous estates, such as Highclere Castle and Stowe House, are dotted with miniature temples. Ours is made of cast stone columns, plaster walls, and a cedar-shingled roof.

The Ottoman tent was inspired by (but looks nothing like) a tent fully built c. 1750 at Painshill garden in Surrey. The present-day re-creation there has a canopy made of fiberglass. Winterthur’s, like the original, is draped in richly colored canvas, which we’ll replace after a year.
Our Chinese Pavilion—located next to the museum entrance—was modeled after the Chinese House folly at Stowe, attributed to architect William Kent and built c. 1738 amid the pan-European rage for chinoiserie in the decorative arts.