

CENTRAL PARK: AN AMERICAN MASTERPIECE

Central Park, constructed from 1857 to 1873, is a unique and long-recognized masterpiece of landscape architecture and the most important work of American art of the 19th century. Central Park's co-designers, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, struggled to establish themselves as artists and to equate their work with the venerable tradition of landscape painting. When the Park was near completion, Olmsted affirmed its status as a "single unified work of art."

Like every other work of art, Central Park is entirely man-made. The only natural feature on the Park site is the metamorphic rock called Manhattan schist, which is approximately 450 million years old. To create the Park's naturalistic lakes and streams, low-lying swamps were drained, a naturalistic shoreline was established, and city water pipes were installed; to create the Park's vast, undulating meadows, swampland was filled with soil, and rock outcrops were leveled with gunpowder; to create the Park's three woodland areas, barren rock-strewn slopes were planted with millions of trees, shrubs, and vines.

Olmsted and Vaux estimated that if all ten million cartloads of soil and materials used to build the Park were to be placed end to end, they would have stretched for 30,000 miles (48,280 kilometers). A walk through Central Park was designed to be a moving experience. Olmsted used the term "passages of scenery" to explain the ever-changing views experienced while walking through the various landscapes: broad meadows, rustic woodlands, tree-lined allées, and a diversity of architectural structures.

As you walk along the Park's pathways, notice how the Park's scenery changes with the weather conditions and times of day. Come back to the Park throughout the year and marvel at the difference that seasonal foliage and vegetation bring to each carefully composed landscape.



One criterion used to critique a great work of art is its longevity — the ability to initiate emotion and communicate meaning long after its creation. In this sense, Central Park is a masterpiece that has survived the test of time.

Like every great work of art, Central Park requires constant care and attention to maintain its present beauty and energy. In the 1960s and 1970s the century-old preserve had become forsaken and dilapidated. In 1980, a handful of farsighted and passionate New Yorkers set out to revitalize the Park and founded the private, nonprofit Central Park Conservancy.

There is no greater testimony to the Park's resilience than the extraordinary renaissance it has enjoyed since 1980 when the Conservancy began to restore Olmsted and Vaux's masterpiece of landscape architecture. The Conservancy's mission remains the management, restoration, and preservation of Central Park, in partnership with the City of New York, for present and future generations.



SELF-GUIDED TOUR OF THE MIDDLE OF CENTRAL PARK

Belvedere Castle, King Jagiello and Turtle Pond, Obelisk, Great Lawn

Belvedere Castle

In 1867, Calvert Vaux, Park co-designer and architect, created this fanciful observation tower as a “belvedere,” Italian for “panoramic viewpoint”. Placed atop Vista Rock, it overlooks the old reservoir (now the Great Lawn). Designed in the Norman Gothic style, the Castle is constructed of the same Manhattan schist as its promontory, giving it the magical appearance of rising out of the rock itself.

The United States Weather Bureau set up offices in the Castle in 1919 to monitor and report New York City's weather. In the early 1960s, the Weather Bureau installed automated meteorological instruments, and the staff vacated the building. The empty Castle deteriorated into a sad, graffiti-covered ruin. In 1983, it was restored by the Central Park Conservancy and became a popular visitor center and nature observatory. The weather instruments remain on the Castle's tower and monitor New York City's weather around the clock. When you hear “The weather in Central Park is...” on the radio or television, remember the information comes from Belvedere Castle in Central Park.

King Jagiello and Turtle Pond

This imposing statue by Polish sculptor Stanislaw Ostrowski (1879-1947) portrays King Jagiello, the Grand Duke of Lithuania, who united Lithuania and Poland after marrying the Queen of Poland. The monument depicts the moment preceding his victory at the Battle of Grunewald of 1410 when the King crossed the two swords - handed to him by his adversaries, the Teutonic Knights of the Cross - above his head.

The sculpture was chosen in 1939 for the entrance to the Polish Pavilion at the World's Fair in New York. That year, the Nazis invaded Poland, preventing the sculpture's return to its homeland. In 1945 it was placed in Central Park by the Polish government as a symbol of the proud and courageous Polish people.

The King Jagiello statue is located at the eastern end of Turtle Pond, which attracts migrating birds and waterfowl, and three species of turtles. The snapping turtles can reach nearly 20 inches (50.8 cm) in diameter, and can be seen sunning themselves at the waterline of Vista Rock. The nature blind, a platform that juts out into the northern side of Turtle Pond, is a wonderful place from which to observe wildlife.

Obelisk

This 3,500-year-old monument stands directly behind the Metropolitan Museum of Art. To celebrate the 30th year of his reign, Egyptian pharaoh Thutmosis III (c. 1479-1425 B.C.) commissioned a pair of obelisks for the sacred city of Heliopolis. In 12 B.C., they were moved to Alexandria, where they stood until the 19th century, when all great cities around the world clamored for an ancient Egyptian obelisk. The Khedive of Egypt gave one obelisk to England in 1879 and the other to America in 1881, in exchange for foreign aid to modernize his country.

On a snowy January 22, 1881, thousands of proud New Yorkers celebrated the turning of Central Park's 220-ton obelisk (nicknamed “Cleopatra's Needle”) to an upright position. The renowned filmmaker Cecil B. DeMille, who fondly remembered playing in the area as a boy, donated the plaques that translate the hieroglyphics.

Great Lawn

Very few people know that the Great Lawn, a luxurious green area at the geographical center of Central Park, was originally the site of the Croton Reservoir completed in 1842, fifteen years before the construction of Central Park began. With the City's increasing need for water, plans for a new water system rendered this reservoir obsolete. The reservoir was drained in 1931, filled in, and opened as a luxurious green oval in 1937.

The Great Lawn is better known as the venue for famous concerts and events, beginning in the 1970s. Concerts by Elton John, Diana Ross, Simon and Garfunkel, and Luciano Pavarotti; the exhibit of the AIDS Quilt; the visit of Pope John Paul II; and the film premier of Disney's *Pocahontas* drew enormous crowds, causing severe damage to the lawn. In addition, the site still held the subterranean walls of the old reservoir, which prevented adequate drainage, and by the 1980s the Great Lawn had turned into the “Great Dustbowl.”

From 1995 to 1997, the Central Park Conservancy and the City of New York undertook the largest single restoration in Central Park's history - the 55-acre area covering the 13-acre Great Lawn Oval and its surrounding landscapes. The Great Lawn is once again the setting for ballgames, sunbathing, and picnicking; the Metropolitan Opera and the New York Philharmonic each give their two traditional performances a year. All these activities are carefully monitored in accordance with the management guidelines instituted to ensure the continuing health of the Great Lawn.

The Great Lawn is a particularly good place to admire some of the Park's 26,000 trees. The Arthur Ross Pinetum at the northern end of the Oval features 15 species and five varieties of pines. The twin linden trees inside the middle of the eastern edge of the Oval mirror each other, their intertwined branches forming an elegant heart-shaped silhouette.



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