From a rather modest background, Humphry Repton became one of the most important arbiters of taste in matters concerning landscape gardening in late Georgian and Regency Britain. His early interest in landscape design was exercised at Sustead, the small estate in Norfolk that he bought when an inheritance allowed him to leave the textile firm where he was employed. At Sustead he devoted himself to all the practical aspects of cultivation and husbandry. After he was obliged to sell the estate in 1783, Repton began to devote himself to art criticism, publishing a companion to the collection of paintings at Somerset House (1788) and a descriptive catalog for Josiah Boydell's *Shakespeare Gallery* (1789). Soon he started to receive landscape commissions and gradually established himself as one of the most sought-after gardeners and the acknowledged heir to Launcelot “Capability” Brown, preparing himself by visiting and studying various sites developed by Brown and William Kent. His first important commission was at Cobham in Kent (about 1790), and by 1794 he had renovated over fifty country-house parks belonging to both Whig and Tory aristocratic patrons.

Still quite conservative, Repton's early work respected the fundamentals of Capability Brown's style, maintaining, for instance, the latter's principle of the serpentine layout. In *Sketches and Hints on Landscape Gardening* (1795), Repton listed those qualities that afford pleasure in gardens: picturesqueness, intricacy, simplicity, variety, novelty, contrast, association, grandeur, appropriation, animation, and the seasons. Particularly, he put much stress on “appropriation,” that is, the incorporation of the area around the estate into the space of the house and park. His aim was to harmonize both spaces by making important buildings in the estate villages mirror the style of the house and, more symbolically, by making sure that the family's coat of arms appeared everywhere on the estate. He also revalued the approach and entrance to the park, usually matching the style of the lodge to that of the main house. Finally, from the early 1790s, he gradually returned to formal gardening based on patterned planting inspired by the geometric shapes that had been popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

His success and the numerous commissions from the aristocracy attracted the criticism of the connoisseur and art critic Richard Payne Knight who, in his poem “The Landscape” (1794), attacked Repton and accused him of pandering to the taste of a decadent ruling class. Similarly, Uvedale Price denounced Repton's landscape interventions in the first volume of his “Essay on the Picturesque” (1794), to which Repton answered with a polite and conciliating “Letter to Uvedale Price, Esq.” (1794). These attacks were part of a wider polemic, raging in the 1790s, on the idea of the picturesque and aimed at Capability Brown's and his followers’ renovations, generally accused of producing unnatural landscapes as opposed to those generated by centuries of agricultural activities.

In *Mansfield Park* (1814), Jane Austen briefly discusses Repton's work, associating his name and style with forms of relentless improvement and the transformation of country estates as a sign of economic wealth and social standing. For Austen, Repton's renovations stand in stark contrast with more traditional ways of managing aristocratic estates and, indeed, Repton's later interventions changed according to the socio-economic shifts in early-nineteenth-century Britain, especially with the rise of a new group of landowners from the merchant classes. Unlike Austen's characterization, however,
Repton always revered the idea of an immutable English social order, and his hierarchic principles were parodied by Thomas Love Peacock in the character of the “renovator” Mr. Milestone in *Headlong Hall* (1816). In the same period Repton started introducing gardens and terraces near the main house, the former usually laid out in formal patterns rather than the open parkland favored in the eighteenth century. He also added a certain historical flavor to his designs, creating “Gothic” gardens in keeping with residences built in this style (as at Ashridge, Hertfordshire). Such interventions proved very popular with his new patrons, the rich middle-class owners of small “villa estates,” rather than with the aristocratic owners of large country estates. Designing for the smaller scale and concentrating on highly patterned planting schemes, Repton anticipated later practitioners such as John Claudius Loudon, author of *The Encyclopedia of Gardening* (1822) and *The Suburban Gardener and Villa Companion* (1838).

Characteristically, Repton’s early-nineteenth-century activities tended toward a synthesis of different styles that mirrored the eclecticism of regency design. He introduced the use of trellis (“treillage”), soon to become one of his hallmarks, which was generally identified with French gardens and images of classical gardens from the frescoes discovered at Pompeii. Moreover, Repton produced designs for the gardens of two of the most outstanding orientalist buildings in regency England, Sezincote in Gloucestershire, for which he prepared a few sketches overlaid with his characteristic fly-leaves, and the Brighton Pavilion, for which he wrote *Designs for the Pavillon at Brighton* (1808).

By 1803, Repton had carried out nearly two hundred renovations, and more than four hundred by 1816. The reasons for this success lay also in his marketing abilities, and especially in his invention of the Red Books, bound volumes describing his ideas for each of his commissions. These books contained “before” and “after” images, made with overlays and transparencies, so that the potential patron could see at a glance the transformations and improvements of his estate. The books also contained watercolors and a text detailing all the proposed changes. Finally, Repton’s renown as the most influential garden designer of his generation came through his publications on the theoretical aspects of landscape gardening. Always deeply aware that the gardener needs a thorough knowledge of architecture, he regularly collaborated with and sought the assistance of architects. In particular, in the last part of his life he was introduced to John Nash, their close collaboration giving rise to revolutionary ideas such as those of the irregular house and the garden city.

See also Aesthetics and Art Criticism; Art and Medievalism; Classical Antiquity; Landscape and Garden Design; Nature; Picturesque; Shakespeare: Britain

**Biography**

Born near Bury Saint Edmunds, Suffolk, May 2, 1752. Training for business, studied Dutch, and lived in Holland, 1764–68; worked in a textile company in Norwich; inherited a small income and bought a small estate in Sustead, Norfolk, 1778; forced to sell it and move to a cottage in Romford, Essex, 1783; turned to art criticism and started receiving his first landscape and garden design commissions, 1788; attacked by Richard Payne Knight in the poem “The Landscape,” 1794, and by Uvedale Price in “Essay on the Picturesque,” 1794–98; replied with a conciliatory “Letter to Uvedale Price, Esq.,” 1794; suffered an accident in London that injured his spine, 1811. Died March 24, 1818.

**Selected Works**

- REPTON, HUMPHRY The Bee; A Critique on Paintings at Somerset House. 1788.
• REPTON, HUMPHRY The Bee; or a Companion to the Shakespeare Gallery. 1789.
• “Letter to Uvedale Price, Esq.” 1794.
• REPTON, HUMPHRY Sketches and Hints on Landscape Gardening. 1795.
• REPTON, HUMPHRY An Inquiry into the Changes of Taste in Landscape Gardening, with some Observations on Its Theory and Practice. 1806.
• REPTON, HUMPHRY Designs for the Brighton Pavilion. 1808.
• REPTON, HUMPHRY On the Introduction of Indian Architecture and Gardening. 1808.
• REPTON, HUMPHRY Fragments on Landscape Gardening. 1816.
• REPTON, HUMPHRY The Landscape Gardening and Landscape Architecture of the Late Humphrey Repton, esq. Being His Entire Works on These Subjects. Edited by John Claudius Loudon, 1840.

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