Walking, drawing, designing. Friedrich Ludwig von Sckell's drawing stick and eighteenth-century landscape gardens

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Abstract

For the German landscape gardener Friedrich Ludwig von Sckell (1750-1823) walking was a method to design landscapes for visitation and inhabitation, in other words, for both walking and staying. Sckell used an idiosyncratic device, the drawing stick, to draw outlines of pathways, plantings, and water bodies directly into the ground at one-to-one scale while walking. This method of "drawing in nature" while in motion was to enable the designer to respond to his imagination, emotions, and the impressions of the site more freely. Although Sckell's walking designer exhibited the "natural" gait promoted in the late eighteenth century, its contrived nature mirrored the equally contrived nature of the landscape gardens it helped to design. Nevertheless, walking "with decorum" as what in today's terms could be called a phenomenological bodily practice, was central to Sckell's naturalistic garden designs that were to foster imagination and emotional response.

Keywords

Walking, drawing stick, design method, imagination, line of beauty.

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> ". . . the active line develops freely. It goes out for a walk, . . . aimlessly for the sake of the walk."
> Paul Klee, 1961 [1956]

In 1818 Friedrich Ludwig von Sckell's *Beiträge zur bildenden Gartenkunst* (Contributions to Garden Art) was published. By the time of its first edition, the landscape gardener who had been born into a family of court gardeners in 1750, had designed numerous private and public grounds in the southern German states of Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria, among them the well-known Englischer Garten in Munich (1789). In his *Beiträge*, Sckell put to paper the principles, methods, and techniques of his design practice. Among them was the drawing stick (Zeichenstab), or drawing pole, a unique tool used by him to design at one-to-one scale while walking. The ground itself became Sckell's canvas, and the wooden pole his device for drawing. Walking was the method. The landscape gardener described the activity of "drawing in nature" (in der Natur zeichnen; Sckell, 1818, pp. 83-84; Sckell, 1825, pp. 75-76) as not only complementing but necessarily refining design drawings on paper which he maintained, often merely indicated the locations and outlines of the various planned landscape features like hills, valleys, and lakes. According to him, only drawing in nature could properly account for and skillfully incorporate existing nature's characteristics (1818, pp. 83-84; 1825, pp. 75-76). Walking and drawing in nature were therefore the most direct means of responding to the qualities of the site.

The drawing stick was a 1.5 to 1.75 m long round wooden pole with an iron tip to facilitate incising the ground. A diameter of 2.5 cm was to render the pole easy to grasp and hold, and an overall weight between 2 and 3 kg was to facilitate its conduct. As seen in an image accompanying Sckell's description (Fig. 1), the pole was to be held with one hand towards the top and with the other hand in the middle pressing the pole's iron tip into the ground. Drawing the pole behind him while pacing forward, the designer would pursue his trained imagination in scratching "a beautiful sinuous line" between predetermined points on the land into the ground. Two workers following behind would mark the line with pickets. Returning to the starting point, the designer would check the drawn line and potentially improve it (1818, pp. 84-85; 1825, pp. 75-76), and if it was the lasting outline of plantations, a hoe could be used to scar the earth along it (1825, p. 77).

Walking

In the visual representation of Sckell's design method we see the designer walking upright – suggesting a disciplined step – and gazing sternly straight ahead.

fig.1
Operating the drawing stick. From: F. L. v. Sckell, *Beiträge zur bildenden Gartenkunst* (München: Joseph Lindauer, 1825), table I. Courtesy Heidelberg University Library.

This, Sckell told his readers, was the actual invention. No longer was the designer's gaze fixated on the ground when drawing, making him oblivious to existing landscape features and necessitating numerous corrections. Instead, pacing forward in straight upright pose the designer was able to look over the land and approach predetermined points comfortably and naturally (1818, p. 85; 1825, p. 77). The walking designer's upright figure corresponds to the gait and posture thought of as "natural" and healthy in the second half of the eighteenth century, and codified in text and image by several philosophers, physicians, illustrators, and the German educational reformers known as philanthropinists.

At the time, walking held special appeal and a science of walking began to develop (Mayer, 2020). Leisurely walking and foot travel became a means of distinction used by the bourgeoisie to set themselves apart from both the working class that *had* to walk and the higher ranks of society whose status was also reflected in their use of carriages and horses. Unharmed by hard physical labor and unhampered by loads, luggage, or even shackles, the upright posture with straight forward gaze was considered "natural" although it had to be learned and to today's eyes may appear rather contrived. It elevated the bourgeois walker above any working-class walker and established his anthropological supremacy over nonhuman nature and all living things (Mayer, 2020, p. 11).

In 1779, engraver Daniel Chodowiecki who illustrated several treatises on human form and character, portrayed a couple with children promenading in a purportedly "natural" habitus (Fig. 2b). In contrast to the straight lines and upright figures in this drawing, Chodowiecki used crooked lines to illustrate an "affected" walking practice by a gentleman hunched over and a lady bent over backwards (Fig. 2a). Walking practice and habitus were used here not only to represent status but also moral character and conduct. Whereas the couple with children appeared as a dignified harmonious familial unit practicing an empathetic graceful social demeanor, the "affected" couple accompanied by their dogs appeared out of sync, withdrawn into their own individual worlds, lacking empathy and social graces, and therefore unfit to prove as a social model for their absent children (Focke (ed.), 1901, p. 11). The illustrations were part of a project initiated by the physicist Georg Christoph Lichtenberg to ridicule the "physiognomy frenzy" (Raserei für Physiognomik, Focke, 1901, p. xviii) inspired by philosopher Johann Kaspar Lavater's argument that bodily comportment and physiognomy, especially facial traits and head form, revealed a person's character.

fig.2
The "affected promenade" (2a) and the "natural promenade" (2b), illustrated by Daniel Chodowiecki, 1779. From: Focke (ed.), 1901, table V. Courtesy Digitale Sammlungen Universität Weimar.

In contrast, Lichtenberg maintained that it was the specific frames of mind that shaped bodily movement, comportment, and facial expression, even if he agreed that individual passions could also leave more permanent traces (1779, Lichtenberg cited in Focke, 1901, p. xix).

Walking was considered an edifying and educational experience (Schelle, 1802, pp. 26, 40). For Jean-Jacques Rousseau whose teachings and romantic sensibility were fundamental to the work of eighteenth and nineteenth-century landscape gardeners throughout the European continent, walking was a means to explore and appreciate not only nonhuman nature but the nature of humankind. The philosopher considered the body's direct subjective and sensuous interactions with nonhuman nature central in this process (Mayer, 2020, pp. 10-13). Maintaining that children should learn proper "natural" walking as early as possible, the German philanthropinists included walking in their physical exercise canon (Gutsmuths, 1793, pp. 469-474; Vieth, 1795, 179-191; Vieth, 1818, pp. 99-109). "An agile light, yet determined manly step, a straight but not stiff posture of the body, especially of the breast, shoulders, and head, light natural movements of the arms" (Gutsmuths, 1793, p. 471) were to be aspired. While the philanthropinists were still predominantly educating an aristocratic elite, their

physical exercises were soon adopted for a broader male audience by Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, the founder of the patriotic and paramilitary German gymnastics movement. For Jahn and his assistant Ernst Eiselen walking "with decorum" required the "natural posture of the entire body, especially the head, without affectation…[and] the stretching of the knee with every step" (Jahn and Eiselen, 1816, p. 3). In other words, it required the gait visualized by Sckell in his representation of the walking designer. The latter assumed the posture that was also to be expected of the visitors to his landscape gardens, including the newly realized public gardens that especially served, as Sckell explained, human movement in the fresh air and could therefore be considered the "most sensible, charitable, and instructive gymnastic school for soul and body" (1818, p. 218; 1825, p. 198). Unmistakably Sckell's upright walking designer belonged to the bourgeoisie, not to the laborers who were employed in the landscape gardens' heavy construction work and who followed in the designer's steps, bending down to ram stakes into the earth along the line he had incised with the drawing stick. Sckell cautioned that while drawing in nature, the artist was to look ahead and never turn back, as he would otherwise risk losing his imagined line (1818, p. 86; 1825, p. 78.).

Drawing

By pulling the drawing stick after him while walking, Sckell turned the human gait not so much "into an object of knowledge" (Mayer, 2020, p. 10) as some of his contemporaries did, but rather into a method of design. By walking he designed landscapes for walking, including the footpaths themselves that since the sixteenth century in the context of gardens had been called "walks."[1] The drawing stick was a technology that extended the body and its habitual technique of walking. The stick was steered as much by the designer's mind, creative intelligence, and imagination, as by his body and its response to surface texture and existing landscape features. Sckell noted that it was "the feeling for beauty and truth of nature" that led "his steps, and consequently his drawing stick that faithfully follow[ed] the movements of its master" (1818, p. 85; 1825, p. 77). He added that "the trained artist is capable to draw as fast as he walks" (1818, 86; 1825, p. 78). The lines incised into the ground in this way "walked" with the designer. They were traces of continuous gestures that evolved during the act of walking and engaging with the land and environment. Unwittingly perhaps, the use of the drawing stick conjures up and combines various meanings of "drawing," a derivative of the Old English word "dragging" (pulling; Oxford English Dictionary, 2002). Besides drawing designs on paper, Sckell drew in nature while in motion. For him, line drawings on paper were lacking due to their small scale and the difficulty to imagine elevation changes. Furthermore, lines' transposition from plan to site, while technically possible, often resulted in forced lines that "lacked a free flying momentum, or better said, nature" (1818, p. 75; 1825, p. 68). Despite their contrivance, lines drawn in nature were what artist Paul Klee in the early twentieth century would have called "highly-charged," "active" as well as the "most authentic" lines (Klee, 1961, p. 105). In contrast to lines on paper which anthropologist Tim Ingold has described as "additive" (2007, p. 43) because they add pigment to a surface, Sckell's lines in nature were "reductive" (2007, p. 43): they resulted from scratching, or furrowing the ground's surface, displacing, or moving material. However, their direction and shape expressed and created the designer's visions for the addition of plants, pathways, and water features to the land. And on occasion even the "reductive" lines themselves turned into "additive" lines; for example, when pathway borderlines were not only furrowed 2.5 cm into the ground and marked by oak pickets driven into the earth but also sowed with a mixture

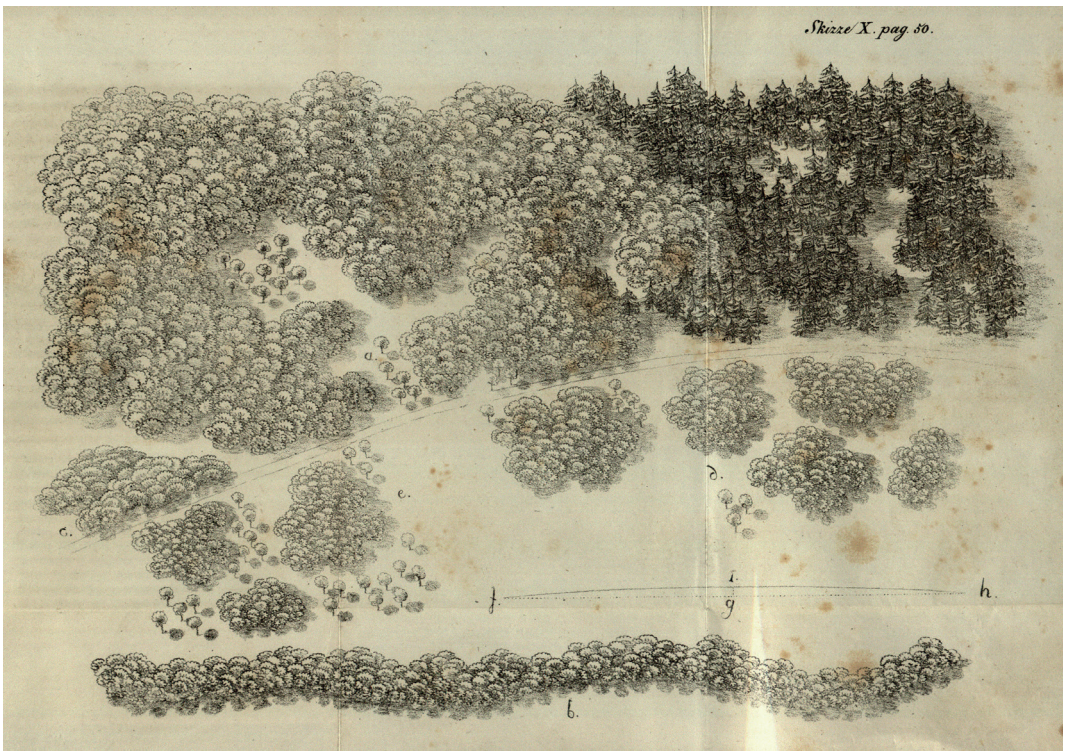

fig.3
Planting designs illustrated in Sckell's second, 1825 edition of *Beiträge zur bildenden Gartenkunst*, Joseph Lindauer, Munich, table X.
In addition to what had been represented in Sckell's 1818 edition of the Beiträge, this sketch also showed the merging of deciduous with coniferous trees (on the right side), and an ideal curve for pathways (marked by the letters "f," "g," "h," "i").
It was also more explicit about pointing out the irregular forms of individual picturesque groups of shrubs, marked with a "c" and "d."
Courtesy Heidelberg University Library.

of grass and clover (Sckell, 1818, pp. 76-77; Sckell, 1825, pp. 68-69).

In Sckell's kinetic gestural outdoor drawing practice mind and body were closely connected. Drawing became an art of movement that resulted from the "energetic and experiencing human subject" (Ingold, 2007, p. 143). The lines drawn in nature bore the traces of human sensibility.[2] Although the designer approached predetermined distant points on the land, the lines drawn with the stick had no obvious beginning or end. They were not intended to connect points along the most direct routes and their itineraries were therefore not entirely predetermined by the points they connected. In contrast, it was the lines determining the points that were ultimately needed to outline and lay out pathways, planting beds, wooded areas, and water features. Sckell's lines were made by and for wayfaring in imaginary worlds, for indetermined rambles, not for the fastest possible transport between places. His lines created landscapes for visitation and inhabitation, in other words, for both walking and staying.

Designing

Fundamental for drawing in nature was the garden artist's imagination in response to his experiences of the existing natural features on site. For Sckell, it was the artist's

> feeling for nature's beautiful forms, his imagination based upon the rules and principles of art that leads him quickly and securely and that shows him where the woods have to emerge as prominent masses and where they have to recede again into darkness; where hills should rise and valleys dip, which lines the stream should describe … , and where the gentle waving lines or the less convoluted more audacious acute- and obtuse-angled outlines should determine forms. (1818, p. 86; 1825, p. 78)

Sckell maintained that by pulling the stick after him, the garden artist could "quite mechanically" (1818, p. 84; 1825, p. 76) draw "the line of beauty" (die Schönheits-Linie) into the earth. Described by painter William Hogarth in his 1753 *Analysis of Beauty*, the presence of this line consisting of two contrasting curves was thought to explain why certain forms and objects appeared pleasing and attractive to the viewer. Variously called "waving line" (Wellen-Linie), "winding line," "serpentine line," and "line of grace,"[3] it was employed in eighteenth and nineteenth-century landscape gardening in two and three dimensions to create undulating, harmonious landscapes that could evoke varied atmospheric experiences. However, the line of beauty was not the only line necessary to create an inspiring landscape scenery that would unfold and reveal itself to the pre-ambulating walker (whose movement, seen in silhouette, in Hogarth's eyes incidentally also described a waving line; 1753, p. 147). Nor was the line of beauty to be misunderstood as a modular Latin "S" that could be mechanically reproduced by a compass. As Sckell explained, in nature no line of beauty was alike (1818, p. 59; 1825, p. 54), and it was not the waving line, also illustrated at "b" in the sketch that Sckell added to his *Beiträge* (Fig. 3; 1818, pp. 57-58; 1825, p. 52.), but strong bold gestures that were required to draw the outlines of extensive thick protruding and indentured woodlands with their acute and obtuse angles (1818, pp. 55, 58; 1825, pp. 49, 52). Long secretive indentures that let light and shadow enter the woodlands, as illustrated at "a" in the same sketch, were considered extremely effective (1818, pp. 55, 137; 1825, pp. 49, 125). However, to evoke a natural wood's edge, trees and shrubs were not to be planted directly along such an outline, either. Instead, after the line had been staked out at every 5 to 14.5 m, it was to be erased, and workers instructed to dig tree holes in arbitrary locations between two stakes (1818, pp. 56-57; 1825, pp. 50-52). Besides the line of beauty and the strong bold line used to lay out extensive wooded areas, the designer's repertoire included the picturesque line.

The latter served the design of small woodlands whose outline protruded and receded irregularly to accommodate intricately interwoven tree groups of different species (1818, p. 109; 1825, p. 99). To heighten the picturesque effect, flowering shrubs could be planted in small irregular groups (prohibitive of any round and oval outlines) in front of larger dense woody areas (1818, pp. 138, 145-46; 1825, pp. 126, 133-134). As indicated at "c" and "d" in the sketch, on adjacent interstitial open grounds individual slim and tall trees could provide further contrast and variety (1818, p. 146; 1825, p. 134).

Sckell's younger colleague, the British landscape gardener John Claudius Loudon had illustrated a similar typology of lines in his 1804 *Observations on the Formation and Management of Useful and Ornamental Plantations*. Loudon differentiated between "beautiful," "grand," and "picturesque" outlines of new plantations (Fig. 4; Loudon, 1804, plate II), while admitting that all trees and woods were already picturesque by nature. If the character to be achieved by a plantation was to be "*grandeur*, the bounding line should consist of bold, angular prominences, succeeded by deep incisions, forming large bays and promontories." Obtuse and convex curves were to be alternated with long straight lines for the "grand" outline to "appear 'irregularly great'"(1804, pp. 87-88.). Picturesqueness could be achieved on a smaller scale through a "mixture of straight and curved lines" so that they produced "*variety* and intricacy" (1804, p. 89). If ornament was a principal consideration, Loudon advised that the outline "should be broken by single trees and groups, so dispersed, as to increase its irregularity" (1804, p. 89). He criticized the monotony of circular tree clumps and serpentine tree belts, siding with the leaders of the late-eighteenth century picturesque controversy who had promoted a picturesque aesthetic condemning designs à la Capability Brown. Although he did not dismiss Brown's style entirely, Loudon ridiculed the time and amount of work it took its adherents to lay out plantations with

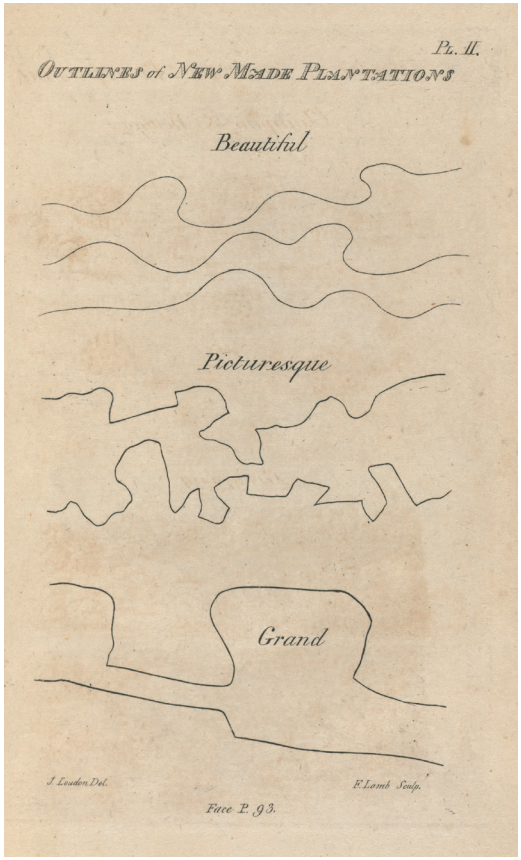

fig.4
Loudon's typology of lines delineating new plantations.
From: Loudon, 1804, plate II.

beautiful serpentine outlines, whereas " 'if nature were followed, [the outlines] might be traced by the plough, following the footsteps of a designer, in two or three hours' "(1804, pp. 92-93). While Loudon did not allude to a drawing stick – the device being particular to Sckell's operations – the practice of tracing a walking designer's movement here also emerges as being key to the design of new plantations and landscapes. The walking designer even appears as the guarantee for a more natural, or picturesque design.

For Sckell, the waving line was not only to be used when outlining paths, planting areas, streams, and rivers. It was also to be applied to the perspectival horizontal views of planting designs. In addition, oblique lines were important to organize the fore-,

fig.5
Designed woodland scene showing different types of plantings, drawn by Friedrich Ludwig Sckell or by his nephew and disciple, landscape gardener Carl August Sckell. From: Sckell, 1818, table 2. Courtesy ETH Library.

middle, and background of the various landscape scenes. They could be created by planting small trees and shrubs in front of tall woods. In a sketch (Fig. 5) Sckell illustrated such plantings whose height descended from left to right and from right to left evoking oblique lines that emphasized spatial depth like in a theater coulisse (1818, pp. 133-134; 1825, pp. 121-122). To stress the point, he also appended to his *Beiträge* the sketch of a picturesque mountain scene with fore-, middle and background complemented with a walking laborer, bent under the weight of a hamper brimmed over with goods (Fig. 6). While the walking figure stressed the composition's picturesque nature, it was not the type of gait and walker Sckell's landscape gardens were created for. They were designed and built for the wanderer: the walker who, like the walking designer himself, had the freedom and ability to let their imagination run, and to let their feelings, their environment and its atmospheres impress upon them.

As the design of gardens used for walking, walking itself was by some considered an art. In 1802, schoolteacher Karl Gottlob Schelle discussed "the art of walking" in a treatise dedicated to the enlightened Leopold Friedrich Franz von Anhalt-Dessau whose principality had been subject to extensive land beautification measures including the creation of Wörlitzer Park, one of the first landscape gardens in the German states. As Schelle explained, walking was to serve the body and its soul. Besides the physical exercise, it was the emotions sparked by the body's movement through nature's scenery and its impressions that could improve both physical and mental health (1802, pp. 20-21, 33-45). Walking was an art because it required a predisposition to receive and respond to one's surroundings and to nature's impressions, an ability that was also key in Sckell's drawing and design practice.

fig.6
Bavarian mountain scene, drawn by Friedrich Ludwig Sckell or by his nephew and disciple, landscape gardener Carl August Sckell. From: Sckell, 1818, table 3. Courtesy ETH Library.

His drawing in nature was what today would be called a phenomenological bodily practice guided by the mind and its imagination. Although contemporary survey plans of gardens designed by Sckell are not known to exist, his design drawings were more than rough sketches that indicated the locations of landscape features (Siemon, 2002). Nevertheless, he downplayed their importance in his *Beiträge.* Addressed to future landscape gardeners his treatise was about the practice of creating gardens on the ground, not about drawing their plans in the drafting studio. What did beautiful garden plans matter, he asked, if the imagination did not go beyond the invention of beautiful garden scenes, if the hand that was to implement them was not able to transfer visions into reality, into imitations of nature? (1818, pp. iv-v; 1825, p. iv). "The ability to invent natural gardens goes in step with the ability to execute them and requires the same skills and sciences" (1818, pp. 52-53; 1825, p. 47). Both, the designer's imagination and visions, and his emotional response to the site were to guide him. Sckell's *Beiträge* therefore was not a normative rulebook. Instead (and among other things), it promoted walking as a kinesthetic drawing and design method that was to develop freely. Upright "natural" walking, despite its contrived nature that mirrored the equally contrived nature of the landscape gardens it helped to design, was thought to foster imagination and a self-conscious cooperation of body and mind. It could, according to Sckell, produce original garden art.

Note

[1] See the entry "walk" in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and, for example, the use of the term throughout Repton, 1805. In the German language, landscape gardeners used the comparable word "Spaziergang" for "walk," and "spazierengehen" for leisurely "walking." See, e.g., Hirschfeld, 1779-1785.

[2] Ingold writes about lines and letters produced by typewriters that "bear no trace of sensibility": Ingold, 2007, p. 144. Also see Sckell, 1818, p. 75; Sckell, 1825, p. 68.

[3] Hogarth spoke of a "waving line" when he meant a two-dimensional line of beauty, and of a "winding line," "serpentine line," or "line of grace" when this line developed in three dimensions. See Hogarth, 1753, pp. 38-39.

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