

# THE RISE AND FALL OF

# EDWARD G.



COURTESY OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY IN ROME

**HERE**

Lawson in his studio at the American Academy in Rome, c. 1920. Michael Rapuano would later be assigned the same space, traditionally one of two studios reserved for fellows in landscape architecture. A recent occupant was Robert Hammond, creator of the High Line and a 2009 fellow.



# LAWSON

BY THOMAS J. CAMPANELLA

# HE SEEMED TO COME OUT OF NOWHERE AND THEN VANISH AGAIN AT THE PEAK OF HIS CAREER.

**B**etween 1923 and World War II, 17 young men won the American Academy in Rome's coveted fellowship in landscape architecture. More than half were students of a singular, extraordinary educator—Edward Godfrey Lawson of Cornell, himself the winner of the first Rome Prize landscape competition in 1915. An elusive figure who seemed to come out of nowhere, Lawson vanished again at the peak of his career, for reasons that have only recently come to light. He built little work of his own, but his students helped change the face of America. His greatest “work” was launching the careers of two of the most powerful landscape architects of the 20th century: Gilmore D. Clarke, a Cornell classmate whom Lawson talked into studying landscape architecture, and Michael Rapuano, Lawson's most gifted student, whom he later persuaded Clarke to hire. Clarke and Rapuano dominated their profession for more than a generation. They created the first modern highways in the world, laid out the arterial infrastructure of metropolitan New York, designed scores of parks and playgrounds with Robert Moses, and planned some of the finest affordable housing projects in the nation. Their extraordinary partnership—“one of the most fruitful collaborations in American design history,” as Laurie Olin, FASLA, has put it—would never have existed without Edward Lawson.

Lawson's early years are obscure. He was born on October 29, 1884, in the heart of Buffalo's working-class East Side, then a heavily German and Jewish quarter. According to census re-

ords, his grandparents emigrated from Bavaria and Denmark; his father, John F. Lawson, was a widower by 1918 who worked as a baker, machinist, and glassmaker. Other sources suggest Lawson was an orphan and raised by relatives, and in official documents he often listed a George Miller of Buffalo as next of kin. In any case, Lawson was penurious and was only able to attend Cornell because the “Rural Art” program was part of the New York State College of Agriculture, making tuition free. He was considerably older than his cohort when he matriculated, at age 25, as a freshman in 1909, but he proved to be a gifted designer and quickly rose to the top of his class. He completed his baccalaureate degree in 1913 and immediately began graduate work in the design history of gardens, working simultaneously for Townsend and Fleming, the practice Bryant Fleming—founder of the Cornell program—had formed a decade earlier. Despite his bookish bent, Lawson was industrious. “I never had a boy come into the office and turn out the work as Lawson had done,” Fleming later wrote. His largest project was to survey and design the new College of Agriculture quadrangle at Cornell.

Shortly after completing his master's degree in 1915, Lawson made a bid for the recently announced inaugural Rome Prize Fellowship in Landscape Architecture. Sponsored by the American Society of Landscape Architects, the new competition was modeled on the architectural program—itsself based on the French Academy's venerable Prix de Rome. Participants had 14 hours to design a country estate for a fictional New York banker





named “I. N. Cognito.” According to the competition guidelines, jurors were to consider above all things “the clearness of thought and soundness of judgment evinced by the design.” Finalists had six weeks to submit a second set of exhibition-grade ink and watercolor renderings. From these a winner was selected, and all the drawings were then exhibited to the public.

Lawson threw himself into the competition, spending whole nights in the studio and hardly breaking even for meals. “He worked exceedingly hard,” recalled E. Gorton Davis, Lawson’s mentor, “and was in a very exhausted condition on its completion, so much so that we were worried about him.” But Lawson won the prize. He defeated two Harvard students among others—Bremer Pond and Elbert Peets—who would go on to successful careers of their own (Pond later chaired Harvard’s landscape program; Peets coauthored *The American Vitruvius*, still a classic). The victory was a triumph for Cornell as much as it was for Lawson, for its landscape program had long lingered in Harvard’s shadow. But it also caused Lawson problems, as Pond and Peets were students of the powerful Harvard professor and ASLA officer James Sturgis Pray, who was infuriated that this upstart from the wrong side of the tracks was chosen over his protégés. Unfortunate for Lawson, the Harvard don was to be his Rome Prize adviser.

Lawson could do nothing right by Pray, who seemed intent on destroying the younger man’s reputation. In a letter to the

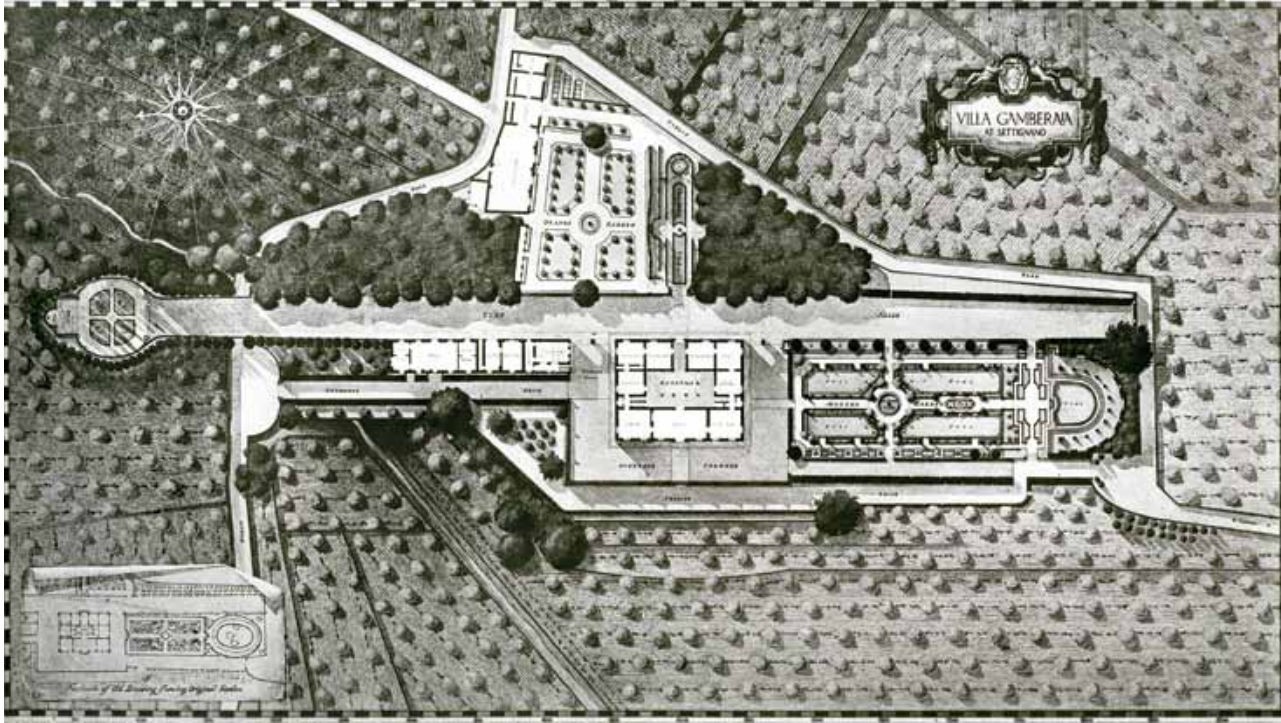
academy’s vice president, Breck Trowbridge, Pray claimed that Lawson lacked “the ability, or at least the previous training necessary to carry on efficiently and productively” as ASLA’s first fellow. It was an outrageous charge, for Lawson was churning out brilliant work on the Janiculum. Lucky for him, another powerful ASLA official—the aristocratic Florentine Ferruccio Vitale—rose to Lawson’s defense. This touched off a bitter feud between Pray and Vitale, one rooted in a larger struggle then raging within the landscape profession—what *Architectural Record* described as the “hot fight... between the advocates of the formal and the so-called natural garden.” Pray’s Harvard program was keeper of the Olmsted legacy, while Cornell—Vitale’s pet program—had shrewdly positioned itself to exploit surging interest in Italianate formalism. By 1915, Cornell’s “country place” star was rising fast, while Harvard—the oldest, most prestigious school in the country—suddenly found itself losing ground. Poor Edward Lawson had wandered into a minefield.

He faced other challenges as well. Lawson’s fellowship guidelines were vague, the lack of precedents made judging his work difficult, and he had neither a resident professor to mentor him at the academy nor a predecessor to show him the ropes. “His work,” wrote Gorham Stevens, then director of the academy’s school of fine arts, “is that of a pioneer.” In addition, ASLA had placed great expectations on him. Not only was he the group’s ambassador at the august academy—an organization on which it yearned to make a good impression—but he was also called upon for fund-raising efforts back home. Lawson’s fellowship was only provisional for landscape architecture at the academy. To create a permanent and recurring fellowship required a substantial endowment with funds raised by ASLA, and the pressure was on Lawson to justify such an endeavor. As John Charles Olmsted rather bluntly put it, the society expected to “see something for our money.” For all Pray’s carping, Lawson did not let them down. He sketched villas in Rome, Tuscany, and Umbria, took 600 photographs of garden details, drew Piranesi’s entrance to the Villa Borghese, and began translating Maria Pasolini Ponti’s *Il Giardino Italiano*. His luminous measured drawings of the Villa Gamberaia in Settignano set standards for landscape draftsmanship at the academy for a generation.

**ABOVE AND OPPOSITE**  
Edward G. Lawson,  
Villa Gamberaia at  
Settignano, section  
elevations, c. 1917.



COURTESY PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVE OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY IN ROME



**ABOVE**  
Edward G. Lawson,  
Villa Gamberaia at  
Settignano, plan,  
c. 1917.

But these matters were mere trifles in light of the Great War that would soon engulf Italy. At first the conflict seemed only a distant threat to daily life at the academy. But in July 1917, the academy's resident director, Jesse Benedict Carter, fell dead of heatstroke at Cervignano, where he had been helping establish an Italian mission of the American Red Cross. America entered the war five months later. The academy's main building on the Janiculum was readied for use as a hospital by the Red Cross, which also took over the nearby Villa Aurelia. Like many other fellows, Lawson signed on for service. He was posted first to Ravenna and then Rimini on the Adriatic, where a hospital had just opened for Venetian refugees. When Rimini was bombed by torpedo boats—a shell burst perilously close to Lawson's quarters one night—the Red Cross called him back to Rome to serve as secretary to deputy commissioner Chester H. Aldrich, himself an architect with academy ties. Lawson's drafting skills were put to use preparing maps, and he remained with the Red Cross until after the Armistice, assisting efforts to resettle the great tide of refugees.

In the summer of 1919 Lawson returned home briefly to visit family and work for several weeks in Bryant Fleming's office. There he counseled two recent Cornell graduates, Ralph E. Griswold and Norman T. Newton, on Rome Prize competition essentials. It was a fortuitous meeting, for both Griswold and Newton would soon follow Lawson to Italy as recipients of the second and third Rome Prize fellowships in landscape architecture. That fall Lawson was back on the Janiculum. He prepared a planting plan of the Villa Medici, home of the French Academy, completed translating *Il Giardino Italiano*, and produced magnificent drawings of the Villa Torlonia in

Frascati and the Bosco Parrasio. By the time he left his studio in April 1921, Lawson had made an indelible mark at the academy. "It was hard to see Lawson go," wrote Griswold, "but still harder for him to say goodbye; he has left an enviable precedent here and will be greatly missed by all who knew him."

Lawson moved to Paris, where he had a job waiting for him with the American Graves Registration Service (AGRS). Working closely with George Gibbs Jr. of the Olmsted Brothers office, Lawson helped lay out several major cemeteries of the Great War—Brookwood in Surrey, England; and in France, the Aisne-Marne Cemetery at Belleau Wood near Chateau-Thierry, Suresnes in Paris, Meuse-Argonne at Romagne-sous-Montfaucon—the largest American cemetery in Europe—and the Somme American Cemetery near Aisne. Lawson was responsible for the planting design, drafting, and delineation of all AGRS cemeteries, and the earliest known plans of each are all in his hand. In Paris, Lawson also became part of the extraordinary émigré community that formed there following the Great War—Gertrude Stein's "Lost Generation." He was almost certainly gay and would have found Paris vastly liberating after the Calvinist provincialism of upstate New York and the stern Catholicism of Italy. Paris in the 1920s was a relative oasis of tolerance for homosexuality, with a flourishing gay subculture of nightclubs and salons—a world evoked by Henri Gauthier-Villars in his 1927 classic, *The Third Sex*. In France, Lawson continued his studies of European gardens and landscapes, among them Ermenonville, where he studied René de Girardin's English landscape garden, the site of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's tomb. He was "entertained at Ermenonville for some time," E. Gorton Davis reported. Davis was pleased with

this newfound passion for French design; for “if anything,” he wrote, “Lawson had become a little overbalanced in his interest in the classic and the Italian version of it.”

In August 1922, Lawson returned home to take up a faculty post at Cornell. It was an auspicious moment, for that summer Landscape Art had been transferred from the College of Agriculture to the College of Architecture, where it became the Department of Landscape Architecture. Just as Lawson had been surrounded by artists and architects at the American Academy, the Cornell students would now be part of a design school’s creative milieu, training alongside their future collaborators. Lawson’s most gifted student arrived at Cornell the very semester he began teaching. Like his teacher, Michael Rapuano came from humble roots. The son of Italian immigrants, he grew up in nearby Syracuse and learned the rudiments of landscape design from his father, a gardener with the city park system. But Rapuano had star quality—he was tall and handsome, captain of his high school football team, an All-American center at Cornell. He was also a brilliant draftsman, whose raw talent Lawson cultivated and refined. Rapuano, in turn, gave Lawson the family he always yearned for. His teacher became a close friend and a frequent visitor at the Rapuano home in Syracuse, where Lawson was often a guest at Thanksgiving. Lawson coached his star student for the 1927 Rome Prize competition, which he won handily. Lawson was himself invited back as a visiting professor the following year. When his ship docked at Naples in July 1928, Rapuano was there to meet him. “Ed was sure happy when he arrived here,” wrote Rapuano in a letter to his family. “It feels like home to him.”

That fall, Rapuano and Lawson embarked on a marathon motor tour to visit hundreds of gardens throughout Italy, France, and Spain, traveling in a secondhand Fiat. For Rapuano, the trip was like a personalized graduate seminar in landscape history and theory. He returned from Italy two years later to a job that Lawson had helped arrange—a coveted position with Gilmore D. Clarke of the Westchester County Park Commission, Lawson’s old Cornell classmate. Clarke had an international reputation for designing some of the first public landscapes of the motor age, and Rapuano quickly became his right-hand man. He planned Manursing Island and Woodlands parks, helped lay out the Briarcliff-Peekskill



Parkway, designed bridges for the Saw Mill River Parkway, and prepared planting plans for the Taconic Parkway. Rapuano’s dazzling watercolor renderings graced commission publicity material and annual reports.

By delegating all conceptual design work to Rapuano, Clarke was better able to focus on executive and planning matters. Their complementary relationship was replicated in New York in 1934, when Robert Moses recruited Clarke to help him reconstruct the city’s vast park system. Moses had long admired Clarke’s Westchester work and used it as a model for his Long Island parks and parkways. Just as Moses made Clarke his park design czar, Clarke put Rapuano in charge of the Department of Landscape Design.

With his five-person team, which included two additional Rome Prize recipients, Rapuano formulated a lean and elegant “public-works Baroque” aesthetic that proved ideally suited for city parks and playgrounds. This yielded a kit of design moves and materials that became standard throughout

**ABOVE**  
Portrait of Edward G. Lawson by Frank P. Fairbanks, 1920. Lawson is shown in his American Red Cross uniform; the Venetian winged lion was the insignia of its Italian mission.

IN 1931, SOMETHING TERRIBLE HAPPENED. LAWSON LEFT TOWN SO QUICKLY THAT HE LEFT NEARLY ALL OF HIS POSSESSIONS BEHIND.



**ABOVE**  
Michael Rapuano  
at Isola Bella on  
Lake Maggiore,  
August, 1928.

**RIGHT**  
Edward G. Lawson  
c. 1930.

the park system. Italianate formalism thus came to define the parks of mid-20th-century New York as fully as the Anglo-Olmstedian picturesque had those of the century before. Looking to Italy was, of course, nothing new for American landscape architects at this time; Charles Platt, Ferruccio Vitale, Beatrix Farrand, and many other “country place” designers drew heavily from the Renaissance in the lucrative business of appointing vast estates for silk-stockng clients. Rapuano was, however, among the first to apply a Renaissance lexicon to the design of city parks. Lawson may have had little interest in the civic realm, but through Rapuano his passion for the Italian landscape came to touch the lives of millions of city dwellers.

Rapuano was not Lawson’s only star student, of course; many others would follow his steps to the Janiculum hill. Richard C. Murdock, recipient of the 1930 Rome Prize, went on to help plan the United Nations Headquarters and the campus of Vanderbilt University. Neil Park won the 1931 competition, squeezing past another Lawson student and finalist, Stanley W. Abbott, who later designed the Blue Ridge Parkway. Morris E. Trotter of Charlotte, North Carolina, won the 1933 Rome Prize and later taught camouflage design at Ohio State during World War II. Lawson’s greatest hitting streak came between 1935 and 1939, when his Cornell boys bagged five consecutive Rome Prize fellowships—James M. Lister in 1935, Robert S. Kitchen in 1936, John F. Kirkpatrick in 1937, Stuart M. Mertz in 1938, and Frederick W. Edmondson in 1939. It is still an academy record. Lawson shepherded so many students to the American Academy in Rome that its fellowship in landscape architecture became known as the “Cornell Prize.”

But all was not well in Lawson’s life. Colleagues noted his odd tendency to identify more closely with students than faculty peers—a peculiarity Bryant Fleming attributed to the fact that Lawson

“had no real family background” and “little or no personal family life.” In a 1931 letter, Fleming described his former student as “a lonesome and very reticent character,” a man who struggled to “place himself on a footing of equality with those of his own age” and who sought fellowship instead with his students—some of whom, cautioned Fleming, he took “too greatly into his confidence.” The students were effectively Lawson’s family, and they in turn were very fond of him. At the time, Lawson was resident director of Architects’ House—the former Ezra Cornell mansion on the edge of campus that had been converted into a residence for College of Architecture seniors. He helped make the rambling house a home, furnishing it with his own curtains and mirrors, hanging tapestries and prints in the hallways, even putting his Victrola and records out for the students to enjoy.

But early in 1931 something terrible happened at Architects’ House that forced Lawson to leave town so quickly that he left nearly all his possessions behind. As Dean George Young Jr. later put it in a memo, Lawson’s “conduct of Architects’

House came near to disaster for us all.” What exactly occurred remains a mystery, but it may well have had something to do with alcohol. By now Lawson was struggling with a serious drinking problem, and it’s possible he had procured liquor—illegally, of course; this was the height of Prohibition—for a house party that got out of control. Lawson was forced to take an unpaid leave of absence and by September was in Rochester miserably running a solo practice. He desperately missed Cornell and pleaded with Young in letters and phone calls to bring him back. “My ambition in life,” he wrote, “is to teach.”

Chastened, Lawson was finally given his old job back in 1933. The next 10 years were among the most fruitful of his career. They were also a time



PHOTOGRAPH BY EDWARD G. LAWSON / COURTESY CARL ORSPALLO. TOP: COURTESY PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVE OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY IN ROME. BOTTOM

of reunion with his old classmate, Gilmore Clarke, who was appointed Cornell's first professor of city planning in 1935 and succeeded Young as dean of the College of Architecture shortly afterward. But Clarke's arrival did not bode well for Lawson. Though Clarke was very fond of his old friend, he had little interest in Renaissance garden design; his passion was planning vast public works projects. It's clear Clarke regarded Lawson as a charming relic of a lost age. "I hold out little hope," he wrote to H. P. Hammond in 1943, "for the successful adaptation of all of the teachers of landscape architecture now in our schools to any new program...developed in light of the changed social and economic situation with which we are now confronted."

Lawson's Ithaca days ultimately ended on a tragic note, steeped in a scandal so embarrassing that Cornell officials effectively buried it for 70 years. It appears that Lawson was targeted by someone intent on outing his homosexuality, though the identity of his accuser remains a mystery. It may have been a coworker or neighbor, a student angry over a grade or even a jilted lover, but whoever it was effectively ended his career. On March 13, 1943, Lawson was arrested by a federal agent in White Hall and charged with committing mail fraud for having received three letters containing "language of an obscene nature." (Since postal inspectors, then as now, are prohibited from opening letters, Lawson's correspondence was evidently brought to the attention of authorities by someone with access to his personal effects.) Bail was set at \$3,000, a huge sum at the time (about \$40,000 today). Lawson quit his job two days later; he would never teach again.

The arrest—particularly outrageous because Lawson did not even *write* the offending letters—sent a silent shock wave through the university. An old Cornell hand, Fitch Hibbard Stephens, was called upon to defend the professor. Gilmore Clarke, still dean of the College of Architecture, moved decisively to save his friend. He wrote a letter of support to the federal judge handling the case, Frederick Bryant, and convinced Cornell President Edmund Ezra Day to do the same. President Day also quietly arranged to have Lawson examined by Dr. Oskar Diethelm, a prominent New York psychiatrist and chair of Cornell's Payne Whitney Psychiatric Clinic. He was hospitalized through the spring.



On May 20, Lawson was arraigned at the U.S. District Court in Syracuse. Stephens at first attempted to plead no contest on his client's behalf. But the prosecuting U.S. Attorney, Ralph L. Emmons—a devout Catholic and father of nine—would not let Lawson off so easily. He objected and the request was refused by the court, after which Stephens entered a guilty plea, imploring Judge Bryant for leniency in his sentence. Here the letters from Clarke and Day proved crucial, for after delivering a stern lecture, Bryant deferred sentencing Lawson pending good behavior. He spared Lawson further humiliation by adjourning the court for lunch until two o'clock but quietly taking up the arraignment a half hour early; thus the courtroom was empty, and no reporters were present. Lawson's bail money was returned, but he was made to post a personal bond of \$500. It was backed by sureties from two men who owed Lawson their careers—Gilmore Clarke and Michael Rapuano.

**ABOVE**  
Drafting room on the top floor of White Hall, Cornell University, c. 1933.

Jobless and disgraced, banished from his beloved Cornell and no longer young, Edward Lawson found refuge in his friendship with Ezra Winter, forged 30 years earlier at the American Academy in Rome. Winter was one of the great mural painters of his generation—his work graces the lobby of Radio City Music Hall and the reading rooms of the Library of Congress—and his wife, Patricia Murphy Winter, was a serial entrepreneur who had just established one of the nation's first herbal nurseries, the House of Herbs, in Salisbury, Connecticut, near the couple's 300-acre farm. Lawson became Pat Winter's aide-de-camp, and the two found solace in each other when, in April 1949, Ezra Winter took his life with a double-barrel shotgun. Lawson remained in Salisbury for 20 years, designing the display garden, testing recipes, brewing and packaging herbal vinegars, and tending the patchwork of planting fields about the homestead. ●

THOMAS J. CAMPANELLA IS AN ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF URBAN PLANNING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA, CHAPEL HILL, AND A FELLOW OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY IN ROME.