

Albert Kahn's earthly paradise

By Brent Gregston



Visit the
museum and
gardens created
by the late
visionary



The French banker Albert Kahn was a financial genius whose high-risk investments made him one of the richest men in Europe by the turn of the century. A lifelong pacifist, Kahn became convinced that a new technology – color photography – could contribute to cross-cultural understanding and world peace. He invested heavily in his dream, sending photographers around the globe between 1909 and 1929 to create an “archive of the planet.”

At home, Kahn created an earthly paradise, one of France’s most original gardens, with species from all over the world. It was the place, on the outskirts of Paris, where he partied and communed with friends like philosopher Henri Bergson and sculptor

Auguste Rodin. The crash of 1929 forced Kahn to sell his home to the Prefecture of the Seine, but they allowed him to live there until his death in 1940. Today, Kahn’s gardens form a spiritual oasis at the end of the Boulogne-Billancourt metro, a few hundred meters from one of the busiest roads leading into the Paris region.

Plant species from five continents meet and mingle here. Kahn had a small Japanese “village” constructed in 1897 by Japanese craftsmen using materials imported from Japan. A contemporary Japanese garden, landscaped in 1990, pays tribute to Kahn’s life, with a pyramid of white stones representing his birth. A pebble-lined stream – symbolizing his life



– flows from the base and meanders into a lake below a small hill covered in azaleas that evokes Mount Fuji. Ginkgo-biloba trees form a canopy of fan-shaped leaves that filter the sun. Brightly painted red bridges are reminiscent of Monet’s gardens in Giverny.

The French garden is an expression of the art of the Renaissance garden and of French classicism. Rows of neatly trimmed linden and chestnut trees accentuate the angularity of the landscaped vegetation. There are apple and pear trees in geometric shapes. Things bloom more freely in the traditional English Garden. The rose gardens are in full bloom from June until September.



The 19th-century domed greenhouse in iron and glass – the winter garden – serves as a reminder that you’re in a *fin de siècle* time warp. Further afield, time travel continues among the granite blocks and centenarian pine trees of the “Vosges Forest” – Kahn planted them in memory of his childhood in the Alsace-Lorraine region of eastern France. A misty “Blue Forest” gets its name from towering Blue Atlas cedars.

The Albert Kahn Museum and Gardens are located at 14 Rue du Port in Boulogne-Billancourt, just west of Paris. For more info, tel. 33.1.55.19.28.00, www.albert-kahn.fr