

A Look At Japanese Gardens

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General History

In Japan, as in many other cultures, the garden can be traced back to early urban settlements to a time when buildings, walls or windows began to visually and physically frame nature and selected forms became isolated from their natural context and enclosed. This area of "captured" nature, which included both flora and fauna, became the garden or "paradise." The concept of "garden as paradise" probably developed from the ancient Persian pairidaeza, meaning "enclosure," and the Greeks used a similar word, paradeisos, for grand animal parks. Early Chinese gardens attached to imperial palaces were likewise animal parks that served as hunting grounds for aristocrats. Walls enclosed the parks, and nature and the animals within the parks were carefully monitored and controlled.

Both native aesthetics and Chinese models influenced early garden development in Japan. Prior to the introduction of Buddhism in the sixth century, Shinto believers venerated unique or extraordinary forms of nature and held them to be the abodes of deities. [Such forms might be unusual rock formations, striking mountain forms, ancient weathered trees, or waterfalls of rare shape or size.](#) Their status as the homes of the native gods suggests that these rarities or "accidents" of nature were perceived as beautiful and sacred in early Japan.

During the ninth through twelfth centuries (the Heian period), courtiers followed Chinese models in constructing spacious [pond-and-island parks](#) adjacent to their residences. These garden parks were used for entertainment; courtiers strolled through them, traveled along their streams and ponds in small boats, and reveled in drinking and poetry parties within their tranquil surroundings.

Although these gardens looked like nature, they were in fact careful imitations of the outer forms of nature, with their naturally occurring materials all painstakingly chosen and constructed. These two examples suggest two different criteria at work in Japanese aesthetics—one that applied to natural beauty and one to man-made beauty. In nature, accidents are looked upon as praiseworthy, but the beauty of man-made objects lay in a perfection achieved through fixed rules.

Garden development in the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries (The Muromachi period) continued to emphasize the symbiotic relationship between man and nature, but developed in a manner vastly different from earlier stroll gardens. Whereas the early grand parks were viewed by moving through them, gardens of this period were designed on a smaller scale for viewing from static vantage points outside the garden proper. [Sand and rocks came to replace the natural water and vegetation, transforming the waters of the Heian-period garden ponds into "dry" ponds of raked sand in the](#) Muromachi period. Likewise, large rocks came to represent whole islands covered with "forests" comprised of moss. These gardens, while "of nature," are not "natural," suggesting that gardens underwent dramatic changes in design at this time.

One of the changes relates to their new purpose. During this period, many gardens were designed for Zen temples and used by monks for meditation, an endeavor that did not encourage interaction with nature but rather the contemplation of it from the outside. This karasansui (dry/withered-mountains-and-streams) style of garden has its roots in the Zen meditational technique of staring at a fixed pointed.

To further aid the monks in their quest for enlightenment, the gardens were designed to offer few distractions. Thus one finds in such gardens few flowers or green foliage to break the monochromatic tones of the gravel and rocks, and little or no water to distract the viewer by its motion or sound. Muromachi-period gardens preserve a quiet, restful space around the monastery; their ultimate purpose was to provide a forum for enlightenment.

The Aesthetics of Japanese Gardens

One of the central messages at the heart of Japanese garden aesthetics stated in a fifteenth century manual is that the landscape garden mirrors nature. In other words, a garden should not

copy existing gardens but reflect selected qualities of the natural environment. The landscape designer must look to nature in order to achieve this objective. The sixteenth-century poet Matsuo Bashō encourages us to "Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine, or to the bamboo if you want to learn about the bamboo. And, in doing, so, you must leave your subjective preoccupation with yourself. Otherwise you impose yourself on the object and do not learn."

Thus, Japanese gardens display a remarkable symbiosis of that which is natural and that which is man-made. Buildings within the garden, man-made pathways, [fences](#) are constructed according to fixed rules, but are designed to integrate within the garden as a whole. Architectural features do not stand alone in their own right or dominate the scenery as they do in Western gardens such as Versailles. Rather, they exist in concert with the "natural" landscape around them. Likewise, the natural elements-trees, bushes, rocks, gravel, water, and so forth-are meant to appear random and uncontrolled, yet are artfully intertwined with the man-made objects. In the Japanese garden man-made rational forms and natural random forms complement one another like the ancient Chinese concepts of Yin and Yang.

Yet the symbiotic relationship between man-made and spontaneous nature is all carefully orchestrated to allow for "accidents" of both nature and humans. There is rain, drought, cold and hot weather, disease, and insects to contend with. Plants grow and change, and even rocks acquire moss on their surfaces. Everything in the garden is in a state of constant flux, including the wear and tear inflicted on the man-made structures by the effects of weather, time, and even humans. But it is this contrast between the controlled and the uncontrollable that is essential for the garden's viability.

It may also be said that gardens serve as microcosms of the macrocosm. Man-made objects, as well as natural flora and fauna, are integral parts of garden architecture, yet all appear on a significantly reduced scale. In this scaled-down world, size becomes relative, causing small structures to seem like grand buildings, large rocks to represent whole mountain ranges or entire islands, and rivulets of water to appear as significant streams and waterfalls. The enclosed environment also forces us to "see" nature with greater clarity. As our vision is narrowed within

the enclosed space of the garden, we are drawn into the complex detail of the world beneath our feet.

Three Japanese Garden Types

The garden at Kinkakuji ([Temple of the Golden Pavilion](#)) is a good example of a pond-and-island stroll garden designed as a microcosm. Like earlier gardens, the garden at Kinkakuji was built as part of a large spacious residence and was designed for travel on foot and by boat.

The garden was begun by shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu in 1391 when he transformed the Kitayama Villa located in Kyoto's northwestern hills into a lavish retirement residence. After his death, the complex became a Buddhist temple. The main attraction is a [three-storeyed pavilion](#) built in a general Chinese style, but without the usual elaborate bracketing, tile roof, and round columns. Rather, the roof is native shingle, and the whole is constructed with squared timbers and plain surfaces of natural wood. The pavilion is set on a man-made platform jutting out into the pond and surrounded by pines and deciduous trees all carefully planted in "natural" profusion to show seasonal changes in foliage to the best advantage. The pond is divided into two parts by a large peninsula. Both portions of the pond feature small rock islands that are artificially placed but appear spontaneous and natural. [The smaller section of pond contains rocks often characterized as a crane-shaped island and two turtle islands](#); the larger section contains a few small rock islands that suggest we are viewing them from a great distance. It has been suggested that the intent of this garden layout may have been to create for the views an enjoyment of ocean scenery reminiscent of that seen on an excursion along the coast of Japan.

But what stands out in the natural environment is the brilliant gold leaf covering the roofline of the pavilion, most of the exterior, and parts of the interior. Although no other building in Japan is gold-covered in this manner, the concept is reminiscent of another residence-turned-temple: the twelfth-century [Byōdōin \(Phoenix Hall\)](#) located in Uji south of Kyoto. Byōdōin also has a pond-and-stroll garden that, like Kinkakuji's, was originally designed for the worldly enjoyment of its creator courtier Fujiwara Yorimichi. After his death, however, the pavilion was transformed into a Pure Land temple complete with a gilt Amida Buddha inside. The garden was likewise

redesigned to recreate the Western Paradise, with a lotus pond and stands of sweet-smelling flowering trees.

Scholars have suggested that adhering gold leaf on the outside of Kinkakuji had the effect of making the building itself sacred, in the same way that placing a gilt image of the Buddha inside a temple might.

On the opposite side of Kyoto, nestled in the eastern hills, is Ginkakuji, [the Temple of the Silver Pavilion](#). It was once part of the Higashiyama Villa begun around 1473 by the eighth Ashikaga shogun Yoshimasa (1436-1490). During the shogun's lifetime, the villa was the cultural center of life in Kyoto; upon his death it was converted into a Zen temple. The garden has two parts: [a garden for strolling around a pond](#) and [a dry landscape garden](#). Rocks and trees are the structural elements in the stroll garden, and they are used in a relatively unaltered state in order to recreate impressions of the natural environment. Great effort is made to maintain an unintentional, uncontrived effect. Yet to be unintentional is artificial, so the designer and gardener walk a fine line between manipulating the elements and letting natural accidents happen: leaves and pine needles fall, moss grows on its own, and trees age, change shape, die, and are replaced. The gardener cannot predict such spontaneous happenings, but works with the changes toward a particular effect. This part of the garden, with its pond and islands, remains a variation on the earlier Heian prototype. The original plan even included a boathouse, which no

The dry landscape part of the garden anticipates the exclusively "dry" gardens of later times. Here for the first time, the topographical elements of ocean and mountain are symbolized solely with sand. [An area of raked white sand symbolizes an open silver sea and a conical mountain of white sand recalls the shape of the most famous mountain in Japan](#), Mt. Fuji.

Woodblock prints that date to the late Edo period, however, suggest that this form evolved upward over the centuries and was once a much lower, flat platform that better fit its original appellation of *kōgetsudai*, "moon-viewing platform". Thus, even in the case of sand, we must confront the "accidental," albeit this time actions due to human inconsistency or design.

Of the twelve buildings that originally comprised Ginkakuji, the Silver Pavilion itself and one other are the only two to have survived into the present. The pavilion has two floors. The second

was used for moon-viewing on nights of a full moon, and the ground floor was used for meditation. The pavilion is not currently silver nor, according to scientific tests of its timbers, was it ever painted or gilded with silver leaf. So why was it named the Silver Pavilion? Some scholars suggest that plans were made to gild the building with silver, but never completed. However, historical records do not support this supposition. Other sources believe that the appellation came from the ocean of sand in front of the structure, which was found to have high mica content. Thus, when the sand ocean is bathed in moonlight, it turns into an ocean of glittering silver.

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Suggested Reading

Treatises on Japanese Gardens

The following book contains a translation of a private treatise on garden building which explains many of the principles involved from a traditional Japanese point of view.

Slawson, David A. *Secret Teachings in the Art of Japanese Gardens: Design Principles, Aesthetic Values*. **Tokyo** and New York: Kodansha International 1991.

Another so-called "secret treatise" is the subject of another new book on Japanese gardens.

Keane, Mark P. and Takei Jirō, *Sakuteiki: Visions of the Japanese Garden*. Boston/Rutland VT: Tuttle Publishing 2001.

History of Japanese Gardens

There are many useful books on the subject. One which has good illustrations and useful drawings is:

Bring, Mitchell, and Wayenberg, Josse, *Japanese Gardens: Design and Meaning*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981. It is part of a well-known series on landscape and landscape architecture and so contains some useful comparative information.

Picture Books on Japanese Gardens

Japanese gardens photograph well, and there are many beautiful books of photographs available. Among them is Itoh Teiji, *Space and Illusion in the Japanese Garden*. New York: Weatherhill, 1973.