

# The Japanese Garden and Impressions of Nature

## Part One: *From Reality to Abstraction*

By Amasaki Hiromasa

Aiming to harmonize with its natural surroundings, the Japanese garden represents a different approach to nature, especially compared to the formal Western garden with its strict geometry. Natural landscape and its components have certainly been a continuing theme of the Japanese garden ever since ancient times, although the elements used and the way in which they were expressed has differed from age to age.

Gardens in Japan have also been a setting for the expression of the people's traditional admiration for the beauties of nature. They have, nevertheless, also been places of entertainment, where noblemen and courtiers amused themselves, enjoying music and poetry from the waters of lakes, whereas feudal lord's gardens functioned as nothing less than a banqueting facility. Then again some gardens were much more

spiritual in character like the garden leading to a tea house; and the symbolic expression of the elements of nature in the dry-stone garden that was so influenced by the teachings of Zen Buddhism is another example of such spiritual leanings.

So just what does the Japanese garden amount to and just how has it changed and developed through history?

### Ornamental Square Lakes

There have been a number of excavations of gardens over the past thirty years, which have particularly furthered our understanding of what



Photo 2: Shima no sho excavation site

gardens were like in ancient times.

The first stirrings of garden design in Japan can be seen as far back as the Kofun period, roughly spanning the period from the third to the sixth century. Dating from the second half of the fourth century, the remains of a stream bed discovered in 1991 at the Jonokoshi excavations in Mie prefecture are proof of this. Small stones line the edges of naturally meandering streams channeled from a spring, and stones were erected where the streams converge.

Although this was a landscaped site for ceremonial purposes, it is interesting as there is already evidence of such design elements as streams of moving water, beaches represented by small flat stones and arrangements of standing stones that were to characterize the Japanese garden after the eighth century. (Photo 1)

During the seventh century or the later part of the Asuka period — a period marking the dawning of the Japanese garden — ornamental square lakes made a sudden appearance in gardens and were extensively used.



Photo 1: Jonokoshi excavation site

The 42-meter square lake discovered at the Shima no sho excavations in Asuka near Nara is contained by straight banks of piled-up stones, with flat river stones measuring 30 cm across laid on the bed of the lake. Both of these elements characterize garden design of the Asuka period. (Photo 2)

Evidence of the existence of such lakes has also been found at other sites beside Shima no sho. It has been established that similar lakes dating from the same period existed on the Korean peninsula at Paekche and Koguryo. So, while we may suppose that the presence of such lakes in Japan was the result of major influences from across the water, it must be said that it also overturns the formerly held belief that lakes with a natural curving shoreline were a universal design feature of the Japanese garden.

It seems very likely that the excavations at Shima no sho are actually of the remains of the residence of Soganoumako, a so-called *shima no otodo*, literally meaning the fine gardens of a minister. In those days, a garden

was referred to as a *shima* — an island. And at the time, it was usual for a garden to comprise a lake which had been dug, filled with water and furnished with artificial islands. While such lakes were a piece of conceptual expression, there is no mistaking the fact that they represented an impression of the sea.

### Sea and Shore

The type of stones and lakes which had been so extensively used in the Asuka period changed dramatically in the subsequent Nara period, during the early part of the eighth century. Square ornamental lakes were superseded by ones with a more naturally defined curving shoreline and small stones replaced the larger ones formerly employed on the bed of lakes. Recent improvements to the reconstruction of the former capital of Heijokyo near Nara in recent years include the garden of Toin. It is the remains of the garden here which mark this turning point in the development of garden design in Japan. (Photo 3)

Measuring some 50 meters east to west and some 60 meters north to

south, the remains of the Toin garden lake reveal that it had two distinct forms. The earlier lake was L-shaped with a relatively simple form and shoreline and large flat stones laid along its edge in the style of an Asuka-period garden. After the lake was reconstructed in the middle of the eighth century it had a much more complicated shoreline with many inlets and promontories, stones punctuating the curving waterline, and with dynamic groupings of stones on the promontories and projections in the shoreline. The bed of the lake was completely covered with stones in the region of 10 cm across, and they continued up out of the water with a gentle slope to form a shoreline or beach and were a particular feature of the lake.

This kind of beach with small stones is called a *suhama*, and is one particular way in which the sea and shore are expressed in the Japanese garden. It is a representation of the kind of white sandy beaches backed by pines that are so indicative of the coastline of Japan. The placing of groups of stones along the curving edge of the lake is another feature characterizing the Japan garden and is, in fact, an expression of the kind of natural groupings of craggy rocks that can often be seen along the coast of Japan. The kind of twisted, weather-beaten pines planted around the edge of the lake and on the islands within it, were a way of heightening the whole dramatic effect.

This appearance of a trend toward a descriptive expression of the sea and shore using a beach of stones and groupings of other stones like those seen in the Toin garden after its reconstruction, was a new development in the design of the Japanese garden. And while this form of design expressive of a preoccupation with nature based on a motif of the sea was carried over into the design of the gardens of shinden-style mansions and for Paradise gardens, it also became an underlying feature of garden design in Japan



Photo 3: The Toin garden



Photo 4: Byodoin

thereafter. In this sense, therefore, the Toin garden should perhaps be referred to as the origin of the Japanese garden *per se*.

### **Sakuteiki—A Treatise on Garden Making**

It was about the middle of the Heian period that designs expressive of this passion for aspects of nature reached their maturity. It was also at this time that Tachibana no Toshimitsu (died 1094), the son of Fujiwara Yorimichi who was chief advisor to the emperor, wrote a treatise on garden making called *Sakuteiki*, which is Japan's oldest such work.

Its fundamental doctrine was that garden making should be an attempt to construct something that would encourage people to recall natural landscape. It states that anyone wishing to construct a garden should first familiarize themselves with the most scenic spots up and down the country, like those of Matsushima in Miyagi prefecture where pines cling to small islands, and Amanohashidate, the famous causeway of sand and pines, in the

north of Kyoto on the Japan Sea. It also advocates that gardens of the masters from the past should also be studied, and that it was important to express one's own feelings in the design, while keeping the climate and lie of the land where the garden was to be constructed very much in mind.

Much of the information in the *Sakuteiki* was of a practical nature, particularly directed toward the construction of the high-born nobleman's *shinden*-style mansion gardens with their large lakes. These gardens functioned both as places of ceremony and as places of entertainment, colorful boats being sailed on the lake for the purposes of enjoying music and poetry. The *Sakuteiki* covered aspects of the design and construction of gardens in some detail, dealing with such things as the construction of lakes and artificial islands, design features at the water's edge, waterfalls and the way they fell, techniques related to streams and watercourses, as well as planting and the placing of bridges. The text also reveals just how much importance was given to the techniques of placing and arranging

stones.

Sadly, however, none of these *shinden*-style mansion gardens remain and our only recourse is to imagine what they were like from the partial remains excavated at such places as Kayanoin, the Kyoto residence of Fujiwara Yorimichi; and at Tobarikyu, the villa of the retired emperor Shirakawa in Fushimi, on the southern outskirts of Kyoto. This void in the history of the Japanese garden can be partly filled by the Paradise Gardens found at certain temples. From the second half of the Heian period Mappo or Latter-Day Buddhist thinking had gained popularity and the attainment of paradise was high in everyone's minds. With the hope of reaching paradise after death, Paradise Gardens were built in front of the main worship halls of Amida temples. While one was a residence and the other a place of worship, it is known that the layout and design of these temple gardens was somewhat similar to the gardens constructed for the aristocracy.

Recent excavations at the mid-11th century Byodoin in Uji on the outskirts of Kyoto have revealed that there was indeed a beach of smallish stones around the central island on which the main Amida worship hall stands. (Photo 4) At the mid-12th century Mootsuuji temple that still stands in Hiraizumi in the northern prefecture of Iwate, there is an island in the center of a large lake measuring some 180 meters from east to west and 90 meters from north to south. Along the gracefully curving waterline there are fist-size stones forming a beach, and the dynamic groupings of stones on promontories and at other locations are particularly striking, too. (Photo 5)

Such schemes expressed with a beach and stone groupings could be said to represent the culmination of attempts to describe in a realistic manner elements of natural landscape using the sea and coast as a specific motif. Such representations, however, were not limited to design



Photo 5: The garden of Mootsuji temple

alone.

It is said that Minamoto no Tooru, the Minister of the Left in charge of administration at the time, had sea water from the Inland Sea brought to his garden of Kawarain in Kyoto, so that the smoke created during the production of salt would help to recreate a scene reminiscent of those at Ooshu Shiogama in distant Miyagi prefecture.

### Muso Soseki Takes the Stage

Beginning with the Toin garden of the Nara period, garden design in Japan reached a zenith during the Heian period, but then underwent considerable change during the first half of the 14th century, due mainly to the work of a Zen monk, Muso Soseki (1275-1351).

There is a specific reason why he must be mentioned. He had grown tired of the descriptive rendering of nature, which up until that time had been the fundamental approach to the design of Japanese gardens. What he did was to recompose landscape by combining elements chosen from the natural sphere according to his own feelings, and he was therefore responsible for one of garden history's single greatest reforms — the creation of a new kind of natural

landscape.

One of the most significant design features of his approach was the three-dimensional expression of space using various combinations of rocks. In place of the gently sloping beach at the water's edge that had been utilized thus far, he defined the edge of lakes and ponds with stones and rocks, and was successful in producing a dynamic sense of tension. Rising above the simple

description of the kind of craggy rocks found along the coast of Japan, the groups of stones he utilized were instrumental in governing the design and spatial composition of a garden.

The garden at Tenryuji temple in the western reaches of Kyoto epitomizes Muso's sentiments perfectly. The water flowing over the waterfall with its grand combination of rocks sends out ripples across the water to strike the resolute groups of rocks standing in the lake making their own very personal statements. The inclusion of a stone bridge in front of the rock-flanked waterfall is interesting as it serves as a hint of a human presence within the scene before us. The choice of a colorful rock over which the waterfall drains is also evidence of Muso's rich color sense in the garden. (Photo 6)

Before long, the kind of very focused and tightly organized spatial compositions Muso Soseki created developed into the shoin-style gardens that were based on the exacting relationship of tensions between the interior spaces of a building where people sat and the garden outside, which they viewed. A further development of his ideas was a move to make the garden more three-

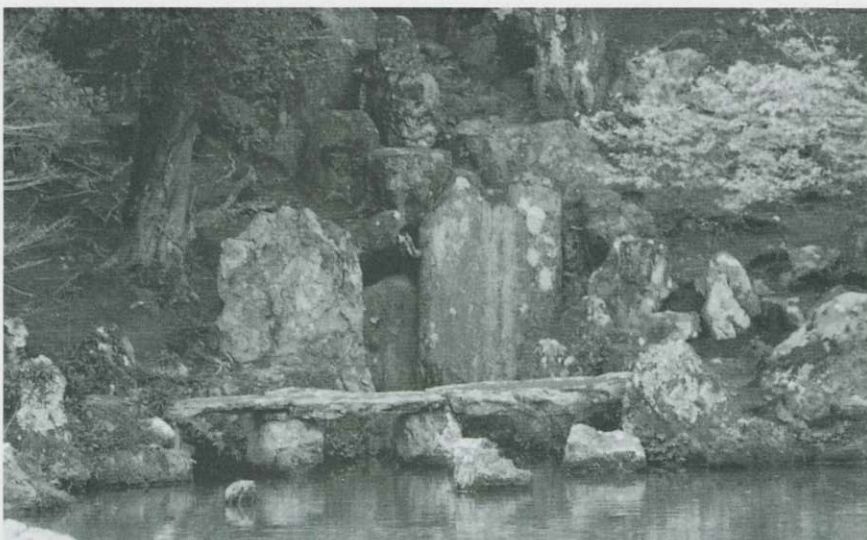


Photo 6: The garden of Tenryuji temple



Photo 7: Kinkakuji or the Golden Pavilion

dimensional in feeling, thus allowing for the provision of pavilions standing at the water's edge as is the case with Kinkakuji or the Golden Pavilion of Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, and Ginkakuji or the Silver Pavilion of Ashikaga Yoshimasa, Yoshimitsu's grandson. (Photo 7 and 8)

Muso also created a dry-stone garden called Kouinzan on a hillside within the gardens of Saihoji — Kyoto's famous Moss Garden temple — where he undertook restoration work. Using rocks, stones and gravel within a garden with no water to create a dry-stone garden had been tried during the Heian period but Muso was the first to make such good use of the qualities of stones and rocks, and to express them so forcefully. The austere atmosphere evoked by the excitingly arranged groups of stones somehow seems fitting in a place of ascetic Zen training. But making such stone groupings the

main compositional element of a garden was surely a concept that was very much Muso's alone.

It goes without saying that the kind of expression made possible by such compositions of stone and rock gave new direction to the development of the design of the Japanese garden. Dry-stone gardens became a recognized style of garden design and it was some two hundred years later that they captured people's imagination with their abstracted expressions of nature.

The developments which took place between the 14th and 16th centuries helped to create the Japanese garden that we all—including the Japanese—now recognize as a garden with a style all its own. **UJI**

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Photo 8: The garden of Saihoji temple