

The Aesthetics of Elimination

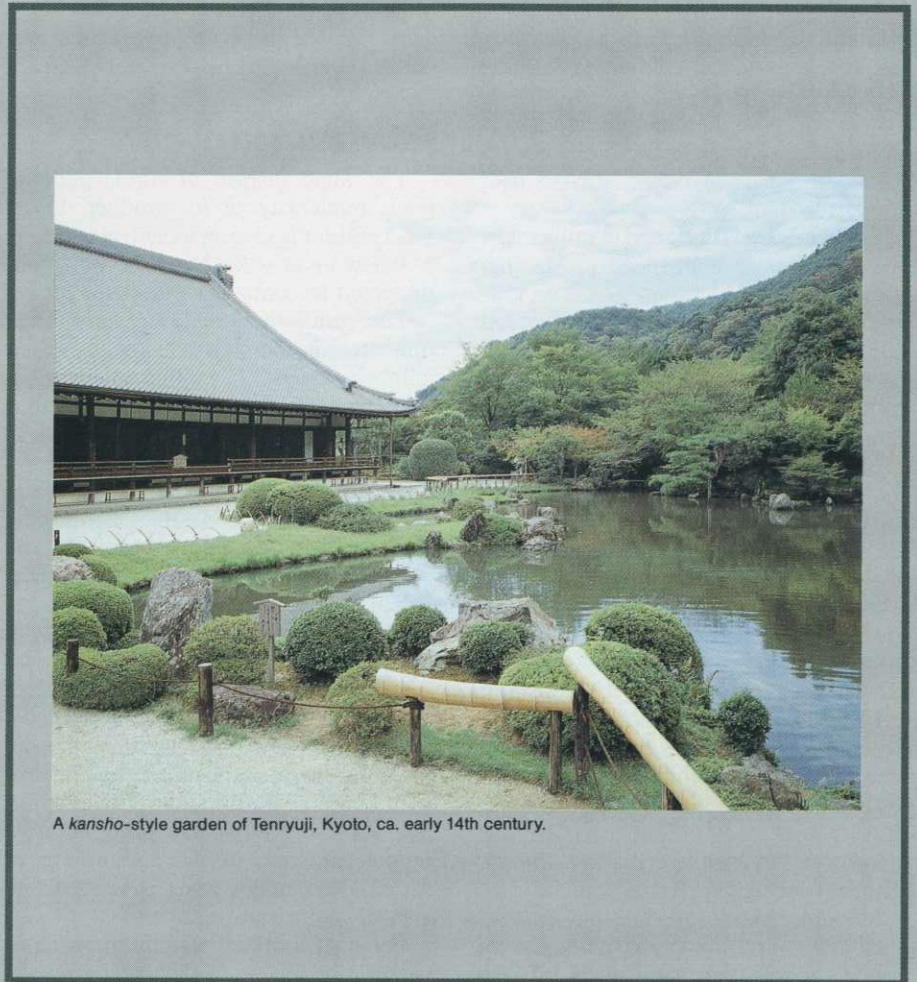
By Nobuo Tsuji

The Japanese have a special fondness for gardens, but the traditional Japanese garden is nothing like the ordered symmetry of the Western garden. Rather it is in essence a man-made replica of nature that often incorporates the surrounding scenery. Another characteristic of the Japanese garden is the important part played by strategically placed rocks, sometimes even superseding that of plants. All in all, the Japanese garden appears on first glance a dull, somber affair compared with its Western counterpart with its colorful flowers and abundance of greenery. But it is in fact the product of highly refined sensibilities, an expression of the simple and plain *wabi* and *sabi* aesthetics of Japanese arts.

The many temples of Kyoto offer a rich encyclopedia and chronology of the Japanese garden. One example is the garden of Tenryūji, reportedly designed by Musō Soseki (1275–1351), the most prominent and influential Zen master in the medieval ages. The garden of this type has a vast pond in the center, and a miniature mountain beyond it. The Tenryūji garden has the “borrowed view” of the Ogurayama, Atago-yama and Arashi-yama mountains acting as a magnificent background to the pond—which is located on the south side of the abbot’s quarters—and the miniature mountain. The primary showpiece of this garden is the grouping of stones carefully made to suggest a waterfall cascading down into the pond even though no water actually flows over these rocks.

This kind of symbolism is based in Zen philosophy. The epitome of the Zen garden is the kind of rock and sand gardens found at the Kyoto temples of Ryoanji and Daisen’in. This style of garden completely void of greenery and water is known as the *kare-sansui* style and was especially popular among Zen temples in the 15th and 16th centuries.

The Ryoanji garden—again, located on the south side of the abbot’s quarters—is a



A *kansho*-style garden of Tenryūji, Kyoto, ca. early 14th century.

flat rectangle of white sand covering about 250 square meters. Fifteen stones are set in five groupings within this expanse in a carefully calculated arrangement that takes the eye from one grouping to the next. The sand is raked in an exact pattern of swirling lines to enhance the overall effect of islands in the sea. On a clear day, the white sand glitters in the sun like ocean waves and the whole scene comes to life.

Abstraction and suggestion—these are the fundamental tools of this garden, a typical expression of the methodology of

an aesthetic of elimination. It is common to apply Zen interpretations to this garden, but perhaps we should remember, too, to admire the considerable imagination and talent of the designer who created this exquisite masterpiece reminding one of contemporary abstract sculptural works. Regrettably, the designer is not known.

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A *kare-sansui*-style sand and rock garden at Ryoanji, Kyoto, Muromachi period (1333–1568).