

# Japanese Aesthetics and the Garden

Rough standing stones  
A stream meandering  
Delight without end.

- Muso Soseki

## Guiding Thoughts in Japanese Aesthetics

**Shizen (naturalness, absence of pretense)** - Gardens (and arguably any aesthetic object) should be natural. Design with the intention of making your creation look as though it had grown that way by itself. If you have obviously man-made objects involved, do not try to disguise them. (ex. Cement mortar or brick looks better untouched than painted.) Choose simple objects which will fit in with the natural surroundings.

**Odd Numbers** - When placing elements in a composition, use odd numbers such as one, three, and five. This will better result in a sense of natural asymmetry.

**The Triangle** - Compositions such as groupings of stones, branches on a tree, etc. can be judged based on how easily one may draw an imaginary triangle between any three elements.

**Fukinsei (asymmetry or dissymmetry)** - Balanced symmetry, as humans devise it, does not exist often on nature. Therefore, it is better to make designs asymmetrical if one wishes to create an impression of naturalness.

**Kanso (simplicity or brevity)** - "Less is more" This idea is most evident in Zen gardens, where a single stone may encompass the idea of an entire mountain or island. Remove what is unnecessary, and the composition will be strengthened.

**Yugen** - Subtly profound, suggestion rather than revelation.

**Datsuzoku** - unworldliness, transcendence of conventional.

**Seijaku** - quiet, calm, silent.

**Koko (austerity, maturity, bare essentials, venerable, abstraction)** - Water is a prime element of a garden, but raked gravel or carefully arranged flat river stones can create the impression of water.

**Contrast** - Contrast can be used to create tension between elements. Tension can create energy, motion and harmony.

**Lines** - Perpendicular lines create tranquillity. Diagonals create tension. Curves soften the effect.

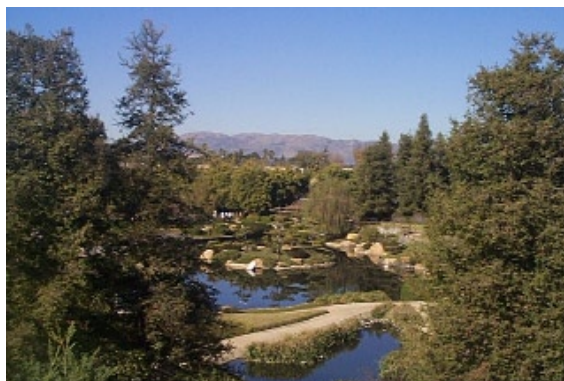
**Ma (space)** - There is openness in everything and nothing exists alone. All objects interact with one another in space. In fact, the space of the garden only exists because there is a larger space outside of it. Where is the space in the composition? Why? How does the composition breathe?

**Layers of time** - Some parts of a composition change with the weather or the angle of the sun. Some change with the season. Others, like stone, hardly change at all for centuries. Yet time changes everything eventually. Good design considers this.

**Meigakure** - This is the quality of remaining hidden from ordinary view. All compositions have a best viewing angle. Find it or create it and control how the viewer approaches and is able to see the composition. For example, bonsai are, in essence, two-dimensional views designed to be viewed from the front only. Set your garden path so that only a single branch of the cherry tree can be seen around the corner and you guarantee the viewer will round that corner. Design the viewer's experience, not just the garden. On the other hand, do not over-complicate.

**Wabi and Sabi** - Two of the hardest concepts of Japanese aesthetics to express in western language, generally they are wabi; "subdued taste", "austere", and sabi; "rustic simplicity", "mellowed". These terms were created by the Tea masters of the sixteenth century.

**Shin, Gyo, So** - Shin; controlled or shaped by man, So; things in their natural state, Gyo; the blending of Shin and So to compliment each other.



## Types of Niwa (gardens - lit. “pure space”)

### Funa Asobi (pleasure boat style) and Shin-den Heian Mansion Gardens

#### Features:

- Built and designed by the Imperial aristocrats.
- Connected to mansions, often taking up half the allotted land of a Kyoto-city mansion (up to 3.5 acres).
- Heavily influenced by geomancy, Buddhist symbolism and Shinto.
- Sparse plantings but colorful flowers and deciduous trees.
- Pond containing an island-mountain connected to shore by two or more bridges.



In the Heian era (10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> cent.), Japan was breaking away from a long period of aping the styles of T'ang Dynasty China. New ideas were developing as the Imperial court “Japanified” what it had learned. In the area of garden design, however, Chinese thought was still a powerful force. Most of the aesthetic principles we see as Japanese had not yet developed.

The dominant architectural style, called Shinden, was essentially a modification of Chinese design. Buildings were arranged somewhat symmetrically and according to the laws of Chinese geomancy. (note: Feng shui is part of Chinese geomancy) Within the mansions, a central building, the shinden (lit. sleeping hall) would be linked to other outlying buildings by covered causeways. Beyond the tiles roofs and verandas was the garden. A large empty area was set aside for open-air gatherings such as dance performances or games. The rest of the garden was intended for viewing and limited strolling. Punting on small boats to catch and grill fish in the pond was one popular activity. Poetry reading and writing was essential.

According to the laws of geomancy, all structures had to be laid out carefully along compass lines and in certain configurations to allow “ki”, the mystic energy of life (Chinese “chi”), to flow properly. Poor ki flow in a home was thought to cause sickness and disharmony. For example, the builders, after consulting with a Yin-yang diviner, would usually create special arrangements to prevent bad ki from entering the home from the northwest (where most of it comes from apparently). In the first Japanese garden design manual, the *Sakuteiki*, it is explained how water courses should flow from the northwest to the southeast so that any bad ki could be cleansed by the protective deity of the east Kamogawa (blue dragon), then proceed west again passing under a veranda of the house so as to draw away any evil spirits that might have somehow slipped into the house. Heavy stones were thought to serve as gates or landing points for spirits and were thus placed very carefully.

Other design rules applied as well. Influenced by esoteric Buddhism, the garden design was expected to include an island in a pond connected to the mainland by a bridge. This represented the world of enlightenment separated from the world of man. The bridges were frequently arched and coated with bright red lacquer (another Chinese influence).

The Heian nobles also imbued their gardens with special aesthetic ideas which are almost unique to this time. Miyabi is refined taste. Mujo is a sense of melancholy which arose from a Buddhist awareness of the impermanence and transient nature of all things; from the seasons to beauty and life itself. Aware is an overwhelming emotional reaction to beauty; especially to subtle beauty in the presence of mujo. Plantings were sparse but of bright flowers such as irises and chrysanthemums. Flowering and deciduous trees were popular for their passing beauty. The Heian gardens wore a different face in each season.

At the end of the Heian era, chaos ensued. Most of the Imperial court culture withered away as civil war shook Japan. Most of the great shinden mansions of Heiankyo were destroyed. As a result, there are no extant examples of Heian mansion gardens. However, they have been found in archeological sites and are well represented in literature such as *The Tale of Genji* and paintings of the era. Yet this garden style never really died and was to be reborn, in part, in the strolling pleasure gardens of medieval warlords.

### Kansho (contemplative style) - The Zen Gardens

#### Features:

- Designed by Zen priests originally called “ishi-tate-so” (priests who move rocks).
- Developed first in the Kamakura period (“sand and stone” designs developed in Muromachi period)
- Few flowering plants, many evergreens.
- Calm mood.
- “The garden as a painting” - Areas set aside for sitting and viewing- meditation
- Abstraction, brevity of design, “short-hand”
- Usually attached to temples, monasteries, shrines, etc.

Zen Buddhism was imported to Japan in the eleventh century. It went







through various periods of popularity and ignominy, but constituted one of the most important influences on Japanese culture.

All Buddhist temples include gardens. The first temple gardens evolved from well-groomed landscaping around Shinto shrines, such as at Ise. Later, the gates and grounds surrounding Buddhist temples became gardens that beautified the temple, similar to the Heian mansion gardens. Jodo Buddhism (“Pure Land”) used temple gardens as a way to symbolize the “Paradise in the West.”; a “pure land” created by Amida Buddha to aid suffering souls in pursuit of enlightenment.

Zen temple gardens began with similar ideas, but philosophically were centered on this world, not the next. Zen gardens are meant to encompass all of nature; nature is the universe. The garden represents (and is) the Buddha’s realm. Gardens are tools; vehicles for meditation and reflection. As such, they tend to be far more metaphorical than other gardens. You can stroll through a Zen garden, but more often, you are encouraged to simply look at it.

The Zen priest and garden designer, Muso Soseki, who designed the garden at Tenryuji, Kyoto, in the mid-1300’s composed the following poem:

The sounds of the streams splash out the Buddha’s sermon,  
 Don’t say that the deepest meaning comes only from one’s mouth,  
 Day and night, 80,000 poems arise one after the other,  
 And in fact, not a single word has ever been spoken.

Abstract “sand and stone” Zen gardens:

Abstract representations of natural elements have long been an aspect of Japanese design. But in the late Kamakura to early Muromachi period (late 15<sup>th</sup> cent.), Zen gardens went further. Designers began to create “the garden as a painting” under the influence of Chinese Zen ink painting. A sort of “short-hand” style developed called kare-san-sui (dry-mountain-water). A good example is the famous rock garden at Ryoan-ji Temple in Kyoto; three outcroppings of stones set on a gravel “sea”. The rocks represent islands, the gravel is raked into geometric patterns resembling waves. But the mind can also ascribe other symbolism to the scene, or none at all. Zen garden designers will often say that there is nothing in a garden except what you bring to it yourself.



### Shuyu (strolling style) and Kaiyu (many pleasures style)

Features:

- Built by Imperial aristocrats, Daimyos, Shoguns; reached zenith in the Edo era.
- Designed for leisure and relaxation, often many acres in size.
- Paths of various types leading to views.
- Bridges, lanterns, decorative fences, statuary (rare).
- Waterways large enough for small boats.
- Elaborate tea pavilions.
- Shakkie - Borrowed scenery.
- Rich colors, striking flowers, exotic trees.
- Usually attached to mansions or villas.

First built in the Kamakura era, strolling gardens cover a wide breadth of design as well as area. Strolling gardens were an outgrowth of Heian mansion gardens and temple gardens. The largest of all Japanese gardens, they include strolling paths, decorative tea houses, and artificially created ponds. Here, courtiers, and later the highest ranks of the samurai class, could relax and immerse themselves in artistic activities such as poetry competitions, tea parties and “moon-viewing parties.”

The garden was an expression of affluence as well. The Kinkaku-ji (“golden temple”) of the shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu is an excellent example. Here, styles of old and new mingled. The structure is three stories tall and houses tea rooms, reception halls and a Jodo Buddhist shrine. Each story is in a different architectural style, yet the whole is a harmonious design covered in gold leaf.

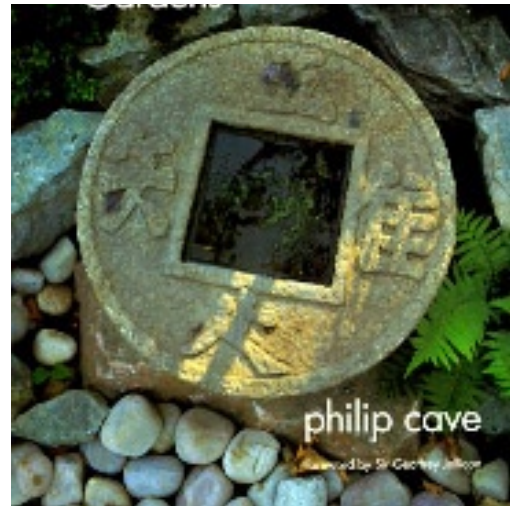


Strolling gardens offer a look at the broad face of nature; more exuberant and less enclosed than temple gardens. Visitors are encouraged to take their time in exploring. Strolling gardens were the first to incorporate the concept of Shakkie or “borrowed scenery”; using the hills, trees and sky outside the garden’s boundaries as part of the composition. In this way, the garden can be imagined to extend for miles. How big are the gardens themselves? Consider Ritsurin-en in Takamatsu: 7,590,000 square feet including artificial hills and ponds.

## Tea Gardens

Features:

- Outer Gate “soto-mon”
- Inner/middle gate “chu-mon” largely a symbolic barrier
- Wash basin “Tsukubai” for ritual cleansing
- Lush, dense, enclosed feeling, few if any flowers.
- Meandering path from soto-mon, through chu-mon to the soan.
- Stone lanterns or pagodas - originally “rescued” from old temples.
- Thatch-roofed tea hut “soan”.
- Usually attached other gardens on the grounds of private homes.



The tea ceremony evolved from the Zen Buddhist monasteries where monks would use tea to help them meditate (read: stay awake). The ceremony quickly became a popular activity with the Imperial and Samurai classes. Elaborate tea villas were constructed (the term referred to the building as well as the garden) where tea parties would serve as occasions for relaxation, poetry, etc. Tea was drunk from expensive vessels in opulent environments designed to show off the wealth and culture of the host.

In the late sixteenth century, however, the Wabi-cha “rustic tea” movement developed. Led by such figures as the lay-priest, Sen no Rikyu, the movement sought to throw away the pomposity and grandeur of past tea pavilions and gardens. Rikyu all but invented the “modern” tea garden and soan (tea hut). The idea was to create an enclosed, serene space for reflection; an appropriate place for a meditative, self-examining form of tea ceremony.

The tea garden was the transition from the outside world to this calm world and was designed to represent a tiny path meandering up a mountain side to the dwelling of an ascetic hermit. The garden prepared the visitor and the tea-maker for the ceremony. Guests arrive at the soto-mon and walk up a winding path to the chu-mon where the tea master greets them. As they approach the soan, they admire the foliage which is generally sedate. They pause at the tsukubai to ritually cleanse themselves before entering the soan.

The guest enters the soan by crouching through a tiny doorway. (designed to inspire humility) The first sight he sees within is a special piece of art displayed in the tokonoma (alcove). After admiring this ikebana, bonsai, poem or painting, the guest is now relaxed. His senses are heightened for the aesthetic. He is ready for tea.

Rikyu’s ideas on aesthetics continue to permeate Japanese thought. Centuries later, his descendants continue to teach his practice. This poem describes it...

In my hands, I hold a bowl of tea  
 I see all of nature represented in its green color  
 Closing my eyes, I find green mountains and pure water within my own heart  
 Silently drinking, I feel these become a part of me.

## Tsubo

Features:

- Constructed in confined space.
- Often only the most essential of elements represented.
- Borrows elements from tea gardens and zen viewing gardens.
- Creates the illusion of nature just outside or even entering the room.
- Popular in Edo period city homes of the merchant class.

The tsubo is a garden form familiar with many Americans. It’s style has been aped for all manner of nefarious purposes such as corporate office landscaping. This is the smallest of all gardens. Originally, the term tsubo referred to the small spaces between buildings or areas of a home. This is where these gardens are to





be found; tucked into a corner or adding grace to a quiet entrance way or veranda. In Japan, tsubo were first developed as simple attempts to make transitional spaces more interesting; such as the nooks and crannies one passed walking around the grounds of a feudal castle. However, it was in the Edo era that the form of the tsubo flourished. In the cities, a new well-to-do merchant class was growing. Restricted by Shogunal law from showing their wealth in public, these nouveau-riche cultivated their appreciation of the arts (and gardens) in private. City houses were cramped elongated rectangles. Facing the street was the shop of the merchant. Further back was the reception room, and even further back were the private rooms for the family. These rooms were open to the outdoors at several points and connected by veranda walkways. Tucked between were the tsubo.

Tsubo can be created in almost any space and are an excellent “starter garden”. The elements are borrowed from both tea and Zen gardens. Weathered stone lanterns, wash basins, gravel beds, small stone pathways and simple lush vegetation are typical. The merchants did not hold any awe for the purposes or symbolism of the elements they borrowed, but admired their beauty. A pathway in a tsubo, for instance, often is too small to walk on or leads nowhere except to a wall covered by a bush. The point is the beauty and the suggestion of greater space than what is there. Tsubo also offered city dwellers a chance to escape the dirt and confinement of the city by lending the illusion of being in the country or forest.

## Bonsai and Ikebana

The art of bonsai has ancient roots in China or even India where it is believed it developed first as a way of caring for medicinal plants. As an art, it has roots in China and probably came to Japan in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

Bonsai is the ultimate expression of the Japanese love for miniature. It is truly “all of nature in one small tree”. There are a variety of styles, some ancient, some modern. Most are meant to express a tree which has grown naturally under specific conditions; standing undisturbed in a forest, wind-swept on a rocky shore, clinging to a cliff side, etc. Perhaps the oldest form of bonsai is the “informal upright” style in a Chinese-style pot or plain unglazed pot. Many of the more exotic styles of bonsai such as cascades and sharimiki (dry, dead wood still sporting live branches) probably do not predate the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The growing of bonsai is an exercise in patience. It is said one is not a true bonsai-ka (student of bonsai) until one has killed at least a dozen trees. The work of balancing proper light, soil, water, nutrients and shaping takes years to master. Of course, this can be said of all Japanese arts. On average, a bonsai does not “look right” until it has been in training for at least three years. Training is the operative term - a specimen may be one or one hundred years old before it is placed in a pot and trained. It is not important how old the tree is, but how old it appears. Does it look like a mature tree?

In addition to trees, almost any vegetation may be bonsai. If the plant is a grass, it may be placed in a tray and pruned to serve as a “companion plant”; a specimen displayed along with a bonsai. Classic choices for bonsai are pines, junipers and maples. But other popular choices include azalea, camellia, wisteria, ginkgo, birch, willow and even tropicals such as ficus. (usually kept in doors)

All bonsai have a front and a back. Solid, rugged or weathered specimens are said to be “male” while gracefully curved, delicate or clean-lined trees are considered “female”. No one usually asks the trees how they feel about this. Each tree has a distinct personality and is unique. It is said that as one sculpts a bonsai, the bonsai also is sculping you.

Delicate branches  
Roots caress a simple pot  
White blossoms shimmer  
The essence of all forests  
Lives here in one small tree.

- *Mastuyamaji Mokurai*



Ikebana (literally ‘flowers kept alive’) is the Japanese art of flower arrangement. As in most gardening styles, ikebana attempts to distill the essence of the plant(s) in the arrangement. Less is more and natural angles and forms are crucial. Ikebana also has ancient roots. There are many schools, of which the most popular are Ikenobo, Sogetsu and Ohara. Only Ikebono dates to within the SCA period, founded by the Buddhist priest Ikenobo Senkei in the 15th century. He is thought to have created the rikka (standing flowers) style. This style was developed as a Buddhist expression of the beauty of nature, with seven branches representing hills, waterfalls, valleys and so on arranged in a formalised way. The present 45th-generation head of the school is Ikenobo Sen’ei. Among the priests and aristocrats, this style became more and more formalised until, in the late 17th century, the growing merchant class developed a simpler style, called seika or shoka. Shoka uses only three main branches, known as ten (heaven), chi (earth) and jin (man) and is designed to show the beauty of the plant itself.

Another old form of ikebana is nage-ire (thrown-in flower), first developed by the great 16<sup>th</sup> century tea master, Rikyu for use in the tea ceremony. Only the simplest of containers was used, often made of bamboo and only one or two plants. For the sedate atmosphere of the tea room, only an unpretentious, even simplistic arrangement would do. Anything else would distract the guests from quietude. Often the arrangement would be the only artwork on display in the tea hut.

Ikebana arrangements may be of a single blossom or of several different kinds of plants. Usually three types is considered the tasteful maximum. Containers may be of wood, lacquerware or ceramic and are usually quite simple so as not to detract from the flora. Often the container is designed to hang from a wall. Ikebana arrangements change with the season with different styles and plants being traditional for different times of the year. Chrysanthemums, for example, are an Autumn flower (obviously since this is when they bloom. There is in fact a traditional chrysanthemum festival in September). Cherry blossoms, young bamboo shoots and other grasses usually suggest Spring.

*A related apocryphal story:* The regent Hideyoshi heard that the morning glories in Rikyu's garden were in full bloom. Right away, he arranged to visit the master for a tea ceremony. Upon arriving, he walked through the garden only to discover that all the flowers were gone. Furious, the warlord stormed up to the tea hut determined to scold Rikyu for a prank. Upon entering the hut, he saw one perfect flower on display.

## Historic Outline

### 300 bce - 300ce - Yayoi Period

260 bce - Shrine at Ise established. The first, and single most important sacred space in Japan. This Shinto Shrine demonstrates the most ancient Japanese architectural style and spiritual connection to nature.

### 300 - 552 - Kofun Period

### 552 - 710 - Asuka Period

### 710 - 794 - Nara Period

Imperial Court begins importing philosophy, art, political thought and aesthetics from Tang Dynasty China.

### 794 - 1185 - Heian Period

794 - Founding of Heiankyo (later called Kyoto) by Emperor Kammu. The classical period of Japanese court culture begins soon after; generally called "Heian". At first, this culture is heavily influenced by Chinese Imperial culture, but later progresses independently and peaks in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Garden and villa design is refined into what will be considered the classic style as courtiers try to out-do each other in the construction of their homes.

1050(?) - Tachibana no Toshitsuna writes the *Sakuteiki*, a practical manual on garden design. It includes extensive suggestions for geomantic placement of objects as well as aesthetic advice.

### 1185 - 1333 - Kamakura Period

1191 - Buddhist priest Eisai introduces the tea ceremony to Japan.

1256/1344 - Muso Soseki designs the garden at Tenryu-ji in Kyoto. Muso is considered one of the greatest zen garden designers of all time.

### 1333 - 1568 - Muromachi Period

1397 - Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu builds Kinkaku-ji (the "Golden Pavilion") as his retirement villa outside of Kyoto.

1423 - 1502 - Shuko Murata. A noted zen monk and tea master, Murata begins the movement of wabi-cha which will become cha-do; "the way of tea".

### 1568 - 1600 - Momoyama Period

1520 - 1591 - Sen no Rikyu. Rikyu becomes tea master to the regent Toyotomi Hideyoshi and popularizes wabi-cha.

### 1600 - 1868 Edo Period

1700 (approx.) Garden designer Kobori Enshu is the first to use a low window (about 2-3 feet tall starting at the floor) for viewing a tsubo garden. One of the many Edo era developments that can be considered "modern" in feeling, even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



## Suggested Reading

The Art of Zen Gardens: A Guide to their Creation and Enjoyment, A. K. Davidson, Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc. 1983

ISBN 0-87477-253-2

\*Good "How-to" book

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In the Japanese Garden, Elizabeth Bibb, Photos by Michael S. Yamashita, Starwood Publishing, Inc. 1991

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Japan: The Rise of Daimyo Culture 1185-1868, ed. Yoshiaki Shimizu, George Braziller Inc. , National Gallery of Art, 1988

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\*Highly Recommended

The Time-Life Encyclopedia of Gardening: Japanese Gardens, Wendy B. Murphy, Time-Life Books 1979

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A Japanese Touch for your Garden, David H. Engel, Kiyoshi Seike, & Masanobu Kudo, Kodansha International

A Japanese Touch for your Home, Koji Yagi, photos by Ryo Hata, Kodansha International 1982

ISBN 4-7700-1662-X

Simon and Schuster's Guide to Bonsai, Gianfranco Giorgi, photos by Enzo Arnone, Simon and Schuster 1990

ISBN 0-671-73488-1

Disclaimer: "Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the Wise. Seek instead what they sought." - Lao Tzu  
I am not a great scholar or historian. The information I present here is very basic and may contain some generalities or errors. The bibliography is far from complete. Comments and suggestions are warmly appreciated. Thank you.

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