



Landscape Symphonies

Glimpse into the Garden: Chinese Landscape Design



The classical Chinese garden recreates the natural world in miniature. Enclosed by a wall, these delicate spaces include one or more ponds, a rock garden, trees and flowers, and an assortment of halls and pavilions within the garden, connected by winding paths and zig-zag galleries.

A Chinese garden was not meant to be seen all at once. By moving from structure to structure, the visitor views a series of carefully composed scenes, unrolling like a scroll of landscape paintings. This type of landscape planning presents the visitor with a private glimpse into a natural scene. The procession of moments created by moving through the garden invites the visitor to still the attention on one view, and enjoy. We get a special glimpse into the philosophy behind such a garden: the human witnessing of the landscape is brief, merely peeking in to a perfectly composed world.

The 16th century Chinese writer and philosopher Ji Cheng instructed garden builders to, “Hide the vulgar and the common as far as the eye can see, and pronounce the excellent and the splendid.” Capturing the attention only to the best examples of nature both reflected and inspired reverence for the beauty and magnitude of nature, even when portrayed on a small scale. An ancient Chinese legend played an important part in early garden design. In the 4th Century B.C. a tale in the Shan Hai Jing, or Classic of Mountains and Seas, described a peak called Mount Penglai located on one of three islands at the eastern end of the Bohai Sea, between Japan and Korea, which was the home of the Eight Immortals. On this island were palaces of gold and platinum, with jewels on the trees. There was no pain, no winter, wine glasses and rice bowls were always full, and fruits, when eaten, granted eternal life. Many classical Chinese gardens have a single or group of islands with a representational mountain of the Eight Immortals. This aspect of Chinese landscape design is one example of how their awe of nature is connected with the deep respect that it includes an aspect of eternity.

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