



Landscape Symphonies

The Great Found in the Small: Japanese Landscaping



In a land where space is infinitely precious, the art of landscaping and garden design has been taken to its ultimate limits of expression. Yet while instantly recognizable by their unique and exquisite form, these gardens invariably resist a straightforward intellectual comprehension. The viewer instinctively senses that their creation has involved an aesthetic and philosophy that are completely separate from the Western tradition. Nonetheless, the same essential concepts and processes of Japanese garden design have been employed throughout centuries.

As in many traditions, the Japanese garden grew as an extension of the human appreciation and awe for the natural world. The earliest known garden forms were sacred places in the midst of nature, which humans marked by pebbles. Predating the introduction of Chinese culture from the mainland, this early gardens can still be recognized at some ancient Shinto shrines, and was the root for the now widely popular rock gardens.

The widespread adoption of Chinese culture and Buddhism from the 6th century on heavily influenced Japanese garden design. During this era, gardens were built at imperial palaces for the recreation and entertainment of the emperor and aristocrats. They introduced ponds and streams as their focal points, contained many Buddhist and Taoist elements and attempted to reproduce famous landscapes.

The first manual of Japanese gardening was the “Sakuteiki” which explained proper organization of garden elements. Although based on earlier Chinese garden principles, it expressed uniquely Japanese aesthetics. The maritime landscape so fundamental to Japanese life and culture entered the landscape by inclusion of features such as islands, beaches, and rock formations. Another influential work about the Japanese garden and related arts was “Rhymeprose on a Miniature Landscape Garden” composed around 1300 by the Zen monk Kokan Shiren. With this work we see a return to the experience which initiated the pebble collections of ancient times. In this excerpt, Shiren focuses on how meditation on a miniature garden can purify the senses and the mind and lead to understanding the correct relationship between man and nature:

“Do you think this miniature landscape is big? Do you think it is small? I will blow on the water and raise up billows from the four seas. I will water the peak and send down a torrent from the ninth heaven! The person who waters the stones sets the cosmos in order. The one who changes the water turns the whole sea upside down. Those are the changes in nature which attain a oneness in my mind. Anyway, the relative size of things is an uncertain business. Why, there is a vast plain on a fly’s eyelash and whole nations in a snail’s horn.”

Martin Carrion van Rijn (530) 632-3263
martin@landscapesymphonies.com