

Essay: The Development of Japanese gardens over 2000 years – what is a Japanese garden?

From a westerner's perspective a Japanese garden may be described as a garden containing lanterns, pagodas, cloud pruned trees and much more. Perhaps it is a garden which is located in Japan or designed by someone who is Japanese? However, none of these are viable answers and only scrape the surface; underneath are layers of history and philosophy dating back to prehistoric times which have evolved and developed early examples into the more modern and contemporary gardens we see today.

The power of the natural world is a huge influence on the development of the Japanese Garden. Shintoism, the indigenous religion of Japan dates to prehistoric time and was only defined as a religion when foreign beliefs such as Buddhism were introduced by the Chinese around the 6th Century CE. The prehistoric people of Japan were animists, holding the belief that plants, animals, rocks, forests, oceans, and other natural phenomena hold spiritual essences called *kami* (Davidson, K., 2006). These deities were worshiped and feared by the native people of Japan, so to worship their Gods, large trees and rocks were enshrined by surrounding them with a rope. In western society, places of worship are constructed, but to the Japanese assembling a permanent building would anger the *kami*. Even if shrines were built, such as Ise Shrine in Mie, they were not buildings in which humans may set foot. Instead, they are symbolic places where *kami* may enter. The most common shrines were giant rocks called *Iwakura* (Fig.1) and were thought of as a place for *kami* to dwell (Goto S. 2003). Later, people began to place rocks, called *Iwasaka*, in a significant natural setting as the focal point for worship. Both *Iwakura* and *Iwasaka* were seen as containing a god or being a link to the world of the gods (Nonaka N., 2008), resulting in rocks becoming a principal element of the Japanese garden.



Fig. 1 Meoto Iwa (wedded rocks), Futamo Okitama Shrine Photograph from Walker, 2017.

Over time Japanese gardens have developed into different types and are classified dependant on their style and function. *Shinden-Zukuri* meaning Shinden Style was the first type of garden, also known as the “Residential Garden” (Goto S. & Naka T., 2016) dating back to the Heian Period (794-1192 AD). The Shinden (mansions) were built by aristocratic families during this era and were located outside the capital due to their size and the demand for huge extravagant gardens. At the time, the new capital *Heian-kyō* (Kyoto) had been designed based on rules of geomancy, Chinese Geomancy (known as *Fēngshuǐ*), a system of laws influencing the arrangement and orientation of buildings and objects in relation to the flow of energy. Therefore, the lack of space within the city resulted in Shinden being built in the surrounding area, where gardens would not be restricted, and creativity could be explored. The main building was U shaped with the garden situated in the centre of the east and west corridors and would extend further south (Fig 2).

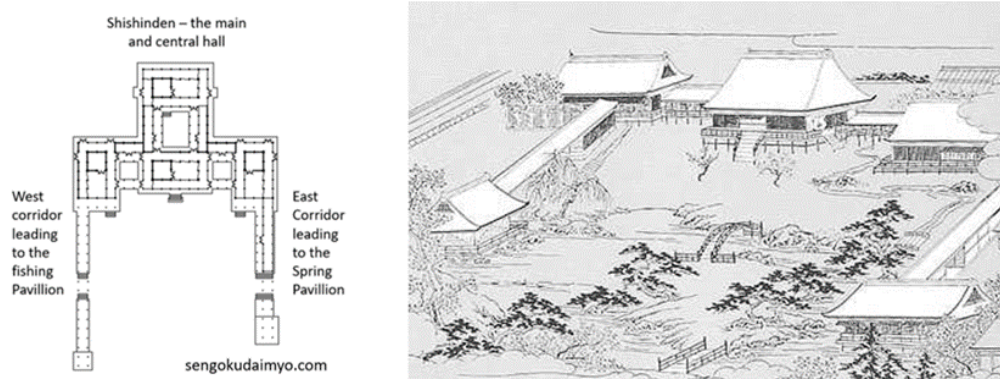


Fig. 2: Diagram of a Shinden (sengokudaimyo.com)

The garden in front of the Shishinden (main central hall), called the *Niwa* meaning gathering place of the gods, would consist of white gravel representing purity. This area was only used for ceremonies to praise the god's or special occasions (Goto, S., 2003). The garden behind the *Niwa* would be a landscape garden containing ponds, islands and mountains, used for leisure. Ponds at this time were an important element as in Shinto; kami are believed to come from a world beyond the ocean and so looking out into the distance across a pond would signify the divine. In the Heian Period, people would look out to the beautiful garden landscapes for inspiration from boats on the pond and compose poetry.

As gardens became more popular during the Heian Period, scrolls were released explaining details on how to build and design a Japanese Garden and were later developed into a book called the *Sakuteiki*. The oldest version of the *Sakuteiki* was handwritten over two long scrolls, and the author remains unclear as the scrolls were passed between wealthy provincial families. However, it is believed to have derived from one of the four great families of Japan, the Fujiwara, Tachibana, Genji or Heike families who were all passionate about creating gardens (Takei, J. et al., 2008). The manual described methods and concepts of gardens and how they should be best represented. These ideas became a format for all Japanese gardens and is still used to this day. The *Sakuteiki* is divided into nine sections but, places most emphasis on stones as they are the framework of the garden (Goto, S., 2003). Unlike other garden elements, stones will not change form overtime like plants do, suggesting that the placement of stones should be the main focus of the garden. The *Sakuteiki* also gives a comprehensive view on inspiration for design, it emphasises that you should look towards nature visualising the, "famous landscapes of our country and come to understand their most interesting points. Re-create the essence of those scenes in the garden, but do so interpretively, not strictly" (Takei, J. et al., 2008).

Chinese religions came to have great influence on the Japanese and their culture. Buddhism was originally brought to Japan in 538 CE resulting in a dispute over the acceptance of Buddhism. Some believed the kami would become angered if they accepted foreign gods. In Japan individual communities worshipped different kami relative to their surrounding geography, however Buddhism offered a way to unify the country and sustain the state. Therefore, Buddha was introduced as one of the kami to sustain the native religion of Shinto (Goto, S., 2003). There are many sects of Buddhism like there are many denominations of Christianity, however in relation to Japanese gardens two sect had a profound influence: Amida Buddhism and Zen.



Fig. 3: Three storey pagoda, Jouri-ji (Photograph from: www.kyototourism.org)

Amida Buddhism, also known as Pure Land Buddhism, presents the idea one should cast aside their own strength and depend on the power of the Amida Buddha to gain enlightenment. A profound garden based on Amida Buddhism is Joruri-ji, where nine statues of the Amida Buddha are enshrined within the garden illustrating the nine levels of the Pure Land (heaven) to which people go dependant on their attitude towards life. The garden was designed by a monk named Enshin, a relative of the renowned Fujiwara family, his intent to recreate the ocean humans must pass over in to reach the Pure Land. The three-story pagoda (Fig. 3) in the east of the garden signifies the eastern paradise where the Yakushi

Buddha lived. Traditionally visitors are supposed to pray to the Yakushi Buddha first to alleviate their suffering before turning to the west to pray to the Amida Buddhas requesting to be sent to the Pure land. (Goto S. 2003).

On the other hand, Zen Buddhism became equally popular during the Kamakura Period (1192-1333). It preaches that all people have the ability to achieve enlightenment through one's own efforts, this idea is called "*jikiri*" meaning self-power. The practices of Zen are not disciplined study but simple physical training such as walking and sitting meditation with the aim to instil a calm mind so one can reach beyond their limits (Goto S. 2003). Tenryu-ji is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and possibly one of the most famous Zen gardens. Designed by the monk Muso Soseki, the garden was an early Zen garden used for meditation purposes from the veranda of the temple building. This viewpoint also gives the impression of holding up a scroll horizontally as if the garden were a piece of artwork (Slawson D. A. 1978). Muso Soseki (1275-1351) became the senior Zen monk in Japan during his lifetime much respected as a teacher. Soseki spent the first 50 years of his life seeking enlightenment and traveling on foot around Japan staying in isolated places, building hermitages, and moving on once his followers found him and interrupted his solitude. His experiences of the different landscapes of Japan and belief in the importance of nature were reflected in his garden designs. (Davidson, K. (2006). One of the significant elements of Tenryu-ji is *Ryumon-baku* (Dragon Gate Falls) a famous waterfall in Zen philosophy which has been replicated many times in other gardens (Fig. 4). The story behind *Ryumon-baku* originated from China but was passed on by monks. The tales describes a large waterfall which fish cannot swim up. However, if a fish is able to jump up these falls – perhaps one in a million – it will become a dragon and fly up to heaven. It is an allegory in Zen to indicate the difficulty in becoming a buddha and achieving enlightenment. (Slawson D. A. 1978



Fig. 4: Tenryu-ji Dragon Gate Falls (dry waterfall) (Photograph from: www.gardensonline.com.au)

A type of garden derived from Zen Buddhism was the *Karesansui* (dry land) garden, a garden without water. These gardens were often based on *Kōan*, questions derived from the words of masters, higher monks would use them to show student monks that there are no limitations to thought and lead them to enlightenment. *Kōan* are paradoxes without any logical answers (Goto S, Naka T. 2016). *Karesansui* gardens are not accessible like pond gardens, they are designed to be viewed from the temple where monks may sit and meditate or contemplate the meaning of the *Kōan* displayed as the garden. The garden, Royan-ji is one of the best examples of a *Karesansui* garden (Fig. 5).

Located in Kyoto, Royan Temple belongs to the Rinzai sect and was originally built by Hosokawa Katsumoto in 1450



Fig. 5: Royan-ji (Photograph from: www.agoda.com/Kyoto)

but was rebuilt several times due to fires and movement of the building's location. There is no record of the designer or date of the current garden at Royan-ji and its interpretation is left to the observer. However, one of the most popular interpretations is the *Kōan* of the Three Tiger Cubs. A mother tiger has three cubs, one of the cubs will eat the others if the mother doesn't watch them. The mother tiger needs to cross the river with the three cubs. How can she bring all three cubs to the other shore without losing any of them? (Goto S, Naka T 2016).

The stones at Royan-ji can be seen as the tigers swimming in the river. However, this isn't certain and simply thinking about the garden's message is a process of self-discovery. For the monks of temples containing Karesansui gardens, part of their daily training consists of taking care of the garden: raking the gravel, clearing it of leaves or weeds. It allows the monks to attain a deeper understanding of nature and demonstrate their efforts as they strive for enlightenment.

Tea, introduced to Japan from China, was originally used as a remedy due to its incredible soothing effects. It used by Buddhist monks to prevent drowsiness during long meditation, while Daoist's claimed that it was an important ingredient of the elixir of immortality from the legend of the eight immortals. Tea drinking refined by the renowned Sen Rikyu (1517-1591) as the Tea Ceremony known as *Chado*, meaning "the way of tea", became one of the most important aspects of Japanese culture (Goto S 2003). The tea aesthetic was to find greatness in the smallest and simplest things in life by removing the unnecessary. This obsession with tea resulted in the development of Tea Gardens known as *Roji*. This is not a garden where tea is grown but a place of preparation, where an atmosphere of calm and serenity is instilled in the approach to the Tea House (Goto S, Naka T 2016). Composed of a series of scenes, the garden path winds through the space taking the visitors on a journey as they are led through the garden (Fig. 6). Stepping stones had a key functionality in the *Roji*, controlling the speed at which guests can walk through the garden allowing them to admire viewing points. "When stepping-stones change direction, it forces the guests to pay attention to their footing, averting their eyes from the scenery. The scenery constantly changes in accordance with one's step", (Goto S, Naka T 2016). The tea garden often consisted of a small space within an urban area but were designed as if you were immersed deep in a forest, allowing guests to "forget their worldly concerns and prepare for the special ceremony whilst walking among the elements" (Goto S 2003).



Fig. 6: Japanese Tea garden (Photograph from: japanesegarden.org)

From 1633 - 1868 under the Tokugawa shogunate (Edo Period), Japan followed an isolationist policy, *Sakoku* (closed country) with little contact with the outside world. However, following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the country was opened up to the West. This led to the *bummei kaiki* or "civilization and enlightenment of the West" with exposure to European art, religion and philosophy and to cultural exchanges. Mirei Shigemori (1896-1975) was born into the new open Japan to become a leading landscape architect recognised for modernizing Japanese garden design. Shigemori designed 240 gardens in his lifetime and succeeded in both conserving and renewing the inheritance of the Japanese garden by using many of its typical design elements but translating them into a more contemporary form. One of his earliest and most famous gardens is the *Hasso no Niwa* or "Garden of the Eight



Fig. 7: Hasso no niwa – chequer board design (Photograph from: [NHK World – Japan](http://NHK World - Japan))

Views" at Tofuku-ji, the main temple of the Rinzai school of Zen Buddhism. The garden was designed in 1938 for no fee, as Shigemori saw this as an opportunity to establish his reputation, and he was requested to reuse materials from the existing site as the Rinzai school believed that nothing should go to waste. The gardens consist of four separate parts and the name refers to the eight views he created around the *hojo* (senior monk's living quarters). The garden features many traditional elements, including a Karesansui

garden with stone settings, but proved very controversial with traditionalists due to Shigemori's use of checkerboard designs similar to the modern European art (Fig.7). Although, these designs were inspired by the look of paddy fields in the landscape and the square patterning of Japanese paper screens. (Tschumi C. 2007).

In conclusion, this essay has covered a timespan of over 2000 years looking at key elements and individuals important to the development of Japanese gardens. In this time, the development of Japanese gardening styles has been influenced by political changes and the introduction of new religions and philosophies, but what seems unique is the ability of Japanese culture to assimilate new elements and build them into their culture (Goto, S., 2003). This is clearly seen in the way the original animistic beliefs of prehistoric Japan remain alive to the current day and are accepted alongside Buddhism, but also in the way their garden designs incorporate Shinto along with imported elements of Buddhism and tea drinking to create designs that can only be recognized as typically Japanese.

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