



# The Complex Beauty of Japanese Gardens

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Tuesday, September 9, 2025 - 12:00 p.m. to 1:30 p.m. ET

## 1. A Japanese Proverb

If it were in our power to keep the cherry blossom on the tree, we should cease so much to admire it.

## 2. Two central concepts in Japanese aesthetics:

Wabi sabi: ... *wabi* ('simple' or 'austere' beauty) *sabi* (a rustic patina)

The acceptance of transience and of imperfection in something.

Mono no aware: ... *aware* (pathos) - *no* (inherent in) - *mono* (things)

The 'pathos of things'. Appreciation of the fleeting nature of beauty: a bitter-sweet awareness of the transience of all things.

## 3. Tachibana no Toshitsuna, *Sakuteiki* (the oldest surviving text in the world on garden creation, dating from late 11<sup>th</sup> century Japan):

Select several places within the property according to the shape of the land and the ponds, and create a subtle atmosphere, *reflecting again and again on one's memories of wild nature*. Let the exceptional work of past master gardeners be your guide... Visualise the famous landscapes of our country and come to understand their most interesting aspects. Re-create the essence of these scenes, but do so interpretatively, not strictly.... Create a sense of atmosphere. [*fuzei* – 'wind'- 'feeling']

## - On Allusiveness

### 4a. 11<sup>th</sup> Century Heian poem

from the *Hyakunin isschu* anthology, and referring to the Garden of Daikaku-ji – the oldest still partially surviving garden in Japan.

The cascade long ago  
ceased to roar,  
But we continue to hear  
The murmur  
of its name.

#### 4b. Muso Soseki (1275-1352)

Not a grain of dust is raised  
Yet soar the mountain ranges.  
Not a drop of water is there  
Yet falls the cataract.

#### - Some reflections from Chinese writers and gardeners.

#### 5. Tao Yuanming or Tao Quian, 5<sup>th</sup> century

I built my house near where others dwell,  
And yet there is no clamour of carriages and horses.  
You ask of me, 'How can this be so?'  
When the heart is far, the place, of itself, is distant.

#### 6. Li Po/Li Bai: *The Waterfall at Lu Shan*, 8<sup>th</sup> century

In sunshine, Censer peak breathes purple mist.  
A jutting stream, the cataract hangs in spray  
Far off, then plunges down three thousand feet –  
As if the sky had dropped the Milky Way.

*[These lines, beautifully rendered here by Vikram Seth, refer to the landscape around the great Buddhist monastery on the Holy Mountain of Lu Shan – a refuge for many in troubled times. The landscape was alluded to visually in many gardens and 'Lu Shan' parks.]*

#### 7. Ji Cheng: *The Craft of Gardens*, 1631

*[On the garden as oasis.]* The hermit's life in a city far surpasses a distant mountain retreat. If you can find seclusion in a noisy place, there is no need to yearn for places far from where you live. Whenever you have some leisure, you are already at your goal, and whenever the mood takes you, you can set off with your friends for a walk.

#### 8. Anonymous Suzhou poet of the 17/18<sup>th</sup> century

One should enter the garden in a peaceful and receptive mood. One should use one's observation to note plan and pattern in the garden, for the different parts have not been arbitrarily assembled, but carefully weighed against each other, like pairs of inscribed tablets... And when one has thoroughly comprehended the tangible forms or objects, one should endeavour to attain to an

inner comprehension of the soul of the garden, and try to understand the mysterious forces governing the landscape and making it cohere.

9. Shen Fu, *Six Records of a Floating Life*, late 18<sup>th</sup> century:

In laying out gardens, pavilions, wandering paths, small mountains of stone, flower plantings, try to give the feeling of the small in the large and the large in the small, of the real in the illusory and of illusion in reality. Some things should be hidden and some obvious, some prominent and some vague.

**- Modern thinking about Japanese and Chinese Gardens:**

10. Mirei Shigemori, *Nihon Teienshi Zukan*, 1939

A garden which can be admired by anyone at any time is a garden that is infinitely contemporary.

11. Shunmyo Masuno, b.1953

I think the most important thing in executing the design of a garden is to talk to the plants and stones, and to hear what they themselves have to say about how they wish to be laid out.

[Compare this with Japan's earliest and classic text on garden design, *Sakuteiki*, (see above) in which the expression 'ishi wo tateru koto', meaning 'the setting upright of stones', refers also to the art of garden design. The author of *Sakuteiki* counsels that stones should be placed by 'following the desires of the stones themselves']

12. Margaret Keswick Jencks, *The Chinese Garden*, 1978

For the foreigner, however, the 'magic realism' of China's few remaining old gardens may still be elusive. They were, after all, meant to be savoured over a lifetime, and they often took a lifetime to make. For a woman with bound feet, the garden of her family home (if she was lucky enough to have one) might represent the sum total of her freedom. In traditional China a group of friends might have spent a whole afternoon in the corner of one courtyard watching the sun move round on a rock – revealing in the cracks and fissures lions perhaps, or cranes, or even the faces of the Immortals – or another, in autumn, 'appreciating chrysanthemums', or, in late spring, the peonies.

13. Chen Congzhou, *On Chinese Gardens*, 1982

Good gardens are like superb lines of verse.