

The Japanese Garden

Gateway to the Human Spirit

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BY SEIKO GOTO, EDITED BY SANDRA A. WAWRYTKO

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REVIEWED BY LISA B. SAFFORD

The majority of books on the subject of Japanese gardens are coffee-table-size instruction manuals. These provide some cursory historical background, but mostly they elucidate fundamental principles of design in combination with copious and beautiful color photographs of famous ancient and modern examples by which to inspire the courageous gardener. To the untutored, Japanese gardens might seem, based on these sources, to be all of a kind, piecing together requisite features of water holes, stone and pebble arrangements, and plantings to form an aesthetic statement expressly Japanese.

The small paperback, *The Japanese Garden: Gateway to the Human Spirit* by Seiko Goto, on the other hand, could not be more opposite, both in intent and form. Containing no color pictures (save the one on the cover) the text is a concise and detailed explication, in roughly chronological order, of the multifarious historical and ideological underpinnings that gave rise to a very diverse array of garden types. One encounters far more history than perhaps anticipated, and as a result comprehends the meaning and purpose of different types of gardens more completely.

As a professor and practicing landscape architect, with a PhD in Garden History from Japan's Chiba University, Goto is eminently qualified to explain the historical foundations of gardening. Beginning with the premise that *niwa*, the word for garden, denotes a gathering place of gods as simple as a sand-covered plot of land, Goto defines pre-historic Shintō beliefs as the unique wellspring of ideas distinguishing Japanese gardens from all other types, especially Chinese ones that were so influential later on. Indeed, most useful in her text are the differences she ascertains between various Japanese garden types, as well as between gardens in Japan and those found elsewhere. The gravel courtyards in front of imperial palaces, for example, signify a *niwa* because Emperors were considered *kami* (gods), whereas such courtyards in China would be paved. A Pure Land Buddhist temple garden contains an island in a water pond, signifying the western paradise "where visitors can experience the world of Buddha in this world," while a Zen temple garden uses only stones and gravel to suggest water as a means to encourage self growth through mind play. Some gardens were meant to be seen as though viewing a succession of paintings, others were to be strolled through or enjoyed from boats. The ideological and historical reasons for these differences are clearly defined in simple, comprehensible prose. Numerous diagrams of buildings and garden plans, elevations and cross sections, are helpful, as is a timeline of major historical periods of Japan and China.

Less helpful are some of the black and white illustrations, such as the Taizokai and Taima Mandalas (figs. 25 and 28); and most of the small black and white photographs do little to advance our under-

standing of the gardens depicted. In addition, for an English-speaking audience, the large numbers of Japanese language texts cited in the bibliography are not of much use. However, a lengthy discussion in chapter three of the principles contained in the first Japanese garden manual, probably of the eleventh century, *Sakutei-ki*, is well presented and most instructive. Likewise, the last chapters linking Confucianism and poetry to gardens is an unexpected treat rarely discussed in other volumes. Goto concludes by observing that "the style of the Japanese garden is cumulative," thus indicating that modern gardens may contain elements derived from many past sources.

Goto's book is intended, and serves well, as an introduction to the history of Japanese gardens. It would be useful for advanced high school and college level courses, although its utility is improved when augmented by other resources in history, art history, or garden art. The lack of useful photographs can easily be remedied through Internet use (a suggested Web list would be valuable in future editions). For those who would travel in Japan, the book's portable size and comprehensive historical contextualizing are invaluable, especially given that nearly every major site is discussed: the Golden and Silver Pavilions, Ryōanji, Daisen-in, Byōdōin, etc. As one who travels with student groups in Japan, I know I will have them bring this book along next time. ■

LISA B. SAFFORD is in her twentieth year of teaching art history; she is the art department chair at Hiram College in Northeast Ohio. She has taught Japanese art courses since 1992, traveled extensively in Japan in programs sponsored by the NEH, Fulbright-Hays, AACU, and ASIANetwork, and taken students to Japan on two occasions. In 2000, she participated in a two-week Intensive Garden Seminar offered through Kyōto University.

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