

JAPANESE GARDEN ART

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History 310
December 15, 2008

JAPANESE GARDEN ART | THE ZEN MISCONCEPTION

Zen garden, dry landscape garden, Japanese rock garden, and sand garden all mean the same thing to most people with a rudimentary understanding of Japanese art. These terms all commonly refer to a garden composed of large stones embedded in raked sand. For some reason, the keyword *Zen* unconsciously comes to mind. But this association is misleading; it is little more than a scripted assumption.

A comparison of multiple texts reveals a great deal of confusion and inconsistency surrounding the origins, intentions, functions, and meanings of Japanese gardens. The biggest misconception is tied to the term *Zen garden*. This term is the product of a classic mistake - equating correlation as causation. Although the majority of modern Western thought categorizes dry landscape gardens as being the artistic expression of Zen Buddhist philosophy, this is a misleading assumption. It is an assumption because few people understand that there is little supporting historical evidence and quite a bit of evidence against it. It is misleading because it implies that this art is fundamentally tied to a religious doctrine.

The following pages illuminate the workings of this misconception through a comparative analysis of literature written by well known authors on the topic. The most relevant ideas and arguments on the matter are broken down, compared, and analyzed. First, the function of dry landscape gardens in medieval society is examined. Second, whether or not sand gardens should be classified as *Zen art* is debated. Lastly, the origins of the term *Zen garden* are revealed.

As a note, the terms *sand garden* and *dry landscape garden* are used interchangeably throughout this document.

Politics | The Arbiters of Taste

There is widespread belief that sand gardens are directly linked to Zen Buddhist religious rituals. The most common belief is that gardens are used during meditation. This is an error that has corrupted both public and academic spheres of thought. For instance, Marc Treib, an architecture professor at Berkeley and respected author on Japanese gardens, writes that “the dry garden, dating to the fifteenth century, was created as an aid to meditation.”¹ Penelope Mason, a well known Japanese art historian, says “one of the most innovative concepts given expression in the Zen temple is the landscape garden as an aid to meditation.”² However, both of these statements are based on false information. Of the two Japanese Zen Buddhist schools, the Rinzai and Sōtō,³ neither practiced meditation using gardens. Members of the Sōtō school, founded by Dōgen, sat indoors facing a wall during meditation; Rinzai disciples, led by Eisai, sat in a circle and faced the center of the room.⁴ Furthermore, Dōgen disapproved of art in general,⁵ stating it “[distracts] from a real search for enlightenment.”⁶ The evidence is clear; gardens did not and do not play a role in Zen Buddhist meditation.

Instead of performing a direct religious function, the emergence of gardens at Zen temples can be attributed to the massive sociopolitical elevation of Zen monks. First, Zen monks became valued as excellent estate administrators. Second, the warrior class became hungry for

¹ Marc Treib and Ron Herman, *A Guide to the Gardens of Kyoto* (Tokyo; New York: Kodansha International, 2003), 3.

² Penelope Mason and Donald Dinwiddie, *History of Japanese Art* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005), 215.

³ Marc P. Keane, *Japanese Garden Design* (Rutland, Vt.: C.E. Tuttle, 1996), 51.

⁴ “Article Four, Zen Garden, Home Garden Services, Garden Design, Landscaping, Landscape Designer, Vancouver Island,” http://careys.ca/garden_articles/article_four_zen_garden_design_landscaping.html

⁵ Wybe Kuitert, *Themes in the History of Japanese Garden Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 134.

⁶ Kuitert, 137.

Chinese Song dynasty culture and artifacts, which became well known and wide-spread.⁷ In addition, the bakufu trusted Zen monks because they were a non-military group.⁸ So when the first Mongol invasion was attempted, the bakufu trusted the Zen clergy as military advisors.⁹ After this, the Zen priesthood became very trusted and favored by the bakufu. This made them powerful. Over time, because of their high social status and highly valued opinion, the Zen monks became “the undisputed arbiters of taste.”¹⁰ However, just because the Zen priesthood deemed something “in style” did not mean it was fundamentally linked to Zen Buddhism. Their tastes were definitely influenced by Zen, but that doesn’t mean the things they deemed fashionable were of Zen origin. Mitchell Bring, an author on the subject, agrees and argues that dry landscape gardens were intentionally used to foster a Song Dynasty reminiscence.¹¹ In short, they designed their “Zen aesthetic” to be socially, politically, and financially profitable. Mason also agrees that dry landscape gardens were not Zen in origin; she states that “Zen monks [engaged] in cultural activities of a primarily secular nature, such as poetry, painting, [...] and garden design.”¹² Again, this is important because it shows the Zen clergy popularized, but did not develop, garden art. Varley continues this line of thought and explains that even the aesthetic concepts of *wabi/sabi*, fundamental to the tea ceremony, were associated with, but did not originate in, Zen Buddhism.¹³

⁷ Pierre-François Souyri, *The world turned upside down: medieval Japanese society*, trans. Käthe Roth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 79.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Mitchell Bring and Josse Wayembergh, *Japanese Gardens: Design and Meaning* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), 172.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 173.

¹² Mason, 212.

¹³ Paul Varley, *Japanese Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 139.

Art | Correlation is not Causation

Whether or not sand gardens should be classified *Zen art* is also quite complicated. To reach a conclusion, we first need a definition of *Zen art*.

Kuitert's proposed definition, extracted from the writing of Hisamatsu and Suzuki, two famous Japanese authors, is "intuitively felt inner creative force that spontaneously and instantly can be expressed by the artist."¹⁴ By this definition, Kuitert argues that painting, tea ceremony, calligraphy, pottery, and theatre are all legitimate Zen art forms, but gardening is not.¹⁵ This makes sense because while paintings can be intuitively and spontaneously created, gardens cannot be.¹⁶ For example, Zen monk Sesshū Tōyō painted many landscapes in the splashed-ink style. They were executed quickly and loosely,¹⁷ which allowed him to make intuitive adjustments spontaneously, on the fly. As Kuitert points out, one cannot spontaneously adjust the arrangement of several boulder sized rocks. Under Kuitert's definition, sand gardens are disqualified; they are not Zen art.¹⁸

However, there are three problems with Kuitert's logic. The first is that although painting, sculpture, and certainly calligraphy allow an artist to work intuitively and spontaneously, this doesn't prove that they did. Furthermore, Kuitert's inclusion of the tea ceremony as a spontaneous and intuitive art form doesn't make sense. The tea ceremony is a highly scripted ceremony with procedure derived from Chinese monastic rules;¹⁹ participants are expected to act

¹⁴ Kuitert, 132.

¹⁵ Ibid., 133.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Mason, 226.

¹⁸ Kuitert, 133.

¹⁹ William Theodore De Bary et al., *Sources of Japanese tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 389.

in a predictable manner; there is no room for “intuitive spontaneity.” But most importantly, he only addresses one definition of Zen art, which happens to be a very inclusive definition.

Kuitert limits his definition of Zen art to the artistic process, and thus neglects to address form. Let’s create an expanded definition to include both form and process: “Zen art is art that bears direct connections to Zen Buddhist philosophy through a uniquely Zen form, concept, or execution.” However, even under this expanded definition, proving sand gardens are Zen art is problematic because the gardens don’t exhibit any qualities unique to or originating from Zen Buddhism. As already stated, the gardens were not used for meditation and the *wabi/sabi* aesthetic does not originate from Zen Buddhism. The tea ceremony elevated the *wabi/sabi* aesthetic²⁰ so highly that it became permanently associated with Zen culture.²¹

Reasons for Misconception

Very few original sources exist concerning Japanese gardens. The two oldest books are *Notes on Garden Making* and *Illustrations for Designing Mountain, Water, and Hillside Field Landscapes*.²² After reading both (they are quite short), it becomes very obvious that Chinese geomancy and Shintoism are the primary conceptual sources of garden art in Japan; although the books mention Buddhism, they do not mention Zen Buddhism. Unfortunately, it seems several scholars could not accept this, and gave their own interpretations too much credit.

The existence of the Zen garden misconception can be traced back to Suzuki Daisetsu Teitarō, who published an essay on the influence of Zen Buddhism on Japanese culture in

²⁰ De Bary, 390.

²¹ Varley, 139.

²² David Slawson, *Secret Teachings in the Art of Japanese Gardens: Design Principles, Aesthetic Values*. (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1987), 17.

1934.²³ The next year, Loraine Kuck, a neighbor of Suzuki's, published *One Hundred Kyoto Gardens*, which marked the first ever published usage of the term *Zen garden* in any language.²⁴ While living in Japan, Kuck visited the famous garden at Ryōanji temple and jumped to the conclusion that it was created as an abstraction of Zen Buddhist principles.²⁵ Since this time, the idea of Japanese gardens being religiously connected to Zen Buddhism has slowly proliferated and become a commonly accepted idea.²⁶ Kuck was influenced by Suzuki; she prints him in her acknowledgments.²⁷

The final step came in the 1950s with the introduction of the phrase *zenteki teien*, meaning “Zen-like garden,” into the Japanese language by Shinichi Hisamatsu.²⁸ Being a student of Suzuki's, Hisamatsu was undoubtedly influenced by Suzuki's advocacy of Zen.²⁹ At this point, the idea officially entered Japanese literature, and finalized this misconception in both the Western and Japanese spheres.

²³ Kuitert, 132.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 130.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 133.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 130.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 132.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

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