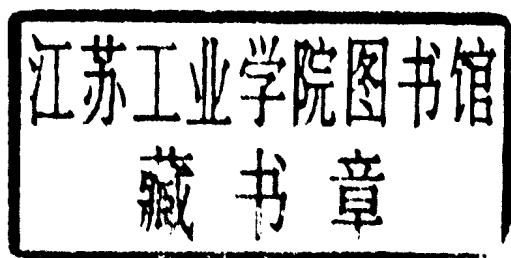


W. KUITERT - JAPANESE GARDEN ART

THEMES, SCENES, AND TASTE  
IN THE HISTORY OF JAPANESE GARDEN ART

BY  
WYBE KUITERT



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Jacket: Noriko Nakamura

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## PREFACE

Japanese gardens are, not only among landscape architects, well known as one of the more fascinating expressions of landscape art the world has to offer. It is regrettable that, in spite of their fame, the background of garden art in Japan is so ill-understood. Well known books on the subject offer not much more than superficial opinions on the symbolic meaning of Japanese gardens; at its best they tell us stories, hardly seeming to be probable, of garden making priests who expressed the profound meaning of the universe in the material forms of the rock gardens they supposedly made with their own hands. The research that led to the present work started, in all its ignorance, as an attempt to get beyond this popular comprehension of Japanese garden art.

One of the first steps was to do away with the view that takes the Japanese people as being fundamentally different from Occidentals. It is common philosophy among landscape architects that the Japanese created their gardens in harmony with nature and that Western man on the contrary conquered nature for which, as evidence, the formal French garden is usually presented. Although the present work does not touch upon such philosophies, it implicitly rejects them. It seems to me that an analysis of 'the difference' between Western and Japanese garden makers only confirms existing misunderstandings. Therefore I have departed from the viewpoint that the history of Japanese gardens must be interpreted as a story of people dealing with nature — whether conquering or in harmony with it — just as we speak about the history of garden art in Europe. In the present work, therefore, one comes across ideas found in Japan's garden history that are also common in the West, although it has not been my purpose to make these parallels explicit.

As a landscape architect I am, of course, above all interested in the garden as a product, something that is made by people to satisfy the needs of others. An owner of a garden may need it for certain reasons of utility. His needs can also be a worldly desire to display, or a craving for more abstract qualities — of beauty for instance — found in the arrangements of natural features in the garden. This way of looking at garden art is reflected in the book. It views gardens from the standpoint of the owner who wanted his needs to be fulfilled, and on the other hand from the point of view of the garden maker who knew how to create it.

It soon became obvious that only research into the history of the art

could give further insight into these questions, as all the famed gardens in Japan are old. But history is a difficult matter, particularly the history of anything like Japanese garden art. There is a great abundance of historic material: old descriptions of gardens, the old gardens themselves, not to mention the recent excavations that uncovered ancient garden sites. Studies on the subject, in Japanese and Western languages, fill many well-stacked book shelves, even when one does not consider the less serious works. It was clear from the very start that a choice had to be made and that I had to make a selection, if I was to make any sense out of the wealth of material.

Accordingly, I selected three main themes out of the many centuries that Japan's garden history counts; choosing subjects that seemed, at first sight, of interest for the modern landscape architect. First of all I concentrated upon the garden world that brought forth the first garden manual in Japan, the first probably in the world, the eleventh century *Sakuteiki*. Secondly, I made an inquiry into the little court gardens of Japan's mediaeval age that employ only bare sand, rocks and sparse plantation. This style of garden, referred to as *karesansui*, 'dry landscape', features abstract forms that appeal to the twentieth century designer. Finally, I was struck by some early seventeenth century gardens in Kyōto. The composition of forms in these gardens shows intellectual qualities that I found as modern as if from our times.

The history of Japanese garden art does not end in the seventeenth century. The eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century showed a decline in creativity and an increasing reliance on standard compositional ideas. The mannerism of this century-and-a-half went together with the growing popularity of the art. The techniques of gardening quickly developed into a nationwide professional practice. In this time a popular interest in the historical gardens came about. Many, more or less systematic, picture books were edited, in which many falsifications originate that have left their marks on research in the field until about the Second World War. From the 1860's on, a growing wave of information on Western garden art reached Japan, which brought forth a rich variety of forms and ideas. However, the traditional practice and forms of garden art continued to be meaningful and were by no means overwhelmed or replaced. Japanese garden art could continue to develop and is a living tradition even in our modern age of technology. This can only be understood in relation with the formative periods in its history. The early seventeenth century was crucial in this respect, because a practice of garden art came into existence in this period that was modern in many



ways. Things like the understanding of qualities of natural beauty, but also the social relations of the garden owner, designer, and maker in the seventeenth century cultural world of Kyôto are already established in a fully modern sense. This is the reason that the book is concluded with this period. However, to place the modernity of the early modern period in its context, to see the achievement and to understand how it came about, it proved to be necessary to include the parts on the ancient Heian period and those on the mediaeval age.

Searching for an answer to the question of modernity, the present book treats only the three fragments of Japan's garden history as mentioned above. It is therefore not a continuous record of all the events and evolutions of the past; neither is it a compilation of the single histories of each and every garden in Japan, although some exemplary specimens are treated at length.

For knowledge of the facts of Japan's garden history I have relied on the research of many respectable scholars. Some of these are professionally active in the field of Japanese garden history. The works of two of them are currently used, and I feel that they should be shortly introduced to the reader. I found the studies of Mori Osamu most reliable, they are to the point, if not somewhat dry. In the last twenty years or so professor Mori's research on gardens has departed from the excavation works he has guided. Earlier pre-war works rely more on documentary evidence.

The thirty-six volume work *Nihon teienshi taikêi*, a title that can be translated as "An Outline of the History of Japanese Gardens", written by Shigemori Mirei and his son Shigemori Kanto should also be mentioned. It is a compilation of histories of almost all of the extant gardens of any significance in Japan. Many gardens have vanished and a great deal of information on the history of the art is found in documents that are not related to any of the still existing gardens; these points are not systematically dealt with in this work, although several chapters of a general nature try to compensate for this. It is, however, an important book of reference.

Both of the above mentioned authors treat the subject as a research into the factual history of the Japanese gardens. They give answers on questions of attribution and dating of gardens. One hardly finds any information about the significance gardens had to the societies and cultures in which they came about, something that I found most intriguing. However, other sources have covered this matter to a certain extent, as the reader will discover in the course of the book.

Looking back over the years that I have worked on this research and the book, I recall all the people who have helped me in various ways. Most of my gratitude is addressed towards my direct teachers, who in the course of time became good friends; to professor Nakamura Makoto, who understood better than I where the road I had chosen was leading to, and received me hospitably as a research fellow in his Institute of Landscape Architecture at the Kyōto University for almost four years; to professor Shirahata Yōzaburō from the same Institute, whose active interest and help with difficult Japanese was of great support; to professor Meto Vroom (Wageningen), my teacher of landscape architecture who, besides general advice, stressed the importance of illustrative maps, drawings, and photographs in the book, and who received me as a visiting member of the Department of Landscape Architecture at the Agricultural University in Wageningen during the last half year of my work; and to professor Willem van Gulik of the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden, who initiated me in the field of Japanese Studies, and whose active engagement and introductions greatly helped in setting up the research as a whole.

There are a large number of other people, friends and institutions, who have assisted in bringing this book about. I want to express my appreciation for assistance received: to professors Yoshida Hironobu and Yoshida Tetsuya; and also the students, and the staff members Jōdai Kazue and Mitsuda Michiyo of the Institute of Landscape Architecture at the University of Kyōto, who challenged me with their questions, and helped me in many ways to find the answers to my own questions, and not in the last place because they tested my Japanese and improved it whenever necessary; to Marc Keane, who read the manuscripts critically and corrected the English, likewise to Linda Beukers-Smith for the finishing touches in this respect; to professor Hara Toshihiko and professor Ishikawa Mitsunobu who both helped me reading old Japanese texts; to professor Wim Boot for valuable advice on the practice of research in the field of Japanese studies; to Itō Taiichi, professor Iwatsubo Gorō, Frans Rip, Takimoto Yoshihiko, and Philip Wenting, who all helped me with the various problems of word processing; to Umehara Chika who typed part of the manuscript; to professor Katō Kunio who through his seminars quickly introduced me in the history of Japan's architecture; to Noor Boeseman who helped me set up the research and provided me with many useful subject references; to Bernard Jeannel and professor Amazaki Hiromasa, who showed me the way to the Kyōto University; to the staff of the Foreign Student Service at the University of Kyōto; to Tamai Michiko of the Tourist Information Center in Kyōto; to the staff of the Japan-Netherlands Institute; and to Hoshi Masachiyo, miss Futahashi,

and mister Kajitani for teaching me many details of the art of gardening in — and the history of — the Imperial Gardens in Kyōto.

Last, but of course not in the least I would like to thank my parents, and my wife Noriko and my son Kense for their loving care and mental support. Without them this book would probably never have been written.

Notes to the reader: In Japanese the family name is followed by the given name, also in the present work. The current usage may deviate from this principle for certain historical persons, in which case I have kept to the existing practice. Also for romanizations I have adhered to the usual transcriptions of the Japanese and Chinese. Macrons, as in Tōkyō, indicate that the vowel *o*, sometimes also *u*, should be slightly prolonged in pronunciation.



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## PART ONE



## CHAPTER 1

### THE HEIAN PERIOD: GARDENS AND ARISTOCRATS, AN INTRODUCTION

In the year 794 of the Christian era the seat of Japan's imperial government was moved to a newly constructed city, Heiankyō, or, the capital Heian. The name of the city is applied to the historical period of imperial reign that begins in 794 and lasted until 1185 when the dynasties fell and a military government came into existence. Although the emperor reigned, actual power was mostly in the hands of powerful ministers, who, with a few exceptions, were all members of a single clan, the Fujiwara. Making clever use of the existing marriage customs they managed in the end to completely dominate the imperial family, although they never laid claims to the imperial throne. The epoch of the late tenth and the eleventh century became the most glorious one for the Fujiwara regents. It is also the age when classical culture was brought to maturity. Garden art reached standards that proved to be the origins of a great tradition. This first part of the book deals therefore with this period of cultural flourishing, roughly the tenth and eleventh centuries.<sup>1</sup>

It was first of all literature that attained great heights, not only setting classical standards for the following centuries, but also pervading the Fujiwara society itself. The Fujiwara's devoted themselves endlessly to composition of poetry, both in private and in company of others, for instance at poetry contests, where teams were called upon to compose on given themes. Tales and diaries, often written by women, formed the other half of Heian's flourishing literary world. But these works again are usually rich in poetry and poetic idiom.<sup>2</sup> Poetry was such an all-pervading medium that it was decisive for proper etiquette and even formed the vehicle for expressing human feelings.<sup>3</sup> It is the conclusion of part one of this work that themes of poetry also affected garden art.

We will see in the course of the following pages how the Fujiwara's used their gardens as a stage on which splendid festivals and gorgeous ceremonies took place.<sup>4</sup> Their gardens, like the buildings of the Heian palaces, formed an integral part of the elegant way of life of the Heian nobles. They never saw it as something separated from themselves and therefore did not appreciate a garden as an outside form. For them it was

emotionally experienced from within, immersed as they were in the beauty of their gardens. It is Heian poetry that bridged the gap between garden forms and human emotions. But before we reach this conclusion an inquiry is made into the actual appearance of the gardens and into the ways in which they came into existence.



## CHAPTER 2

### PALACE GARDENS

This chapter deals with the gardens as they existed in the later Heian period palaces of the noblemen. The actual appearance is reconstructed in order to give an idea of what these gardens looked like. In passing we will note how the palace gardens were used. We turn first to the palace architecture, of which the gardens formed a part.

#### 2.1 PALACE ARCHITECTURE

In the early centuries of the Heian period the architecture of Japanese stately buildings was closely inspired by the Chinese model (fig. 1).<sup>5</sup> The large compound of the Imperial palace for instance, in which ministries and other governmental institutions were housed, was laid out according to principles of monumental symmetry. Also the buildings themselves were in the Chinese style of painted wood and erected on stone foundations. The roofs were tiled. Off the central axis, deviating from the Chinese symmetry, laid the actual imperial residence (fig. 2). This was again a complex of buildings, in plan view symmetrically arranged. However, from the very origin of palace architecture in Japan the buildings of the imperial residence kept strongly to native traditions, and the Heian palace formed no exception. The buildings of the residence were of plain wood that was not painted; roofs were covered with bark shingles. Pillars were simply dug in the ground, in the old primitive way.<sup>6</sup> In the later centuries of the Heian period the imperial residence began to depart from the symmetric lay out. Asymmetry and the overall appearance of unpainted wood became typical features. In due course, the imperial palaces came to inspire the designs of palatial residences of high ranking government officials.

The regular residence of a middle class aristocrat in the later Heian period occupied a plot of land of one *chō*, which equals roughly one hectare. It was surrounded by a wall with several gates, usually in the south, east and west, and not on the north side.<sup>7</sup> In front of the main hall (*shinden*) was, as with an emperor's palace, an open space for the staging

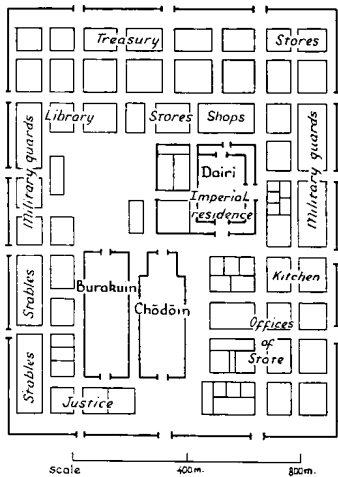


FIGURE 1. Plan of the large compound of the Imperial Palace, referred to as *daidairi*, or The Great Palace Enclosure. The Chōdō-in was an official audience hall with a large courtyard, the Burakuin was a compound for celebrations and contests. The Heian shrine in the centre of modern Kyōto is a nineteenth century reconstruction of the Chōdō-in at half of its original size.

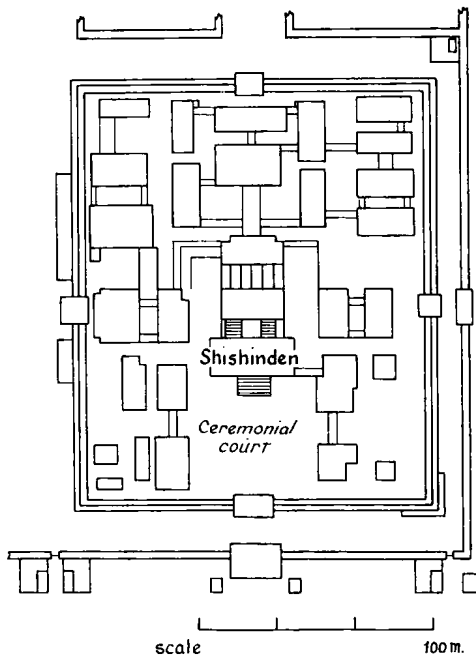


FIGURE 2. Plan of the Imperial Residence, the *dairi*. The Shishinden was the formal meeting hall where the Emperor daily held his discussions with primary officials. The present imperial Palace in Kyōto is an accurate nineteenth century reconstruction of the Imperial Residence.