

Japanese Gardens: A Place to Connect with Self

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Abstract

日本(*Nihon*) as its name suggests, Japan is indeed the land of the rising sun, its culture deeply rooted and reflected in the lives of its citizens. During my eight years-long stay in Japan, I observed that country's lifeline lies in the dedication of the people towards their work. The major cities of Japan like Tokyo and Kyoto are like any other metropolitan city, except for one significant feature they portray: their gardens. In the concrete jungle of the city, you are very likely to find a green soothing patch near you in the form of the traditional Japanese garden or deep woods. Japanese gardens have developed over the centuries during different periods named- Early Japan (before 794), Heian Period (794-1185), Kamakura and Muromachi Periods (1192-1573), Azuchi-Momoyama Period (1573-1603), Edo Period (1603-1867) and Modern Gardens (1867 to present) instilling their unique qualities. This article will highlight the elements of these gardens, their significance, and the objective behind creating these gardens.

Keywords

Japanese Gardens, Japanese culture, garden elements.

Introduction

Japanese gardens are carefully built on the aesthetics and philosophical principles of Japanese culture, hence depict respect towards nature, simplicity and are far from artificial ornamentation. When you enter one of these gardens, you get the impression of randomness as if all the trees here have grown naturally without human interference however, in reality,

a well-planned design followed by diligent action and methodical care is behind the charm of these heavenly gardens. Some essential elements of these gardens that set them apart from the gardens of the rest of the world are:

Water

Water is considered a means of purification and symbolizes the continuity of life in Japanese culture, its presence in Japanese gardens is always there in the form of lakes, ponds, and streams: natural or man-made. Clearwater is circulated by giving various degrees of elevation in a *sansui* (water flowing) garden, which helps in keeping the air in the garden fresh and cool. Ponds in these gardens are created following an important design principle of avoiding geometric shapes such as circles or rectangles giving them a natural look. “Living Flowers” or colorful carps a symbol of strength and perseverance are inseparable inhabitants of these ponds and add color and bring life to these ponds. During the Nara period (710-784) these ponds served as the place for the nobles to have banquets where guests wrote poetry. The poet had to finish his poem before a drink kept on the float reaches him.



Image 1: Flowing Water



Image 2: Pond in Myogadani Garden

Moss

Moss might be considered as a weed by other countries, but in Japan, it is cherished and appears in the national anthem of Japan as a metaphor for prosperity. Saihoji temple of Kyoto – a world heritage site, is rightly known as *koketera* or moss temple and is home to the foremost moss garden of Japan. This garden is a sprawling landmass of 35000sqm covered in moss. Zen Buddhism brought the concept of the dry garden to Japan, where white raked gravel played the role of seas and rivers, rocks as mountains and moss became the land, island, or forest. The aim was to bring a miniature of mountain scenery for the meditators. Moss also represents the aesthetic of *wabi-Sabi*, which means finding beauty in the most ordinary and simple things. Moss has a remarkable quality of absorbing noise. Korakuen garden located near the Tokyo Dome, and Shinjuku Gyoen situated near the world's busiest railway station are unaffected by the hustle-bustle of the area; credit can be given to plenty of moss in these gardens.

Stones

Stones, sands, and gravel play an essential structural element in Japanese gardens and represent mountains and ragged shorelines. In dry gardens, sands and gravels are raked around rocks to give the impression of water flow or cloud. White sand represents purity and shines in the sun, whereas dark, gray, and bluish sand depicts the feeling of tranquility. Generally, asymmetric and natural shapes rocks are preferred over fanciful ones. The integration of rocks into a composition is emphasized over the uniqueness of the individual rock; too many versions of the same rock or the use of contrasting rocks are also avoided. The rocks are placed randomly into the ground far enough to provide a sense that the rock has been there for a long time.

Bridges

There is no doubt that the beautifully designed bridges are the most eye-catching elements in the Japanese gardens. Built of materials such as wood, stone, bamboo, or even a simple uncut stone slab these bridges represent harmony maintained between man and nature. The spiritual significance of these bridges lies in various meditative experiences and indicates a journey between the mortal world and the afterlife, unburdening and cleansing the individual. The red color in the iconic *Guzei* or red arched bridge symbolizes wisdom, transformation, and all that is sacred and implies that while crossing it one leaves his worldly attachments behind and progresses on the path of spiritual enlightenment.



Image 3: Stone Bridge Koishikawa Korakuen Garden



Image 4: Red Wooden Bridge

Plants

Consistency and restraint are sought rather than gaiety while selecting and placing plants in these gardens. These gardens bring out different emotions with changing seasons and give

an entirely different viewpoint to observe them. The iconic pink and white *sakura* that blossom in spring symbolizes clouds because of their blooming nature. Due to their transient nature, they embody the cultural concept of *mono no aware* (the pathos of life), awareness of impermanence, reflecting the sadness for both: their passing and it being the reality of life. Autumn paints these gardens in remarkable shades of red, yellow, and brown. Japanese maple flashes the crimson foliage. Ginkgo trees flash bright yellow foliage and are found in Shinto shrines; they are said to host local spirits. Lotus known as Buddha flower and considered sacred, bloom in summer; the view of floating lotus on the placid-surface of pond calm the mind whereas Pine trees and bamboo act as a screen which keeps the distractions of the outside world away.

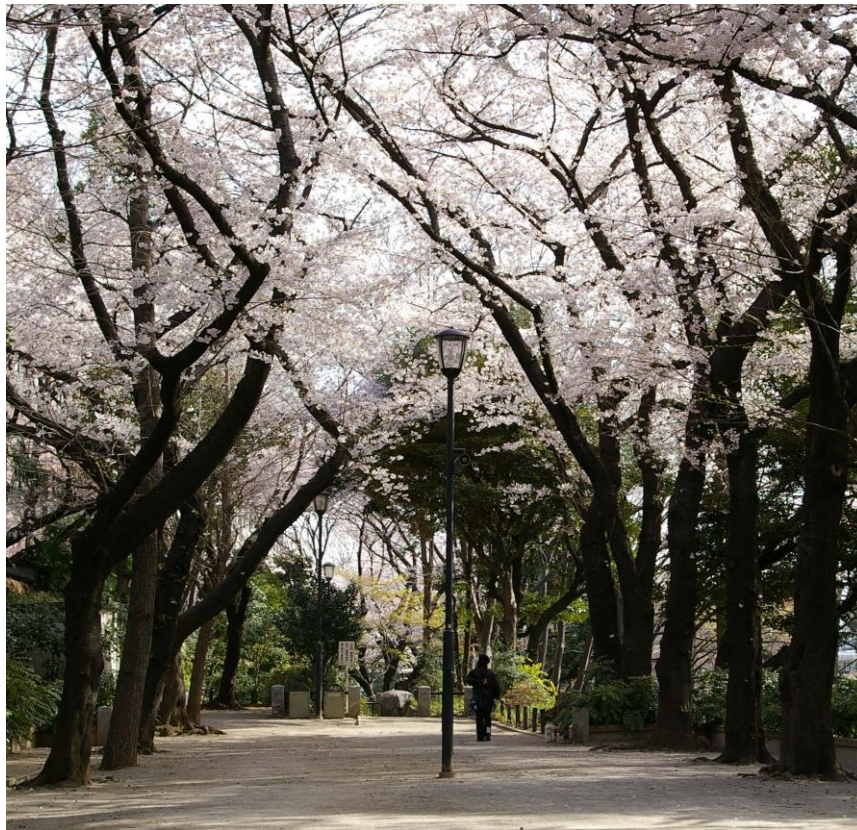


Image 5: Sakura



Image 6: Japanese Maple

Borrowed Scenery

The term *Shakkei* or borrowed scenery is used by Japanese garden designers when they incorporate certain landscapes into their garden that can be seen from the garden, such as mountains, lakes, waterfalls, and forests to capture it alive. Integration of the scenery into the garden is done artistically to blend perfectly with the theme of the garden, enhancing its beauty and purpose. This technique in Japan originated in Kyoto, which is rich in natural scenery. Several gardens in Kyoto offer stunning views of Mt. Hiei. The Entsuji temple garden is one of the best examples of the *Shakkei* technique. Mt. Fuji which is only 96 miles away from Tokyo is a popular backdrop for many gardeners in the city.

Lanterns

Toro or traditional lanterns were initially used in Buddhist temples to illuminate the paths and also as an offering to Buddha during prayers. These lanterns entered Shinto shrines in

the Heian period. Later in the Muromachi period, they were used in tea gardens to light the paths for an evening tea ceremony. They can be classified into two categories- hanging and platform lanterns. *Dai-Doro* (platform lantern) the most popular and widely used lantern type in Japanese gardens is made of stone or bronze and represents the five basic elements of Buddhist cosmology. The topmost part pointing towards the sky represents two elements *fu* (air) and *ku* (spirit), the middle part that encloses the lantern's light represents *sui* (water) and *ka* (fire) and the bottom part touching the ground represents *chi* (earth). Over the period these lamps have become inseparable from the Japanese gardens.



Image 7: Stone Lantern

Paths are designed in such a way that the composition of the garden unfolds in an intended way. Decorative furnishing like Pagodas, stone basins, and summer houses along with fences like *sode-gaki* (bamboo fence) contribute to the uniqueness of these gardens.

Conclusion

Japanese gardens offer much more than only a green space; they depict the charm of restraint and encourage one to disclose its beauty uniquely. Asymmetry is a core aesthetic of these gardens which is used by placing all the elements in such a manner as to evoke the order of the natural environment. They nurture the craving for nature. They fill the soul with great joy and thrill and help in achieving the higher goals of one's life by supplying a meditative and calm state of mind, thus enabling one to reconnect with self.

Acknowledgment

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About the Author

Ms. Neha Gupta is an aspiring writer who has written in many anthologies for Impish Lass Publishing House. She has won second prize for Asian Literary Society's Wordsmith Award (English Story)2020 and many certificates for ALS weekly English poetry contest. She is a trained Kathak dancer, yoga instructor, and an experienced teacher who holds a degree of B.Ed. She has lived in Japan for eight years and has cleared the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) N3 level. Currently, she is teaching the Japanese language and perusing her passion for writing.

