

The Japanese Art of Stone Appreciation

A brief introduction and historical overview.

“Suiseki (pronounced suu-ee-seek-ee) are small naturally formed stones admired for their beauty and their power to suggest a scene from nature or an object closely associated with nature. The Japanese art of suiseki is believed to have originated some two thousand years ago in China, where small stones of great natural beauty were set on stands to represent legendary islands and mountains associated with Buddhist mythology or Taoist beliefs. In the sixth century A.D., emissaries from the Asian mainland brought several such stones to Japan.

During this early period of artistic development, miniature landscape stones were appreciated both for their natural beauty and for their religious or philosophical symbolism. For Buddhists, the stone symbolised Mount Shumi, a mythical holy mountain that was believed to lie at the centre of the world. For Taoists, the stone symbolised Horae, the Taoist paradise. For believers in the Chinese philosophical system of yin-yang, the ancient doctrine that attempts to explain nature’s workings according to two opposite yet complimentary principles, a miniature landscape stone set in water symbolized the two fundamental forces of nature.

The Japanese appreciation for miniature landscape stones was also highly influenced by Shintoism, the native religion of Japan. For the Shintoist, specifically designated natural stones and other elements in the natural environment –the sun, the moon, and particularly trees–were the abode of powerful spiritual forces or gods (*Kami*). To symbolise the divine nature of such stones and to mark them off as places of worship, they were encircled by a thick rope of plaited rice straw fringed with rice stalks and strips of folded white paper.

From these diverse religious and philosophical traditions there developed in Japan several forms of artistic expression based on the aesthetics of stones. Miniature landscape stones set in trays were one manifestation: however, the art of stone appreciation was particularly refined in garden design. One of the earliest and most comprehensive Japanese books on the latter art was an eleventh century garden manual called the *Sakuteiki*. It describes in minute detail the characteristics of stones and their proper positioning, advising the gardener to exercise great care in aligning them. It is warned, for example, that a stone incorrectly placed –such as a naturally upright stone set horizontally- will disturb the spirit of the stone and may bring misfortune to the owner.

The artistic appreciation of stones underwent further refinement in the centuries immediately following. From the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, however, there occurred a radical change in Japanese taste. Under the influence of Zen –with its emphasis on austerity, concentrated meditation, intuitive insight, the experience of absolute “nothingness” and direct communion with nature- a different type of stone came to be admired. Unlike the older Chinese stones, these new stones were subtle, profoundly quiet, serene, austere and unpretentious. It was also during this period that most of the great dry landscape gardens (*Karesansui*) were constructed. For Zen monks and others, the stones were symbols of Zen thought, serving as objects for contemplation and meditation. According to the teachings of Zen

everything finite tells of the infinite, and everything animate and inanimate is the product of the same force. By meditating on the stone, a monk could understand the essence of the stone, the essence of a mountain, and all else in the universe. To experience this essence, to become one with the stone, was to become enlightened.”

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