Landscape painting in Japanese gardens

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Abstract The Japanese gardens is not simply nature, it is alwayes been nature crafted by man. It bilongs to realm of architecture and is nature as art. In Japan, the gardens traces its origins back to the first urban settlements and palaces.

In the figure of Sesshu (born c. 1420), Japanese painting finally progressed beyond the mere imitation of artistic models imported with the second wave of Chinese influence, and reached that final stage of acculturation in which absorption is so complete as to allow new and original departures. Sesshu nevertheless visited China to undergo further training in the techniques of ink landscape painting. The art of the Sung and Yuan dynasties had slowly filtered through to Japan with the arrival of Chinese Zen priests, who came to settle in Zen temples in Kamakura from the mid-thirteenth century onwards.

Results and Discussions

Art historian Ichimatsu Tanaka mentions an early "Catalogue of Treasures of Butsunichi-an" compiled by the monks of the sub-temple of Engaku-ji in Kamakura, and concludes: "Judging by the examples of Sung paintings in the catalogue, however, it is reasonable to assume that Sung influence was already manifesting itself in the Japanese painting of the time." These paintings were initially devotional in character, and included portraits of famous Zen priests or Buddha figures in a landscape setting.

The first independent ga-in, a type of art academy, was founded in the mid-fifteenth century under the Ashikaga shoguns. Many of its members were priests and painters residing in Shokoku-ji, one of Kyoto's five most important Zen temples. Josetsu, first head of the academy, and his successors Shubun and Sotan quickly established a distinct Muromachi style of suiboku, Japanese ink painting.

Sesshu had also been a monk in Shokoku-ji. But hav-ing trained at this remarkable dual institution of Zen temple cum art school, he broke away from its institutionalized traditions in his forties to begin an independent career, leading the life of an itinerant monk and painter. His rejection of the conventions of Chinese-in-soired landscape painting is a symbolic indication of Ja-oan's increasing cultural independence. Tanaka offers the following summary of Sesshu's achievement: "He thus represented the vanguard in a natural trend towards artistic independence as painting progressed from the religious to the purely aesthetic". Perhaps “natural” would be even better than "aesthetic", for Nature herself is now Sesshu's religious theme. Nature in his work is no longer the mere backdrop to devotional portraits of Buddhist saints, no longer the idealized setting of a Pure-Land paradise, but acquires its own religious significance.

Key words landscape, painting, gardens

Figure 1. A monochrome ink drawing
Sesshu's perception of nature clearly reveals the influence of Zen on his work: he accepts nature as "religious" iconography. The words attributed to Zen monk Dogen (1200-1253) here spring to mind, in which he compares "the sound of the valley and the color of the mountains" to the "tongue" and "body" of the Buddha. The later Zen priest and painter Hakuin expressed a similar belief when he said: "This very place the Lotus Paradise, this very body the Buddha." The dualistic vision of Heian times, in which the present world of suffering was compensated by the paradise of Amida Buddha beyond, has here given way to the non-dualistic Zen vision of the Muromachi era, in which sacred and profane, matter and spirit, Buddha and ordinary mortal are seen as a single whole.

Figure 2. Landscape painting

It is interesting to note that Sesshu was simultaneously a practitioner of meditation, painting and garden design. Although conclusive evidence remains lacking, he is credited with the creation of a number of gardens in western Japan. If, as we have already suggested, he indeed approached his painting as a form of religious exercise, then we may infer that he saw garden design in a similar light.

I would finally like to draw attention to Sesshu's particular preference for splashed and dabbed brush strokes, a technique which he learnt in China. It is possible that he selected rocks with a view to achieving similar textures in his gardens.

The gardens of the Muromachi era are thus no longer the scenic illustrations of nature recommended by the Sakutei-ki in Heian times. They are related instead to a new school of painting whose own origins lie in the religious practices of Zen Buddhism. And like paintings, they are designed to be viewed statically. The Heian chisen shuyu teien, the pond-spring garden designed to be enjoyed by boat, has given way to the Muromachi chisen kansho teien, the pond-spring garden designed to be enjoyed from fixed vantage points. At the same time, too, the waters of the first pond garden have effectively evaporated into the "dry" ponds of the latter.

Conclusions

1. The garden in Japan cannot be treated independently of architecture.
2. Man's play instinct naturally prompts him to explore and expand these self-imposed systems in new permutation.

References