THE GARDENS OF JAPAN

The beauty of the shades and tones of green... is another of the characteristic charms of a Japanese garden. One remembers them always as places of shade and sunlight and reflections, green and rippling water, grey-green rocks and soft ferns, beauty and peace everywhere.

ELIZABETH K. ROYS, 1926

Captivated by the exquisite calm of the gardens in Japan, Elizabeth Roys writes her most poetic descriptions. Her account emerges as gently, beautifully, and carefully as the gardens she studied. While garden design in Japan had its origins in China, Roys notes that it “developed into an art peculiar to itself,” influenced by climate, geography, and culture. Unlike highly walled Chinese gardens, Japanese gardens invite the surrounding landscape to approach the house, often featuring distant hills in the garden’s ensemble.

The ideal of sansui (hill and water) is essential, and Roys finds these elements in almost every garden. Foremost, the aim is to encourage contemplation and contentment. Flowers are few as they would detract from the ambiance of reflection. Pines, plums, cherries, willows, and maples provide restful green with delicate variety throughout the seasons. Rock-work is also a key component. Roys admires the striking use of stone, particularly natural specimens and those carved into bridges and lanterns.

Especially impressive was the “dry” garden at the Daitoku-ji temple in Kyoto, designed by the great landscape artist Soami. Observing how stones and clipped shrubs are used to evoke a feeling of water, she likens his work to the Post-Impressionists of her era.

Acknowledging the artistry of Japanese gardens, Roys critically examines temple gardens, private estate gardens, and even a hotel garden, regarding each as a three-dimensional painting. She analyzes composition, plantings, and sensual appeal, unveiling the elements that make each garden enchanting.

All photos, drawings, and captions are by Elizabeth K. Roys.