

The Japanese-style Garden at Hillwood

丘林園  
一九五七年三月  
揮筆

Hillwood Museum and Gardens  
4155 Linnean Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20008

Brooke Whiting  
Horticulture Department  
March 13, 1997



## II. A Brief History of Japanese Gardens in America

The tradition of gardening in Japan dates back as far as 650 AD when garden theory and practice came to Japan from mainland Asia.<sup>1</sup> Early influences were primarily Chinese and Korean. In Japan, the art of the garden grew and diversified, most remarkably in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries when Zen Buddhist monks arrived and began to incorporate their philosophy and symbology into temple garden design and architecture. Today, traditional elements are frequently combined in Western Japanese-style gardens despite their origin in gardens of disparate style and function.

After the Europeans established a sea trade route to the Far East, Asian art and decorative objects slowly became recognized and appreciated in the Occident. However, Japanese items remained scarce, and little to no information on gardening was imported. Louis XIV started the first oriental garden craze with a porcelain pagoda at Versailles. As Chinese-style pavilions gained popularity, so too did a new style of garden design, the English landscape garden. This more naturalistic style took inspiration in Chinese parks and gardens; on the Continent it was called the *jardin anglo-chinois*.<sup>2</sup> A modest form of this design theory was employed at the great plantations and country homes of North America.

Few authentic Japanese goods reached America until Commodore Perry's voyage in 1853. As in Europe, Chinese decorations were fashionable in America and helped prepare a ready market for Japanese styles. In the 1860's there were Japanese pavilions at several international exhibitions in Europe, and in 1876 the Japanese government sponsored a display at the Centennial International Exhibition in Philadelphia. At this site a small garden was constructed by Japanese craftsmen. Soon the popularity of Japanese art grew. As occurred with styles of interior decoration, Japanese garden elements were frequently detached from their meaning and associated settings when employed in American gardens.

The early twentieth century saw an increasing popularity of Japanese styles on the West Coast as well. This fashion was supported by the growing number of Japanese immigrants flooding into California. In 1894, San Francisco hosted the California Midwinter Exposition where an occidental Japanophile privately financed the "Japanese Village", including a one acre garden constructed by Japanese workers.

These display gardens, along with the garden at World's Columbian Exposition of Chicago in 1893, were left as public parks after the official exhibits closed. These sites spawned progeny and became more and more popular until the early 1940's when anti-Japanese sentiments proliferated. During the early decades of the twentieth century both Japanese architecture and garden design were being readily incorporated into their American counterparts.

As early as 1902, articles appeared in magazines such as House & Garden, Country Life in America, and The House Beautiful describing Japanese garden elements and ways to adapt Japanese gardening techniques to the American home, landscape, and budget.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, most characteristics of Japanese gardens were removed from their original contexts and thereby lost their symbolism and authenticity.

---

<sup>1</sup>Professor Matsunosuke Tatsui, Japanese Gardens, (Tokyo: Japan Travel Bureau, 1956), 1-9.

<sup>2</sup>Clay Lancaster, The Japanese Influence in America, (New York: Walton H. Rawls, 1963), 9.

<sup>3</sup>"Japanese Temple Gardens," House & Garden, March 1902, 77-90.

O. Tsuji, "A Japanese Garden Six Feet Square," Country Life in America, March 1905, 495.

Anna C. Hartshorne, "Famous Gardens of Japan," House & Garden, Vol. V, January to June, 1904, 76-81.

Horatio S. Stoll, "Japanese Gardens," The House Beautiful, July 1914, 43-45.

F. Maude Smith, "Artistic Japanese Features for Gardens and Country Estates," House & Garden, 1907, 62-63.

Edmund Buckley, Ph.D., "Landscape Gardening in Japan," House and Garden, July 1908, 2-10.

In the 1920's and 1930's, oriental-style gardens became widely popular at American estates. These gardens were usually a fashionable imitation, and conglomerated elements of both the Japanese and Chinese garden traditions. Occasionally, Asian design theories were loosely employed, however, more of these gardens were theme arrangements of ornaments and exotic plants.

During World War II many of these oriental and Japanese gardens were destroyed. Some of the few authentic and properly maintained Japanese gardens were lost to neglect and vandalism as the Japanese gardeners were interned. After the war, bad feelings lingered, and it was not until several years later that Japanese arts again gained recognition.

In 1954, the Museum of Modern Art in New York built a small Japanese house and garden in their courtyard. This exhibit once again exposed Americans to the Japanese building arts and started another fashion craze in garden design and architecture.

Since the 1950's, the art of Japanese garden-making has diverged into two routes. One path has been the continuation of pre-war type Japanese-style gardens which often attempt to imitate true Japanese gardens through the use of oriental statuary and garden elements. This group also contains gardens which strive to integrate Japanese elements and philosophies into the American landscape with its unique benefits and dilemmas. The overall quality of these gardens varies from the theme park effect to highly acclaimed landscape architecture such as the Bloedel Reserve.<sup>4</sup> A second much smaller group of gardens are an attempt to completely transpose a Japanese experience to America. These gardens and their designers pride themselves on the authenticity of their design, materials, and spiritualism.

---

<sup>4</sup>Heather Lockman, "Gardens: Nature in Gentle Custody. Shaping the Bloedel Reserve in Puget Sound," Architectural Digest Magazine, June 1984.

Susan Rademacher Frey, "A Series of Gardens" President's Award of Excellence, Landscape Architecture Magazine, Septemeber/October 1986.

### III. The Japanese-style Garden at Hillwood: A History

When Marjorie Merriweather Post bought the property at 4155 Linnean Avenue in 1955, she obtained a beautifully sited mansion with an established garden. The Irwin residence, *Arbremont*, was renamed *Hillwood*, and soon underwent remodeling to present a completely different appearance.

Perry Wheeler was the most fashionable landscape architect in Washington, DC in the mid 1950's. Wheeler designed gardens for elite historic row houses in Georgetown and would later consult on the design for the White House Rose Garden. More importantly, he had worked on the Davies estate, *Tregaron*.

Mrs. Post hired Wheeler to revamp the gardens at *Hillwood*, taking advantage of the property's view over Rock Creek Park to the Washington Monument. Wheeler modified the existing layout and improved present features, including an early twentieth century oriental garden.

Photos show the hillside garden Mrs. Post bought (see figures 1a and 2a). A path meandered through a woodland planted with azaleas and crossed rugged footbridges to a small island in a pond. This garden, probably built in the 1920's with the original *Arbremont*, may have been designed by landscape architect Rose Greely who designed other work at the property. The early oriental garden closely approximated other fashionable pre-war theme gardens; it was an American garden with several Asian ornaments and decorations.

Though the specifics of their relationship are unclear, Wheeler was acquainted with a Japanese-born garden designer from Long Island, Shogo Myaida. Myaida was employed by Mrs. Post to create a new garden on the site of the previous oriental garden.

In 1957, Myaida visited *Hillwood* and designed a large and complex series of waterfalls and pools incorporating Japanese-style plants, lanterns, and woodworking. According to Mr. Myaida, he was forced to work without the benefit of a survey after Mrs. Post quarreled with the surveyors and let them go. This inconvenience resulted in plans that are more schematic than accurate in details. During the spring of 1958, Myaida brought an assistant, Louis Legakis, to oversee the construction of the new garden.

After the completion of the garden, it gained stunning reviews in elite East Coast social circles. The New York Herald Tribune's *Inside Fashion* columnist reported, "A Japanese garden is about the most chic thing anybody can own these days. Mrs. Herbert May (formerly Merriweather Post) has just installed the most sensational in this country at her Washington, DC home."<sup>5</sup>

As with most gardens, the Japanese-style Garden at Hillwood has never remained static. Mrs. Post and her gardeners were constantly adding new ornaments and plants to the original design. As a result of Mrs. Post's intervention, this garden came to be a clear expression of her taste and style, and not solely the creation of someone else. Though the Post gardening staff maintained Hillwood to a high standard, this garden has lost much of its Japanese character. Mrs. Post's Garden clearly illustrates the blending of both Japanese traditions and American tastes and values and should be maintained and interpreted to demonstrate this unique quality (see figures 1b and 2b).

---

<sup>5</sup>Eugenia Sheppard, "Japan Invades Gardens," New York Herald Tribune, 25 June 1958.

#### IV. The Life of Shogo J. Myaida

Shogo Joseph Myaida lead a most extraordinary life. Born in Japan at the close of the nineteenth century, he grew up exposed to the culture of a noble family and the influences of Christianity. By the age of 22, he had a diverse formal and practical education in architecture, forestry, horticulture, engineering, and art. He worked at the Imperial University in Tokyo helping to establish one of Japan's first formal Landscape Studies programs. In 1922, Myaida left Japan for a tour of European gardens with American landscape architecture students. (See appendices A.1 and A.2)

After his tour of Europe, Myaida decided to settle in the United States. In America, Myaida worked various jobs related to the landscape industry in New York, the Carolinas, and Florida (see figures 3a, 3b, and 3c). During the construction of Mrs. Post's Mar-a-lago in Palm Beach, Myaida was working as a planting supervisor for Lewis and Valentine, the landscape company. However, Myaida and Mrs. Post never met at this time.

Myaida designed many gardens during the 1920's and 1930's in both European and oriental styles (see figures 4a and 4b). His first pre-war success was the Mme. Kio Tea Garden, Long Island's first Japanese restaurant and idyllic escape, opened in 1923 (see appendix A.3). He attempted to market the concept of an Americanized "Tea Ceremony" to fashionable hostesses (see appendix A.4).

Myaida's most significant early professional accomplishment fell victim to bad timing. In 1939 he corresponded with the Japanese government regarding the construction of a Japanese-style garden surrounding the Nippon Pavilion at the World's Fair in Flushing Meadows, NY. Myaida designed and constructed at least two gardens at the Fair, one a substantial entry to the Japanese exhibit complete with stream, pond, and bridge (see figures 5a and 5b). However, animosities against the Japanese were rising at this time and the commission did not lead to expanded professional opportunities nor to greater recognition.

During World War II Myaida was lucky to escape internment. However, he was scrutinized by the FBI and faced personal and professional discrimination. It was not until the late 1950's that Myaida again established a clientele and found a ready market for his designs.

Shogo Myaida's non-traditional upbringing predisposed him to embrace American culture and a new lifestyle. Significant events in his life, such as the transliteration of the original spelling of his name *Maeda*, and his marriage to a Caucasian woman, demonstrated his willingness to incorporate himself into the melting pot that is America. This multiculturalism is evident in his garden design work as well. Plans and sketches of his work show a frequent blending of occidental and oriental traditions and elements.

...I would rather not make Japanese garden....but make a creative, little American-Japanese....anyway, suitable to most of the property...suitable to personality...so I tell them. I making garden for you but your garden. Not my garden so you have to tell me what you like to have; what kind of things you like; what taste of your desire; then I make up for you to satisfy your life... ....Never could do Japanese Garden, so tedious. Details have to be maintained. Clipping plants, each leaf may be there or not there....there are quite different values so hard to get right maintenance, so I rather not make a real Japanese Garden, I would have to maintain for them....<sup>6</sup>

This statement shows a clear understanding and acceptance of differences between America and Japan. Myaida knew a traditional Japanese garden would cease to be authentic after several years of inadequate

---

<sup>6</sup>Lorie Kitazano, Lily Kiyasu, and Dorothy Rony, Interview with Mr. Shogo Myaida, 10 July 1988. Appendix A.1.

maintenance. Myaida's gardens did require a high level of specific maintenance in order to mature effectively, however, his designs did not depend on the employment of imported Japanese gardeners.

Myaida's later gardens, especially those of the 1960's and 1970's, clearly demonstrate a Japanese-American style (see appendix A.5). These gardens are not authentically Japanese. However, these gardens have moved far beyond the pre-war oriental expressions that simply stuck Japanese elements haphazardly into the American landscape.