

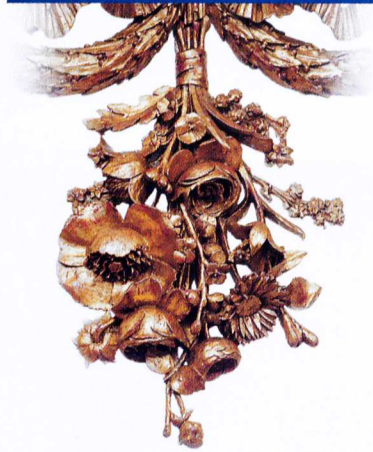
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The Japanese style garden at Hillwood and its context

By Kendall H. Brown

It is unusual to consider gardens in connection with antiques in general and Russian imperial objects in particular, especially a Japanese style garden built after World War II in the United States. Yet Marjorie Merriweather Post (see p. 82, Pl. I) brought them all together at Hillwood. For her, the European antiques she purchased and the Japanese garden she commissioned shared several basic traits. Both were the exotic products of foreign cultures known for exquisite workmanship and for spirituality in art. Both were the kinds of trophies that helped define the status of the social elite on both sides of the Atlantic in the first half of the twentieth century. Nonetheless there were distinctions. In the case of her art collection, she was gathering objects originally made for others, while with her Japanese style garden she was the patron, commissioning an original. In the end, the Russian antiques brought her renown as a collector, while her Japanese style garden languished in obscurity until its two million dollar restoration in 2001 and 2002.¹

Until very recently gardens outside Japan in the Japanese style have not been considered a distinct part of landscape history embodying a unique aesthetic. Instead they have most often

been viewed as adjuncts to the glorious history of gardens in Japan, with their owners claiming that they are authentic Japanese gardens. This rhetoric persists despite the numerous differences between these gardens and premodern gardens in Japan in terms of design, plantings, and function.² What is unusual about the Hillwood garden—officially named *Kyurin'en* (Hill Wood



Garden)—is that both Shogo Myaida (Pl. VI), its designer, and Marjorie Post acknowledged that their creation was a hybrid “American Japanese garden,” as Myaida called it, to be used primarily as a setting for some of Marjorie Post’s famous parties.

Given that Japanese style gardens outside Japan have existed in large numbers in virtually every part of the world for well over one hundred years, it makes sense to think of them as a separate category. While Japanese style gardens are usually “about”

being Japanese, gardens in Japan serve various specific functions, including the representation of religious paradises, the poetic allusion to famous locales, or the elucidation of Confucian moral precepts.

There are of course some underlying similarities between Japanese and Japanese style gardens. These include the garden as a symbol of cul-

tural sophistication, as a location for cultural role playing and temporary transformation, or as a place that offers escape from and thus implicit criticism of the dominant social and cultural order. To admit these functions of gardens is to admit that they serve as barometers of the patrons, designers, and societies that created them. Instead, most writers on Japanese style and Japanese gardens prefer to treat the garden as being purely for spiritual retreat and rejuvenation. It seems that neither Post nor Myaida considered the Hillwood garden in this way, but truthfully admitted its hybrid style and overtly social function.

When, like Myaida and Post, we consider Japanese style gardens in the United States as part of American landscape history, these gardens tell us how Americans have wanted to see Japan, and, because many of them were built by Japanese, they also tell us how the Japanese have wanted to be seen abroad. The Hillwood garden offers particular insight into both of these important phenomena in the social history of gardens.

In the absence of constant maintenance, gardens deteriorate, and because Japanese style gardens are usually recognized as having no value apart from being replicas of Japanese gardens, they are often altered to be more “authentic”—more like the generic “Japanese garden” discussed in innumerable popular books.

When we understand Japanese style gardens in their historical context, it makes sense to

restore representative examples or those with unique historical value. The Japanese style garden at Hillwood, despite its lack of authenticity, falls into the latter category. It is a wonderful example of a postwar garden built on an American estate by one of the country’s grandest cultural icons. It is the most elaborate extant gar-

den on May 13, 1989. He believed so much in translating Japanese culture to fit American customs that upon emigrating he even changed his family name from Maeda, which was hard to pronounce for most Americans, to Myaida, pronounced “my Aida.”⁵ He was born into a high-ranking family and raised in comfortable surroundings in the



den built by Myaida, a notable garden designer who worked on the East Coast from 1922 to 1972. He firmly believed that Japanese garden aesthetics and functions had to be modified in the modern-day United States, and he strove to create American Japanese gardens.

Myaida was born on June 25, 1897, and died

Facing page: Pl. I. This bronze figure is one of the many Asian ornaments throughout the Japanese style garden at the Hillwood Museum and Gardens in Washington, D. C. Except as noted, photographs are by courtesy of the Hillwood Museum and Gardens, Washington, D.C.

This page: Pl. II. Redwood gate and one of the redwood bridges in the Japanese style garden at Hillwood, designed by Shogo Myaida (Pl. VI) in 1957 for Marjorie Merriweather Post. The photograph was taken c. 1989. The garden was restored in 2001 and 2002.

city of Takamatsu in Kagawa Prefecture on the island of Shikoku. His father, Suzuki Dengoro, served as a member of parliament before his premature death. The family's cultural achievement is indicated by the fact that one brother studied violin in Vienna and later played for the Tokyo Symphony Orchestra, and another studied ornamental metalwork at the Imperial Fine Arts Academy in Tokyo, reportedly having one work acquired by the imperial family. After his father's death, Myaida and his mother moved to Tokyo where the young man was sent to a Christian church, baptized, and given the Christian name Joseph. He then studied at the experimental Agricultural Forestry secondary school in Kanagawa Prefecture, adjacent to Tokyo, from 1914 to 1918. As part of his training, he helped build a villa for Count Matsuura at Oiso. After graduating he worked as an assistant to a professor at the architecture department of an art institute, probably the Imperial Art College in Tokyo. Around 1921 he became an assistant to Professor Honda Seiroku (1866–1952) of the forestry department of

the Tokyo Imperial University (now the University of Tokyo). In the summer of 1922, Myaida traveled to Europe to study garden history with a contingent of researchers from a midwestern American university led by Professor Philip Homer Elwood (b. 1884).

Entering the United States after his European sojourn, Myaida settled in New York City. After working at a few odd jobs, he built a tearoom, garden, and house for a Japanese man living on Long Island, and he helped redesign part of the Japanese garden at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. In 1923 he was commissioned to design an elaborate Japanese environment at Brenau College (now University), a small women's college in Gainesville, Georgia. There he spent three years constructing the pond, island, garden, and various structures at Camp Takeda—the college's summer camp for girls, built on a Japanese theme.⁴ Myaida then traveled with a Brenau trustee, John Barns, to Palm Beach, Florida, where he worked for a well-known architect, who numbered Marjorie

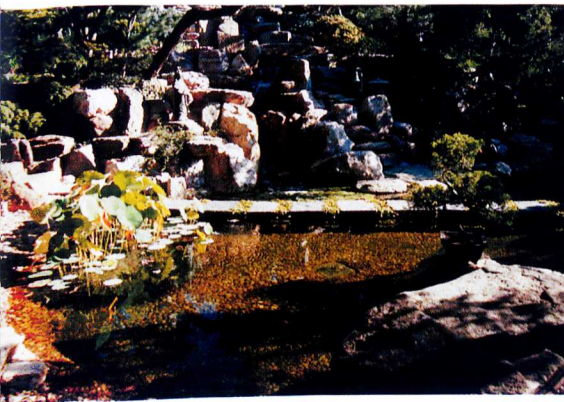
Post among his clients. Myaida worked briefly on her estate, Mar-A-Lago, in the employ of the landscape contractor Albert Lewis of Long Island.

Myaida returned to New York in 1926 to work with the Lewis and Valentine Company (c. 1918–1970), a landscape contractor, on Long Island. When he was laid off during the first years of the Great Depression, he started a small garden maintenance company and built a few small residential gardens on estates along the North Shore of Long Island. Myaida's next major commission was overseeing construction of the Japanese garden for the Japanese Pavilion at the World's Fair of 1939 in New York City. In the previous year he had given the paper "Gardening in America Today" at the national meeting of the School Garden Association of America in New York City, in which he argued for more professional training of American gardeners on the Japanese model.⁵

Throughout the depression years of the

Pl. III. The lower pond in the Japanese style garden at Hillwood in a photograph of c. 1960.





1930s Myaida worked hard to find garden clients. In particular he targeted New York's wealthy suburbanites to whom he pitched the idea of a hybrid tea ceremony. In his essay "The Japanese Tea Ceremony in America and Europe" in an undated pamphlet for prospective clients, Myaida gives a capsule history of the *wabi* style tea ceremony, and then states:

My idea is to develop this 'o cha no yu' in American life, using the spirit, motive and method of [tea master] Rikiu, bringing to the American Tea Party not only the spirit of congenial friendship, but a lovely ceremony and a knowledge of antiques. The construction of a small woodland temple for this Tea Ceremony would add a new interest to the American scene. American culture borrows from the civilized development of all ancient cultures and there is much that is lovely and interesting in this beautiful old ceremony displayed in its proper setting.⁶

He then provides a sixteen step "Outline of Course for New Tea Party." "The New American Tea party" or "The American 'O cha no yu' party" was to have a waiting arbor built along the driveway and then a tea temple in the woods constructed in any national style as long as it was harmonious with the taste of the hostess and the general surroundings. Then appropriately seasonal invitations were to be sent to guests who should be limited to four or five persons. Other steps outline the course of the ceremony, adapting the forms of the Japanese tea gathering to the milieu of American society ladies. For instance, step eleven was to "serve light lunch... in dim light—of unique menu—using antique dishes."⁷

Not only does Myaida propose a hybrid ceremony, but he suggests in his conclusion that he can build the appropriate structures and garden, for "no one can imitate the idea successfully, without the assistance of one who is fully acquainted with the original Japanese Tea Party." Myaida then offers to

be the host of such parties, citing his aristocratic pedigree as proof of his proper social status. The pamphlet concludes:

If you would be interested in my suggestions and work on your estate, which I assure you would be a most exclusive idea in this country, I should deeply appreciate an opportunity to give my best effort and ability, as it is my desire to accomplish just one piece of work of art to leave in America before returning to Japan.

It appears that Myaida's "New American Tea Party" was never put into practice. In the 1950s, however, he did start to build "American Japanese gardens" in response to clients who wanted a Japanese garden. Most of his patrons were women, for, as was written in the article "Japan Invades Gardens," "A Japanese garden is about the most chic thing anybody can own these days."⁸ Myaida worked on gardens for such North Shore luminaries as the collector of Japanese art Mary Griggs Burke, but his greatest commission was Marjorie Post's, which came to him via her chief landscape architect at Hillwood.

In 1955 Marjorie Post purchased the twenty-five-acre property Arbremont, which she renamed Hillwood after her previous home on Long Island. Myaida subsequently was hired to redesign an oriental garden already on the grounds. His original blueprint, "Basic Plan for Improvement of

Existing Japanese Garden at Hillwood," shows that the garden had a small waterfall and upper pool, and a larger lower pond with a bridge leading to a small island. Myaida enlarged the upper pool and waterfall, added a second bridge to the island in the lowest of the three ponds, and constructed a new path of stepping stones.

Although Myaida's original plan includes only two stone lanterns and a stone pagoda as ornaments, it is apparent that Marjorie Post wanted to use the garden as a setting for the various metal and stone Asian statuettes she had purchased in the United States and Asia. As the design progressed, Myaida accommodated his client by setting out many of her treasures—including brass goldfish, phoenixes, cranes, and a stone image of the bodhisattva Guanyin—around the multitiered garden. Although these objects were probably not to Myaida's taste, his philosophy was that the garden was for the client and thus should reflect the client's predilections rather than his own. Another sign of this flexibility is found in regard to the color of the garden's torii style gate. Initially Myaida asked his patron whether

Pl. IV. A path of stepping stones brings visitors close to the waterfall as they cross the large lower pond in the Japanese style garden at Hillwood.

Pl. V. The Japanese style garden at Hillwood in April in a photograph of c. 1960.

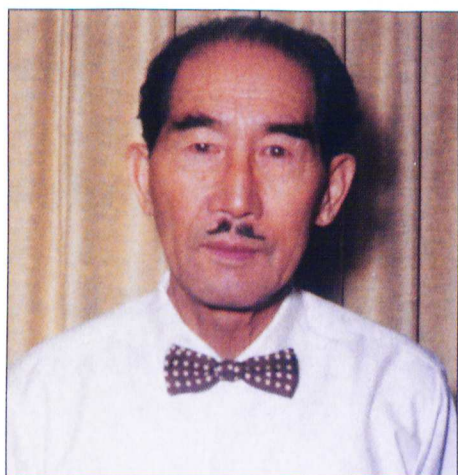


she wanted the gate covered with a wood stain or with red, black, gold, or yellow paint. In a follow-up letter he wrote that “this garden gate is traditionally used in private gardens and should be left unpainted to become weathered. Do you prefer this?”⁹ Ultimately the gate was left unpainted.

Myaida related later that the Hillwood garden “is not like a regular formal Japanese garden.”¹⁰ He was insistent that he did not build “Japanese gardens” but rather gardens that were a “little creative”—what he termed “American Japanese gardens” suited to the specific property and to the personality of the owner. Myaida’s preference was based not only on a distaste for the tedious maintenance required for Japanese gardens, but also out of the desire to create gardens that—like his own life—were a harmonious fusion of Japan and the United States.¹¹

In parallel fashion, Marjorie Post desired a Japanese garden different from the austere, modernist stone and gravel gardens that were coming into fashion in the late 1950s. Photographs and home movies reveal that her garden was often used for elaborate parties at which plastic lanterns would be set along the paths and Asian dancers and acrobats would perform on the lawn. Her garden is thus entirely different from those built in the same period by other heiresses including Natalie Hays Hammond (1904–1985) in Westchester County, New York, Ganna Walska (1891–1984) at her Lotusland estate in Montecito, California, and by Post’s goddaughter Barbara Woolworth Hutton (1912–1979) at Cuernavaca, Mexico.

While the aesthetic appeal of Myaida’s garden is dependent on the taste of each viewer; the designer’s clearly elucidated philosophy of creating a hybrid American



Japanese idiom makes the Hillwood garden an important part of Japanese style garden history. Similarly, the garden is a testament to Marjorie Post’s taste and to her desire to display the objects she had collected.

The recent decision to restore the garden to its appearance under Myaida is a bold precedent in the history of Japanese style gardens, for it recognizes the historical value of the Hillwood garden. The larger rationale for restoring the garden, like that for preserving the collections and house, was succinctly articulated by Marjorie Post herself: “Distinguished houses, outstanding gardens and specialized private collections of artistic or other significant objects are

This page:

Pl. VI. Shogo Myaida (1897–1989), the designer of the Japanese style garden at Hillwood. It is the most elaborate extant garden by Myaida. *Photograph by courtesy of Gloria and Francis Massimo.*

Pl. VII. A stone tower in the Japanese style garden at Hillwood.

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Pl. VIII. Workers dismantling the lower pool of the Japanese style garden at Hillwood at the beginning of the recent restoration project.

Pl. IX. Aquatic plants are added to the lower pond of the Japanese style garden at Hillwood every summer.

now known to be part of the very fabric of cultural history [and] must be permanently preserved for the aesthetic and intellectual benefit of future generations.”¹²

¹ For the restoration of the garden, see Heather Hammett, “Eyes on the Future, Technology Plays a Role in the Restoration of a Historic Garden,” *Landscape Architecture*, October 2001, p. 24.

² For an overview of Japanese style gardens, see the introductory essay in Kendall H. Brown, *Japanese-style Gardens of the Pacific West Coast* (Rizzoli, New York, 1999).

³ This biographical information, and most of that which follows, comes from an oral history interview with Shogo Myaida conducted on July 10, 1988, by Dorothy Rony of the New York Chinatown History Project (now the Museum of Chinese in the Americas) in New York City and Lorie Kitazono of Queens College in Flushing, New York. The text of the interview was provided to the Hillwood Museum and Gardens by Gloria Massimo, a longtime neighbor of Shogo and Grace Myaida in Albertson, New York.

⁴ Photographs of the camp were published in the *Brenau Bulletin*, vol. 16, no. 1 (1925), n.p. (Shogo Myaida papers, Hirasaki National Resource Center, Japanese American National Museum, Los Angeles).

⁵ The nine-page paper was presented to the national conference of the School Garden Association of America



in New York City on June 28, 1938. Because it is written in flawless English, and the oral history indicates that Myaida's spoken English was far from fluent, it is likely that his wife, Grace, or another native speaker edited the text (Shogo Myaida papers).

⁶ The four-page pamphlet also gives a capsule biography, adding the “fact,” not mentioned in his oral history interview, that he studied art at the Imperial Fine Arts Academy in Tokyo.

⁷ Eugenia Sheppard, “Japan Invades Gardens,” *New York Herald Tribune*, June 25, 1958.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Shogo Myaida to Marjorie Post, September 23, 1957 (archives, Hillwood Museum and Gardens, Washington, D.C.).

¹⁰ Sheppard, “Japan Invades Gardens.”

¹¹ Oral history interview (see n. 3).

¹² Introduction to a document dated December 14, 1968, instructing the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., in the management of Hillwood as a museum (Hillwood archives).

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