

BOOK REVIEW

Japanese Gardens and Landscapes, 1650–1950

By Wybe Kuitert

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ix + 372 pages.

Reviewed by Christian TAGSOLD



In 1988 Wybe Kuitert published his book, *Themes, Scenes and Taste in the History of Japanese Garden Art* with the Dutch publisher J. C. Gieben. His historical overview proved so groundbreaking that the University of Hawai'i Press later republished it as *Themes in the History of Japanese Garden Art* in 2002. Kuitert avoided glorifying and essentializing Japanese gardening, and instead offered a rich socio-historical account. Furthermore, he shattered several myths, such as the idea of the Zen garden. Kuitert proved that this concept was only invented in the 1930s for Ryōanji's stone garden, which up to that point had simply been interpreted as a landscape symbolizing a Chinese legend, but not as a deeply spiritual place that reflected the essence of Japanese culture.¹ Kuitert's book, however, had one important shortcoming: it only covered gardens and garden art up to the early seventeenth century. Aficionados of Japanese gardens might argue that the Edo period only saw the decay of gardening anyway, and that most gardens laid out under the rule of the Tokugawa shogunate do not merit much attention. However, in the last two or three decades, Japanese garden historians such as Shirahata Yōzaburō and Hida Norio have published various books and papers in which they rehabilitated the Edo period as a time of lively gardening and garden theory.²

Kuitert's new book, *Japanese Gardens and Landscapes, 1650–1950*, not only follows this trend, but discusses landscaping up to the mid-Showa period. The book is richly illustrated. Many of the maps, drawings, and photographs are unique findings from the archives and fascinating in their own right. Over seven chapters, Kuitert moves through premodern and modern garden history chronologically, but divides the periods topically. Thus, the first three chapters are dedicated to the Edo period. The first treats daimyo gardens, the second, the broad affection for plants, garden manuals, and gardens among commoners, and the third, the tea culture of noble and high-ranking intellectual circles in relation to gardens. From the fourth chapter onwards, Kuitert shows how modernity and Japanese gardens were initially at odds immediately after the Meiji restoration until the dust of the

1 Kuitert 1988, pp. 150–55.

2 The most important of these publications are Shirahata 1997 and Hida 2009.

immense political and social changes settled, and fresh impulses rejuvenated gardening in the twentieth century.

The influx of Western knowledge and techniques did not leave landscape architecture untouched. Those who had seized power and wealth during the Meiji Restoration had new gardens built, whose style reflected this influence. However, as the century drew to its close, garden historians like Ozawa Keijirō rediscovered and saved many historical resources on Japanese garden history, subsequently arguing for their relevance in modern times. By and by, gardens turned into a national symbol which also drew the interest of the West. At the same time, the appreciation of nature changed fundamentally. In chapter 5, Kuitert takes up the example of the Musashino plain, and especially Kunikida Doppo's romantic vision of it, to illustrate how naturalism emerged. This led to the somewhat eclectic approach of landscape architect Ogawa Jihē discussed in the ensuing chapter. Ogawa started his career in Kyoto at the end of the nineteenth century when the old imperial city was rebranding itself to compensate for the loss of its role as the capital. With patrons such as Yamagata Aritomo, for whom he laid out Murin'an, and commissions such as the gardens of the Heian Jingu, Ogawa became well known. He was thus able to extend his work to Tokyo and exert a fundamental influence on Japanese gardening up to the 1940s. Finally, in the last chapter, Kuitert explains the seeds of contemporary gardening and landscape architecture in Japan.

Through stressing the social and cultural context of gardening and embedding his story in a rich flow of sources, Kuitert avoids the essentialism of many books on Japanese gardens. Kuitert, however, cannot completely shed the influence of Japanese garden culturalism. "Tradition" occasionally pops up as a self-explanatory argument for Japanese garden history in some cases where it would have been more illuminating to discuss precisely which figures drew on historical resources and to what ends. The discussion of the influence of the *Sakuteiki*, a garden treatise from the late Heian period, largely reflects the status it has been given by Japanese garden historians in the twentieth century in order to forge a strong tradition:

The *Sakuteiki* so precisely and concisely catches the full essence of garden making that it can be correlated to the English *genius of the place*, both in themselves easily extended to apply to landscape architecture as a whole. (p. 158)

Here, one gets the slightly distorted idea that the *Sakuteiki* consists of a timeless message, while in reality the text fully reflects Heian belief systems that modern readers simply do not share anymore. A more nuanced presentation of the *Sakuteiki* as an invaluable historic source and of the way it was rediscovered and interpreted in modern times would have helped here.

However, the book is so rich in discussion and brings so many historical sources to the readers' attention that these faults are of little consequence in the overall assessment. Kuitert's book makes premodern and modern Japanese garden history highly accessible, while eschewing the common distortions of popular literature. Here we get a serious and comprehensive treatment in an enjoyable prose style which is open to a broad range of readers.

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