

A Treasure of Singularity and Simplicity

Contemplating the Zen garden known as Ryoan-ji

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In the annals of serendipitous military mercy, the decision to spare Kyoto the atom bomb in 1945 must stand out. Perhaps because he had spent his honeymoon here, decades earlier, Secretary of War Henry Stimson saved a city, its population, and an incalculable number of religious and cultural treasures. Rome has churches; Kyoto has, by one rough count, 1,600 Buddhist temples and 400 Shinto shrines.

The sheer depth and variety of beauty, breaking in everywhere, can overwhelm the first-time visitor, especially a Westerner. Kyoto's bustling main streets are visually uninspired, although some quarters boast Parisian-style boulevards lined with patisseries as well as trees. But turning off a busy thoroughfare gives access to a different pace of life: geisha quarters of discreet charm, residential neighborhoods ascending to the hills, and hidden gardens that make you forget urban life. Silence abounds.

Every tourist comes away from this city with a bundle of memories and with sensory overload. And each retains a special fondness for one of its myriad masterpieces. For me, it is a treasure of singularity and simplicity, the Zen garden known as Ryoan-ji.

It is the most photographed garden in the country and also the richest, because, paradoxically, it is the most austere. It has (seemingly) eliminated greenery, water and growing "nature" in favor of rocks, gravel and abstraction. Like tea, the "dry" garden encourages meditation. The sandbox has become a tool and a space for contemplation.

Even in one of Kyoto's most visited sites, private reflection is possible. The orderly, uniformed junior-high-school students and other groups of only slightly less orderly adult tourists can crowd the viewing platform of the abbot's chamber that gives on to the flat garden. (Late afternoon is the best time to visit.) But no one who has suffered the crowds at the Louvre or the Sistine Chapel will find cause for complaint. And the rest of the temple grounds -- including a pond garden filled with the sounds of water, birds, and wind brushing through swaying bamboo and sturdier plantings -- were practically devoid of people during an early summer visit.

Especially by comparison to the famous Golden Pavilion (Kinkaku-ji), 15 minutes away by foot and an equally popular tourist haunt, Ryoan-ji epitomizes what many Westerners think of when they think "Zen." According to Chris Rowthorn, an American journalist who has lived here for almost two decades, the two places embody the two poles of the Japanese spirit: "Ryoan-ji is a walled, introverted garden, meant for contemplation and retreat, while Kinkaku-ji is an extroverted pleasure garden that seems to have no borders. In some ways, this tension is also reflected in Japanese history, with its swings from cloistered isolationism to aggressive expansionism."

This may be too simple.

Kinkaku-ji was built as a retreat by the Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu in 1397, and later converted into a temple. Like Ryoan-ji, it is relatively small compared to some of its more grandiose Kyoto neighbors. The pavilion, 42-feet high, has three stories, each in a different style, the top two shimmering in thick gold leaf. The whole structure is caught by its own reflection in the pond it seems to float upon. A phoenix crowns the shingle-thatched roof. Kinkaku-ji readies you for Ryoan-ji. It uses water, air, lightness and visual mirroring as aids to spiritual reflection. Ryoan-ji does just the

opposite: It looks (mostly) in, not out. It is of the earth, and it offers a different kind of illumination.

A temple first appeared here in 983. At the end of the 15th century someone designed the grounds; further reconstruction followed in 1800. (Such rebuilding is common in Japan, whose aesthetics place little premium on such Western notions as "originality.") An artist named Soami (c. 1500) is generally given credit, although two other names are inscribed on one of the garden's rocks. Perhaps these were his assistants. What we see today may not be identical to what the first viewers saw 500 years ago.

No matter. Thirty-three yards long, 11 yards deep, the garden consists of gravel and sand, raked daily, and 15 rocks of differing shapes and sizes, laid out in five random groupings. Sources for the design include both native Shinto pebble ground covering and small tray gardens popular in Japan and China. The dry style (called *kare-sansui*) seems as distant as possible from Kinkaku-ji's ornate glitter.

Because Zen traditionally teaches simplicity, it favors the aesthetic known now as Wabi-Sabi, taking pleasure in rustic materials, natural imperfections, and muted colors, which lead to a deeper, more sophisticated, sense of beauty. At Ryoan-ji, the wall bordering two sides of the garden sits on a stone base and is made of oiled mud whose pattern changes with the light, the season, the weather. It is topped by tile. It has been designated a national treasure.

As unknowable as the garden's maker is its meaning. Many Japanese gardens display two smaller rocks flanking a larger one to signify Buddha and two disciples. Other configurations spawn other meanings. The garden at Ryoan-ji originally bore the label "Tiger Cubs Crossing the Sea," but no one knows why. A more general interpretation takes the gravel for the sea and the rocks for islands. At this point, no one seems to care.

One fact has struck everyone as significant: It is not possible to see all 15 rocks from any single position along the viewing deck. Perhaps only when full illumination comes, through meditation, will all be visible.

To say that the garden is pure abstraction, like a painting by Kline, Pollock or Rothko, or that it has banished nature and turned entirely inward to facilitate meditation, is itself an exaggeration. Moss -- an important constituent of most Chinese and Japanese landscapes -- has grown around the base of several of the larger rocks. More prominently, the deck commands a view of the trees on the outside. The garden never entirely excludes the world.

Nature surrounds the enclosure. Ryoan-ji, like all gardens, looks different throughout the year. One large weeping cherry tree rises on the left side; its blossoms overhang the garden in spring. When I visited, the only touch of color throughout Kyoto came from the fading azaleas. The plum, cherry, quince, wisteria and iris had passed; autumn's chrysanthemums and flaming maples, as well as winter's camellias, had yet to arrive. The hues of summer's green alone enlivened rock and stone. "Dry" is not quite the right word.

Three centuries after someone made Ryoan-ji, William Blake instructed us in how "to see a world in a grain of sand." The English Romantic mystic was not thinking of the gravel and stone of the Zen garden, but he might as well have been.

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