

The Japanese Garden at Pocantico

Cynthia Bronson Altman

Less than fifty kilometres north of Manhattan, on the highest point of the hills to the east of the Hudson River, is a quiet garden that could be in the heart of Japan, perhaps in the eastern (Higashiyama) precinct of Kyoto. Cherry trees are bedecked in mantles of snow-white and pale-pink, their petals floating gently to the still waters of a pond and the carpeted banks of verdant moss. The pale yellows of spring daffodils and the glowing oranges of summer day lilies border a meandering stream, and closely pruned azalea hedges throughout the garden display vibrant flame-red, pink and cool-white blossoms in June; in the autumn, the hills are ablaze with the multi-hued maples, brighter for their contrast to the deep greens of pine and yew.

This Japanese garden is at the country home of John D. Rockefeller (1839-1937) which was built just north of Tarrytown in an area known as Pocantico (the word the Rockefellers used when referring to the garden in their correspondence). Called Kykuit (Dutch for 'lookout', the name given to the hill by early settlers), the house was designed by the leading country-house architects of the day – William Adams Delano (1874-1960) and Charles Holmes Aldrich (1871-1940) – and the landscape was planned by William Welles Bosworth (1869-1960). The Japanese garden was created in 1908 as part of the early landscaping surrounding Kykuit.

The year 2006 marks the 50th anniversary of the found-

ing of the Asia Society by John D. Rockefeller 3rd (1906-78). The occasion is currently being celebrated with the Asia Society exhibition, 'A Passion for Asia: the Rockefeller Family Collects', which displays sculpture, ceramics, prints and textiles amassed by three generations of Rockefellers. However, the family's love of Asian art extended beyond these objects to two gardens indebted to the landscape tradition of the Far East – the Japanese garden at Kykuit, and the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Garden in Seal Harbor, Maine. This article offers a history and tour of the Japanese garden at the Rockefeller family home, now a property of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and will consider the garden's early form of 1908 and its expansion in mid-century. An important example of the Japanese garden in America, its design combines elements of several types: stroll garden, hill and pond, dry landscape (*kare-sansui*) and tea garden.

Adjacent to the house are gardens in the Beaux-Arts style that form extensions to the rooms that open out onto them. Bosworth drew inspiration from the gardens of Italy, then in vogue, which had been brought to the American consciousness through such publications as Charles Platt's *Italian Gardens* (1894) and Edith Wharton's *Italian Villas and their Gardens* (1904), the latter illustrated by Maxfield Parrish. Terraces descend toward the Hudson to the west; sculpture and fountains after Renaissance and classical models adorn

(Fig. 1) The Japanese garden at Pocantico, c. 1920
The Rockefeller Archive Center, The Rockefeller University, Sleepy Hollow, New York
(Photography by Mattie Edwards Hewitt)



the gardens; bay, jasmine and dwarf citrus were placed in front of pavilions and in pergolas in spring and summer. Bosworth incorporated elements from many traditions in the formal gardens; from the French tradition he chose *allées* of carefully pruned linden, from the Islamic, a shallow rill with seven bubbling fountain jets; boxwood topiaries of fanciful shapes were imported from Holland for the inner garden; and roses from England filled the semicircular garden to the north.

Below these sumptuous formal gardens, Bosworth planned a landscape inspired by Japan. He and John D. Rockefeller, Jr. (1874-1960), who oversaw the construction of house and garden for his father,

...proceeded to plan an artificial Japanese-style brook and pond built in a natural depression below the terraces 'which has always been very wet after rain'. The pond would ... serve several functions: it would beautify the otherwise marshy runoff area; it would serve as a water hazard for the nearby golf course; and ... as a source for dirt fill needed elsewhere, which would defray the cost of building it ... (Berger, p. 221)

This garden was created in the years following the many international expositions of the late 19th and early 20th century which brought to the West an awareness of the aesthetic traditions of Asia. The 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia included a Japanese village, and the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition included a Japanese garden on an island, parts of which remain. For the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition, two structures were brought

from Japan: a 14th century temple gate (later given to the city of Philadelphia, but destroyed by fire in 1955) and a building modelled on a hall of the imperial palace in Kyoto (Gill, 1994). The influence of these expositions on industry, art and design was far-reaching and profound. The fascination with the exotic extended to landscape design, and botanical material was imported for the creation of gardens reflecting those of China and Japan. One of the earliest Japanese gardens in the US was planted in 1885 for Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840-1924), a woman keenly interested in the arts of Japan through her association with the circle in Boston collecting Japanese art for the Museum of Fine Arts. In Canandaigua, New York, a Japanese garden and teahouse was created between 1906 and 1910 at the Sonnenberg Gardens under the direction of K. Wadamori. In 1909-10 a Japanese garden was designed by Takeo Shiota (1881-1946) for Edith and George Gould at Georgian Court, in Lakewood, New Jersey. In 1915 Shiota designed the Japanese Garden at Brooklyn Botanic Garden, one of the earliest such gardens open to the public (Martin, p. 41). Several gardens from this early period are still in existence in the northeast of the US.

Archival photographs and letters record the 1908-09 Japanese garden and teahouse at Pocantico (Figs 1 and 2). The early garden was a hill and pond garden, gathering the water of the natural wetland area. Azaleas, pines, Japanese maple and weeping cherries were planted. To the north, a path and stream banked with juniper and carefully pruned



(Fig. 2) The 1909 Japanese teahouse at Pocantico, c. 1920 The Rockefeller Archive Center The Rockefeller University, Sleepy Hollow, New York (Photography by Mattie Edwards Hewitt)

ornamental shrubs bordered the rolling lawns of the golf course. The fountains and pools in the formal gardens around Kykuit were designed to spill into the stream and the waters were then recirculated from a pump at the end of its course, a distance of about 800 metres.

The first teahouse was completed in 1909. The use of mahogany, an expensive wood, caused some consternation:

The carpenter Uyeda ... had been hired on the basis of a \$3,500 model he had built on the Pfizer estate [probably the Pfizer estate in Bernardsville, NJ] and a \$5,000 estimated for the job at Pocantico, of which \$1,700 had been for material. He had then blithely ordered mahogany timbers, which were not included in his estimate, and in non-stock sizes The materials cost had doubled: Uyeda's ... estimate for the whole job stood at \$8,000, and the little Tea House would finally cost \$10,000. (Berger, pp. 289-90)

John D. Rockefeller, Jr. wrote to Bosworth on 2 May 1909:

... That mahogany was to be used was never suggested to me, nor did I dream of such an idea. Mrs Pfizer's house, as I understand it, was not of mahogany and there was nothing to lead me to suppose that mahogany was contemplated for our tea house This Tea House is only another instance where in our effort to do a great many things ... without undue delay and in an acceptable way we have become involved in a standard of work and an expense which was not contemplated at the outset nor in my judgment justified at the present time. (Rockefeller Archive Center [RAC], OMR III, series 2, box 36, folder 348)

The panels of the outer walls (*amado*) slide into pockets, and lattice panels covered with translucent paper (*shōji*) move aside to reveal the views of the surrounding gardens. Interior sliding panels (*fusuma*) divide the space inside. The original roof, a combination of hip and gable (*irimoya*), was of thatch; by 1922 leaks had developed and it was replaced with copper.

Letters indicate that the gardener, Takahashi, arrived at the gardens in 1910 and was also working there in 1916. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. wrote to Bosworth on 5 July 1910:

I enclose herewith a letter recently received from a Japanese of the name of Takahashi, who says he is a gardener. I have made no reply. It may be worth your while to look him up. Possibly he could do the planting under your supervision. Perhaps you will advise me further in the matter. (RAC, OMR III, series 2, box 20, folder 182)

Six years later, on 1 August, he again wrote to Bosworth:

Takahashi is making some changes and additions to the Japanese Brook plantings. He says the original plantings were not large enough and has already ordered \$500 worth of new material and wants \$500 worth more. Can you conveniently visit Pocantico, at an early day, look over what he has done and see if you approve what he proposes? (*ibid.*)

Bosworth reports on the meeting a few days later (7 August):

I stopped at Pocantico on Saturday ... – and interviewed Takahashi – looking at what he has done – and wishes to do – It all seems to me to be well advised and advantageous. I recommend supplying

him with the additional plants he wants. He thinks the dogs are out of place at the bridge - according to true oriental tradition, and should be built into the bank in some way. I couldn't just make out how - I reminded him of my original scheme of some light bamboo shelters in the open space opposite the tea house. (McCauley, p. 206)

By 1919, in the privately printed *The Gardens of Kijkuit*, with text written by Bosworth, the garden was described thus:

... This brook has been designed and planted in Japanese style by two native Japanese gardeners, Mr Takshashi [*sic*] and Mr Uyeda, from the Emperor's gardens in Tokio. The waterfalls, miniature mountains, dwarf planting, bridges, lakes and Tea House, built of mahogany, are all according to the best Japanese tradition and of themselves constitute an extensive garden. Weather-beaten rocks, carefully transported from the neighboring woods so that the marks of time should not be obliterated, are here composed in harmonies and contrasts unknown to European art. A variety of stone lanterns ornament these gardens. The watercourse forms a beautiful pond with an island reached by picturesque stepping stones, and after meandering through the hollows along the entrance driveway, tumbles at length into a rocky gorge overshadowed by drooping willow trees.

Throughout the years since its creation, the garden has provided respite and enjoyment to several generations of Rockefellers at Pocantico. Abby Aldrich Rockefeller (1874-1948) wrote often to her sons who were overseas during World War II and described for them the details of daily life. A letter of 1 August 1944, to Winthrop, offers a glimpse of their regard for this special place (Fig. 3):

Since I wrote you last a great deal has been going on in a completely domestic and family way. I think I will begin to tell you the news backwards. Yesterday Mary-Nelson and I took three of her children and the three little Laurance girls on a picnic. We opened up the Japanese teahouse for them to see They were really very good and did what we told them to, took off their shoes and didn't poke their fingers through the screens. (RAC, RG2, OMR, Series AAR, sub-series 1, box 5 AAR to WR, 1943-44)

The garden and teahouse changed little in the first half of the century. In 1960 after the death of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., the 1909 mahogany teahouse (today called the Shrine) was moved about 150 metres west to a grove of white pine, and a new house and an elaboration of the garden was commissioned by Nelson Rockefeller (1908-79), with the help of his sister-in-law, Mrs John D. Rockefeller 3rd (1909-92). Junzō Yoshimura (1908-97) was the architect and David Engel (b. 1922) designed the garden.

Mrs John D. Rockefeller 3rd wrote to Junzo Yoshimura on 14 November 1960:

... since Mr Rockefeller, Jr. passed away, the next generation ... has become interested in redoing the garden more authentically and would also like to replace the present building with a very simple and beautiful garden pavilion of a classical style which you know

so well along the order of the Katsura Villa garden pavilions. Because of John's and my special interest in Japan, my brother-in-law, Nelson ... has asked me to work on this project on his behalf. I have therefore consulted our mutual friend Arthur Drexler at the Museum of Modern Art as to who might do the landscaping and the architecture. We have chosen a young man, Mr David Engel, whom I believe you know, to make plans for the redoing of the garden, and he has already outlined a most interesting and imaginative plan. Because of your expertise with building in this country and because of your knowledge and appreciation of Japanese classical architecture, Arthur and I feel that you would be the ideal person to help us on the designing of the new pavilion, if you could possibly be persuaded to do so I would also be interested to know whether you think it would be feasible to have such a pavilion built in Japan and shipped over to the United States in the same manner in which the exhibition house at the Museum of Modern Art was carried out. (RAC, NAR possessions, box 24)

Six years earlier, Yoshimura had designed a structure for 'The House in the Garden' series at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), which also included structures by architects Richard Buckminster Fuller (1895-1983) in 1941, Marcel Breuer (1902-81) in 1949, and Gregory Ain (b. 1908) in 1950. In 1954 after the exhibition concluded, the house by Yoshimura was given to the city of Philadelphia for Fairmont Park, where it can be visited today (called the *Shōfūsō*, Pine Breeze Villa).

For Pocantico, Yoshimura designed a small house for the edge of the pond (the house at MoMA was over seventy



(Fig. 3) From left: Abby, John 3rd and Nelson Rockefeller at the 1909 Japanese teahouse, c. 1912
The Rockefeller Archive Center, The Rockefeller University, Sleepy Hollow, New York

square metres; the Pocantico house is less than forty). It was built in the *sukiya* style, characterized by restrained elegance and traditional rustic simplicity, which reached its zenith in the Momoyama era (1569-1603) when it was used both for the residences of Japanese nobility and for abbots' quarters within temple precincts (Fig. 4). The interior of the teahouse is divided by *fusuma* into one room of twelve tatami (a tatami



(Fig. 4) The teahouse at Pocantico designed by Junzō Yoshimura, 1964
(Photography by Ezra Stoller © Esto)



(Fig. 5) The Ridge-pole Raising Ceremony in the teahouse at Pocantico conducted by Susumi Yoshida, with Rockefeller family members: (from left) John D. Rockefeller 3rd, Mrs John D. Rockefeller 3rd, Nelson Rockefeller, Mrs Laurance Rockefeller and Laurance Rockefeller, 8 December 1962
The Rockefeller Archive Center, The Rockefeller University, Sleepy Hollow, New York

is approximately 1 by 2 metres) and one of six. A long low lacquer table in the centre of the larger room is next to an area where tea may be prepared. Against the north wall are shelves which display treasured objects, and the *tokonoma*, the space for a hanging scroll and arrangement of flowers. The *shōji* of the exterior walls open to a view of distant mountains across the pond to the west, and a more intimate

hillside garden with a square water basin to the east. The structure is larger than a traditional teahouse, and includes a small kitchen and a bath with a deep-soaking tub of cedar. Much of the building was prefabricated in Kyoto by the firm of Nakamura Komuten. During the winter of 1961/62, their craftsmen completed the project on site working under a tent. On 8 December 1962, a Ridge-pole Raising Ceremony (*Jōtōshiki*) was held, with Shinto, Buddhist and Christian prayers for the protection of the house from all the elements, and for the prosperity and safety of the craftsmen, engineers, architects and owners (Fig. 5).

The upper section of the garden was redesigned and expanded by David Engel in the early 1960s. He had studied in Kyoto in the 1950s under Tansai Sano, a seventh-generation garden master at the Zen temple Ryōan-ji at Daitoku-ji in Kyoto, and had worked with Sano on the garden for Yoshimura's MoMA house and for its garden in Philadelphia. For Pocantico, Engel created a stroll garden through an ever-changing landscape. From the main gate at the road, a path of stepping stones banked by liriopie (border grass, or lily turf) leads over an arched stone bridge through a small gate, with a roof made from the bark of *hinoki* cypress, to the pond in front of the teahouse. Beyond the teahouse the path divides. One fork leads through a small gate (with a roof of *madake* bamboo) to the dry-landscape garden (Fig. 6). The design is patterned



(Fig. 6) The dry landscape garden at Pocantico, 1964
(Photography by Ezra Stoller © Esto)

on the 15th century garden at Ryōan-ji in Kyoto. Arranged within the expanse of raked white gravel are five groups of rocks, which can be seen as islands in a vast sea or mountain peaks rising through banks of clouds or mist. At the north end of this garden is the fourth gate, roofed with *hinoki* bark. The other fork, to the east, crosses an arched granite bridge and leads to stepping stones running down the middle of a stream (Fig. 7) and across a deep pool where carp once swam, at the foot of a waterfall four metres high. A stucco wall capped with dove-brown roof tiles creates the western boundary, separating the garden from the open lawns of the golf course. A grove of bamboo shades a section of the upper path. Stones of many shapes and sizes form the pathways: cobblestones from a street in Albany, smooth round river stones, large and small squares of grey granite, and roof tiles placed on edge. A millstone marks the spot where the two paths diverge. Stone lanterns, pagodas and water basins grace the paths. To the west of the pond in front of the teahouse are two conical piles of gravel; a low azalea hedge, clipped to mirror their shape, leads the eye to the rolling lawns and further to the distant cliffs across the Hudson; this illustrates the Japanese design principle of *shakkei*, or borrowed scenery, bringing the macrocosm of the outer world into the microcosm of the garden. Moss and grey-green lichen cover the walls of stone and lend the soft patina of age – the quality so prized in Japan as *sabi*.

The hollow tones of the *shishi-odoshi* (lit. deer-scare) – a rhythmic knock of bamboo on rock – the splash of the waterfall into a deep pool, the rustle of breezes through the bamboo, mute the rush of the world today, creating a space for contemplation and meditation, for a mindful walk and tea ceremony, transporting one to another world, another reality.

The garden is part of the Pocantico Historic Area, given to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, in 1979. This landscape which offered inspiration to the Rockefeller family over the years, is shared today with the many visitors who come to enjoy its tranquillity.

Cynthia Bronson Altman is the curator at Kykuit, the Rockefeller family home in Tarrytown, New York.

Kykuit is a site of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and is maintained and administered by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. Historic Hudson Valley operates the visitation programme.

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(Fig. 7) The garden stream at Pocantico, 1964
(Photography by Ezra Stoller © Esto)

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