

The Birth of the Zen Garden - Karesansui

The creation of Zen gardens in Japan demonstrates the application of effectual logic to overcome constraints and innovate in challenging circumstances. The development is actually a good example of the effectual transformation.

The style of Zen gardens known today as “Karesansui” or Japanese Rock Gardens was created in the Muromachi period (1336-1573). Karesansui gardens were laid out in small spaces of temples, which were often surrounded by similar monks' cells. While constructed in extremely small spaces, Karesansui abstractly expressed the great nature of "deep mountains and valleys" using a simple and refined garden style. Karesansui gardens were created not only to decorate the space, but also to demonstrate the spirituality of Zen, which considered the natural environment as a place for cultivation, as well as to provide a place for Zen monks to practice their asceticism.

This innovation of Karesansui gardens as the minimalism can be easily understood by comparing them with gardens such as Tenryu-ji Temple Garden, which is the pinnacle of Zen gardens as Japanese Water Gardens established in early 14th Century.



Pic-1. Tenryu-ji

A Fresh Start from Nothing

In the late Muromachi period (16th century), when Karesansui gardens were created, the authority of the imperial court, led by the emperor, was on the wane, and conflicts among the samurai powers intensified. The Onin War (1485-1493) turned Kyoto into a land of turmoil, and the city was devastated by the warfare. However, as the reconstruction began after the War, Zen temples were also rebuilt.

One such example is Daisen-in of Daitoku-ji Temple, erected by KOGAKU Soutan in 1513. Daisen-in (pic-2) was one of the independent monks' quarters built within Daitoku-ji temple as a head temple complex. However, it is a very small area of the head

temple. No source of water to create a pond and few available materials for landscaping.

It was a challenging task for Soutan and his Zen monks colleagues to realize a "Zen garden" , such as the established one in Tenryu-ji Temple.

Who are we? What can we do?

They said, "We can create an island without a pond.

Even if there is no water, we can create currents and waves. "

Thus, using the Karesansui technique, a waterfall formation was created using stones that were available on the spot, and together with a small raised area, Turtle Island and Crane Island were created. Here, the planting was also used as an expression of the deep mountains and valleys. The gravel used in the front garden of the temple was spread over the small garden, and a stream pattern was drawn on the surface to represent the flow of water.

Karesansui was established as a garden style with Zen spirituality that accepted such a difficult task as a form of cultivation. Although it is difficult to understand and succinctly explain the spirituality of Zen, Zen emphasizes "investigation of the true self" as a cultivation for attaining enlightenment. There is also the teaching that accepting one's own circumstances and taking independent action is the way to truth. The effectual thinking and principles of action of these Zen monks, demonstrated in the face of difficult

circumstances and restrictions, resulted in Karesansui, a refined garden style through effectual transformation.



Pic-2. Panoramic view of Karesansui, Daisen-in Temple, Masuo Koogure, 1997