

A Historical Walk Around Kyoto



Ryoanji Rock Garden

Ryoanji Temple is located in northwest Kyoto near one of the most popular tourist spots in Kyoto, the Golden Pavilion known as Kinkakuji Temple. Dating back to the late 15th century, repairs to this UNESCO World Heritage Site are necessary from time to time. Current repairs to a section of weather damaged roofing are scheduled to be completed by February 25, 2010.

Zen

Zen is a school of Buddhism which was brought to Japan from China. Zen emphasizes wisdom through experience in the attainment of enlightenment, particularly in the form of meditation. This stands in contrast to alternatives such as logic, reasoning or traditions of dogma. There are three major schools of Zen that currently exist in Japan, Soto, Rinzai and Obaku. This temple as well as neighboring Kinkakuji Temple belongs to Rinzai which is the second largest school.

Japanese Zen Rock Gardens

While Ryoanji Temple has many beautiful Japanese gardens to enjoy, it is most famous for its *karesansui* (枯山水) or dry landscape garden. As the name implies there is no water in this type of garden, which also means there are no trees or plants themselves. Instead the focus is on carefully placed stones and gravel around them that represent miniature landscapes borrowed from nature. These garden scenes are inspired by Chinese and Japanese black ink landscape paintings.

The Mystery of Ryoanji Temple

A lot of mystery and intrigue surround this garden. Its exact history is not really known. Details such as the date it was created and the designer are still in debate, however it is most commonly attributed to Soami (1455 - 1525) a famed landscape painter of the time. Interpretations range from "A mother tiger with her cubs crossing a river" to the idea that all fifteen stones cannot be viewed at once unless one reaches enlightenment. Recently, mathematical shape analysis has shown that the empty space is implicitly structured and is aligned with the temple's architecture. Researchers propose that this design subconsciously represents a branched tree thereby creating a sense of peacefulness. This garden is said to inspire peace and contemplation. So just like a good mystery, this garden, an interpretation of nature itself, is often the focus of the contemplation which it is meant to inspire. Perhaps it is contemplation like this that helps one overcome the normal boundaries of logic.

By Donald Reynolds