

## THE POETRY OF A GARDEN



*Taihu rock*

There are many kinds of gardens. Flower gardens. Vegetable gardens. Zen rock gardens. One of my favorites is in the middle of New York City. It is the Astor Court at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Opened to the public in 1981, this is a replica of a Chinese scholar's garden, an elegant retreat far from the intrigues of worldly life. Designed for a scholar living as a recluse, this is a garden planned for serenity: a moon-gate entrance; zones of dark and light that represent the balance of yin and yang; tall intricately carved wooden doors and windows; a patterned brick floor that contrasts with live trees and bamboo; a covered walkway and pavilion with graceful roofs; spectacular rocks.

A scholar's library is a workroom; a scholar's garden is an oasis of tranquility. In the library one reads and studies to acquire knowledge; in the garden one brings poetry to bear on one's studies in a search for wisdom. Beautiful to the senses, the scholar's garden nourishes the soul. Through an elaborate arrangement of natural elements the scholar's garden becomes a place of contemplation, an infinite space in a confined place

– a spiritual utopia. Chinese scholars gave their gardens long poetic names such as The Garden of the Master of the Fishing Nets (the name of the garden reproduced at the Met) or The Garden of the Unsuccessful Politician. It was usual for these scholars to design their houses and gardens themselves, as a form of artistic expression.

The formal aesthetic of the scholar's garden creates its sense of harmony and everything in the garden has symbolic meaning. For example, the impressive sculptural Taihu rocks, found only in the Tai lake district of China, represent wisdom and immortality. During the twelfth century Song dynasty, these rocks were the most expensive objects in the empire. In the Astor garden court, a huge Taihu rock with irregular cavities and round holes or "eyes" dominates the southern wall. The great value of this rock comes from its proportions, its unique perforations, and its distinct silhouette.

The rocks, combined with pools and streams of water, form the basis of the garden's plan. Water is seen as nourishing and restorative. By always following its own path, water represents that which is true to its own nature. The wise scholar-poet, like water, does only what is completely natural. In the garden, the softness or yin aspect of the water is offset by the solidity or yang aspect of the rocks.

Wooden furniture and other structures in the garden are built using traditional joinery techniques. Nails are never used. The garden plants, like the rocks and water, are appreciated not only for their beauty but also for their symbolic value. Live bamboo represents integrity, a strong and resilient moral character. The lotus, associated with spiritual flowering, symbolizes purity and the soul. And the chrysanthemum, with its autumn bloom, flowering at a time when most plants wither and die, symbolizes the scholar-poet who achieves perfection late in life.

A scholar sips jasmine tea  
in the garden.  
It is quiet,  
the chrysanthemum is blossoming.

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*A Chinese Garden Court: The Astor Court of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*

By Alfreda Murck and Wen Fong

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