

***Tenshin-en*: A Japanese Garden at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts**

Julie Moir Messervy

An urban haven for contemplation that embraces two cultures.

For many Westerners, the idea of owning a Japanese garden is an unreachable dream. Busy, stressed in their workaday world, they imagine returning home to a serene paradise of ancient stones perfectly set in a bed of moss, flanked by rippling waters of a *koi* pond. Here, in this miniature world, they can give voice to their inner thoughts, day-dreams, and spiritual longings; they can become their true selves in a garden of beauty.

Few of us will have the space, find the time, or have the money to create such a sanctuary in our lives. How fortunate it is, then, that the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, built just such a garden for all of us to experience and enjoy. Sitting within its walls, closed off from busy Boston traffic and passersby, one feels sheltered in an oasis, paradoxically surrounded by, yet removed from, present-day urban life and times.

One sits in a curiously transcendent world, feeling the stones as venerable souls set with a modern freshness and vigor, reminiscent of rocky shorelines of New England, yet universal in the abstract power of their dry composition. At first, the visitor feels overwhelmed by the energy of the place, nearly 200 rocks, set here and there, and

senses a mixture of design prowess and accident. Equally impressive are the lushness and quantity of the plantings: over 70 species—1750 specimens in all—adorn the landscape, changing the feeling and form of the garden through the seasons. In early spring, the white-panicked flowers of andromeda hang as tresses from the shiny green of the shrub's leaves. Mid-spring into early summer brings a continuous bloom of azaleas in shades of white, fuchsia, rose, salmon, and pale pink, hummocking as small hills at the feet of tall stones and lanterns. Early to midsummer brings the purple, yellow, and white iris, standing in upright sheaths behind rocks. In fall, the maples, azaleas, and enkianthus turn brilliant hues of red, yellow, and orange to mark the onset of colder weather, before the snows drape the garden in winter. One could attend the garden every day and discover oneself anew through the continuously changing appearance of plants amidst the unchanging stolidity of the stone elements.

A Merging of Cultures

Tenshin-en, the Garden of the Heart of Heaven, is a 10,000-square-foot contemplative viewing garden located at the north side

The Japanese lantern located near the water basin at Tenshin-en. Photo courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



The crushed gravel “sea” at Tenshin-en. Raking gives the effect of ripples on the water’s surface. Photo courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

of the West Wing of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Completed in 1988, the garden is named in honor of one of the museum’s first curators of Asiatic Art—Okakura Kakuzo, also known as Okakura Tenshin.

Tenshin-en is one of New England’s few semipublic viewing gardens in the Japanese style. A true Japanese garden, according to cultural traditions, derives—and takes inspiration—from the landscape around it. In this spirit the project team of landscape artists flew over the New England region in a small plane to gain a sense of its geography and aesthetic qualities. The resulting garden is an interpretation of two cultures, combining the depth of meaning of Japanese garden symbol-

ism with a feeling of beauty and repose that evokes the New England landscape. Rocky coastlines, deep forests, soft hillsides, and craggy mountains are abstracted and recreated to remind viewers of the beauty and diversity of this region. The intent, according to Professor Nakane, the garden’s designer, was to create in the garden “the essence of mountains, the ocean and islands . . . as I have seen them in the beautiful landscape of New England.”

Each rock, plant, and paving stone was chosen from local materials and combined with artifacts selected from the Museum’s collection or brought from Japan. Together these intermingle to create a contrast



Looking along the curved path towards the gate at Tenshin-en. Photo courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

between natural materials and human objects and arrangements.

Origins of *Tenshin-en*

The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, asked an internationally known garden master from Kyoto, Professor Kinsaku Nakane, to design and construct a Japanese garden as an important addition to the museum's world-renowned Asiatic collection. Funds for the project were donated by the Nippon Television Network Corporation, Mr. Yosoji Kobayashi, Chairman of the Board.

As the garden master's project coordinator, my responsibility was to assemble a project team to carry out his conceptual designs.

The Halvorson Company, a Boston landscape architecture firm, was chosen to produce the technical documents and details necessary to build a garden of another culture in this country. Our mandate was to combine an acute sensitivity to the nuances of Japanese design with a full understanding of the legal and technical requirements of building projects in this country. Also included in the team were various subcontractors from this country and from Japan, each of whom brought specialized training and craftsmanship to different aspects of the project. The landscape contractor was Donald B. Curran, Incorporated of Ipswich, Massachusetts.

The garden evolved through a style of collaboration quite different from normal American landscape architectural practice. The garden master's concept and execution were upheld by the efforts of every team member in an atmosphere of unstinting commitment to the creation of a work of art: the Museum's curatorial staff guided the garden process and provided and conserved many of its artifacts; the Italian masons set Kyoto roof tiles on its walls; the Japanese carpenters built a traditional gate in Kyoto, dismantled it, and reinstalled it on site with the American carpenters' help. All upheld the master's concept, in a collaboration of the highest order.

On one of his trips to the site, Professor Nakane was present to set the critical elements that make up the structure of the garden. To watch him was to see a true master at work. For six hot days in July, 1987, Professor Nakane established the positions of the rocks in the garden. Attending to an image of power and beauty that existed only in his sketches and in his imagination, he set almost two hundred stones.

With the aid of a 100-foot hydraulic crane, its highly attentive operator, and three landscape crews, the shape of the garden began to emerge. One by one, the boulders, filling eight tractor-trailer trucks, were bound and chained to the crane's wire. Like the conductor of a symphony orchestra, Professor Nakane would indicate to one crew how deep into the ground they should dig, and to another which way the stone should face—and where its head, feet, front, and back should be positioned. The crew placed the stones, some weighing as much as eight tons, in the ground and made minute adjustments under Professor Nakane's watchful eye. All this was done without a word spoken, as Professor Nakane speaks only Japanese.

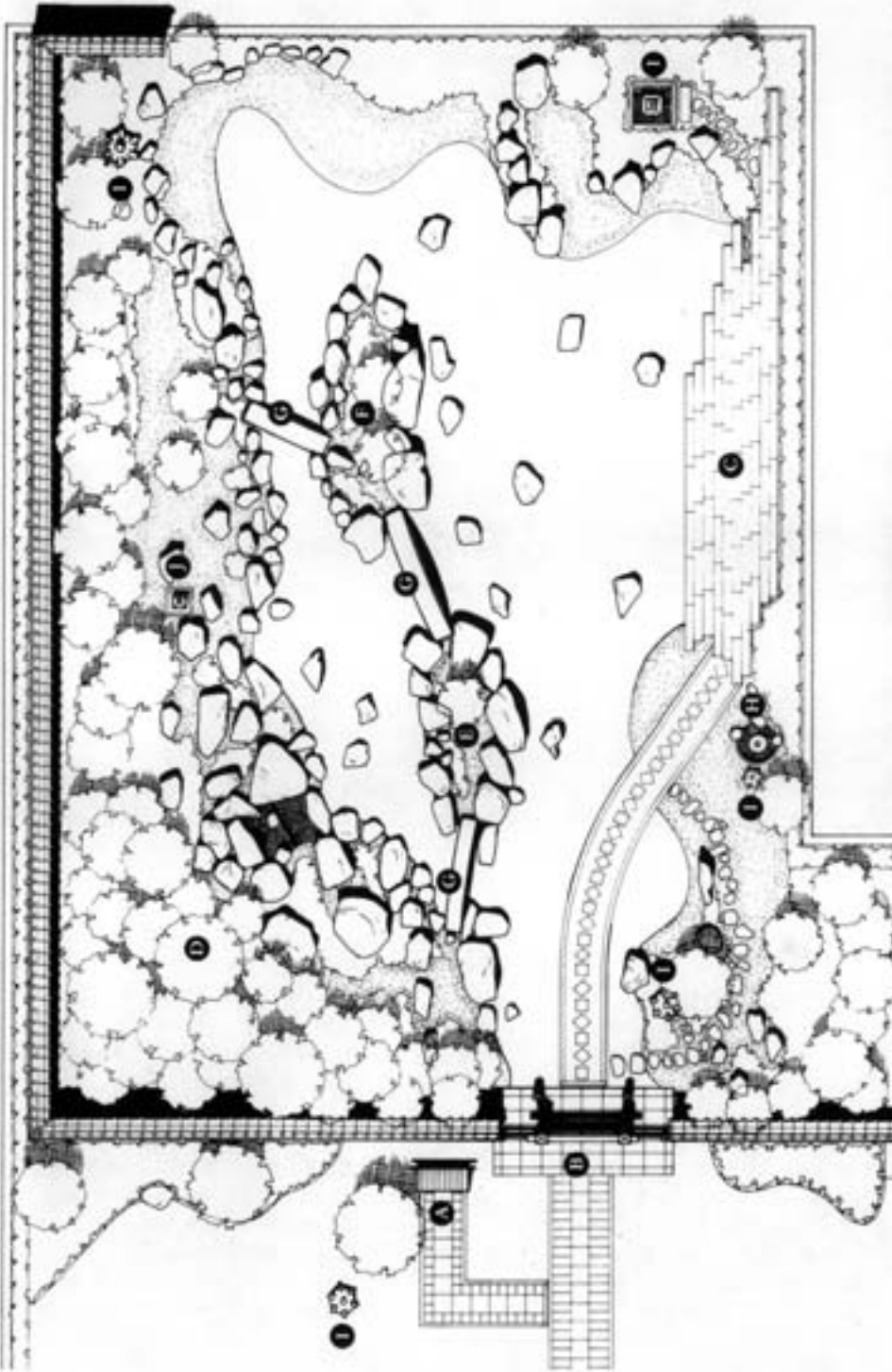
Professor Nakane, in a calm and almost casual way, would set one stone at the *takiguchi* (waterfall), the next stone on the *tsurujima* (Crane Island), and the next in the foreground of the garden. He saw the final result in his mind's eye and worked around the whole garden to balance his composition right from the start. As well as fitting into the design as a whole, each stone grouping had to be balanced in its own right—all of which Professor Nakane accomplished with split-second decisions. When the composition was complete, nothing needed to be altered; the whole felt dynamic and yet balanced.

After he had set the stones, Professor Nakane returned to Japan while the walls and new sidewalks were installed. On his next trip to Boston he set fifty-two trees on the day he arrived, but unexpectedly returned to Japan the following day, called back because of a death at the Osaka University of Fine Arts, which he heads. At that point, his son and chief assistant Shiro Nakane took over and set the remaining plantings, ornaments, and stepping stones, and supervised the erection of the Japanese gate.

Professor Nakane returned one more time for the opening of the garden on October 24, 1988. At that time, he declined to speak but chose instead to paint a sign for the garden in *sumie*—Japanese ink. Inscribed is *ten*, *shin*, and *en* (with Chinese characters) in his own beautiful calligraphic hand. Since then, *Tenshin-en* has been opened to the public from spring through fall and is visited by thousands of people every year.

Design Features of *Tenshin-en*

Tenshin-en is designed as a viewing garden in the *karesansui* style, harkening back to Zen temple gardens of the fifteenth century in Japan. *Kare* means "dry," *san*, "moun-



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| A | Information board | 案内板 | |
| B | Gate | 門 | |
| C | Terrace | 壇・テラス | |
| D | Mt. Sumeru with dry waterfall | 須弥山と水無し滝 | |
| E | Tortoise Island | 亀島 | |
| F | Crane Island | 鶴島 | |
| G | Bridges | 橋 | |
| H | Water basin | 手水鉢 | |
| I | Lanterns | 燈籠 | |
| J | Pagoda | 塔 | |
| K | North Gallery | ノース・ギャラリー | |

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tain," and *sui*, "water"; thus it is a "dry mountain water" garden, or a dry landscape garden. Water is suggested by the raked gravel "sea," which unites all the landforms of the garden—the mountains, islands, and rocky shoreline formed by mounded earth and rocks.

Tenshin-en relates to its surroundings by a technique called *shakkei*, that is, by borrowing and echoing the distant landscape and bringing it into the garden walls. Curved shorelines and bridges within the garden echo the lines of the Fenway landscape that abuts the museum on its north side, designed by America's premier garden master, Frederick Law Olmsted. Olmsted designed parks and green spaces during the late 1800s, creating Boston's "Emerald Necklace," the park system that links open space from Franklin Park to the Boston Commons as one nearly continuous sweep of green. Although conceived and designed on a scale far vaster than *Tenshin-en's* miniature landscape, Olmsted understood the need to evoke a harmonious understanding of nature, as he wrote in 1879: "We want a ground to which people may easily go after their day's work is done, and where they may stroll for an hour, seeing, hearing, and feeling nothing of the bustle and jar of the streets, where they shall, in effect, find the city put far away from them."

A Deeper Reading of the Garden

Visitors who understand the garden's symbolism will probably have a richer experience of it. The dry "waterfall" (*takiguchi*) to the back and left of the garden represents the Buddhist concept of *shumisen* or Mt. Sumeru, a mythic mountain thought to support the heavens above and the world below, and around which the universe was believed to be centered. The two "islands" in the left and right center of the garden are two of the "Mystic Isles of the Immortals," Taoist mythical islands said to bring immortality and prosperity to those who incorporated

them in their gardens. To the left is *kamejima*, the Tortoise Island; to the right is *tsurujima*, the Crane Island. Looking carefully, one can see the head, feet, tail, and flippers of the tortoise, and the head, wings, and tail of the crane.

According to Professor Nakane, "The mountains and islands symbolize the natural beauty of this region [New England], and, at the same time, mean enduring prosperity and happiness for the Museum visitors." If one studies the garden's design features, the rocky coastline to the right recalls the Maine Coast, and the two large rocks on Crane Island suggest Mt. Fuji (on the right) and one of New England's best known peaks, Mt. Monadnock (on the left). Looking carefully, one can see a profile much like that of New Hampshire's "Old Man in the Mountain" on the floating island between the Crane Island and the rocky coast. The stepping stone path area is an abstraction of deep forests, and the mossy hillside behind the Crane Island recalls the softly forested landscape of New England.

The Stones

In the Japanese garden, the stones are the backbone and provide the overall structure. Rocks from Topsfield, Boxford, and Rockport, Massachusetts, total about 390 tons. Each is placed according to ancient rules and traditions dating back to the Middle Ages of Japanese history. A dark granite vertical stone and base, carved in Japan, is located to the left of the waterfall, and says *Ten-shin-en* in Chinese characters, a gift of the garden's donor, Yosoji Kobayashi.

The Wall and Japanese Gate

The wall is a modern interpretation of a Japanese mud-and-wattle wall, seen in temple compounds and surrounding traditional gardens all over Japan. This wall, varying in height from five to seven feet, was constructed of poured concrete mixed with a light colorant, which was then sandblasted



One of the curved bridges which link the “islands” to the “mainland.” Photo courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

to roughen the texture. The base band is of granite from Deer Isle, Maine, resembling the facade of the museum’s West Wing.

From the outside, one can see only a narrow round cap of tiles of a simple design to meld with the spare lines of the West Wing. From the inside, one sees the full slant of the roof that protects a typical wall from the elements. These silver tiles are made of clay baked four times rather than the usual two, in order to accommodate Boston’s more severe climate. An old Kyoto firm, Yokoyama Seiga Kojo, specializing in shrine and temple roof tiles supplied the 1500 pieces that make up the roof, including round roof tiles, stacked tiles, beam tiles,

and eaves tiles. A special Museum of Fine Arts emblem tile, *onigawara*, featuring the museum’s seal, was also made up and grouted to the end wall at the Education Entrance.

The imposing Japanese gate is called *kabuki-mon*, meaning “hanging gate” (and does not refer to the famous Japanese theater.) A traditional gate for a mountain castle or large palace in Japan, it was chosen as a Japanese-style horizontal counterpoint to architect I. M. Pei’s large concrete beam at the entrance to the West Wing. The gate is built of Japanese cypress, a wood with excellent natural preservatives. Special design features of the gate are the 13-inch-wide post

Perennials in *Tenshin-en*

Six hundred perennials adorn the garden. Ferns of many varieties are used with hostas and liriopse to soften the appearance of the rocks. Leatherleaf ferns as well as lady, hart's tongue, Japanese painted, Christmas, and maidenhair ferns, abound in the garden. Hostas include 'Gold Standard', 'Green Fountain', 'Francee', 'Blue Cadet', 'Nakiana', and 'Flavo Circinalis', with five giant hostas featured outside the walls ('Halcyon', 'Christmas Tree', 'Nigrescens', 'Frances Williams', and 'Blue Angel'). Other perennials include bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*), trillium (*Trillium grandiflo-*

rum), goatsbeard (*Aruncus canadensis*), lady's mantle (*Alchemilla pubescens*), iris (*Iris ensata*, *sibirica*, and *crinata*), geraniums (*Geranium endressi* 'Johnson's Blue', *G. sanguineum*), astilbes (*Astilbe chinensis* 'Pumila', 'William Buchanan'), bleeding heart (*Dicentra eximia* 'Zestful'), wild ginger (*Asarum europaeum*), liriopes, and sedges (*Liriope spicata*, *Carex conica* 'Variegata'). One can also spot pachysandra (*P. terminalis* 'Cutleaf') planted as a specimen near the water basin and stepping stone path. The groundcover moss is *Polystrichum commune*, known as hair-cap moss.

and beams (*kasugi*, or "umbrella wood" curved beams above the two small doors), the ornamental nail covers, and ironwork.

The gate was constructed in Japan by Suzuki Komuten, carpenters who specialize in building traditional Japanese structures. After being erected once for approval in Japan, it was disassembled and rebuilt in Boston. The wrought-iron fittings, hinges, and nail covers, also fabricated in Japan, are of traditional design.

The Water Basin

The water basin, or *chozubachi*, enables a visitor to ritually purify his or her body and mind as preparation for contemplating the garden and for receiving inspiration and renewal from its spiritual meaning. Similar stone basins were used in tea gardens as vessels for ritual cleansing before taking tea. This *chozubachi* is in the *fusen* style, *fu* meaning "to proclaim" and *sen* meaning "spring of water."

The stones around the water basin are arranged in the original Koho-an style. The

large stepping stone upon which one kneels to partake of the water is called a *maeishi*, or "front stone"; the stone to its right is the *yuokeishi*, or "hot water container stone," on which such a container would be placed in winter so that guests could add hot water to the basin to warm their hands. The stone to the left is the *teshokuishi*, or "hand candle stone," on which a guest might place a portable candlestick when using the garden at night.

The Stone Lanterns

Stone lanterns were originally used as votive lights placed in front of Buddhist temple buildings. In later years they played a more ornamental role and were designed specifically for garden use—to light the path to a tea house or to light certain areas of a garden. Near the water basin is a small Japanese lantern of the Edo period (1603-1867), originally located in the Japanese Court of the museum's Asiatic Collection. It has a tall mushroom-shaped "hat" and is placed so that it can cast light over the water basin at night.

In the northeast corner of the garden is a *kasuga*-style lantern, a reproduction of one from the Kawageta Temple, the original considered a “very important cultural property” by the Japanese Government. Dating from 1311, the lantern is a very good example of late Kamakura-period (1185-1333) lanterns. It shows the then prevailing concern with power and beauty in its attacking lion and peacock carvings. Single petals of lotus are carved at the base, a Buddhist symbol of the soul’s ascent from mud to the glory of flowering.

Just inside the gate is another *kasuga*-style lantern, a reproduction of the main lantern at the Joruri-ji Temple near Kyoto, carved about 1366. The shape of this lantern follows the composition of the Kawageta lantern but it is narrower overall: the lotus petals are taller, the window is smaller, and the curve to the roof is steeper.

A large Korean lantern in a fourteenth-century style, originally located in the courtyard of the museum, is situated in the southeast corner of the garden. Outside the garden wall is a Meiji-period lantern, dating from about 1880, featuring ornamental friezes of mountains and deer.

The Paths

Japanese garden paths are based on the principle of *shin-gyo-so*. The path outside the gate is of the *shin*, or “formal” style, the stepping stones are of the *so*, or informal style, and the curved *nobedan* path is of the *gyo* style (somewhere between informal and formal in style). The cut stones on the curved path are surrounded by black-washed Mexican river stones set in mortar. This path brings one to the cut stone terrace on which are three *shogi* benches of traditional design. The informal stepping stones paths called *tobiishi*, take the visitor to the Korean lantern, the water basin, or are used as an alternate route back to the Japanese gate.

There are also three bridges that link the “islands” with the “mainland” and form a

path for the viewer to take a visual rather than an actual journey. These bridges, called *soribashi*, or “curved bridges,” are as long as 17 feet and weigh as much as 1.5 tons.

The Plantings

Over seventy species of plants give color and texture to the garden. Cherries, Japanese maples, and pines are all signature plants of a Japanese garden and serve as symbols of the changing seasons. *Tenshin-en* is composed of a mixture of Japanese and American species; such plants as Japanese *Cryptomeria* combine with American holly to create a new horticultural interpretation of an ancient art form.

Trees: Japanese maples, called *kaede*, or “frog’s hand” or *momiji*, are mainstays of a Japanese garden. Used to create a feeling of mountain scenery at the edge of a forest, they link open land to forested land. Broadleaf evergreen trees are generally not hardy in the Northeast, so American hollies, *Ilex opaca*, were used in place of some of the evergreen oaks that, in Japan, act as tall evergreen screens to give the sense of a deep forest. Needle-leaf trees, including compact selections of the Canadian hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*) and *Cryptomeria japonica* ‘Yoshino’, are used to create a lush background to the waterfall and mountain path areas. *Cryptomeria* is part of the indigenous vegetation in Japan and are planted extensively in holy areas such as shrine precincts. Red pines (*Pinus densiflora*) and tanyosho pines (*Pinus densiflora* ‘Umbraculifera’) are used to highlight the islands.

Deciduous trees used in the garden include *Stewartia pseudocamellia*, mountain ash (*Sorbus decora*), star magnolia (*Magnolia stellata*), and of course cherries: the weeping cherry by the gate (*Prunus subhirtella* ‘Pendula’), October cherries (*Prunus subhirtella* ‘Autumnalis’) and Sargent cherries (*Prunus sargentii*). The Japanese admire cherries as symbols of a life well-lived—they



Stone lanterns are used to light paths and highlight special areas of the garden's design. Photo taken in 1988 and reproduced courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

bloom suddenly and abundantly, but are gone nearly overnight, suggesting a good way to face death as well.

Shrubs: The 1100 shrubs in the garden provides its finished and colorful look. About 500 azaleas of many varieties provide color over two months in the spring. Early bloomers include the Korean azalea (*Rhododendron poukhanensis*) and varieties of *R. mucronulatum*. The popular 'Delaware Valley White' azaleas and early reds ('Hinocrimson' and 'Hinodegiri') mix with

midseason bloomers of various colors: salmon ('Guy Yerkes'), silver-pink ('Kaempo'), white with pink throat ('Geisha'), white ('Girard's Pleasant White', 'Polar Bear'), rose-red ('Vyking'), and the beautiful 'Purple Gem'. Late-blooming varieties include the North Tisbury hybrids ('Wintergreen', 'Yuka', and 'Marilee'). Azaleas are pruned in the *karikomi*, or cloud-form shape, to suggest the billowing forms of hills and to soften the base of the stones.

Other shrubs used extensively are mountain laurels (*Kalmia latifolia*), andromeda

(*Pieris japonica*, *P. floribunda*), enkianthus (*Enkianthus campanulatus*), kerria (*Kerria japonica*), daphne (*Daphne burkwoodii* 'Carol Mackie'), forsythia (*Forsythia intermedia* 'Arnold Dwarf'), barberries (*Berberis thunbergii*, *B. mentorensis*), junipers (*Juniperus procumbens* 'Nana', *J. chinensis* 'Sargentii'), euonymus (*Euonymus alatus*), holly (*Ilex pendunculosa*), and dwarf spiraea (*Spiraea japonica* 'Little Princess').

Maintenance

Contrary to popular opinion, a Japanese garden is not a low-maintenance landscape. One day a week throughout the garden's open season, a maintenance crew comes to tend the garden. Every week the crew prunes certain trees and shrubs, weeds the moss, and rakes the gravel. Other gardening chores occur at specific intervals during the year: moss is trimmed for propagation, perennials are cut back or divided, fertilizers or horticultural sprays are applied, hemlock bark mulch is spread, azaleas are deadheaded and also pruned at least twice a year to maintain their shape and size.

Viewers are always curious about how the garden is raked. Crushed granite gravel from Mt. Airy, North Carolina, represents the "sea" of the garden's landscape. A heavy six-tine rake is used to give the effect of ripples on the water's surface. Starting from the near right-hand corner of the garden, the crew

rakes in lines parallel with the West Wing wall. When the raker reaches an obstacle, such as a stone or island, he stands on it and rakes around it in a circle, continuing the pattern under the bridges and around all detached stones. Finally, the raker follows the edge of the garden's "sea" around the perimeter until meeting the gate. The abstract lines of "water" are most apparent during rainy or cloudy days, or when the textures are emphasized by a thin veneer of snow.

Tenshin-en is frequented by viewers coming to learn about another culture's garden art, to enjoy the verdant atmosphere, or to seek a moment's peace. In the Garden of the Heart of Heaven, visitors will feel the truth of the words of Okakura Tenshin who once said, "One may be in the midst of a city, and yet feel as if one were far away from the dust and din of civilization."

Tenshin-en is open to Museum of Fine Arts visitors from April to November, Tuesdays through Sundays, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

The designer of the Arnold Arboretum's Linda J. Davison Memorial Path and the project coordinator of *Tenshin-en* during its construction, Julie Moir Messervy is a landscape designer living in Wellesley. She is author of *Contemplative Gardens* (Howell Press, 1990) and is currently finishing a new book, *The Inward Garden*, to be published by Little Brown and Co. in September 1993.