



Portland Classical Chinese Garden The Five Elements: ROCKS

Haze, mist and the haunting spirits of the mountains are what human nature seeks,
and yet can rarely find.

By Guo Xi

Reverence for rocks began in ancient times

In *Lan Su Yuan*, the Portland Classical Chinese Garden, tall strangely-shaped rocks are seen throughout the landscape. In Chinese gardens, rocks are more than what they appear to be. In cultural terms, rocks are miniature mountains that allow those who wander in the garden to feel as if they are retreating into the wilderness. In China there are five holy mountains that represent the center of the earth and its four corners. Some ancient stories explain that mountains are the pillars that link heaven and earth. The classic text, the *Shu-ching*, (recorded around 5th century BCE), tells how Shun—the ruler of China from 2244-2206 BCE—went on a pilgrimage every five years to visit the four mountains that defined the limits of the land in each direction. He began a tradition of making offerings on the summit of each mountain. The Chinese phrase for pilgrimage means ‘to pay respect to a mountain.’ Seeing rocks in a garden is an invitation to make a mental journey to these sacred mountains.

Top heavy, rugged stones that seem to defy gravity and hang in the air like clouds are the most highly prized

In classical Chinese gardens, rocks are highly valued. Stone is sought that has been sculpted by natural forces. The most highly valued rocks come from the mineral bed of Taihu, or Lake Tai, not far from the important city of Suzhou, Portland’s sister city where the garden was designed and crafted. Lake Tai has long produced the most prized rocks. The chemical make-up of this great lake has caused the limestone in its bed to wear away in very irregular patterns. The more porous a rock is, with many holes that extend all the way through and with cracks and crevices creasing the stone, the more highly valued it is for placement in a garden. The strange and contorted forms of Lake Tai rock allow mountain peaks, caves, windswept trees and even fluffy cloud formations to emerge from the hard wrinkled surfaces. In general, rocks are also valued in Chinese culture for their concentration of ‘*Qi*’ energy, the life force which is contained in all parts of the universe. Lake Tai rocks permit this vitality, or *Qi*, to flow freely through the hard yet open surfaces.

(NOTE: *Qi* means breath, air, vital energy; *Qi* is pronounced *chee* as in Qigong—some forms of which are a martial arts variety and others serve the purpose of meditation and self-awareness.)

Craggy rocks crouch like tigers; coiling dragons try to reach the Milky Way

The art of building rock mountains in a classical Chinese garden must have a unity of parts and whole. Sometimes there is a lone mountain peak that provides inspiration to visitors who gaze upon it and provokes thought about the ancient Chinese immortals who lived on mountain tops. Some rocks are the perfect spot from which to imagine gazing at and welcoming the moon. Sometimes rocks are placed

together, as if in a range of craggy peaks, whose caves and deep ravines invite brave exploration. Placing rocks in combination with plants and trees and mounds of earth, bring to life a twisting and turning mountain path, where the traveler can mentally seek an escape from the stressful world. The furrows that penetrate the Taihu rocks are also thought of as eyes. When rock mountains have openings on all four sides, they can ‘see’ everywhere and thus suggest wisdom.

A person viewing garden rocks can practice ‘mental aerobics.’ Strange, twisted and startling profiles in the Lake Tai rocks begin to transform into fierce dragons, wrinkled faces and even floating clouds. In this way, the outlines of weathered faces or the forms of wild animals that inhabit distant peaks appear ‘animated in stone’ and send the observer into other realms. By shrinking one’s self in the mind’s eye, a person can scale the wrinkled surfaces of towering mountain peaks. By changing perspective, a person can challenge what appears wild or frightening and can explore the unknown emptiness inside caves. In Chinese culture, rock formations are seen as an entry way to “worlds within worlds.” As the viewer’s sense of relative size changes, a passage into other realms can take place. Space and time may lose meaning inside a timeless universe.

The music of the universe recorded by ancient rocks

At the Portland Classical Chinese Garden, visitors pass through the crabapple blossom gate from the *Courtyard of Tranquility*, where the inscription *Enter the Wonderland* invites everyone to explore all the elements. Beyond this four-petal-shaped opening, there is a large single Taihu rock bearing the inscription *shí yùn*. The character for *shí* means rock or stone and the character *yùn* means ‘music’ or ‘rhyme’. Therefore, ‘music of stone’ (humorously referred to as ‘rock music’) is a poetic translation on the rock that is placed here. Maybe these words refer to the whistle of the wind as it sweeps through the cracks of this dense material. Dr. Charles Wu, Professor Emeritus of Reed College, (an honored professor for life) teaches that this inscription may: “...on a more elevated level, suggest the music of the universe that this ancient rock has ‘recorded,’ so to speak, through the eons. Whatever the music may be, it takes a quiet mind and sensitive ear to hear it played by the rock.”



QUESTION TO PONDER: Do you think that rocks can record time?

Near Stones, Far Mountains

In the piling-up of garden mountains, the Chinese garden designers have always kept in their minds the rich tradition of landscape painting by accomplished artists. In the landscape painting to the viewer’s eye, as in the garden rockeries, mountains may transform into dragons descending from Heaven. Cloud vapors rising heavenward appear to float from stone. Artists and rocks may even capture the surging waves of the sea as they reach their highest crest just before falling back again. Both in the bold brush stroke of the painting and in the deliberate placement of twisted and wrinkled rocks in the garden, stone transports the visitor beyond what is actually seen with the eyes, into a mental and emotional realm where the past and the present can both exist. Wandering through Lan Su Yuan, Portland’s urban Chinese garden, becomes a journey to a far away place—yet, still within easy reach of the imagination.