

JAPANESE GARDEN

THE HUNTINGTON

SARA OCHOA
HISTORY OF THE DESIGNED LANDSCAPE | SUMMER 2026
FINAL ASSIGNMENT

A Zillgitt Bonsai Court



B Zen Court Dry Garden



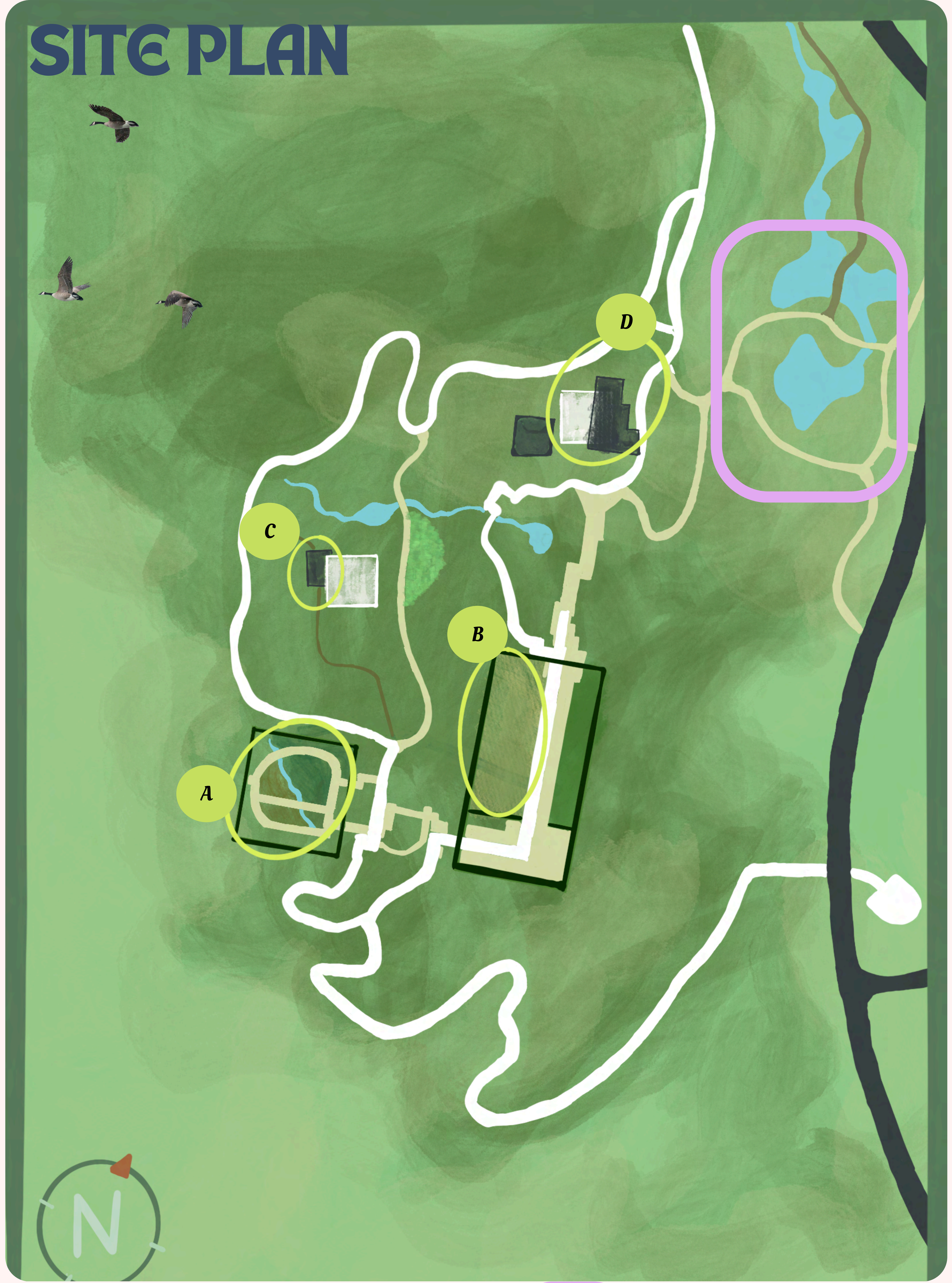
C Ceremonial Teahouse



D Marsh tea house



SITE PLAN



 Enlargement area

SITE DETAILS



ENLARGMENT



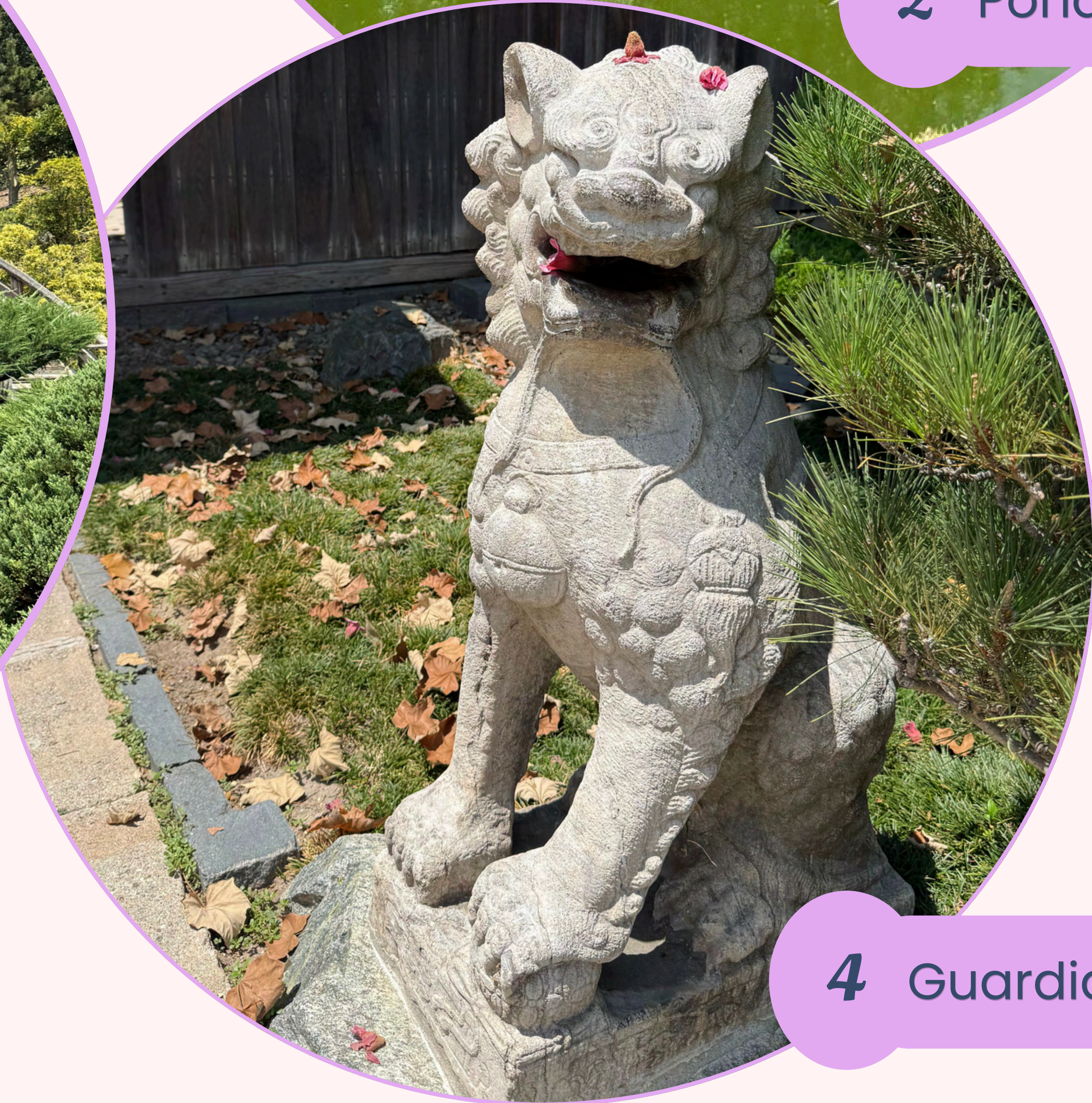
1 Stone Lantern



2 Pond island



3 Moon Bridge



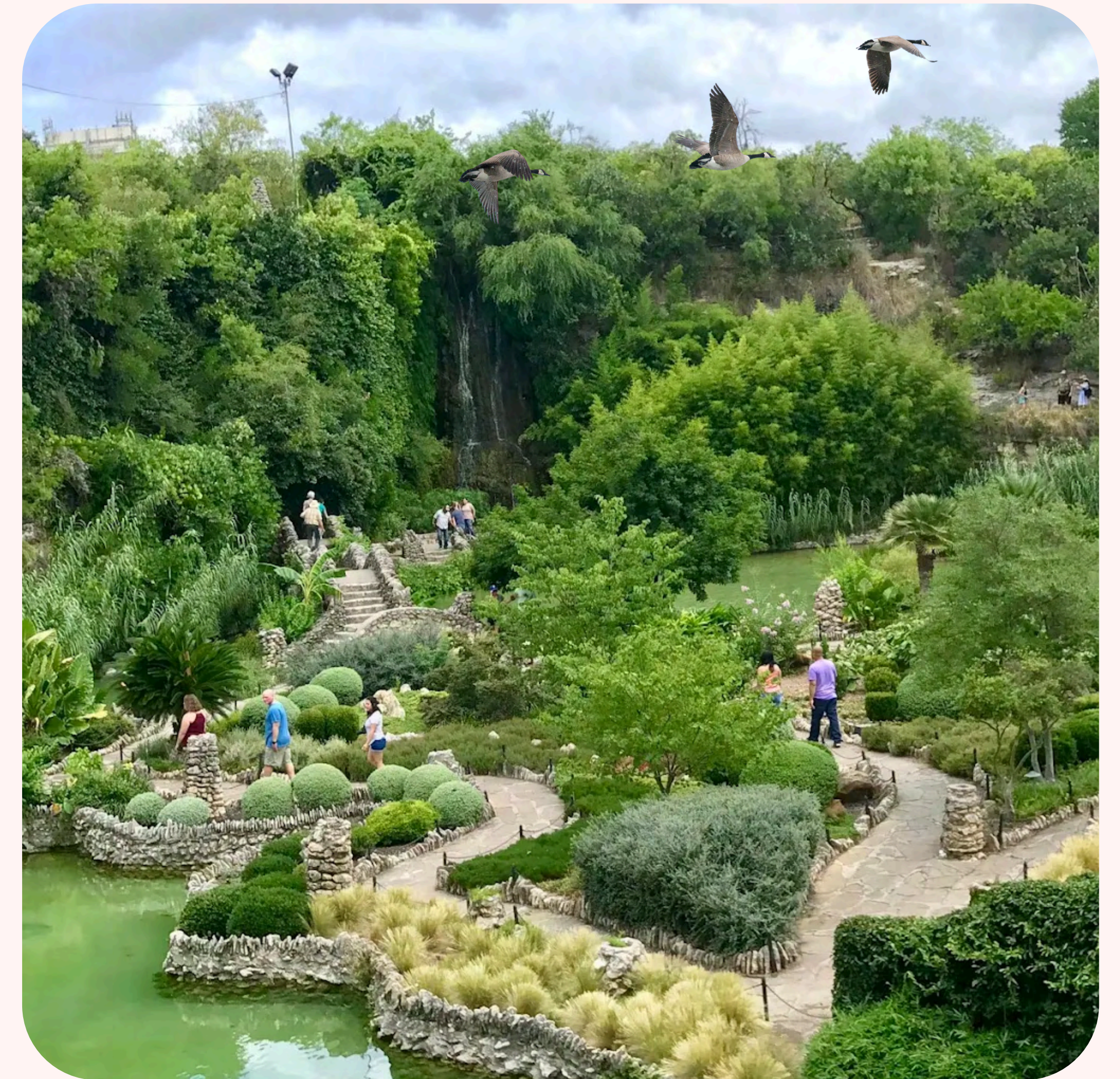
4 Guardian Lion-dog

THE JAPANESE GARDEN IN AMERICA: ADMIRATION AND EXCLUSION

The Japanese Garden in America: Admiration and Exclusion

Miegakure is a Japanese landscape design concept meaning "hide and reveal," in which scenic vistas are concealed behind winding paths and foliage, then unveiled gradually as a visitor moves through the garden. The word joins two Japanese roots, mieru, "to be able to see," and kakureru, "to be hidden."

Both my landscape of significance, the Japanese Tea Garden in San Antonio, Texas, and its historical precedent, the Japanese Garden at The Huntington in Los Angeles, use this concept beautifully. Miegakure is most obvious in the awe you feel when an expansive koi pond suddenly unfolds in front of you.



Photograph of the Japanese Tea Garden, San Antonio.

But during the extensive (borderline obsessive) research I've done on Japanese gardens and their influence in America, I realized the concept operates in a far less visible way. The painful history behind these gardens is itself hidden, perhaps so the surface beauty can be enjoyed more easily. Yet I've come to feel that beauty comes from understanding. Understanding the Japanese immigrant experience only makes the leaves appear greener, the koi brighter, the atmosphere more intoxicating, because it is a privilege to fully enjoy a beauty that also acknowledges the heartbreak.

Stroll Gardens & the daimyō



The Tale of Genji, Chapter 5 ("Wakamurasaki" / Young Murasaki), album leaf, Tosa school, 17th century. Burke Albums (Mary Griggs Burke Collection). Public domain.

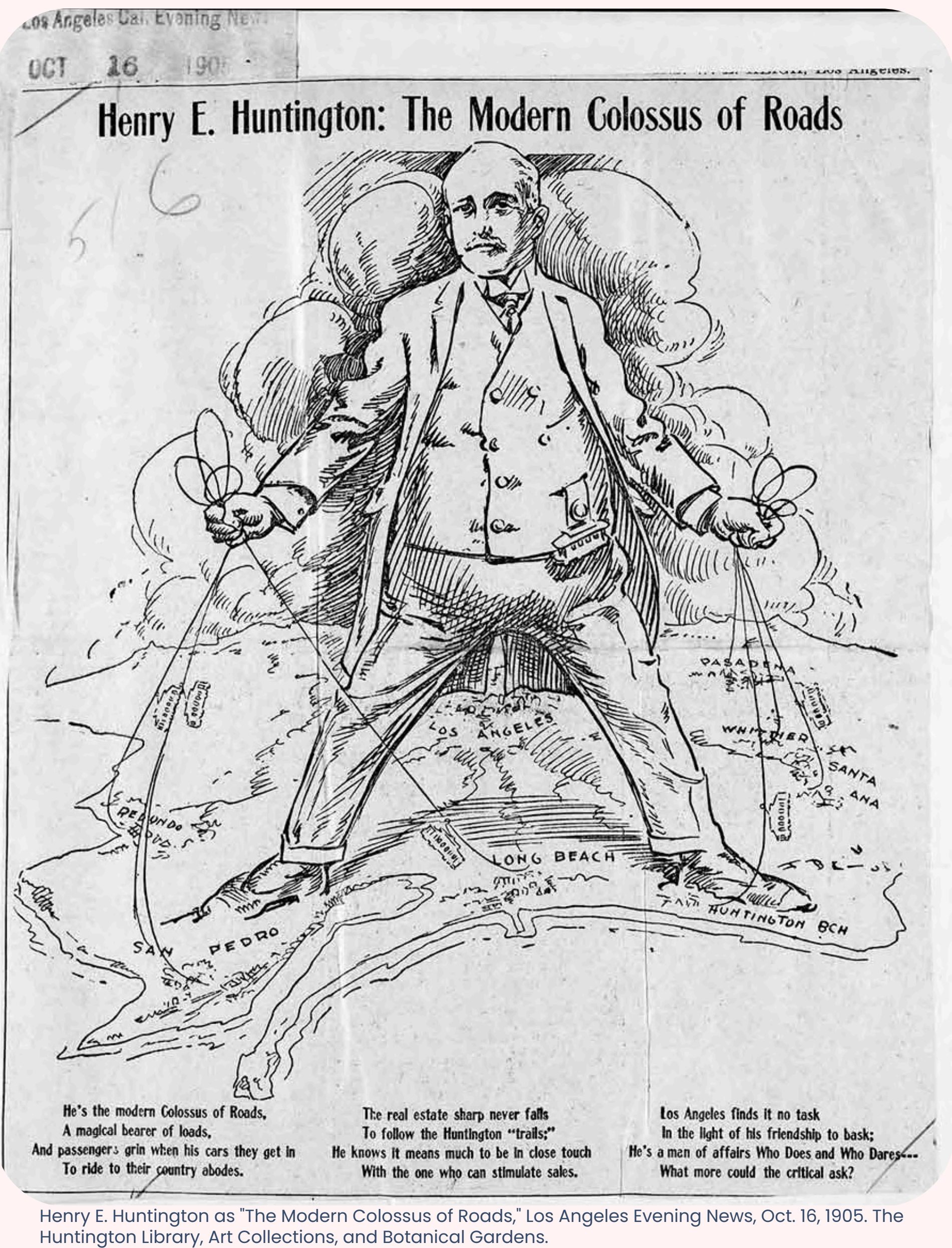
First, Japan itself. The most obvious precedent for both sites is the traditional Edo. period (1600–1800s) stroll gardens. The kaiyū-shiki stroll garden is organized around a central pond and a circuit path that guides visitors through the landscape.

Traditionally, daimyō (feudal lords) built these gardens as expansive displays of wealth and taste. The Edo period was peaceful, redirecting energy and resources from warfare toward art and gardens. Travel outside the country was also restricted, so the daimyō recreated famous landscapes in miniature within their gardens.

Though built over an ocean and many centuries away from Edo Japan, both the Huntington and San Antonio gardens follow the stroll garden model: a koi pond at the center, a winding path circling it, and vistas that hide and reveal along the way. We can draw another comparison: Henry Huntington, an immensely wealthy railroad magnate, commissioned his garden to recreate distant, admired landscapes that would display his wealth and taste.

Shinto and Buddhist Influence

Even the age-old stroll garden was inspired by those that came before it. The iconic elements within the gardens were not purely invented for the enjoyment of the feudal lords, they were borrowed from even older sacred landscapes.



The Tale of Genji, Chapter 5 ("Wakamurasaki" / Young Murasaki), album leaf, Tosa school, 17th century. Burke Albums (Mary Griggs Burke Collection). Public domain.

From Shinto, Japan's indigenous belief in kami (sacred spirits inhabiting rocks, trees, and water), comes the garden's reverence for natural elements and sacred stones. Buddhism, which arrived in Japan in the sixth century, brought the pond-and-island paradise concept, votive stone lanterns, arched bridges, and guardian lion-dogs at the entry.

All of these once deeply meaningful religious elements appear in the daimyō's stroll gardens as ornamental decoration, concealing their origins beneath their beauty, perhaps a hide-and-reveal older than miegakure itself. We also see all of these elements displayed in my two sites, with an even further departure from their origins.

Japonisme

Now for a massive leap forward through time and space to the west in the 1850s. After Japan had reopened its doors to the rest of the world. A rush of Japanese prints, objects and designs reached the west and incited a widespread craze for Japanese art and aesthetics known as Japonisme.

We can see clear evidence of this at the World's Fair exhibitions between 1876 and 1915. Japan presented gardens and temple-like pavilions that captivated a generation of American architects. The Japanese garden became a fashionable symbol of culture and worldliness. Importantly, the gardens that emerged on the estates of wealthy Americans were very much interpretations rather than reproductions.



View of Japanese Tea Garden from Lagoon.
From Official Views Of The World's
Columbian Exposition, 1893.



Photograph of the Ceremonial Tea House, Huntington Gardens

Here, both of my sites emerge. The Huntington's garden was a relatively faithful interpretation, its Japanese House and ceremonial teahouse were made in Japan and shipped over, and its iconic moon bridge was built by Japanese craftsman Toichiro Kawai in 1913.

San Antonio's Japanese Tea Garden (built 1917–1919) was a looser adaptation, planted with subtropical palms and ferns and anchored by a heavy stone, palm-thatched pavilion that bears little resemblance to the light timber structures of a traditional Japanese garden.



Photograph of the Japanese Tea Garden, San Antonio.

WWII and Japanese Exclusion

Earlier I described what can be seen, mieru, and those that are hidden, kakureru. Admiration for Japanese art and culture did not last; it turned to suspicion almost overnight.

After Pearl Harbor and Executive Order 9066, the government forcibly removed over 120,000 Japanese Americans from the West Coast. Both my sites encapsulate the devastating impacts of this time. In San Antonio, the Jingu family, who lived in and tended the garden for decades, was evicted by the city and the garden itself was renamed to "Chinese Tea Garden."

In California, the incarceration of the Huntington's Japanese American employees left the garden neglected and in disrepair for years.



Dorothea Lange / National Archives Catalog

The Laborer is Disposable

Here is my theory of how admiration turned so easily to disregard. The reverence for a kami, the meaning of a votive lantern, the sacred crossing of a bridge, each was beautiful because of the meaning a culture had ascribed to it.

But when those objects were pulled across time and an ocean and set down as ornaments on an American estate, the meaning, the spirit, and the people who carried it were stripped away. And a beautiful object emptied of its meaning is, ultimately, disposable.

The admiration was never extended to what these things meant, and it was certainly never extended to the people responsible for them.



Photograph of the Japanese Tea Garden, San Antonio.

This pattern of admiring the garden while overlooking its makers did not begin or end with these two sites. Japanese immigrants, barred from owning land by California's Alien Land Laws, effectively built the trade of residential gardening in Southern California, so much so that a 'Japanese gardener' became a fixture of the well-to-do household.

After the war, incarceration stripped families of homes and businesses, and gardening, with its low start-up costs, was one of the few trades still open to them; many returned to it. As that generation aged, they passed their routes to



Russell Lee, "Group of Mexican laborers getting straw for tying carrots near Santa Maria, Texas," February 1939. Library of Congress, FSA/OWI Collection.

Standing at the edge of the koi pond in the blazing heat at The Huntington, you can see the near-perfect circle formed by the moon bridge and its reflection in the water. It is a beautiful image on the surface, and beneath it, unseen, is the living system that makes it possible: the soil, microbes, and algae that let the koi thrive and the lilies bloom.

Ever since I visited the San Antonio Tea Garden at sixteen, I have loved koi ponds and Japanese gardens (you can even find one in my own school design from Intro to the Professions). Learning this history hasn't made me love them less. But it has made me feel it is my responsibility, and my privilege, to carry forward some of the significance that has been lost along the way, to make the people and their stories as irreplaceable as the beauty they created.



The Yoshimura family at Mission Nursery, San Gabriel, 1930s. Courtesy of San Gabriel Nursery & Florist.

the Mexican immigrant laborers who had often worked alongside them, and who had reached California through the same agricultural door a generation earlier. The hands that shape California's gardens have changed, Japanese, now Mexican, but the arrangement has not: the labor is essential, and the laborer is disposable.



Moon bridge, Japanese Garden - Huntington Gardens

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