MIREI SHIGEMORI—REBEL IN THE GARDEN

CHRISTIAN TSCHUMI

MIREI SHIGEMORI—REBEL IN THE GARDEN
MODERN JAPANESE LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

WITH PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTIAN LICHTENBERG

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THE SPIRIT OF THE ROCKS by Christophe Girot

To many of us Japan remains an extraordinary culture where the archaic meets the modern in the most diverse and surprising ways. The Japanese landscape and garden tradition seems to have escaped this rule and remained, at least to Western eyes, a place of immutable secular tradition where man and nature remain in contemplative harmony. It is as if the spirit of the Shinto rocks from the remote Muromachi era were still distilling its sacred substance to this day. The fact is that we have ignored most developments in Japanese garden design over the past century. Outside a few generalist books, there is scant literature written in English, and it is hard to think of a garden design or a landscape architect from this recent period, which is well known outside Japan. With all the dramatic changes that the country underwent over the last 100 years, it is, however, quite difficult to imagine that this could not have had an effect on the secular Japanese garden tradition.

This first English monograph on Mirei Shigemori is a breakthrough with respect to the question of recent evolutions in the Japanese garden tradition. The book enables us to enter the realm of the modern *karesansui* garden, and to understand a significant shift towards nature that has happened in Japanese society over the past century. This is of invaluable importance because it enables us to break away from the archetype of the Japanese garden as an immutable sphere, impermeable to change and innovation. With Mirei Shigemori we see how the spirit of the rocks is transmogrified into undulating waves of colored concrete, how rectangular checkers of stepping-stones dissolve into a background of moss and shrubs. The work that is comprised in this book incorporates not only his gardens, but also his writings and his teachings. It is impressive and consistently shows the birth and evolution of what one could call the modern Japanese garden.

The works of Mirei Shigemori coincide with important periods of change in recent Japanese history. It is interesting to note how spiritual and respectful of a certain order these gardens remain, but it is also interesting to note how they reflected the radical changes in Japanese society. Mirei Shigemori never left his native island. He only knew of the Western world through books and pictures. He probably embodies the last authentic period in the evolution of the Japanese garden, one where the influence from Europe and America was still relatively minimal. The way his projects are oriented spatially, and the way in which the elements are arranged, coincides with some of the canons of the *karesansui*. But there is also an important degree of individual creativity and fantasy in all the projects; Mirei Shigemori had the courage to transcend the established garden tradition that he learned, altering also its spiritual significance.

There is something both unique and delectable in this book; the extraordinary compilation of original plans, combined with excellent photographs and text, casts light on the most intricate details of Mirei Shigemori's digressions from the established canons of his times. There is something personal in his design approach that is quite strong and dedicated. What appears different on the surface and in the style in fact reflects a deep commitment and consistency toward a certain understanding of nature. One could say that Shigemori is probably one of the last Japanese landscape designers not to have been affected by American culture. The work is therefore of prime importance to both professionals and scholars of Japanese garden design. The microcosm that is represented here reveals an extremely diversified and rapidly changing oeuvre. One could say that everything in Shigemori's garden has an underlying meaning. A meaning that is much deeper than what appears to the naked eye, a meaning that is drawn from the substantive spirit of the rocks.

Tradition would like old stones to symbolize islands, but Mirei Shigemori has succeeded in making liquid stone, that is to say concrete, symbolize the cosmic waves of a *karesansui* garden from the Muromachi period. These waves of concrete, which flow and then solidify, incorporate the essence of matter in their very shaping. It is a clear break from tradition, and may even be a comment on the end of a way of seeing and believing the world. The carefully flowing and ever-changing sand grooves of a temple garden become suddenly petrified and set in their patterns of concrete. What does this shimmer of an instant cast in concrete really mean? I have learned from this book to leave all my preconceptions about the modern Japanese Garden behind. Mirei Shigemori offers a refreshing voyage through the evolving 20th century tradition of Japanese gardens. It conveys a deeper and better understanding of an epoch, which, although quite recent, has remained a black hole to Westerners until this day. It is thanks to the courage and determination of Mirei Shigemori that his oeuvre now stands as an uncontested achievement. It is also thanks to the relentless determination and astuteness of Christian Tschumi that Shigemori's work will finally receive all the international attention that it deserves. Let us hope that, beyond the milestone period described in this book, the spirit of the rocks will continue to permeate the Japanese gardens of tomorrow.

CONCEPT GARDENS by Günter Nitschke

Mirei Shigemori was the best known and most extensively published Japanese garden artist of the 20th century. One of his gardens (Yûrin no Niwa) has even been preserved by being disassembled and moved over hundreds of miles to a different location. And since 1938, when Mirei Shigemori finished working on the original publication of the (still untranslated) 26 volumes of his *Nihon Teienshi Zukan*, or "Illustrated Book on the History of the Japanese Garden", anyone exploring the history and principles of the Japanese garden—including myself—has been deeply indebted to him as an erudite and endless source of information on traditional garden design.

Even after the publication of Christian Tschumi's comprehensive study of Mirei Shigemori's work as a scholar and a designer, it might be still too early to identify him unequivocally as the first great reformer of Japanese garden art or the last traditionalist hanging on to a beloved past. Moreover, by now, that is 30 years after Mirei Shigemori's death, the *really* modern garden in Japan often boasts rivers and cascades carved in plastic, rocks cast in glass and trees sculpted from sheet metal; in addition, their creators justify their modern garden designs with the claim that they are creating a "second nature." To my way of thinking, the garden has arisen as an urban phenomenon and has always existed as a delicate overlap of nature and architecture. It is neither purely one thing nor the other. In the best examples, it discloses both in the form of art. Therefore, our minds and our hearts are needed to make or appreciate a garden. Searching here for a possible message and legacy in Mirei Shigemori's life and work, I wish to draw the reader's attention to three major aspects of it.

First, the main leitmotif running through his work is an enduring ambition, or rather an obsession to "modernize" the garden art of Japan. This question of modernizing the garden probably arose because Mirei Shigemori approached garden design similarly to architectural design. From the 20th century on, architecture was driven by novelty and it fed off constant manifestos and sales drives for ever new forms. There have been massive changes in architecture over the last hundred years. But modernizing the garden is a different story, since nature obviously is beyond concepts of traditional and modern. What can one possibly modernize in nature? We can never ask trees, rocks or mountains to adopt more modern forms just because we have become bored with their traditional or old-fashioned looks. Mirei Shigemori might not have quite understood what it truly was he wanted to renew and what he possibly could and should have renewed: nature, architecture, or perhaps himself.

Second, *bummei kaika*, officially translated as "civilization and enlightenment of the West," was the cultural order of the day during Mirei Shigemori's lifetime. His enthusiastic absorption of European art, religion and philosophy must have unconsciously infected him—like it infected most other Japanese intellectuals and avant-garde artists shortly after the Meiji Restoration—with the same split so characteristic of all three, namely the split between god and man, the human being and the earth, body and soul, culture and nature. Even when Mirei Shigemori refers to Shinto deities, he speaks of them as one speaks of God in the West. If you look carefully at any of his designs in this book, your attention is drawn to the mental concepts, such as Yin and Yang, the five sacred mountains, the isles of the blessed, the gods of the four cardinal directions, rock groups as the abodes of ancient Shinto deities, bundle patterns on kimono designs, or even large pictographic interpretations of particular Chinese characters. His gardens are primarily mindscapes rather than landscapes, their themes are concepts. His designs should be understood as garden versions of conceptual art.

Admittedly, Mirei Shigemori continued to use mainly natural materials, rather than plastic or metal, but he definitely already used cement. Nowhere in his gardens are we drawn to sensual delights, such as seasonal flowers or the murmur of a river. His gardens point to a modern, self-conscious individual and to a self-proclaimed innovator, disinherited from his past, just quoting from it, and estranged from nature, equally just quoting from it. Here I sense the basic weakness of Mirei Shigemori's gardens. His designs emanate the energy of one separate ego, not of someone working in unison with nature as a whole. Their novelty will make them the first gardens the coming generations will want to replace, unlike any garden from the Muromachi or Edo era we seem to be able to enjoy for ever.

Third, we have come to realize, mostly in hindsight, that the work of artists often expresses a vision or premonition of things to come, as well as a hidden warning. Of the approximately 250 gardens Mirei Shigemori designed, more than three-quarters are dry landscape gardens, some of them comprising vast areas, such as in the "Garden for Appreciating Clouds" at Kôzen-ji Temple in Kiso Fukushima (see page 105). The dry landscape garden type per se is not at all a modern invention. It existed in Japan from the early Middle Ages on. The mesmerizing effect the empty garden has had on the modern Western psyche as either being inducive to or resulting from meditation is due to a fairly recent misunderstanding. Or does it foreshadow—unconsciously and even despite Shigemori's recorded intentions—a fate our planet might face in the future, namely to become a barren moonscape with sparse patches of green or rocks , and no water or place for animals? Even the smallest and most innocent weed or daisy that pops up through the sand in his white gardens is usually eliminated immediately so that it does not disturb the seeming purity of the design-concept. Sometimes I wonder why we have come to accept such raked white surfaces as gardens in the first place?

I had the chance of meeting Mirei Shigemori several times and I found him to be a serious but humorous person, outgoing, helpful and generous, not a charlatan. He was probably not aware of the message his designs would convey once they became divorced from their original Shinto context or Zen temple setting and spread globally. The value of this exhaustive monograph by Christian Tschumi lies in the fact that now, for the first time, Westerners can also judge for themselves whether Mirei Shigemori's life work succeeded in his aim to renew the spirit of the traditional Japanese garden. Do Mirei Shigemori's gardens nourish the contemporary Japanese and Western mind and heart equally or more than traditional gardens still do?

Already during Mirei Shigemori's lifetime, there was a growing realization that there could no longer be any meaningful landscape design without recognition of the need to heal our earth from its progressive devastation and desertification. Only such an awareness, accompanied by a real, not just romantic, re-discovered sense of unity with nature—transcending our dominant Judeo-Christian-Islamic dualistic vision of man versus nature—could give a new content and form to a modern garden. Today the search for a separate modern Japanese garden, as such, appears to be futile.

MIREI SHIGEMORI AND MODERN JAPANESE ARTISTIC CREATION

by Kendall H. Brown

A confession: as an art historian specializing on Japan, I teach three lecture courses on modern Japan—painting and prints, sculpture and ceramics and architecture. Although I have taught seminars on premodern gardens, visited many recent gardens and published on Japanese-style gardens in North America, modern gardens are absent in my formal classes. In similar fashion they are given short shrift in most books on modern garden history and on recent Japanese culture. Clearly most academics consider modern Japanese gardens peripheral to the dominant concerns of Japanese visual culture and to international garden history.[1] Yet, that supposition becomes untenable after reading Christian Tschumi's study of Mirei Shigemori. In the contours of his biography as in the content of his design and writing, Mirei Shigemori was a paradigmatic Japanese modernist. Indeed to understand Japanese modernism more fully we must examine Mirei Shigemori.

As a dynamic creator in several media as well as a prolific historian and engaged theorist, Mirei Shigemori embodied the interdisciplinary nature of much 20th century Japanese art and its overtly historical and theoretical underpinnings. By seeking a Japanese avant-garde within an avowedly Japanese context, he confronted the central artistic quest of his era—a new direction in Japanese creativity founded on the desire to overcome a fundamental tension between the perceived polarities of dynamic Western culture and the relative stasis attributed to Asian tradition. Although East–West cultural interface had occupied Japanese artists since the dramatic westernization of the late 19th century, it acquired a new urgency in the mid 20th century when Japanese artists accommodated the overt nativism of the war era, then, in the wake of defeat and occupation, were further compelled to demonstrate both the persistence of an "essential" Japanese culture and its world relevance.

The profound paradox of the simultaneous search for Japanese uniqueness and universalism that animated Mirei Shigemori's design and theory is first encountered in his biography. Like many of his contemporary painters and sculptors at the prestigious Tokyo School of Fine Art, Mirei Shigemori's academic art training (around 1917–20) was in the native idiom known self-consciously as *nihonga* ("Japanese painting" as opposed to *yoga*, or "Western painting"). Nonetheless, his education unfolded within a largely European intellectual milieu dominated by ideas of the artist as heroic, anti-authoritarian creator and of art as a revolutionary practice. Mirei Shigemori's maturation coincided with the emergence of abstraction in painting, manifest in Japanese versions of Futurism, Cubism, Constructivism and Surrealism, all of which he surely imbibed despite the Romanticist tendencies exhibited in his taking a new name based on that of the painter François Millet.

Even as he was naming his children after European cultural heroes—Kant, Hugo, Goethe and Byron—Mirei Shigemori was building his first gardens in the *karesansui* genre and helping reform ikebana. Following (and surpassing) the fascination with historiography displayed by so many modern Japanese artists, in the 1930s he published a 9-volume history of ikebana then a 26-volume survey of Japanese gardens. Part of a desire by intellectuals to chart Japan's cultural trajectory, these efforts were nurtured by a nationalistic pride in Japanese historic achievement and by the realization that understanding history, and thus better defining "Japaneseness," was conducive to fresh creation. The study of traditional arts to spur radical art was central to Japanese modernism, and occurred most dramatically in ikebana when Sôfû Teshigahara (1900–1979) founded the progressive Sôgetsu school. Abetted by Mirei Shigemori, he revolutionized the moribund world of flower arrangement by connecting it with painting, photography, design, pottery and

music. Teshigahara's addition of unconventional items to his arrangements and conception of flowers as Surrealist objects surely influenced Mirei Shigemori's gardens with their peculiar combinations of materials and compositional disjunctures.

Teshigahara's postwar embrace of the aesthetics of the "modern primitive" may also have stimulated Mirei Shigemori to explore these ideas which resonate in his theoretical essay *New Sakuteiki* and appear in his later gardens. As conceived by Surrealist poet turned ikebana theorist and art critic Shûzô Takiguchi (1903–1973), and further articulated visually and verbally by figures including painter Tarô Okamoto (1911–1996), architect Kenzô Tange (1913–2005) and potter-sculptor Shindô Tsuji (1910–1981), the "primitive modern" addressed the debate on tradition by uncovering a vital and transformative energy in Japan's prehistoric culture that allowed artists to radicalize existing practices within the Japanese cultural framework and thereby transcend the dichotomy of Japanese "tradition" and Western "modernity." The formative, "original" and "essential" components of Japanese culture and indeed of all creative endeavor were located in the material products of the Jômon (c.10,000–300 BC) and Yayoi (c.300 BC–AD 300) periods. Thus, since true Japanese tradition was marked not by the refined elegance or lyrical naturalism previously associated with the Japanese past but instead by primitive force and dynamic tension, it was not merely congruent with contemporary Western art but even universal.[2]

In his book *Modern Art* (1938), Takiguchi linked ikebana and *karesansui* stone gardens, interpreting both as precursors of the Surrealist object. A year later the Surrealist painter Noboru Kitawaki (1901–1951) depicted an emblematic *karesansui* garden in his painting, *Ryôan-ji Vector Construction*.[3] The discovery of *karesansui* by Surrealists was part of a broader modern discourse on stones and stone gardens in which they could stand for many things, including the non-duality of Zen. While Mirei Shigemori's interpretation revolving around Shinto *kami* was relatively rare in the 20th century, his idea of adapting *karesansui* forms was not. Most notably, Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988) designed modernist stone-oriented gardens at the Reader's Digest in Tokyo in 1951 and UNESCO in Paris in 1958, and in that same year Tange constructed Brutalist stone gardens at the Kagawa Prefectural Office in Takamatsu and at Teshigahara's Sôgetsu Kaikan in Tokyo.

Mirei Shigemori criticized these types of gardens as creatively sterile Western imitations. For him, a key lesson of modern art was that successful abstraction demanded strong content—"the artist's idea." A nativist, he held that Japanese gardens by definition should manifest Japanese ideas. To supply this meaning, Mirei Shigemori sought to connect his gardens with the particular cultural memory of their locations and, more broadly, with East Asian belief systems including Daoism, Confucianism, orthodox Buddhism, Zen and, most importantly, Shinto. The primordial power attributed to nature in (modern) Shinto ideology served Mirei Shigemori both as the locus of a universal creativity (consistent with the "modern primitive") and as the bedrock of a unique Japanese identity. When it came to producing form for that content, Mirei Shigemori applied elements of modern painting and ikebana, resulting in the chromatic brightness, rapid movement of line, and overt compositional dynamism of his typical postwar gardens.

Perhaps Mirei Shigemori's strongest link to modern art was neither thematic nor formal but born from the idea of artist as fountainhead, independent from all but the authority of ancient traditions and universal paradigms. His insistence that the power of gardens derives from the power of the garden maker and that the artist's will must be as strong as that of the gods parallels similar statements by avant-garde theoreticians. For example, in his famous book *Art of Today* (1954), Okamoto stressed the fundamental

creativity of the artist, railed against ossified styles and moribund institutions, argued for a dynamic concept of tradition, and located the "raw power" of creation in the artist's intervention between object and practice.

Mirei Shigemori's intellectual connections with his peers do not diminish his creativity or accomplishment. To the contrary, they increase the intellectual depth and cultural relevance of his work. His gardens exist in a complex relationship of mutual inspiration with the art of his fellow painters, sculptors and garden makers. There is no doubt that Mirei Shigemori's garden at Tôfukuji Hôjô (1939) was one of the seminal works of mid-century Japanese culture, bridging the naturalistic geometry of early modernist gardens, like the Okada House garden (1934) by Sutemi Horiguchi (1895–1984), and modern primitivism that flowered after the war. Moreover, his impact likely transcended modernism. The accumulation of forms and symbols in some of his late gardens so overwhelm modernist ideas of elegant simplicity or elemental power that Mirei Shigemori might be seen as the inspiration for postmodern Japanese landscape design.

1 A notable exception is Marc Treib, "Converging Arcs on a Sphere: Renewing Japanese Landscape Design," in Marc Treib, ed., *The Architecture of Landscape, 1940–1960* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), pp. 270–298.

2 For an overview of the "modern primitive," see Niimi Ryû, "The Modern Primitive: Discourses of the Visual Arts in Japan in the 1950s," in Louise Allison Cort and Bert Winther-Tamaki, eds., *Isamu Noguchi and Modern Japanese Ceramics, A Close Embrace of the Earth* (Washington D.C.: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 2003), pp. 87–101.

3 For the latter, see Marc Treib, *Noguchi in Paris: The UNESCO Garden* (San Francisco: William Stout, 2003). Noguchi's gardens, particularly his Ryôan-ji inspired works, are studied by Bert Winther, "Isamu Noguchi: The Modernization of Japanese Garden Design," *Nihon teien gakkaishi* 1:1 March 1993, pp. 30–44.

REBEL WITH A CAUSE by Christian Tschumi

Mirei Shigemori **[002]** had a real cause to be a rebel. There were two issues that profoundly concerned him about the Japanese garden in 20th century Japan. One was the continuous imitation of past styles and the other the loss of the ancient spiritual roots of the garden. Both were right at the center of his understanding of life and culture as a whole, and artistic creation as an important part of it.

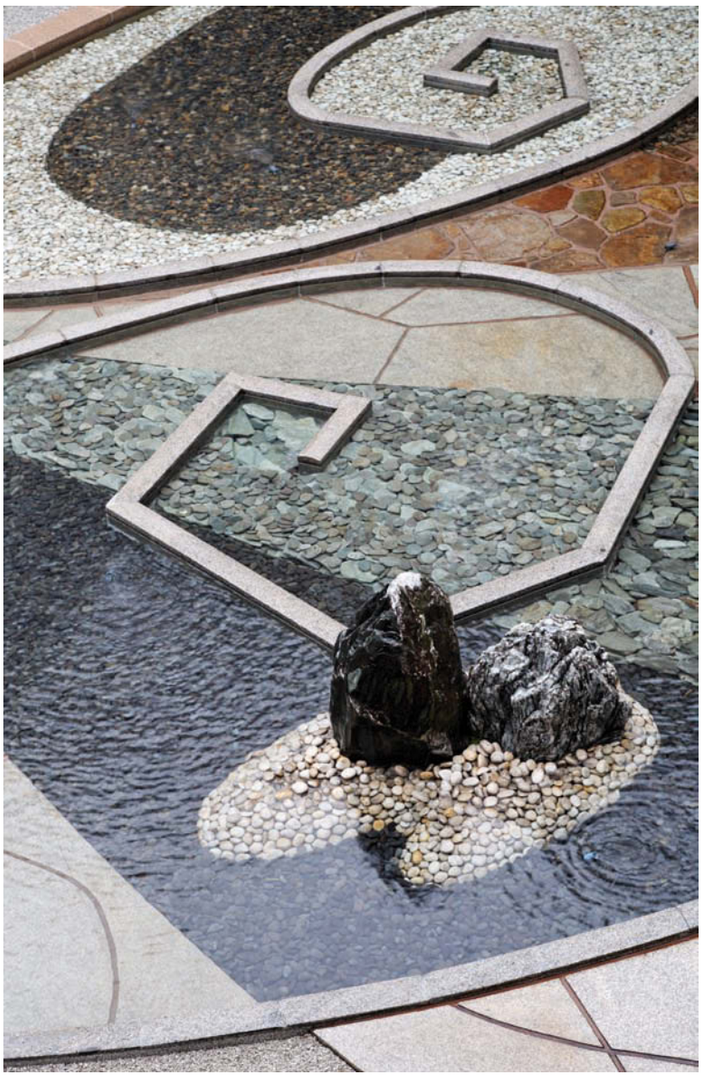
Artistic Creation in the Present

Mirei Shigemori regarded the making of a garden as an artistic creation. Art for him meant engaging with life and, in the case of the garden, with nature, which by definition is subject to continuous change and constant renewal. This view of garden art left little room for imitating past styles, a practice he viewed with great suspicion. Mirei Shigemori wrote: "One can make gardens according to the ancient meanings or according to the ancient shapes, but actually the person who is designing the garden and building it is from the present time and no other. The significance of the fact that we are people who live in the present is that we cannot make gardens that embody the meaning of the old times or have the shape of those times. So, in this case, we can only make a garden that is an imitation and this is meaningless."[1] This shows how much he saw art as rooted in the present, drawing from the current life-world. In his view gardens should connect to people's everyday experiences and should reflect modern times. In this way art is pregnant with meaning as it mirrors the situations that people deal with and creates a specific moment in time. As a person looking into the future, Shigemori felt it was wrong to imitate past forms at the cost of present artistic inventiveness. Although, in general this was an attitude not unlike that proposed by the Western modernists, it did not imply that Shigemori assumed that European garden styles should be adopted in Japan. Quite the contrary, in fact; he argued that Western garden culture was not relevant to the renewal of the Japanese garden, as it did not engage at all with the culture of the place or build on its long history **[003]**.

The historical survey of gardens all over Japan (see also pages 33–35) certainly opened up a new perspective on garden history for Shigemori. Analyzing what he had seen, he naturally wrote his own version of the history of the Japanese garden, and also came to some interesting conclusions and interpretations. Shigemori explains that from the Heian through Momoyama periods, court nobles, priests and warriors constantly introduced fresh ideas to the creation of gardens. But, over the course of the Edo period, parallel to the fading of the daimyos' power, merchants and other wealthy city folk increasingly started to make gardens. This growing body of amateurs was in search of design advice, a need well recognized by Kitamura Enkin, the author of *Tsukiyama Teizôden*, a book that quickly became a bestseller as a result. But despite the author's intention of teaching ordinary people how to make gardens, the book also established a standard way of making gardens. People did not just use *Teizôden* as a source of inspiration, but rather as a set of guidelines. This meant that Japanese gardens became stereotypical in layout, stone setting and even planting. Eventually, even professional gardeners started to abide by the *Teizôden* style, as this was what they were judged against. At this point,

1 Mirei Shigemori, "Shin-Sakuteiki," in *Shigemori Mirei Sakuhinshû: Niwa Kamigami e no Apurôchi* (Tokyo: Seibundô Shinkô Sha, 1976), p. 292. This text was first published as a series of 11 essays in the *Kintaifu* pamphlets nos. 16 to 27 (with no essay in no. 19); after Mirei Shigemori's death his son, Geite Shigemori, compiled the above book and republished the essay for the first time in one piece.

[002] **Mirei Shigemori, about 1970**



[003] **Yûrin no Niwa**

[004] **Plan of Kibitsuhiko Jinja**

[005] **Ryôan-ji *kami-ike***

gardens had lost much of the creative character of earlier times, and garden-making largely became about imitating old forms. Shigemori concluded that after the middle of the Edo period, the Japanese garden had lost the vitality that was its most important feature and the desire to recreate its forms took precedence over the process of garden-making as a creative act.

Rediscovering the Spiritual Roots

In addition to his fierce opposition to simple imitation of the past or assimilation of European styles, Shigemori pointed to what he saw as an enormous deficit in contemporary Japanese gardens: a significant loss of spirituality, which was usually replaced by interchangeable and meaningless form. People in the modern world had lost this important connection to the world of the gods, a link the ancient Japanese gardens had been testament to. The old references had been dropped or simply forgotten and new ones contained no spiritual dimension. To Shigemori most new gardens were dull, often unimaginative reiterations of past forms. Hence, he saw this desecration as leading to much poorer gardens that clearly lacked the profound aesthetic experience of their predecessors.

When Shigemori imagined a garden, he saw the *kami*, the native Japanese gods, and the *iwakura*, the shrine rock. He saw the ancient roots of the Japanese garden in the memory of nature and the spirits that occupy it. In his writing Shigemori developed a myth of the Japanese origins and he asserted that when people lived in primitive huts or caves, as hunters and gatherers did, they enjoyed intimate contact with nature and the gods. But this changed when the ancient people built houses and started to spend more time inside, protected from direct contact with nature and its forces. So the process of civilization in this respect was a path toward alienation from the gods in nature, creating an increasing distance between people and nature. Then, according to Shigemori, there came a point when people, fearing the absence of the gods, started to bring nature back into their lives and close to their houses in the form of gardens. Hence the oldest gardens we know were created as places for the gods, called *kami-ike*, literally "god-ponds." They would contain an island with a stone or a small shrine where the gods would reside **[004 | 005]**.

The pond symbolized the ocean and the *shima*, which literally meant "the silent mountain floating on the waves," was the island where the gods lived. Therefore, in old Japanese *shima* came to signify garden, a meaning many people still remember. So the early "god-ponds" and their islands were a way of worshipping the gods, of reconnecting with the other world. Shigemori understood the creation of gardens as first and foremost an attempt to reengage with nature as it is inhabited by the gods. This was the aspect of the past that previous generations of garden makers had emulated, and this should be put into practice in the present. He wanted to reestablish this important connection that had been lost when people had become overpreoccupied with imitating old garden styles. For him the memory of garden-making was the capacity to create things like the ancients did when they were in direct contact with the gods in nature.

These two points, the continuous imitation of past styles and the loss of the ancient spiritual roots of the garden, were the main criticisms that Mirei Shigemori formulated. Later, in the chapter on selected gardens, we will look at the solutions he proposed in his own garden designs.