How to create a Suikeki or 'water rock' landscape

GRANT NORDBY
ENGLISH 314
China, Japan & Korea

The cultivation of miniature rock landscapes has an ancient history. It began in China more than 2000 years ago. Emperors and noblemen created elaborate palace gardens, complete with streams and scaled-down mountains. In time, Buddhist monks and wealthy intellectuals began to cultivate bonsai (miniature trees) and gongshi (‘spirit rocks’) in their mountain retreats and city courtyards. As Chinese influence spread abroad, Korea and Japan adopted the practice. Japan, especially, went on to develop the art in ways unique to its culture and landscape. There it is called suiseki, or “water rock.”

Man as part of Nature

For Zen Buddhists, these abstracted stone landscapes are more than just a hobby – they are a means of understanding man’s relationship to existence. Zen Buddhists believe that enlightenment is achieved by “turning the eye inward” through meditation and “mindfulness of daily experiences.” Maintaining a close connection to nature is one way to stay close to one’s “Buddha-nature.”

What is Chi?

The concept of chi is central to the Asian understanding of nature. Chi may be thought of as the “spiritual energy” connecting every living thing. Buddhists believe chi, in its various forms, is responsible for the nature and arrangement of the elements and for the patterns directing living things. Hence, a refined sensitivity to the patterns, or chi, flowing through nature is critical to reproducing those patterns in suiseki.
Asymmetrical Balance

In nature, the only place you find symmetry is in animals and plants. Everything else – mountains, rivers and rocks – is asymmetrical.

Something can be asymmetrical and still be balanced. Think of two people on a see-saw (Figure 4). Two people of equal weight can sit at equal distances from the center and be balanced. This is symmetry. But if one person is larger than the other, they can still balance by sitting at different distances from the center. This is asymmetrical balance.

Create an asymmetrically balanced composition by arranging the stones so they are visually “balanced” on an invisible fulcrum. The three stones in Figure 5 form a scalene triangle. The largest stone has the most visual “weight” so it is near the center; a medium-sized stone is a bit farther out; and both are balanced by a smaller stone that is a greater distance from the “center”.

All your suiseki arrangements should be asymmetrical, and all of them should appear asymmetrically balanced. This will create an appearance that is both dynamic and natural-looking. Avoid extremes – they are rare in nature and make it difficult for the eye to see pattern and balance.

A special challenge of suiseki is that it is a 3-dimensional art. If the composition will be viewed from multiple angles, you must arrange the stones so that they appear asymmetrically balanced from each vantage point. This is harder than it sounds, but it is also lends a feeling of discovery as you try different configurations.

Odd Number of Stones

Always use an odd number of stones in combinations of scalene triangles. This will help to avoid creating awkward alignments (see Figure 6). The only occasional exception to this rule is two. Two unequally-sized stones can be arranged to create a tense, unequal relationship. This is not a restful-looking arrangement, though, and should generally be avoided.
**Visual Weight**

The stones you select (see “Selecting Stones & Containers”) should have a clear “top” and “bottom” (Figures 7 & 8). They should also be rooted deep in the ground, rather than resting on the surface, to give the impression of permanence and scale. Resist the urge to place stones in arbitrary, gravity-defying positions.

Stone-arranging is a dialogue with nature, where the designer learns from nature by observing and imitating natural landforms. For example, gravity suggests that mountains be downward-sloping triangular shapes. An arrangement meant to evoke a mountain scene should use stones with that same character. If the designer wants to create the impression of sheer bluffs flanking a river, near-vertical faces are appropriate, but you must pay attention to the direction of sediment in the stone.

**Patterns in Nature**

In nature there is a seemingly infinite variety of stone, arranged in all sorts of different landscapes. The designer of a suiseki should be absorbed with the character of the land. Ask yourself questions like these:

* Are there steep inclines or gentle slopes? Is the surface full of deep ravines or is it smooth or crumbled? Is the stone sedimentary or igneous? Are there layers in the stone? Does it come apart in sheets, or is it flaky or fine-grained? What is its color and composition? What is its texture? Is it veined? How does it tend to erode? How old is the landscape? Is there variety in topography, so that water forms deep gullies and waterfalls? Or is it a broad, gentle landscape? What kind of vegetation grows on the stones?

As a general rule, imitate nature. Practicing suiseki is about deriving abstract meaning from real landscapes. That is better done when you have observed real places. Use the stones and landscapes of your own region. There you will have more opportunity for observation (and rock-collecting) and you will form a more meaningful connection to the place where you live.
Stones

In the Japanese *suiseki* style there are 5 basic stone shapes. They are (pictured in Figure 10): tall vertical, low vertical, arching, flat and “reclining ox”. Keep these shapes in mind as you search for stones.

Stream and river beds are good places to search for stones. Glacial rocks such as those found in the fields of Iowa are less successful because they came from different sources and have been worn round by glaciers. Rocks small enough to display on a desktop can be found almost anywhere – even in gravel. Just keep your eyes open!

There are two kinds of good *suiseki* stones: “graceful” and “grotesque” (Figures 11 and 12). As the name suggests, “graceful” stones are gracefully shaped and proportioned, with a minimum of cavities or protrusions. “Grotesque” stones, like those favored for the Chinese *gongshi*, have many cavities and protrusions and are often contorted in shape. Groups of stones should be one type or the other – never mixed.

To stay true to the *suiseki* style, avoid using brightly-colored stones or oddities like geodes or fossils. They are too distracting from the composition as a whole. Variety in texture, such as veining or layering, is desirable as long as it doesn’t overwhelm.

Patina – the appearance of age – is very important. Select stones with worn corners and some lichen or moss on the surface. Freshly cut or broken rock has a jarring, ungraceful appearance that looks unnatural and out-of-scale.

Choose stones that imitate the shape of the environment from which they came. Squarish eroded limestone, for example, makes a good river scene. Fine-grained triangular pieces might make a better mountainscape.
Selecting Stones, Containers & Sand

**Containers**

After you have chosen the stones you will feature, find a container that is low and shallow. A shallow container will not distract the eye from the stones’ vertical forms. Suiseki are often displayed in expensive hand-carved wooden stands or in shallow trays. For our purposes, the less-expensive pots designed for bonsai trees will work. They are suitably well-proportioned and are usually made in subtle colors ideal for suiseki. Tall containers such as the one in Figure 14 are meant for “cascading” bonsai trees, not for rock arrangements.

The size of the container should be related to the size and proportion of the stones. For a single stone, the container might be approximately as wide as the stone is high (including the depth of the pot). A multi-stone arrangement might need a shallower container that is about 1/3 wider than the tallest stone is high. These suggestions are approximate; use your own intuition in determining the right container for a composition.

These proportions are OK, but could be better. Ideally, the container would be a little narrower and a lot shallower.
Selecting Stones, Containers & Sand

Sand
In the garden karesansui style or the desktop suiseki style, sand or fine gravel is often used to represent water. At this small scale, sand, rather than gravel, should be used. Its color should contrast slightly from the color of the stones. If the stones are dark, the sand should be lighter; if the stones are light, the sand might be darker.

If there are drain holes in the pots, cover them with something porous (like paper or scraps of fabric, seen in Figure 17) so water can drain through while sand is retained. If you wish to use real water in addition to – or replacing – the sand, drain holes must be plugged. To prevent mildew, drain and dry the composition occasionally.
Arranging a Composition

Applying the Principles of Design
Use the "principles of design" just described to arrange your stones. Here they are again:

**STRIVE FOR ASYMMETRICAL BALANCE**

**ODD NUMBER OF STONES**

**VISUAL WEIGHT**

**IMITATE PATTERNS IN NATURE**

Figure 20
Arranging a Composition

1, 2, 3 & 5-stone Compositions

Questions to Ask Yourself:

Is it asymmetrically balanced? From multiple vantage points?
Does the composition avoid extremes in proportion and color?
Is there a clear top and bottom to the stones?
Do the stones appear rooted in the ground?
Does the composition evoke the impression of natural landscapes?
Do you recognize any of the 5 basic shapes?
Do the stones in a composition look like they came from the same place?
Is this stone “graceful” or “grotesque”?
Is there a variety of texture?
Do the stones have a patina of age?
Does the container suit the composition?
Do the sand and container contrast well with the stones?
Sources:

Creating Japanese Gardens, Ortho Books
The Living Art of Bonsai, by Amy Liang

Photo Credits:

Figure 1: From www.scholarsrock.com
Figure 2: From www.wikimedia.com
Figure 3: From www.wedgewoodacupuncture.com
Figure 4: Image by the author
Figure 5: Image by the author
Figure 6: Image by the author
Figure 7: Image by the author
Figure 8: Image by the author
Figure 9: From www.northeastiowarcd.org
Figure 10: Image by the author
Figure 11: Image by the author
Figure 12: From www.scholarsrock.com
Figure 13: Image by the author
Figure 14: Image by the author
Figure 15: Image by the author
Figure 16: Image by the author
Figure 17: Image by the author
Figure 18: Image by the author
Figure 19: From Creating Japanese Gardens, Ortho Books
Figure 20: Composite image; image of Mount Fuji from www.britannica.com

*All unlabeled images are repetitions of images that appear elsewhere in the document or were produced by the author.*