

“Suiseki” – stone treasures

In Japan, *suiseki* stones are regarded as works of art which are to be admired. These stones are formed by the forces of nature, and take the shapes of mountains, islands, waterfalls, and other landscape features (such as country cottages). They are also embedded and displayed on special trays and carved bases. These valued traditions have their origins in China, where a custom was practised to celebrate the beauty of stones symbolising elements of nature that were present in Buddhist beliefs. The stone was a symbol of the mythical Mount Shumi, which they located in the centre of the world. The 1st objects of this kind reached

Japan in the 6th century BC. The very name *suiseki* means “water stones” and it is a reference to the process of creating landscapes from small stones arranged on shallow trays filled with water. Their uniqueness also results from the belief that the spiritual strength of the *kami* gods is vividly present in the stones, and this is one of the explanations behind the existence of Japanese stone gardens.

At first, the most valued stones were those which conveyed the most complicated wonders of nature. However, with the passing of time, simpler forms became more and more appreciated due to the influence of Zen philosophy. Some *suiseki* stones have become objects of contemplation. Their value mainly resulted from their evocative shapes which could transport the viewer into another reality. The colour of the stone is significant, as well. The most valued stones are dark, even black; light coloured and white stones are regarded as being without depth.

The multifaceted role of *suiseki* stones manifests in many ways. They have become the subject of poems, and have been given poetic and descriptive names. People used to take the stones with them when travelling or in danger, as to them they were their most valuable possessions.

Individual specimens are evaluated and described according to the accepted classification which refers to their shape, among other features. They can take the form of islands or mountains, especially those with lightly-coloured peaks that could suggest the presence of snow or passing clouds. *Suiseki* stones can also resemble waterfall hills or hills with dried streams, provided natural grooves are visible in the stone or the colouring effects of quartz or calcite. They can personify figures of gods (Buddha, or the [compassionate Kannon](#)), or resemble the shapes of country cottages, bridges or birds (e.g. cranes).

Bonsai and *suiseki* images

As a rule, any interference in the *suiseki* stone’s structure should be avoided. Any changes in shape are regarded as being contrary to its spirit. Although in practise this is sometimes different, the base can be modelled, carved so as to ensure the stability of the stone. The very setting is as important as the item. Only when these two elements are skilfully integrated can they become a source of harmony and true pleasure that it is possible to derive from having contact with this unique artform.

Suiseki stones can be displayed on wooden and lacquered *dai* bases, closely moulded to their shape (as in the case of the *suiseki* which can be seen on the website of Małopolska’s Virtual Museums) or special large trays filled with water, or with sand which has been smoothed away with different tools (including small spoons or down feathers). Sometimes, compositions are created on bases by adding miniature elements (houses or figures being elements of the landscape). *Suiseki* exhibitions are often combined with *bonsai* presentations, as those miniature trees complement the overall image. From time to time, they can mask some of the imperfections of the stone. Depending on the season, *suiseki* are also placed in alcoves, accompanied by rolls and selected plants – pine tree branches and bamboo shoots in winter, Japanese plum trees and branches of forsythia, or blooming wisteria in summer.

Home-made *suiseki*?

Interestingly enough, not only stones formed in Japan can be regarded as *suiseki*. Although it can be difficult to find such evocative forms that resemble natural landscapes, such exceptional objects can be found in any place, including Poland. It would be sufficient for the stone to be displayed on a special base according to the rules of the art. Although it may seem easy, in Japan this activity is treated as a separate

occupation. The responsibility for the creation of trays and bases lies with the Japanese masters, who have developed their proficiency in the art throughout their entire life...

Elaborated by Editorial team of Małopolska's Virtual Museums,



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Bibliography:

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