

Shin, Gyo and So

Japanese gardens can be subdivided into these three broad groups. All three are represented here at Foxfire

Shin gardens are full scale and everything can be taken more or less at face value. A rock is a rock and a tree is a tree. No representation and no interpretation of what you view are required. These gardens are large in size and were most often created for the rich and powerful such as the Emperor or other high nobles mainly because they were the only ones who could afford the substantial outlays in land and labor to construct and maintain them. Much of Foxfire can be demonstrated to be **shin** in nature.



Gyo refers to the concept that the garden is not complete of itself but must rely on the imagination of the viewer to complete its image. These gardens are smaller in size and within the economic feasibility of many more people. They deal with illusions to a degree to lend an appearance of depth and spaciousness to otherwise constricted areas.

Some illusions of size can be produced by the placement of rocks of various sizes in the garden. Larger rocks are placed nearer to the viewer and smaller rocks are placed further away. Since in large vistas the objects further away appear to be smaller in size this placement of stones mimics that natural perception and produces a feeling of depth and spaciousness. Likewise, plants with larger leaves



are planted closer to the viewing area while those with smaller leaves are positioned near the back of the garden. Again, the senses are manipulated to see something that is not necessarily there. Small-scale representation is an integral part of the **gyo** garden. A pile of boulders might represent a larger mountain and the trickle of water lends itself to the image of a mountain stream. The familiar bonsai plant is a **gyo** object. The miniature tree represents its larger brother in the wild and with the imagination of the viewer to help, the illusion of a distant full-scale scene is completed.

The **so** garden is the most abstract of the three types. It relies entirely on the imagination of the viewer to complete the scene. These gardens, by being nothing in particular, have the potential to be anything to the eye of the beholder. **So** gardens are often seen near temples and monasteries and are often thought of as meditation in nature. The large **so** garden at Foxfire is a duplicate of the world famous garden at the Ryoanji Temple in Kyoto, Japan built hundreds of years ago and still revered for its unique qualities to this day.

The random placing of the stones in odd numbered groupings of odd numbered rocks can represent anything the viewer wishes, -continents on the ocean, galaxies

in the sky or a tiger and her cubs. The possibilities are endless. For me this garden provides a subtle aura that helps the mind to relax and expand. I believe the Zen masters have the ability to meditate and let their minds expand regardless of surroundings due to their long years of study and discipline. For those less adept than the masters the peaceful non-distracting surroundings provide the background that facilitates meditation.

Shin, gyo and **so** can also define a relative degree of formality in a setting. A



Shin pathway would be laid out in a very precise regular way with well-shaped, flat, smooth stones. A **gyo** path would have rougher stonework and not be nearly as perfect. The **so** pathway would be uncut stones placed in non-regular alignment-much like a natural pathway of stepping stones across a stream.