

EAST MEETS WEST AT THE SHADOWED WALL

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In 1980, Luis Barragan in a conversation described his typical day. He said:

I begin work each morning at about half past seven. I have lunch here with my team of architects at about four in the afternoon. My evenings are spent reading books on art and architecture, as well as novels. I usually begin a project at the onset without setting pencil to page, without sketching a single drawing. I sit down and try to imagine the wildest things, a process that involves a certain madness. After this initial brainstorm, I let the ideas rest a couple days, sometimes several days. I return to them and begin to draw sketches in perspective ...¹

With these quiet, plain and refreshingly simple words, Barragan reveals three important characteristics of his design process. First, his nightly routine of reading was obviously integral to his work. Second, he sought imaginative ideas to blend into his designs.² And third, the use of perspectives as a design method influenced the way he saw and responded to space. Finally, there is one other defining characteristic implied by this quote. The architect's reverence for a monastic life of solitude allowed for his productive, reflective introspection.

Luis Barragan acknowledged that many ideas for his designs were from collaborations with friends and influences derived from his readings and studies. In his comments on his gardens he named as sources for inspiration his recollections of the landscape of his early childhood, the Mediterranean style work and romantic words of poet and landscape architect Ferdinand Bac, and also his memories of an early, profound visit to the Alhambra in Granada, Spain.³ However, his innovative landscapes of the 1940s and 1950s seem to dramatically depart from the models of these stated attributions. These works reveal instead the assimilation of a wider range of environmental, artistic and cultural influences. In his later work he is not as forthcoming in giving credit to the generators of his ideas. Antonio Toca Fernandez criticized Barragan for, as saw it, becoming secretive about his later influences because of a contemporary, universal value placed on originality. Barragan feared that public knowledge of his inspirations would diminish respect for his achievements.⁴

In Barragan's library there are 40 books directly

related to gardens of many types and locations that suggest other paradigms for his later works.⁵ Of these forty books, most of which were published between 1930 to 1955, the largest number feature gardens from the Far East. Seven well worn volumes describe Japanese gardens. Barragan had a notation system in which he underlined key passages in his books in colored pencils or simply left a paper strip as a page marker. Two of the seven volumes on Japanese gardens contained a total of ten paper markers.⁶ In addition to books on Japanese gardens, he owned the classic Chinese garden reference of the times Osvald Siren's *Gardens of China*.

The highly unusual Barragan landscapes of the forties and fifties are in part assimilations of symbolic elements from oriental garden typology. Starting about 1940 Barragan retreated for a number of years from the practice of architecture because of his disillusionment with urban problems that he believed were caused by an exploding population and tasteless commercial exploitation. His concerns lead him to a period of solitary research and experimentation in the design of seven gardens for himself.⁷ During this period he developed a design approach that reflected an awakening nationalistic cultural emotion that he shared with other Mexican friends and artists along with his other more personal interests in art, landscape and architecture.

Four of his seven experimental gardens are located on land south of Mexico City in the difficult terrain of lava beds adjoining his future El Pedregal housing project. This land has a strong physical presence that fostered the design of more naturalistic gardens. Partly because of the challenge of beautiful but difficult landscapes, Barragan expanded his library references to include oriental garden literature, among other topic additions. Confronting the lava rock covered surface of El Pedregal, Barragan wisely consulted and utilized ideas from cultures which highly valued beautiful, naturalistic rock landscapes and the myths that inspired them.

Luis Barragan's other three experimental gardens from this period are located in Tacubaya, Mexico City, where he later built his house and studio. These garden designs also show evidence of his knowledge of oriental garden design concepts. The urban, walled enclaves in Tacubaya play upon the half light and privacy so appreciated by both Barragan and oriental designers. The spaces are filled with dense plants that offer serene frontal views and foster meditation. One garden, located

across the street from his house, is more open than the other two nearby gardens. This small garden plot is divided into three courts through the device of descending terraces. Within a walkway sequence of adjoining courts, a viewing platform with a space-defining wall is placed suggesting a Chinese garden pavilion. As in the typical Chinese garden, they are painted white or light colors with plants placed nearby to cast delicate shadows. In this garden the walk continues on to a studio. The sequence is reminiscent of Chinese garden-house relationships.

Barragan's growing interest in achieving design originality led to a change in his design approach. During his 1931 trip to France, he stayed several months in New York where he met often with Guadalajara exile and artist Jose Clemente Orozco. It was Orozco who impressed upon Barragan the duty of creating new art as opposed to reinventing the past.⁸ After his trip, Barragan departed forever from the Mediterranean styles inspired by Ferdinand Bac. Through his private readings and meditations he was able to overlay ideas drawn from multiple cultural influences and mysteriously personalize his recently acquired knowledge of the modern idiom. The exotic and unfamiliar Oriental design sources he found in his books were very appealing to him. Incorporating garden types from China and Japan with elements drawn from his other interests helped him produce highly innovative landscapes.

Barragan had an appreciation of the Sung-Muromachi style landscape perspective paintings, executed by Zen monk artists. A paper marker was placed by Barragan in his copy of Loraine Kuck's *The Art of Japanese Gardens*, where a typical Zen landscape painting appears.⁹ The abstract perspective was created by overlapping and fading the distant representations of rock elements, and by diminishing in size a path leading up a perpendicularly steep mountain. A small figure, the artist-philosopher, is shown pausing halfway up the mountain where he has turned and is contemplating the dark valleys below. The scene implies that he will continue his climb to Enlightenment. This painting represented to the Zen Buddhist who painted it the act and process of meditation. It is a painting illustrating a pilgrim's solitary reflection that occurs because of the distance from the scene he is focused on and also because he is restrained by the mountain cliff boundary from actual involvement in the scene. In the same way, the picture plane boundary of the perspective restrains the viewer from active involvement and promotes the act of meditation.

Barragan understood the Zen Buddhist value of contemplation. This is reflected by Barragan in his own design process — the use of readings that lead to ideas expressed in perspective drawing. The process allows him to study and create. Using an effect similar to Oriental landscape paintings Barragan's perspective sketches led to the composition of living perspective gardens that invite reflective viewing and introspection. This process and intention also infiltrated Barragan's later work. An example cited in Antonio Riggen Martinez's book *Luis Barragan: Mexico's Modern Master, 1902-1988* describes the modifications Barragan made in his own home. Over time, the view of the garden from his

living room was treated as a picture plane, a glass boundary that he could not penetrate.¹⁰ He discouraged his own movement to the exterior by means of the development of a circuitous path to the garden. He ceased to ever physically enter his garden, leaving it unattended and overgrown. This glass barrier provided him a meditative view.¹¹

Meditation was the product of the solitary lifestyle that Barragan deeply valued. A more lasting influence on Barragan from Ferdinand Bac was that landscape architect's exaltation of studious solitude.¹² Also, as a religious man, Barragan related to the mystical spiritualism of Zen Buddhism which promoted a life of solitude. He believed that solitude promoted serenity and an appreciation of beauty.¹³ Barragan's abundant use of Roman Catholic symbols in his designs complemented his interest in garden-making symbolism representing oriental myths.¹⁴ Indeed, the five paper markers placed by Barragan in Loraine Kuck's book *The Art of Japanese Gardens* identified the areas of her book that have the most extensive descriptions of Chinese myths that direct Oriental garden designs through symbolism. As Barragan adapted his gardens to the more powerful natural features at El Pedregal, he drew generously from Oriental religious and cultural philosophy. Barragan found that the garden symbolism used to represent Chinese myths adapted easily to the subtle depiction of aspects of the Aztec creation myth associated with the El Pedregal site.¹⁵ The rich design ideas he learned from Oriental garden literature were utilized in his remaining garden, plaza and fountain projects.

El Pedregal: Seekers of The Way

El Pedregal's plazas and gardens, now almost totally destroyed, exist only through Armando Salas Portugal's photographs. These poignant images illustrate a dramatic world of slanted, slab rocks with glistening pale translucent desert flora enhanced with the aid of Portugal's camera filters. Plazas were populated with orthogonal planes merged with freely formed lava beds. Fountain sprays are pictured cooling the bright surfaces. Steps and paths climb upward towards vertical planes made of lava rock and the mountain view beyond. Small patches of sand and grass, courtyards among the sea of lava, suggest a landing for the artist-philosopher.¹⁶

The baroque lava rocks attracted Barragan's admiration and that of many of his artists friends. Barragan purchased 750 acres of this land with the intention of developing a housing subdivision while preserving its natural beauty. He built a fantastic landscape that included entrance plazas, show gardens and home sites. While strikingly innovative, there is something familiar about this project. The natural attributes of the property recall the tortuous Chinese rock gardens located in Suchow. At El Pedregal it is easily seen from photographs that Barragan had employed the Chinese and Japanese lake-mountain garden concept. As with the oriental model, the lakes are depicted wet or dry and contain abstracted mythical islands. The traditional artificial mountains made of rocks that surround the scene and frame the view in the oriental model are present in Barragan's park scenes, but with rock coverage so extensive at El Pedregal, the mountains

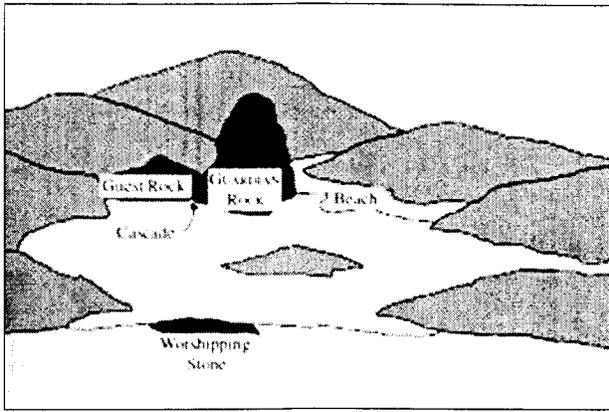


Fig. 1 Computer diagram based on a drawing from Jiro Harada's *Japanese Gardens* (London, The Studio Limited, 1956), p. 13.

are not artificial.

A famous photograph by Armando Salas Portugal shows an El Pedregal garden detail — a single, perpendicular rock, at once magical and surrealistic in appearance as if it were lifted from a Magritte painting.¹⁷ The proportions and shape remind the viewer of the single, free standing perpendicular rocks placed in Oriental gardens to symbolize mountains.¹⁸ In other locations throughout the Mexican project, openings in garden walls that frame distant views are strikingly similar to wall devices that focus views in oriental gardens.

The most convincing argument for the oriental garden influence are the path and stairs that are viewed in almost all photographs of El Pedregal. Oriental intellectuals visited the mountains, where as recluses they had the leisure to enjoy the natural beauty and a simple lifestyle. They had time to think about nature and to understand their universal relationship to the world. By seeking the way to understanding they were called Seekers of the Way or Taoists.¹⁹ The Zen Buddhists shared these beliefs. They believed the struggle to overcome adversities produced a superior being.²⁰ As in paintings, at El Pedregal the struggle was symbolized by a climbing path up a mountain. The grass and sand landings at El Pedregal allowed the artist-philosophers to reflect and find enlightenment.

Many photographs of El Pedregal show rocks and stairs. The angle of the camera suggested the direction of travel will be up. The scenes convey quiet, serene, and comforting places. The conveyance was also intentional. Barragan directly supervised and approved the views he wanted photographed of this project.²¹ He intended to show the climb and to symbolize the search for enlightenment. The designs promoted his contemplative views about life.

In Alvaro Siza's book *Barragan: The Complete Works* there are a few rare photographs showing the larger context of the El Pedregal garden that illustrate a gentler path meandering around a natural lake. The path passes aesthetically pleasing, serene garden elements and settings.²² These vignettes provide visual experiences for the enjoyment of nature similar to those provided in the Katsura Palace Garden. Barragan possessed a detailed

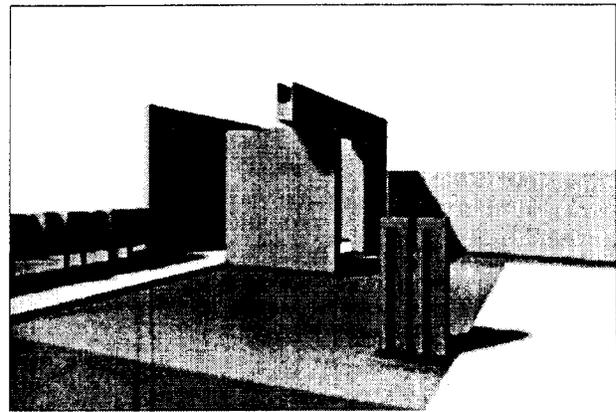


Fig. 2. Computer perspective of *Los Clubes Fuente de Los Anantes*.

separate site drawing of this garden along with photographs of the settings. At an intersection in the El Pedregal larger context photograph, Barragan's path departs from the lake's edge, implying a larger configuration lake resembling the Katsura lake shape.²³

Artificial Hills: Asymmetrical Japanese Garden

For five hundred years, Japanese garden books have suggested rules to guide the design of the natural hill garden. These commonly understood rules include instructions for the garden layout governed by a diagrammatic perspective which was mentioned in Jiro Harada's *Japanese Gardens*, a book included in Barragan's library.²⁴ Each element in this garden type has by custom a name and a role. While certain elements of this traditional composition are often missing,²⁵ enough remain to fulfill the overall idea. The ubiquitous model enforces an expectation of graceful, balanced gardens. The viewer of this small artificial scene is persuaded of natural grandeur by an enhanced perspectival effect achieved through layered overlapping rocks.

Traditionally, at the center of the garden composition, a main, large rock, called the guardian rock is located. Close by, a smaller rock called the guest rock creates a crevice for the water cascade. The cascade flows forward into a small lake which is traditionally depicted by either water or sand. The water then seems to disappear to the right, out of sight of the viewer, implying a continuation of the scene.

To the side and rear of the rocks and cascade are overlapping rocks that screen the real view. To the right of the viewer, lies an open beach space that counterbalances the rock elements on the other side of the lake, left of the viewer. The viewer's place in the composition is in front of the perspective's picture plane on the near shore by a rock called the worshipping stone. The relationship between the guardian rock, guest rock and the worshipping stone is triangular. This perspectival setting is planned to lead the eye to the focus of the picture frame — the water cascade.

Barragan's use of the perspective drawing as a design tool easily led him to emulate the traditional Japanese

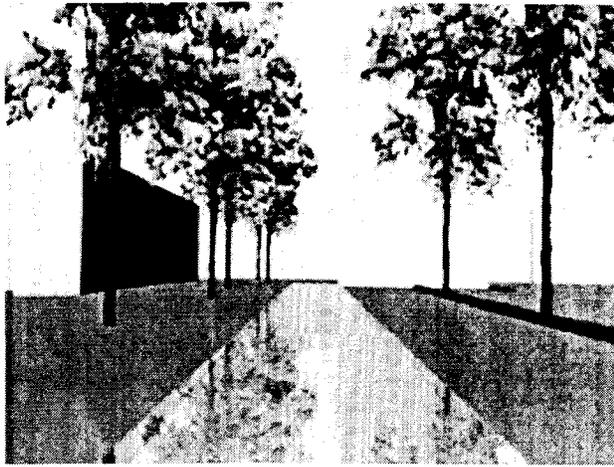


Fig. 3. Perspective of Los Clubes Plaza y Fuente del Bebedero.

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arrangement. The most intriguing examples of this are reflected in two landscaped areas, one at Los Clubes, Fuente de Los Anantes, and the other at Las Arboledas, Plaza y Fuente del Bebedero, both built in 1959. Upon examination, these spaces reveal object placements that clearly reflect Japanese principles. Barragan's minimalist elements are situated in such a way as to suggest a Japanese triangulated garden arrangement.

At Fuente de Los Amantes, the tallest element, a wall "mountain", is located at the vertex of a triangle placing it farthest from the viewer. Cascading water from this mountain rushes towards a nearby slightly smaller wall mountain located to the left of the vertex on the short side of the left leg of the triangle. There are two shorter elements, a pair of vertical wooden troughs in the forefront of the picture plane at a similar position as the worshipping stone the so called "lovers." The mountains in the Fuente de Los Amantes are surrounded by a "lake." The lakes in Barragan's gardens as in the Japanese prototypes are either wet using water or dry using sand to indicate water.

The ground surface of the lake and the surrounding edges are evenly textured, formed by unpatterned river pebbles. Pebbled surfaces are traditional in both Moorish and Chinese gardens. Indeed, the treatment of this fountain is similar to Chinese examples.²⁵ Functionally, Barragan's lake is a water fountain feature and a bathing opportunity for horses from the nearby stables.

Barragan's fascination with Japanese garden ideas is also convincingly demonstrated through the solitary figures of the lovers. The placement, arrangement and relationship of the lovers,²⁶ captures the sense of the serene isolated vertical rocks found in a garden that Barragan knew well, an exceptional example of a dry sand lake garden the 15th century Ryoan-ji Japanese garden.²⁷ One last coincidence regarding this plaza is its unusual L-shape that allows for two perspective views of the fountain. Barragan marked a passage in Loraine E. Kuck's *The Art of Japanese Gardens* that refers to both Ryoan-ji and the famous L-shaped hill garden found in the Daisen-in, a small garden in the Daitokuji monastery in Kyoto.²⁸ Daisen-in is known for its imaginative forceful

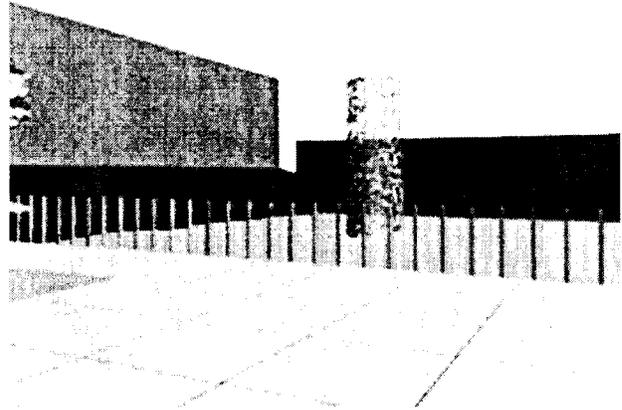


Fig. 4. Perspective of fountain at El Pedregal Plaza de las Fuentes.

water cascade depicted in rock and sand without water. Both the overall L-shape of this garden that provides an opportunity for two perspective views of the cascade and the interesting material innovations used in both garden models obviously influenced the Mexican architect.

The design of the Plaza y Fuente del Bebedero is another compelling example of the influence of Japanese hill gardens. Most striking of Barragan's gardens, its perspectival focus is the tall white wall "guardian rock" coupled together with the smaller blue wall "guest rock." From these rocks horizontal and projecting dramatically forward is the symbolic cascade, which serves as the horses' water trough. Successfully blocking the outside world are a series of bamboo and white wall mountains staggered and layered to enhance the depth of the perspectival view. The depiction of the lake in this example is more complicated since the wet water cascade falls to a dry sand path lake. The arrangement of the wall mountains closely follows its prototype.

Isles of the Immortals, Mount Sumeru and Serpent Pleasure Boats

One additional fountain should be included in this discussion, the largely destroyed El Pedregal Plaza de las Fuentes.²⁹ It emulates many of the elemental moves of a typical hill garden. At the center of the composition is a fountain jet that is surrounded by a series of heavy lava rock wall mountains. Typical of the oriental model, these walls block the near views while focusing the viewer on the distant views. However, this cascade does not spring from two companion rocks. The similarity to the hill gardens is most likely because of Barragan's methodology — the employment of perspective sketches in his design process.

A fuller explanation of his design is suggested by a reading marked with a paper slip placed by Barragan in Loraine Kuck's book *The Art of Japanese Gardens*.³⁰ This section discusses oriental lake garden myths and describes in detail lakes containing three islands where immortals live. The myth was probably of particular interest to Barragan at that time because of his growing preoccupation with Aztec creation myths and with his

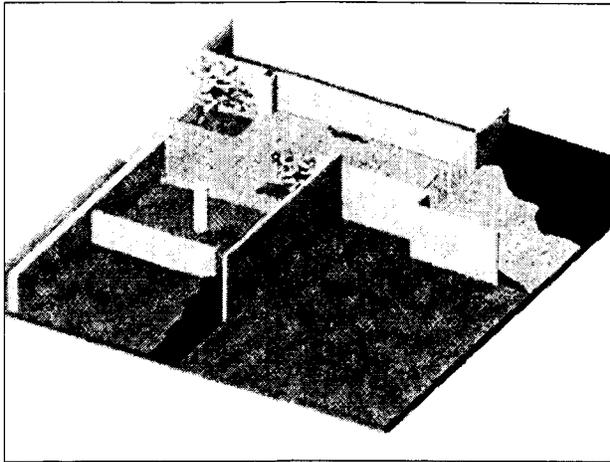


Fig. 5. Perspective of El Pedregal Plaza de las Fuentes.

own religious spirituality and death.³¹ The discussion also includes a description of another important lake myth drawn from an earlier Buddhist form of one central figure, Mount Sumeru, the universal center surrounded by heavenly bodies. Mount Sumeru is generally depicted as a large rock rising from the water and concentrically surrounded by the rocky mountains and circular seas.

Barragan emulated previous oriental garden designers by always being imaginative in his interpretation of traditional elements. The sea rising Mount Sumeru focus was represented by a water jet shooting up from a depressed volcanic pool of water. The falling return of the water jet produced concentric rings shallowly defining the "seas." Layered background stone walls screen the observers' views and at the same time represented the rocky mountains. On the near side of the perspective where transparency was necessary to view Mount Sumeru, a layer of mountains was represented by a vertical spike fence, painted scarlet.³² This color strengthens its presence which provides visual support of the design idea and protects the viewer from accidentally slipping into the depression. The point of the design is more apparent in plan when one can view the line of the edge of the depressed pool.

The horizontal plaza plane is incorporated into the entire plaza design as if it were an extension of the mythical sea. The white enclosing plastered wall on the other side of the plaza acts as the outer layer of the rocky mountains and the plaza. Two separate groupings of trees are easily interpreted as additional, typical lake elements in Japanese gardens — the islands for the inhabitant of Immortals.

The design inspiration is confirmed by Mathais Goeritz's jaunty serpent sculpture placed at the farthest side of the plaza from the fountain and appearing to move towards the Mount Sumeru fountain. The resemblance of the serpent to the serpent pleasure boats that transported parties to the islands of the Immortals and Mount Sumeru is striking. One of Barragan's paper markers is placed on the exact page of Loraine Kuck's *Japanese Gardens* that illustrates a typical pleasure barge

of similar physical character to the sculpture.³³ It is not difficult to see that Barragan transposed this myth and its symbols into an interpretation of the Aztec creation myth that is associated with the formation of El Pedregal by the volcanic eruption of Mount Xitle. The water fountain represents hot fire red lava erupting from the volcanic cavern below. The scarlet, spike fence renders the heat of the eruption. Staging this myth as a garden scene yielded Barragan the same sympathetic magical device as the Orientals used to edify past national religious and cultural experiences.

Luis Barragan found a kind of happy companionship through his readings with Chinese and Japanese garden designers. Their use of gardens as an escape from unpleasant, distracting urban chaos to beautiful natural environments fit comfortably with Barragan's own. The Oriental sages' trust in silence and solitude was reflected in Barragan's own life. Even though he had a natural propensity for spiritual and intellectual introspection, the Orientals helped him sharpen his beliefs and taught him lifelong habits and methods. The work that remains for us today is much the richer for it.

NOTES

¹ Mario Schjetnan Garduno, "Enclosures and the Open Sky: A Conversation of Forms" *Arts De Mexico* 23 (March-April 1994), p. 108.

² Barragan's fascination with innovation is amplified by an interesting passage underline by Barragan in a well-worn book on horses found in his library which states "To come to your [horse] meeting you must provide a suitable spectacle or they won't come again." His later desire for design originality as contrasted with his earlier reworkings of others' works permeated the designs of his gardens and his architecture after the 1940s. See John Board, *Horse and Pencil*, (London: Christopher Johnson, 1950), p. 103.

³ Ferdinand Bac, *Les Colombieres* (Paris: Louis Conard, Libraire-Editeur, 1906).

⁴ Antonio Toca Fernandez, "The Work of Luis Barragan: Looking and Seeing" in Alvaro Siza ed., *Barragan: The Complete Works* (New York: Princeton Press, Eng. trans. 1996), p. 13.

⁵ I am indebted to Juan Palomar Vereá, architect and President of the Fundacion de Arquitectura Tapatia AC, Guadalajara for allowing me access to Barragan's library and for allowing me to reproduce the catalogue listing of Barragan's books.

⁶ These two books are David H. Engel, *Japanese Gardens of Today* (Vermont and Tokyo, Charles E. Tuttle, 1959), 270 pp.; and Loraine E. Kuck, *The Art of Japanese Gardens* (New York: The John Day Company, 1940).

⁷ Antonio Riggen Martinez, *Luis Barragan: Mexico's Modern Master, 1902-1988* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1996), p. 56.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁹ Kuck, *The Art of Japanese Gardens*, p.125.

¹⁰ Martinez, *Luis Barragan: Mexico's Modern Master 1902-1988*, p. 106.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 148-164.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 58, 61.

- ¹⁵ Ibid., p. 72.
- ¹⁶ Armando Salas Portugal, *Barragan* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), pp. 29-30.
- ¹⁷ Tsuyoshi Tamura, *Art of the Landscape Garden in Japan* (Tokyo: Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai, 1938), p. 94.
- ¹⁸ Kuck, *The Art of Japanese Gardens*, pp. 5-6.
- ¹⁹ Martinez, *Luis Barragan: Mexico's Modern Master 1902-1988*, p. 107.
- ²⁰ Ibid, p. 55.
- ²¹ Siza, *Barragan: The Complete Works*, p. 109.
- ²² Tamura, *Art of the Landscape Garden in Japan*, pp.112-116, Plate III.
- ²³ See Jiro Harada, *Japanese Gardens* (London: The Studio Limited, 1956), p. 13.
- ²⁴ Kuck, *Japanese Gardens*, p. 257.
- ²⁵ Ibid., p. 45.
- ²⁶ Barragan supervised and coordinated the story and the views of his work illustrated in this presentation. Emilio Ambasz, *The Architecture of Luis Barragan* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1976), p. 74-75.
- ²⁷ Pictures of Ryoan-ji appear in several of the books in his collection. His paper marker was found next to a photograph of the garden. See Kuck, *Japanese Gardens* p. 156.
- ²⁸ Ibid., p. 143.
- ²⁹ Portugal, *Barragan* pp. 20, 32-34.
- ³⁰ Kuck, *The Art of Japanese Gardens*, p. 10.
- ³¹ Martinez, *Luis Barragan: Mexico's Modern Master 1902-1988*, p. 112.
- ³² Siza, *Barragan: The Complete Works*, p.98
- ³³ Kuck, *Japanese Gardens*, p. 45.