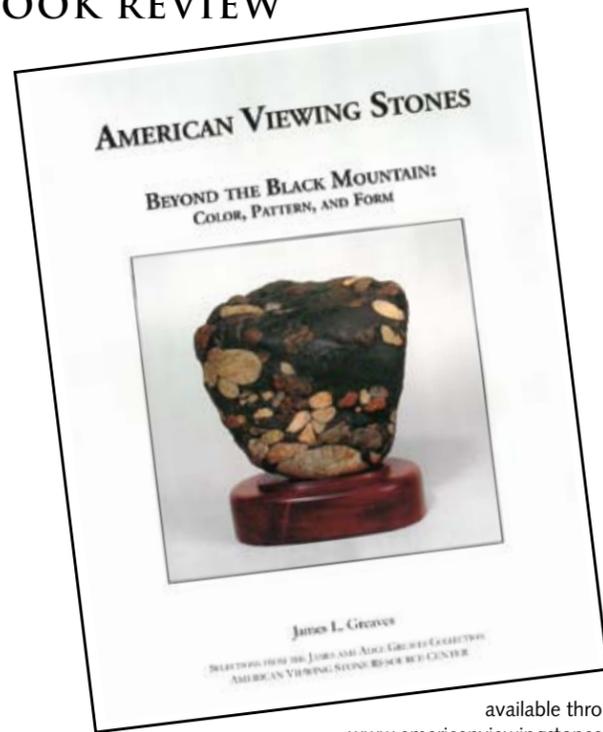


BOOK REVIEW



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STONES ON VIEW

The aesthetics of stone appreciation, specifically of Japanese *suiseki* and Chinese *gongshi*—or, as they are better known, ‘scholar stones’—has long been a subject of personal interest to me and one worthy of exploring in STONEXUS.

American Viewing Stones, a book recently published by Jim Greaves, has reawakened that interest and opened a window onto a fascinating world that invites exploration.

The book can be seen as an portfolio of *objets d'art* and its text as an informative catalogue that enables us to better understand what is on view here. As this ‘catalogue’ makes clear, stone appreciation is considered to be, by those involved in it at least, an art, an art which does not reside in the *objet* itself, but in the eye, and mind, of the beholder.

The introduction to the book is the introduction to an ancient avocation, providing as it does an overview of this peculiar relationship between man and stone, an act of appreciation that has evolved over time, become a culture unto itself, spread geographically and developed stylistic distinctions and a complex array of categories.

As Greaves informs us, “*The formalized appreciation of stones originated in China. Collecting rocks for religious or aesthetic purposes can be traced back to the Han dynasty (206 B.C. -A.D. 220).*” Garden rocks with special qualities were held in high esteem during the Tang dynasty (618-907); and, during the Song dynasty (960-1270), the appreciation for larger garden rocks was extended to smaller stones, the *gongshi* (spirit stones) that have come to be known in English as ‘scholar stones.’ These could be brought into the house and placed there to be admired; some were small enough to be carried in the sleeve of a robe. The quality of the *gongshi* was considered to be a reflection of the sensibilities of its owner.

In the early 7th century the Chinese Imperial Court sent gifts to the Empress of Japan—*penjing* (rocks and trees displayed in basins) and *gongshi*, which the cultured Japanese greatly admired. Initially the Chinese aesthetic prevailed, but stylistic differences manifested as the Japanese connoisseurs were affected by a growing acceptance of Zen Buddhism which led to a “*pronounced shift away from the energetic, convoluted Chinese styles, toward subdued, horizontal*

landscape stones. This shift to more subtle stones culminated under the influence of Zen priests and tea masters of the Muromachi Period (1338-1573), who saw the more subtle, suggestive stones as an aid to communication with nature from which one might attain inner awareness, refinement and, ultimately, enlightenment.”

Just as the Japanese expression of the art of stone appreciation was initially influenced by the Chinese aesthetic, so Korean sensibilities were influenced by the Japanese aesthetic until their own more rugged character asserted itself. I find these distinctions of character intriguing. Though they sprang from the same source, the way that the Chinese scholar stones, the Japanese *suiseki* and the Korean *su-seok* differ from each other is remarkable. American ‘viewing stones’ represent yet another mode of appreciation, one informed by its Asian origins but evolving in its own way, as might be expected by an emerging ‘school.’ The Chinese have been at this for 1500 years at least, the Japanese for several hundred years, whereas it is only in the last 50 or so years that the art of stone appreciation has itself come to be appreciated, and practiced, in this country.

Another way the aesthetics of the various schools differ is in the attitudes toward altering the form of a stone. Ideally the stones selected and presented are nature’s pure creations, weathered by time and the elements, yet for more than a thousand years there has been a tradition in China of ‘enhancing’ a stone’s shape. During the Tang dynasty extraordinary pieces of limestone were carved and then deposited in Lake Tai for a few generations to ‘maturate.’ That tradition survives and in China today the prevailing philosophy

is that the hand of man may be skillfully employed to enhance the forms wrought by nature—thus making the piece in part, at least, a ‘work of art.’ As much as 20% of the surface of a *gongshi* can be worked and Chinese collectors consider it a ‘natural’ stone.

The Japanese did not adopt this practice. In theory a *suiseki* stone cannot be altered in any way, but in practice flattening the bottoms of stones is generally tolerated. (There is, however, another classification in Japan called *biseki*, stones polished to heighten their mineral beauty.) Koreans are the most strict about not enhancing stones and tolerate no alterations. American collectors also refrain from altering stones but creating a flat bottom is a common practice; they will, without compunction, slice the top off a large boulder to obtain a stone worthy of display.

The broader classifications of viewing stones—Landscape, Pattern, Object, Color, Figure, Embedded Image—are described and illustrated and the topic of presentation is discussed, but the principal contents of the book are the stones themselves, depicted in over 150 excellent color photographs. We are pleased to present a selection of these photographs here. Note that the author, preferring natural appearance to dramatic effect, has chosen to depict each stone against a neutral background.

American Viewing Stones will inspire and inform those with a predilection for stone appreciation, particularly those who have already begun to develop an ‘eye’ or even, perhaps, their own collection.

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‘The Midnight Hills’
 Three-peaked Mountains stone
 Sampo-seki
 Thomes Creek, California
 collected by Frank English

below:
 ‘Demon’ (Oni)
 Embedded-image stone
 Mokelumne River, California
 collected by Jim Greaves

