

The Integration of Gardening Techniques of Suzhou Gardens in Art Museum Space Design in the Jiangnan Region, China

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Abstract

This study investigates the integration of traditional Suzhou garden design techniques into contemporary art museum spaces in the Jiangnan region of China. Using a qualitative multiple-case study approach, three representative museums were examined: the Suzhou Museum, China National Silk Museum in Hangzhou, and Nanjing Museum. Data collection involved on-site observations and documentary analysis of spatial layouts, design elements, and gardening techniques. The findings reveal three primary integration strategies: first, the adoption of Suzhou garden spatial layout concepts including asymmetrical arrangements and layered spatial hierarchies; second, the application of traditional framing techniques (jiejing) using architectural elements to create visual connections between interior and exterior spaces; and third, the "introducing scenery into the museum" approach that incorporates natural elements such as water features, rocks, and plants to enhance visitor experience. The comparative analysis demonstrates that museums successfully applying these techniques show improved visitor engagement and reduced museum fatigue. These findings provide practical design guidelines for museum practitioners and architects seeking to integrate traditional Chinese garden aesthetics into modern cultural spaces while preserving regional cultural identity.

Keywords: Suzhou Gardens, Art Museum Design, Jiangnan Region, Traditional Gardening Techniques, Cultural Integration

Introduction

The classical gardens of Suzhou represent one of the most refined expressions of Chinese landscape architecture, recognized globally through their inscription on the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage List. In 1997, the Humble Administrator's Garden, Lingering Garden, Master of the Nets Garden, and Huanxiu Villa were designated as World Heritage sites, with additional gardens including Canglang Pavilion, Lion Grove Garden, Couple's Retreat Garden, and Garden of Cultivation added in 2000. These gardens embody centuries of Chinese philosophical, artistic, and horticultural traditions, creating intimate landscapes that integrate architecture, plants, water, and rock formations into harmonious compositions (Keswick, 2003).

Contemporary museum space design, however, faces significant challenges in creating meaningful visitor experiences. Research indicates that modern museum spaces frequently prioritize rationality and functionality while neglecting cultural diversity and humanistic considerations (Huang,

2023; Yao & Wang, 2020). Studies have documented widespread "museum fatigue" among visitors, characterized by decreased attention, physical tiredness, and diminished engagement as tours progress. Wang (2024) specifically identified that museum spaces lacking spatial variation and cultural depth contribute significantly to visitor disengagement. This problem is particularly acute in Chinese museums, where spatial design often fails to incorporate national cultural characteristics and symbols that could enhance visitor connection to exhibits (Yang, 2024).

The Jiangnan region, encompassing areas south of the Yangtze River including Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces, provides an ideal context for examining the integration of traditional garden techniques into museum design. This region hosts numerous art museums that have attempted to incorporate Suzhou garden aesthetics, creating opportunities for systematic analysis of design strategies and outcomes. The present study addresses this research gap by examining how specific Suzhou garden techniques can be adapted for contemporary art museum spaces, focusing on museums within the Jiangnan cultural sphere where these traditions originated.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the characteristic gardening techniques of Suzhou classical gardens from the Song Dynasty and Ming Dynasty periods, with particular attention to spatial organization, framing methods, and landscape element integration.
2. To examine and evaluate the application of Suzhou garden techniques in three art museums located in the Jiangnan region (Suzhou Museum, China National Silk Museum, and Nanjing Museum), identifying successful integration strategies and design innovations.

Literature Review

Historical Development and Characteristics of Suzhou Gardens

Suzhou gardens evolved through distinct historical phases, each contributing unique design principles. According to historical records in the Suzhou Prefecture Records, the number of gardens increased from six during the Zhou Dynasty to 271 during the Ming Dynasty, with 130 remaining in the Qing Dynasty (Yu, 2004). This proliferation reflected both economic prosperity and the cultural prominence of literati society in the region. Keswick (2003) documented that Suzhou's gardens represent the pinnacle of Chinese private garden design, distinguished by their integration of poetry, painting, and landscape architecture. The gardens embody Confucian and Taoist philosophical principles, particularly the concept of "the unity of heaven and mankind" (tianren heyi) that seeks harmony between human creation and natural processes (Yao, 2011).

Research by Tao & Fang (2012) established that Suzhou garden culture reflects literati values emphasizing tranquility, artistic refinement, and spiritual cultivation. Garden designers employed techniques including borrowed scenery (jiejing), framing views (kuangjing), layered spatial sequences, and scale manipulation to create environments that appear larger and more complex than their physical dimensions suggest (Yan & Mei, 2021). These techniques transformed limited urban spaces into immersive landscapes that provided "the pleasure of mountains and forests without leaving the city" (Shu, 2017).

Museum Space Design and Cultural Integration

Contemporary research on museum space design has increasingly recognized the importance of cultural context in creating meaningful visitor experiences. Huang (2023) analyzed spatial narratives in museum exhibitions, identifying problems including monotonous layouts, lack of humanistic elements, and insufficient cultural grounding. Lv (2013) specifically examined regional cultural characteristics in urban museum interior design, arguing that museums should reflect local cultural identity to enhance visitor engagement and educational impact. Chen (2021) and Yang (2024) explored Suzhou classical garden spatial aesthetics as models for modern design, proposing that garden techniques including asymmetrical layouts, spatial layering, and borrowed views offer solutions to contemporary design challenges. However, these studies remained largely theoretical, lacking empirical examination of actual museum implementations. Guo (2021) provided initial exploration of Suzhou garden techniques in museum display contexts, while Wang (2024) identified ongoing challenges in translating traditional aesthetics to modern architectural programs. The present study addresses this gap by examining specific case studies where integration has been attempted.

International Perspectives on Chinese Garden Design

International scholarship has contributed significantly to understanding Suzhou garden design principles. Keswick (2003) comprehensive study established that Chinese gardens function as three-dimensional paintings, with each view carefully composed according to principles derived from landscape painting. Johnston (1991) documented the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of Chinese gardens, emphasizing their role as spaces for contemplation and self-cultivation. More recently, Henderson (2013) examined how Chinese garden principles have been adapted in contemporary landscape architecture globally, demonstrating the continuing relevance of traditional design approaches.

Conceptual Framework

This study employs a conceptual framework that links traditional Suzhou garden design techniques to contemporary applications in museum spaces. The framework identifies three primary technique categories derived from classical garden practice : spatial organization principles, visual framing methods, and natural element integration. These categories correspond to observable design features in museum spaces, enabling systematic comparison across case studies. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual relationship between traditional techniques and modern museum applications.

Table 1 Conceptual Framework: Traditional Techniques and Museum Applications

Traditional Technique	Design Principle	Museum Application
Spatial Organization (kongjian buju)	Asymmetrical layouts, winding paths, layered spaces	Gallery sequences, circulation patterns, spatial hierarchy
Visual Framing (jiejing/kuangjing)	Borrowed scenery, leaky windows, door frames as view composers	Window designs, interior-exterior connections, exhibit framing
Natural Elements (ziran yuansu)	Water, rocks, plants integrated with architecture	Courtyards, water features, interior landscaping

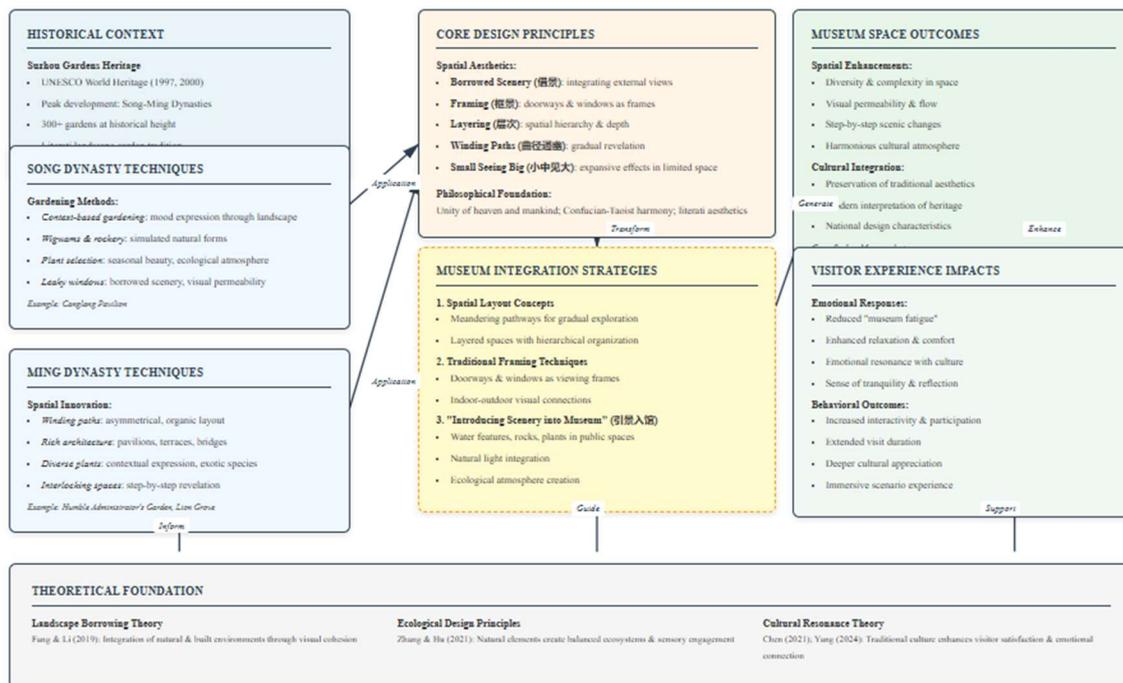


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework: Integration of Suzhou Garden Techniques in Museum Space Design

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative multiple-case study design to analyze how contemporary art museums in the Jiangnan region incorporate Suzhou garden design elements. The case study approach enables in-depth examination of spatial configurations, design techniques, and the relationships between traditional garden principles and modern architectural solutions.

Case Selection

The selected case study museums as Table 2.

Table 2 Selected Case Study Museums

Museum	Location	Type	Garden Features
Suzhou Museum (New Wing)	Suzhou, Jiangsu Province	Comprehensive Art Museum	Interior courtyards, water features, leaky windows
China National Silk Museum	Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province	Specialized Textile Museum	Garden courtyards, borrowed scenery, pathway design
Nanjing Museum	Nanjing, Jiangsu Province	Comprehensive Art Museum	Indoor gardens, architectural framing, traditional motifs

Table 2 three museums were selected based on the following criteria : (a) location within the Jiangnan region; (b) documented incorporation of Suzhou garden-inspired design elements; (c) classification as art or cultural museums; and (d) public accessibility enabling direct observation. The selected cases represent variation in museum type, scale, and design approach while sharing the common context of Jiangnan cultural heritage.

Data Collection

Data collection employed two primary methods. First, on-site observations were conducted at each museum during multiple visits between March and June 2025. Observations focused on spatial layout patterns, arrangement of garden elements, usage of traditional materials (stone, water, plants), architectural framing devices, and circulation pathways. Photographic documentation captured design features including leaky window patterns, courtyard configurations, and interior-exterior spatial relationships. Second, documentary analysis examined available design materials including museum publications, official website descriptions, architectural documentation, and scholarly analyses of each museum's design approach.

Data Analysis

Analysis proceeded through three phases. Thematic analysis coded observation notes and photographs according to the conceptual framework categories : spatial organization, visual framing, and natural element integration. Comparative analysis examined similarities and differences across cases, identifying common patterns and unique approaches. Visual analysis systematically reviewed photographic evidence to document specific design features and their relationship to traditional Suzhou garden techniques.

Research Results

1. Traditional Suzhou Garden Techniques : Song and Ming Dynasty Characteristics

Analysis of classical Suzhou gardens from the Song and Ming dynasties revealed distinctive design characteristics that inform contemporary applications. Song Dynasty gardens (960 - 1279 CE) emphasized mood creation through landscape composition, reflecting the influence of literati painting traditions. Garden designers drew upon poetic and artistic conventions to create spaces that evoked emotional responses and spiritual contemplation. Key techniques included the careful arrangement of rocks to simulate mountain forms, the use of water to create reflective surfaces and movement, and plant selection emphasizing symbolic associations with Confucian virtues (Gao, 2024).

Ming Dynasty gardens (1368 - 1644 CE) developed more sophisticated spatial organization principles. The Humble Administrator's Garden exemplifies the characteristic asymmetrical layout approach, where overlapping spaces create multiple viewpoints and unexpected vistas at each turn. Garden pathways were designed as winding routes that progressively reveal scenery, using rocky formations, courtyard walls, and leaky windows as visual barriers that partially obscure views while suggesting what lies beyond (see Figure 2). This technique, termed "step-by-step scenery change" (yibu yijing), maintains visitor interest through continuous discovery while creating an impression of spatial vastness within confined areas.



Figure 2 Leaky Window Examples from Canglang Pavilion, Suzhou.

Source: Xu (2024)

Table 3 Comparison of Song and Ming Dynasty Gardening Techniques

Design Element	Song Dynasty (960 - 1279)	Ming Dynasty (1368 - 1644)
Spatial Layout	Emphasis on intimacy and poetic mood; smaller scale compositions	Complex asymmetrical layouts; overlapping spaces; multiple viewpoints
Framing Techniques	Simple leaky windows; basic view framing through doorways	Elaborate leaky window patterns; sophisticated borrowed scenery; visual layering
Plant Selection	Focus on symbolic "Four Gentlemen" (plum, orchid, bamboo, chrysanthemum)	Diverse species including exotic plants; seasonal variety emphasized

Table 3 (Cont.)

Design Element	Song Dynasty (960 - 1279)	Ming Dynasty (1368 - 1644)
Rockery	Mood-creating formations; landscape painting influence	Functional spatial dividers; dramatic peak formations; cave-like passages
Architecture	Simple pavilions and corridors; integration with natural elements	Diverse building types (ting, tai, lou, ge); elaborate detailing; wood frames with tile

2. Case Study Analysis : Integration Strategies in Jiangnan Art Museums

1. Suzhou Museum

The Suzhou Museum's new wing, designed by I.M. Pei and completed in 2006, represents the most comprehensive integration of Suzhou garden principles in contemporary museum architecture. The design employs three primary strategies derived from traditional garden techniques.

Spatial organization follows the classical asymmetrical layout principle. The museum's floor plan avoids axial symmetry, instead creating a sequence of interconnected spaces that gradually reveal the collection. Corridors and galleries are arranged to produce the "winding path" experience characteristic of gardens like the Humble Administrator's Garden. Visitors encounter multiple changes in direction, scale, and lighting that maintain engagement throughout the tour.

Visual framing techniques are extensively employed through geometric window designs that recall traditional leaky windows (loukong). These apertures frame views of interior courtyards and the adjacent historic garden, creating visual connections between interior exhibition spaces and exterior landscapes. The museum incorporates borrowed scenery by positioning windows to capture views of the Humble Administrator's Garden's northern section, integrating the World Heritage site into the museum experience (see Figure 3).



Figure 3 Suzhou Museum interior showing leaky window design and courtyard view

Source: Pei-kai (2020)



Figures 4 Suzhou Museum
Source: Suzhou Museum (2025)

Natural element integration is achieved through a central water feature and rock garden that directly references Suzhou garden traditions. The main courtyard incorporates water, white-washed walls, and abstracted rock formations that evoke traditional garden aesthetics while maintaining contemporary architectural language. Interior plants and light manipulation create seasonal variations in visitor experience, echoing the garden tradition of designing for changing conditions throughout the year.

2. China National Silk Museum, Hangzhou

The China National Silk Museum employs garden integration strategies appropriate to its specialized focus on textile heritage. The museum campus is organized around multiple garden courtyards that provide visual relief between exhibition areas while displaying mulberry trees and other plants associated with silk production.

Spatial organization employs a pavilion-and-corridor structure derived from traditional garden architecture. Exhibition halls function as discrete "garden buildings" connected by covered walkways that offer views of landscaped areas. This arrangement creates a circulation pattern that alternates between enclosed exhibition spaces and semi-outdoor transitional zones, reducing visitor fatigue through environmental variation.

The museum's borrowed scenery technique incorporates views of the West Lake scenic area visible from elevated viewing platforms. Large window walls in rest areas frame distant landscape views, connecting the museum experience to the broader Hangzhou garden tradition associated with the lake. Pathway design follows garden principles of progressive revelation, with plantings and architectural elements positioned to create layered views that unfold as visitors move through the campus.

3. Nanjing Museum

Nanjing Museum's integration of garden elements focuses on interior spaces and architectural framing devices. The museum's Republic of China History Hall employs traditional architectural elements including moon gates and lattice screens that derive from garden design vocabulary.

Spatial organization creates a "garden within a museum" through the inclusion of interior courtyard spaces within the exhibition sequence. These spaces provide natural lighting, visual rest points, and opportunities to incorporate living plants within the museum environment. The

arrangement follows the traditional principle of alternating between enclosed and open spaces that characterizes Suzhou garden design.

Framing techniques are employed through the use of traditional doorway and window forms that compose views of both exhibits and courtyard gardens. The museum incorporates reproductions of traditional leaky window patterns in interior partitions, using these elements to control sight lines and create layered visual experiences within exhibition galleries.

Table 4 Comparative Analysis of Garden Integration Strategies

Integration Strategy	Suzhou Museum	Silk Museum	Nanjing Museum
Spatial Layout	Highly developed; asymmetrical; winding paths	Campus-based; pavilion-corridor structure	Interior courtyards; alternating spaces
Framing Techniques	Modern leaky windows; borrowed scenery from adjacent garden	West Lake views; window walls; layered plantings	Moon gates; lattice screens; interior partitions

Conclusion and Discussion

Conclusion

This study has examined the integration of traditional Suzhou garden techniques into contemporary art museum design within the Jiangnan region of China. Analysis of classical garden characteristics from the Song and Ming dynasties identified three primary technique categories - spatial organization, visual framing, and natural element integration - that provide a framework for museum design applications.

The case study examination of the Suzhou Museum, China National Silk Museum, and Nanjing Museum demonstrates that these traditional techniques can be successfully adapted to contemporary museum requirements. Key findings include the effectiveness of asymmetrical spatial layouts in maintaining visitor engagement, the applicability of framing techniques for connecting interior and exterior environments, and the value of natural element integration for reducing museum fatigue and enhancing visitor comfort.

The comparative analysis reveals that successful integration requires thoughtful adaptation rather than literal reproduction. Each museum demonstrates a distinct approach calibrated to its specific context, collection focus, and architectural conditions. The Suzhou Museum provides a model of comprehensive integration within new construction, while the China National Silk Museum illustrates campus-scale garden applications, and Nanjing Museum demonstrates interior-focused strategies applicable to existing structures.

These findings contribute practical design guidelines for museum practitioners and architects seeking to incorporate traditional Chinese garden aesthetics into modern cultural spaces. The research demonstrates that Suzhou garden techniques offer solutions to documented problems in contemporary museum design including spatial monotony, visitor fatigue, and lack of cultural identity. Future research should expand the case study scope to include museums in other regions of China and examine quantitative measures of visitor response to garden-integrated designs.

Discussion

The case study analysis reveals distinct patterns in how contemporary Jiangnan art museums integrate traditional Suzhou garden techniques. These findings extend previous theoretical discussions by providing empirical evidence of successful implementation strategies.

1. Landscape Borrowing and Visual Framing

Consistent with Fang & Li's (2019) conceptualization of landscape borrowing in classical gardens, all three museums employ framing techniques to extend perceived spatial boundaries. The Suzhou Museum demonstrates the most sophisticated application, using geometric apertures that simultaneously reference traditional leaky window patterns while employing contemporary materials and proportions. This approach supports the assertion that borrowed landscapes remain viable for achieving aesthetic and cultural continuity in modern design contexts.

The China National Silk Museum's incorporation of West Lake views illustrates how the borrowed scenery principle can be scaled beyond the intimate garden context to embrace regional landscape features. This expansion of the framing concept addresses the different scale requirements of museum architecture while maintaining fidelity to the underlying design principle.

2. Ecological Integration and Visitor Experience

The findings support Zhang & Hu's (2021) argument that ecological integration enhances designed environments. Each museum incorporates natural elements water, plants, and natural lighting that contribute to visitor comfort and engagement. The Suzhou Museum's central courtyard functions as both an aesthetic composition and a climate-moderating element, reducing the environmental monotony that contributes to museum fatigue.

The alternation between enclosed exhibition spaces and garden views observed across all cases corresponds to traditional garden sequences that balance compression and release. This rhythm addresses the problem identified by Wang (2024) of monotonous spatial experiences in contemporary museums. The garden-derived approach provides natural rest points and environmental variation without interrupting the exhibition narrative.

3. Cultural Resonance and Regional Identity

The research confirms Chen (2021) and Yang (2024) emphasis on cultural resonance in museum design. The integration of Suzhou garden elements creates recognizable connections to regional cultural heritage that distinguish these museums from generic contemporary architecture. This cultural specificity addresses the concern raised in the literature regarding Chinese museums' lack of national design characteristics.

Notably, the three museums demonstrate different approaches to balancing traditional reference and contemporary expression. The Suzhou Museum achieves a sophisticated synthesis where garden elements are abstracted into modern architectural vocabulary, while Nanjing Museum incorporates more literal reproductions of traditional forms. Both approaches successfully communicate cultural identity while serving contemporary functional requirements.

Recommendations

1. Museum designers should incorporate asymmetrical spatial sequences that create progressive revelation of exhibition content, following the "winding path" principle established in

classical Suzhou gardens. This approach maintains visitor interest and reduces fatigue associated with linear circulation patterns.

2. Architectural framing devices including modern interpretations of leaky windows, moon gates, and lattice screens should be employed to create visual connections between interior exhibition spaces and exterior landscapes or courtyards. These elements enhance spatial depth and provide visual relief.

3. Natural elements including water features, plants, and controlled natural lighting should be integrated within museum circulation sequences to provide environmental variation and create rest points that reduce visitor fatigue.

4. Future research should examine visitor experience data to quantify the impact of garden-integrated design on engagement, satisfaction, and learning outcomes. Comparative studies across different museum types and regional contexts would strengthen the generalizability of these findings.

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