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Lotus Lessons

In Suzhou, an ancient flower blooms

BY DAN ALLEN

As a symbol, the elegant but unassuming lotus flower has long been linked to enlightenment. So it's only fitting that one simple ceramic bowl, shaped like a lotus in bloom, sheds so much light on the history and nature of the ancient Chinese city of Suzhou. The 10th-century relic was discovered in 1956 in a hidden chamber inside Suzhou's iconic Tiger Hill Pagoda (known as the "Leaning Tower of China"), and is an exquisite example of Yue ware celadon from the Five Dynasties era. Classified as a national treasure, the bowl-and-saucer piece owes its rare olive-green hue to a long-secret baking and glazing process dating from the even earlier Tang Dynasty, praised by contemporary Suzhou poet Lu Guimeng for having the "essence of trees from a thousand hills."

The lotus flower bowl (inset) now resides in a special case at the Suzhou Museum (below), the graceful, final design of renowned Chinese-American architect I.M. Pei, whose own ancestral roots lay in Suzhou, and who spent several summers here as a child. In contrast to the flashy vertical building boom that's transformed much of Suzhou during its rapid growth into a Chinese megacity, the Suzhou Museum is a modest but highly stylish white structure on a dark gray frame, paying deep homage to traditional local garden architecture with its use of inner pools and reflective spaces, all reinterpreted through the geometrically playful prism of Pei's expert contemporary gaze.

As harmony would have it, the Suzhou Museum stands next to the Humble Administrator's Garden, the largest of the city's famed classical gardens, nine of which have been designated a UNESCO World Heritage site. Indeed, with its flowering lotus design, the celadon bowl is the perfect garden-esque symbol for Suzhou and an embodiment of China's millennia-enduring passion for symmetry and art—a treasure from the past that's still unfolding into the future.

Los Angeles-based Dan Allen contributes to *Fodor's* and the *New York Post*.

MICHAEL FREEMAN/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO. INSET: COURTESY SUZHOU TOURISM

