



THE GRAND DAME OF  
PORTLAND JAPANESE GARDEN

# Celebrating Maggie Drake, Trustee Emerita

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Margueritte (Maggie) Drake, the first woman to be Board President of Portland Japanese Garden, acknowledging those in attendance at the organization's 60th anniversary gala in 2023. 📷 Jonathan Ley

### A REMARKABLE AND ADMIRER LEADER

Portland Japanese Garden has been and always will be a community effort. Founded by civic leaders in government, business, and cultural organizations in 1963, it has been a place of nature, beauty, and cultural understanding for more than 60 years. And while it has relied on every single person who has worked for it, volunteered for it, joined it as a member, or even just visited once to make it the acclaimed world class organization it's known as today, there are certain individuals who stand out as having made exceptional contributions to it. One such person is Trustee Emerita Margueritte “Maggie” Drake, one of the earliest Board Members and the first woman to be its Board President. It is our pleasure to present this profile on a woman who has been a remarkable and admired leader for the entirety of Portland Japanese Garden’s existence.

### A SMALL CORNER FOR A GIANT

The switchback trail of Portland Japanese Garden’s Entry Garden sweeps up the hill like a stroke of ink, a scene so artfully rendered that it looks as though it was the work of a calligrapher’s hand. Passing through trillium and Douglas fir and Oregon grape and deer fern and by the glass walls of the Sheila Edwards-Lienhart Bridge, the visitor’s foot falls on granite pavers at the top of the stairs when they reach the Cultural Village. It is typically here that the eyes dance around the vegetated roofs and cedar slats of the Kengo Kuma-designed buildings. But as I take a moment to look down and to the right I see fabricated steel articulated into curves of reddish brown by the sculptor Michihiro Kosuge (1943-2021). The untitled work is on an unassuming landing named the Margueritte Drake Sculpture Terrace.

Maggie Drake is approaching the century mark in life and is one of the few remaining civic leaders who helped found Portland Japanese Garden in the 1960s. The Margueritte Drake Sculpture Terrace might be the only section of the Garden to bear Margueritte Drake’s name—but all 12.5 acres bear her touch.

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Better known by her nickname, Maggie, Drake is approaching the century mark in life and is one of the few remaining civic leaders who helped found Portland Japanese Garden in the 1960s. This small corner might be the only section of the landscape to bear Margueritte Drake’s name—but all 12.5 acres bear her touch. One only needs to flip through the microfiche to see how she was a reliable presence in *The Oregonian’s* society pages. Her name would often appear in black and white, whether it was leading as the first President of the Bonsai Society of Portland, teaching courses at Portland Community College, heading fashion shows at the Waverly County Club, serving on the Board of Portland Junior Symphony, or being a member of the Portland Garden Club, Ikebana International, and Senke School of Arranging.

That indomitable spirit to imbue her city with a sense of culture and worldliness also made an indelible impression on Portland Japanese Garden as one of the earliest Board Members of the organization. Drake made history when she became the first woman to be its President. She was present at the Garden when the Flat Garden was constructed in 1963 and has either led, collaborated on, or witnessed every step of the way since. All these years later, I went to her home, a comfortable and bright apartment that looks out onto a towering Pacific Northwest forest to learn more about this remarkable person.



PORTLAND MADE

“I was raised over on the east side, what was known as the Alameda District,” shares Drake, who was born to Margueritte and Charles Hirschbuhl on March 12, 1926. “I went to The Madeline School and St. Mary’s Academy. I had a sister who was 17 months younger than myself—she now lives in Fresno, California. And I think that I was very fortunate. My parents were wonderful to us—very hardworking, and they provided just about everything. Eventually, Daddy bought us a horse, which was a miracle because he wasn’t into equestrianism. I had a wonderful childhood.”



William “Robbie” Robinson, former Head Gardener of Portland Parks & Recreation Bureau, with Maggie Drake at a Garden event in the 1980s.

On November 20, 1948, Maggie Hirschbuhl would marry the man who would be her husband until his passing in 1992, Donald Griffith Drake. Drake himself would become a well-known Portlander, serving on the Board for the Port of Portland for ten years and running a business that constructed notable buildings in the area including the Lloyd Center and Lincoln High School. As the young Drakes cemented themselves in the Portland social scene, Maggie began to develop a keen interest in Japanese culture, a fascination and appreciation she continues to sustain.

“*Home Beautiful* came out with an issue entitled Shibui, which can be taken to mean ‘less is better,’” Drake recalls. “From there I just really got into Japanese culture—bonsai especially. I became the first president of the Bonsai Society of Portland and worked a great deal with Mildred Schnitzer at learning ikebana.”



The Flat Garden before its construction, a sight Drake would have seen as one of Portland Japanese Garden’s earliest Board Members. 📷 William “Robbie” Robinson

THE FIRST DAYS OF PORTLAND JAPANESE GARDEN

Drake’s interest in the gifts of Japan, which also led her to becoming a founding member of the Asian Art Society at Portland Art Museum, came along the same time the United States began to rekindle its interest in a nation it had just fought a violent war against. American municipalities started to develop means of establishing social, political, and economic ties to Japan and its people, and one of the most popular approaches was gardens. Drake, naturally, became interested when momentum grew to build a Japanese garden in Portland.

The Iyo Stone at Portland Japanese Garden was placed in tribute of its first Board President, Philip Englehart



“I saw an ad in *The Oregonian* that said the Japanese Garden was going to have its first annual Board meeting at the U.S. National Bank downtown, and that the public was invited,” Drake shares. “Fortunately, I cut it out and I went to the meeting. I can’t recall her name, but another woman joined me. And we sat there against the wall, very prim and proper, and listened to everything that was going on. And then [the Garden’s first Board President Philip Englehart] said that they were going to go into an executive meeting and, ‘Thank you, ladies, for coming.’ And then he immediately followed that with, ‘I actually don’t know why you have to go if you’re interested enough to come tonight. Just sit back down.’ Within the next month, we were both on the Board.”

At the time, a strain of virulent racism and intolerance to those of Japanese ancestry in Portland, which sometimes manifested itself into violence, still remained. It was not enough to surmount the passion people like Drake had for creating a place of beauty and cross-cultural understanding. She gives a lot of credit to the elected leaders from that era.



“We [heard enthusiasm for the Garden] from the very beginning,” Drake notes. “But I do want to mention [Portland Mayor Terry D. Schrunk] because without Terry, we would never have had the Garden. And he was highly regarded in Japan. My husband and I traveled to Japan with Terry and Chamber of Commerce. We were treated like the King of England. I mean, it was absolutely fantastic.”

Because she was involved so deeply and so early, Drake has had the incredible experience of knowing and working alongside essentially every person who has also made an impact on Portland Japanese Garden, from its first Garden Director Kinya Hira (1964-69) to its current Garden Curator, Hugo Torii (2021-). Included among this who’s who is Professor Takuma Tono of Tokyo Agricultural University, the original designer of the Garden. Her interactions with him, and his explanation of its connection to Buddhist texts helped elevate the Sand and Stone Garden as one of her favorite spaces. “It’s just so peaceful,” she shares. “Professor Tono was a great storyteller.”

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*Maggie Drake, during her tenure as Board President, leading a ceremony commemorating a groundbreaking for the Garden's new restrooms in the 1990s.*



### MAKING HISTORY

Portland Japanese Garden has been fortunate to have a series of outstanding individuals in the role of Board President but up until the 1990s they had all been male. Drake would make history for the organization when she became the first woman to take the helm.

“I was very surprised I was asked because we’d always just had men,” Drake remembers. “It was very exciting for me, an exciting time of my life. My grandchildren were sitting in the front row when they honored me and named me Board President. When they introduced me, my grandchildren stood up and shouted, ‘Yay, Grandma!’ And that was a surprise—it was sweet of them because it was so spontaneous. And so my first words as President were, ‘As you see, I bring my own cheering group.’”



*Maggie Drake (right) standing next to Elizabeth Hirsch, a former Portland Japanese Garden Board Member at a Garden reception in 1993.*

Her grandchildren and family make up only a part of her cheering group, however. When asking people for their thoughts and impressions on Drake, the love she has earned is powerful and unmistakable.

“Maggie Drake—our Grand Dame of Portland Japanese Garden,” shares Dee Ross, President of the Board of Trustees from 2005 to 2007. “I had the great fortune to befriend and be mentored by Maggie as I was elected the second woman to preside over the Board so long ago. Maggie paved the road before me and I am eternally grateful for her diplomacy, her grace, and her total dedication to the Garden in every way. I always knew I could get a straight answer from Maggie for any of my requests for guidance during my term and many years hence. Throughout the many changes and transitions we have experienced at the Garden, Maggie was held in great esteem by all of us involved. Her history with the Garden, her knowledge, both academic and artistic, has always been revered. Most of all, when I think of Maggie Drake, I go back to her gift of grace. I shall always hold her in my heart as that rare soul I wish to model.”

“Maggie is magnificent in every way,” shares Cathy Rudd, President of the Board of Trustees from 2015 to 2017. “She is the epitome of all knowledge, beauty, and grace regarding Portland Japanese Garden. Maggie turned an ordinary piece of land into the beautiful calming Garden it is today. Without her vision and energy, we would not be enjoying this serene landscape.”



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CATHY RUDD | BOARD PRESIDENT (2015-17)



Maggie Drake at the Garden, standing next to Sadafumi Uchiyama, Curator Emeritus.

Her tenure as Board President did see a big change. Formerly the site of the old Portland Zoo, the organization undertook major overhauls of the grounds to turn it into the natural oasis hundreds of thousands of visitors enjoy each year. While most of the old remnants of the zoo had been stripped away by the time Drake was named Board President, one notable feature remained: an old building that held meager offices for a handful of staff and dingy restrooms, which led to the space being not-so-affectionately referred to as “Flushing Castle” and the “swamp.” In 1992, the Garden’s Board voted to tear it down and put in a new structure that held updated restrooms, a storage space, a lounge for volunteers, and a Gift Shop before it was resituated in the Cultural Village in 2017.

“It was something that had to be done,” Drake notes. “We were getting so many visitors, and the restroom that we had was terrible. I mean, you have no idea. It was gray cement, just an awful building. And our secretaries had been housed in that before the Pavilion was built. I had a marvelous Board. It was easy.” In May of 1994, a Shinto ceremony was held to bless the new structure.

Sadafumi Uchiyama, Curator Emeritus since his retirement at the end of 2023, shares that Drake was a “legend” by the time he first joined the organization as a Board Member in the mid-1990s and was impressed by her leadership skills. “In different meetings, we’d be arguing the pros and cons of different initiatives,” Uchiyama recalls. “But ultimately everyone knew that we had to bring the question to Maggie. She’s a great listener—very sharp. I remember there was one time we were struggling to wrap up a debate, and she quietly raised her hand and said, ‘Gentleman, I think we have talked enough. Let’s make a decision.’ And then everyone just said, ‘Ok.’”



Maggie Drake at Tsurugaoka Hachimangu in 2017.

## AN ECSTATIC LIFE

While Drake’s role as an active leader of the organization has lessened in recent years, she still keeps up-to-date on the organization. For instance, she was well aware the building she helped install had become the Garden’s new Membership Center in 2024. Around the organization, people regard her with affection and adoration.

“Maggie Drake is an incredible role model and inspiration,” shares Lisa Christy, Executive Director of the Garden. “When I joined the organization ten years ago, I quickly learned how deeply admired Maggie is. I’ve heard many stories about her and they always include words like *caring*, *courageous*, and *wise*. Undoubtedly it was those qualities which helped Maggie stand out in our community during a time when women were ostracized and ridiculed for daring to lead.”

“I’m grateful for all that Maggie Drake has done,” shares Trish Adams, President-Elect of the Garden’s Board of Trustees, set to assume the position in May of 2026. “It is no small feat to be the ‘first’ when taking on leadership positions. She not only excelled in the role of Board President, she broke a glass ceiling, and so many talented women have now followed her—Dee Ross, Cathy Rudd, Dorie Vollum, and the late Gwyneth Gamble-Booth. Beyond that, we have all greatly benefited from her vision, that will to build the Garden in 1963. Because of the work she did along with her fellow early leaders, millions of visitors have now learned more about Japanese culture and the potential of nature to create harmony and peace.”

“Getting to know Maggie better has been one of the great pleasures I’ve experienced since joining the organization,” shares Megumi Kato, Senior Director of Brand and Innovation. “She has set a standard for leadership that I and so many other women here aspire to achieve. As Portland Japanese Garden continues to evolve and explore new ways to connect with its community and inspire love for nature and cultural understanding in new generations, the remarkable dedication and integrity of people like Maggie will be a guiding light and tremendous influence.”



“I have always felt very proud of Portland Japanese Garden. The people that support the Garden really are in love with it. I mean, it becomes an integral part of their lives and there isn’t anything they wouldn’t do to make sure that it was okay. I think that it provides a wonderful place for visitors to go. It’s fabulous, and I’m really proud because they have maintained Professor Tono’s dream. 12-and-a-half acres on top of the hillside. I think if they are able to maintain what they have, they’ll be doing a good job.”

MAGGIE DRAKE | TRUSTEE EMERITA

“I too know and love Maggie,” shares Diane Durston, Curator Emerita. “She is a vibrant and elegant lady. She loves bonsai, Japanese art, and the Garden itself more than anything else. She taught me a lot about the Garden’s history and has been such a faithful supporter of the organization and its programs. That little corner at the top of Sheila’s Bridge beside the Gift Shop will always be a place to honor her.”

“Women have come a long way since 1963 but there still remain gaps in treatment, representation, and opportunities,” concludes Lisa Christy. “But thanks to women like Maggie, the gaps have narrowed. And when I think about the kind of legacy I want to have as the Garden’s Executive Director, I’d consider myself fortunate to come even close to the standard of care, courage, and wisdom that Maggie set.”

For Drake, the love for the Garden remains. “I have always felt very proud of Portland Japanese Garden,” Drake offers. “The people that support the Garden really are in love with it. I mean, it becomes an integral part of their lives and there isn’t anything they wouldn’t do to make sure that it was okay. I think that it provides a wonderful place for visitors to go. It’s fabulous, and I’m really proud because they have maintained Professor Tono’s dream. 12-and-a-half acres on top of the hillside. I think if they are able to maintain what they have, they’ll be doing a good job.”

The afternoon visit concluded as summer sunlight added a shine to the forest view below. Drake shared kind thoughts, encouragement for those of us employed at this organization she helped found more than a half-century ago. I wanted to tell her how grateful I am that a handful of Portlanders made plans to take battered old zoo grounds and transform them into something beautiful. I wanted to tell her that she’s proof of how we can effectively counter bigotry by creating shared spaces of understanding and cultural immersion. I wanted to tell her how fortunate I feel just to walk the Garden. But those words got stymied by one large hope that this charming woman, who has experienced the joys and sorrows of life for almost 100 years, was happy. And so I asked, praying that she was. The woman renowned for making every brief and carefully chosen word count gave the best possible answer.

“I’m ecstatic.”

*Written by Will Lerner, Communications Manager, Portland Japanese Garden & Japan Institute*



Maggie Drake (center) alongside former Garden CEO Steve Bloom (left) and friend Joyce Loeb at a Garden event in 2021. 📷 Jonathan Ley



Maggie Drake (center) alongside Megumi Kato, Sr. Director of Brand & Innovation (left), and Will Lerner, Communications Manager at a Garden event in 2024. 📷 Jonathan Ley



Maggie Drake (left) with Diane Durston, Curator Emerita, at a reception for an art exhibition in 2013. 📷 Jonathan Ley

Maggie Drake greeting Doug de Weese, Portland Japanese Garden Board Trustee, at the Garden’s 60th anniversary gala. Doug de Weese is the son of former Board President Bill de Weese, a fellow early leader of the organization alongside Drake. 📷 Jonathan Ley







Margueritte  
Drake  
Sculpture  
Terrace

Michihiro Kosuge  
Untitled  
1995  
Bronze  
Gifted from the artist  
to the Portland Japanese Garden