Elizabeth Kirkland Roys ’28 visited gardens in China, Japan, Korea, India, and what was then Siam, when touring Asia with her mother in 1926–1927. She recorded these visits through photographs and scholarly descriptions of not only the gardens she visited, but also the different conceptions of the garden in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indian, and Siamese culture. Her study included hand-drawn maps and lists of the plants and trees most commonly used in each type of garden.

This unique travel journal is contained in a set of five notebooks, which were discovered in the late Ms. Roys’ attic after the death of her husband in 2002. In the summer of 2003, the Botanic Garden of Smith College was bequeathed this treasure trove, and I was fortunate enough to be assigned the task of cataloguing Roys’ work for use in a future exhibit. Since then, I’ve been continually astounded by the breadth and depth of this documentation of landscapes largely untouched by Western and modern influences.

Roys describes a Japanese garden filled with maples at a Shinto temple on the island of Miyajima. Her exquisitely detailed photos of this garden include glimpses of a secluded tea hut and haunting views of the temple gate, completely surrounded by water at high tide. In China Roys visited (among many others) the gardens of the Summer Palace in Peking, the courtyard of the Temple of Confucius, and the garden of the Chang family in Nanking. The Korean notebook contains information about peasant gardens as well as an account of a tour through the gardens of Prince Yi in Seoul. Roys’ study of Indian gardens includes descriptions of the gardens at the Taj Mahal and at the Palace at Delhi, as well as a comparison of mosque and Hindu temple gardens. In Siam, where Roys and her mother were fortunate enough to have an audience with the royal family, she documents not only the palace gardens, but also the garden at the tower of Wat Arun in Bangkok. Her photos of Siamese temple ruins give us a rare glimpse of gardens and stupas that may no longer exist.

The notebooks on Chinese gardens are the most extensive, and indeed the major part of the trip was in China, largely for nostalgic reasons. Roys was born in China in 1905. Her parents, Charles K. Roys and Mabel Milham Roys ’00, were appointed as missionaries to Weihsien, Shantung Province, by the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. Dr. Roys was chief surgeon at the teaching hospital in Weihsien until 1916, when the Royses were transferred to Tsinan. The family was forced to return to the United States in early 1920 when Dr. Roys was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Charles K. Roys died in September 1920, when Elizabeth was fifteen. Her younger sister Mary was ten years old.

Throughout her life, Mabel Milham Roys remained fervently committed to the work she and her husband had begun in China. Unable to continue this work alone, she remained in the United States, where she became the first woman to carry administrative responsibility in the foreign field for the Presbyterian Board. Her duties included the supervision of educational, medical, and evangelistic concerns in China, Japan, the Philippines, Korea, and Siam. The 1926–1927 trip was therefore also a business trip for Mrs. Roys, who wrote many detailed reports to send home about the social conditions and the missionary work in the countries she and her daughter visited.
Roys Notebooks continued

For Elizabeth Roys, the purpose of the voyage was to study botany and gardens. In her letters home, Mabel Roys often refers to her daughter’s love of the plant and tree species growing around temples and palaces. Elizabeth’s interest in botany and garden history is evident in the scrupulous care she used in compiling her notebooks. Her photography is magnificent, and every photo is accompanied by a detailed and informative typewritten caption that refers back to concepts in the text. She divides each notebook into sections based on garden type. For example, the notebook on Indian gardens begins with a discussion of the Indian conception of a garden. The rest of the text is devoted to temple gardens, tomb gardens, palace gardens and private gardens, and includes an appendix that lists tree species most frequently planted in temple gardens.

Roys studied botany at Smith, and the notebooks may have been created to fulfill an academic assignment upon her return. Roys’ fascination with botany was lifelong. After her graduation from Smith, she wanted to continue her studies but was denied admission to the Yale School of Forestry because of her gender. Instead she worked as a research assistant at Yale, cataloguing Asian woods, until her marriage in 1932. Although she became a full-time housewife, her interest in gardens never diminished. She helped establish a neighborhood garden club in Madison, Wisconsin, where she and her husband lived until her death in 1991. Roys was also a patron to Madison’s Olbrich Botanic Gardens.

The Botanic Garden and Smith College in general have inherited a treasure in these notebooks. Many of the gardens and buildings documented by Roys may no longer exist, owing to the effects of time and to the political unrest that plagued many Asian countries in the twentieth century. Of the existing gardens, certainly many must be dramatically altered in appearance. A future exhibit about Elizabeth Roys and her Asian garden tour for the Church Exhibition Gallery in the Lyman Plant House will help us share her remarkable travels and work with the Smith community and the public at large. I hope to continue my study of Roys and her notebooks by retracing her steps across Japan, China, Korea, Thailand, and India, to discover what has become of the gardens she so lovingly described.

In a 1926 letter introducing Roys to his Asian colleagues, Dr. Ganong, Professor of Botany and first Director of the Botanic Garden at Smith College, announces the academic purpose of her voyage:

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Smith College, Department of Botany
Northampton, Mass., U.S.A.

June 26, 1926.

To those Botanists and others to whom this letter may be presented: Greeting.

The bearer of this letter is Miss Elizabeth Kirkland Roys, a very capable and successful student of this College, where she has specialised in the science of Botany. In the course of a tour she is making around the world with her mother, she is continuing her botanical education through a systematic study of the botanical institutions along her route. She is fully prepared to profit by any facilities for such study as may be accorded to her, and will, I am sure, be gratefully appreciative of any opportunities for the thorough pursuit of her favorite subjects.

I therefore commend Miss Roys to the courtesy of my botanical colleagues in full confidence of her favorable reception according to the customs prevalent among us.

With compliments and respects,

William Francis Ganong, Ph. D.
Professor of Botany, and Director of the Botanic Garden at Smith College.