The Main Subjects and Motifs of Zen Art

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Zen came to Japan in the twelfth century, and during the eight hundred years of its history it has influenced Japanese life in various ways. The key distinction of Zen philosophy is that it viewed enlightenment not as something that came from outside, but as a direct, self-sought experience of the "here and now," brought about through meditation and the guidance of a master. The sudden spiritual transformation, the ability to see the world as it is, could not be the result of intellectual work. The Truth might be born only in the depth of the heart which is a wordless experience. It cannot be expressed by words. Thus the language of symbols, gesture and art began in Zen the means of the translation of the spiritual experience. Religious and aesthetic aspects are inseparable in Zen.

Creation of art work and contemplation of beauty became an important part of religious practice for Zen devotees. According to the words of one Zen master, "One who doesn't know Zen art will not be able to penetrate deeply into Zen." It is no mere chance that many Zen art forms are united by the word "Way." This is the Way leading to awakening of the sleeping mind, to spiritual transformation through the deep concentration on one of the forms of art (painting, calligraphy, and gardening, for example).

Over the centuries gradually three distinct types of Zen-influenced painting (*Zenga*) came to be established. First is monochrome landscape (*sansui*). The second type is portraiture, known as *chinzō*. These solemn, reverential studies of well-known teachers clearly were intended to represent the physical likeness of the master as closely as possible. The third type is *zenkiga*, and features didactic figure paintings illustrating Zen parables or depicting such themes as the Buddha or Zen patriarchs in some legendary situation. In other words, these topics illustrate the most important ideas of Zen teaching in a most convincing way. Originality and specific character of the Zen attitude are revealed in *Zenga* with the most obviousness and clearness.

The main personages of Zen painting are patriarchs, Zen monks, and hermits. Yet how far are their portraits from the images of saints in orthodox Buddhism! There is nothing realistic in these pictures. Seldom do we find solemn and dignified personages, but rather lively caricatures of absurdly fat men, roaring with laughter, or somebody who sits quietly with a tiger in a state of tranquility and calm. Although Zen art is full of didactic and moralizing meaning, its humorous aspect is also very important. The particular humor of Zen is found in many of the pictures. We could only admire the ability of Zen masters to laugh first of all at themselves, to see in life not tragic side, but the divine play. How infectious is the laughter elicited by the picture of Shōhaku, a master of the eighteenth century, "Three Sages Laughing on Rozan Bridge" (fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Shōhaku, "Three Sages Laughing on Rozan Bridge," eighteenth century. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

This painting is based on an old story that tells about an abbot who vowed never again walk across the bridge between his monastery and outside world. One day two friends visited him. When the time came to say goodbye, the three of them were talking so fast and so merely that before they knew it, they had all crossed the bridge. When the two visitors remarked to the abbot that he had just broken his vow, he merely laughed even more. The three friends then had to grab each other to keep from falling into the gorge, they laughed so hard. It is this moment that Shōhaku has captured with his brush—the moment of crisis in which the abbot would either be struck with guilt and dismay at having broken his vow or be tremendously amused at the way life triumphs over plans and verbalizing. Instead of three monks bowing ceremoniously to each other, we see hilarious old men warmly attached to each other, physically and psychologically. They are just tremendously amused by the incongruity between what man proposed and life disposed.

Paradoxicality and eccentricity of the tricks of Zen masters who broke down all the stereotypes of usual human being behavior often became the subject of Zen art. Depicted as unconventional in manner and eccentric in his personal appearance, Hōtei—a semi-legendary Chinese monk who died in the early tenth century—is an ideal subject for Zen painting. Usually he is depicted with a big belly and a huge bag full of absolutely useless objects—odd rocks, stones, chicken bones, dry plants, birds' feathers, and so on. His behavior is paradoxical and might be considered by other "normal" people as meaningless, foolish, silly. He usually is painted with his staff, a symbol of non-attachment and spiritual freedom. Full of inner peace and harmony, Hōtei always is smiling, always is grateful for everything he has. He lives in consonance with Tao. He is an emblem of innocence and simplicity, of the approach to enlightenment through everyday experience and of life without worldly cares.

Looking at the Zen personages, it is difficult to understand what they laugh at, or at whom; the reason for their laughter is not expressed by the painter. But it seems that if there is any reason for joy, for laughter, we should look it for not on the outside, but inside of their heart. Where is the reason for laugh of the Chinese hermit Jittoku, who became the favorite subject of Zen art? According to the artistic canon, he is

often shown holding a broom—a symbol of wisdom and insight—in his hands (fig. 2). He is often depicted with another hermit-poet of T'ang China, Kanzan, who lived around the eighth century.

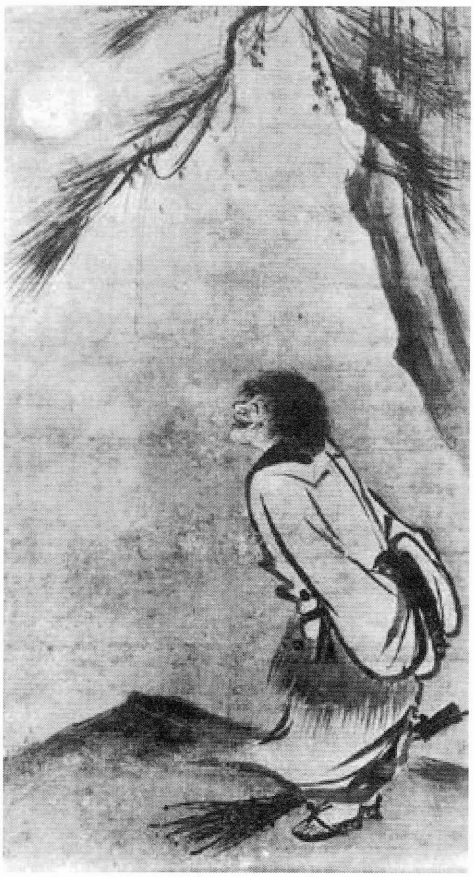

Fig. 2. Geiami, "Jittoku Laughing at the Moon," sixteenth century. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The Zen master accepts and affirms everything: the birth and growth, decay and death of men. There are no regrets for the past and no fears for future. He is ready to accept all the magic-like transformation of life, all its unending changes. He does not try to arrest and interrupt its flow. Spiritual freedom for him is just that capacity to be as spontaneous and unfettered as life itself. The Zen term for a monk, we note in this connection, is "*unsui*," which means "drifting or floating like clouds and water." This free, spontaneous style of life is close to the Taoist "*wu wei*," which has been translated by many Western scholars as "non-action." Perhaps *wu wei* can best be understood by contrast with its opposite, "*yu wei*." The character for "*yu*" is composed of two symbols, hand and moon, thus signifying the idea of clutching at the moon as if it could be seized and possessed. In one of the Zen temples in Kyoto, Konchi-in, there is a famous *fusuma* painting by Hasegawa Tōhaku (1539-1610) "Monkey Reaching for the Moon" (fig. 3). Here we see a monkey reaching for what she thinks is the moon. She sees the reflection of the moon in the pool and tries to grasp it. The meaning of the painting is obvious. The Zen master wants to say: "Don't mistake the reflection of the moon for the moon." Do not mistake thoughts about reality, or words about reality, for reality itself. The Truth is beyond words and it cannot be expressed by words.

A good illustration of this idea is the painting "Patriarch Hui-neng Tearing a Sutra Scroll" by Liang K'ai. In any religion but Zen such an action would surely regarded as evil. Yet this is a picture of the first great Chinese Zen master, painted by a Zen-inspired artist. The words of any language fall far short of mirroring the vital process of life. Words of wisdom have no meaning until one's own experience gives them meaning. Each person must be enlightened by his own experience. The Zen masters try to give their disciples experiences that will shock them into this realization.

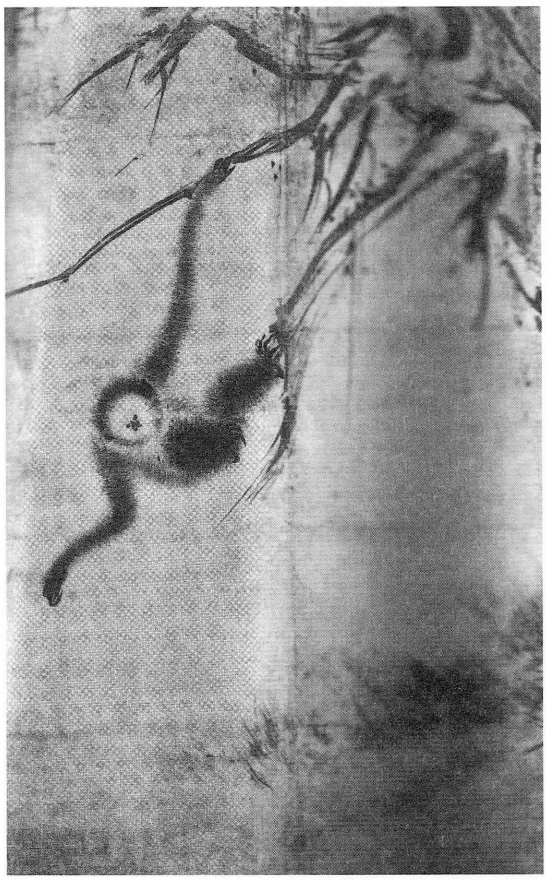

Fig. 3. Hasegawa Tōhaku. "Monkey Reaching for the Moon," sixteenth-seventeenth centuries. Ryūsen Collection, Myōshin-ji, Kyoto.

Tearing up the holy books of one's religion is shocking to a respectful student of that religion. But from the Zen point of view, this is an ideal situation to paint, providing an opportunity to emphasize the difference between the inner meanings of a way of life and verbal descriptions of it. Not only may the idea behind the painting contribute to insight, but so may the technique of the painter. The strokes are mostly short and straight, with a staccato effect like that of a series of shouts. The brush strokes of the painting are completely in accord with the subject.

Zen masters stress the independence from etiquette, from any kind of formal piety. There is a famous story about Bodhidharma's (Daruma's) meeting with the Emperor Wu. The Chinese emperor described to his visitor all the Buddhist monasteries and temples he had built, and then asked what merit he had accumulated to his karmic account. "No merit at all!" replied Bodhidharma. He is always depicted as a fierce old man with a great black beard and large penetrating eyes. "Ten minutes and eighty years," answered Hakuin, a famous Zen master, when he was asked how long it takes to paint Daruma. The eighty years mentioned by the Zen monk, are, first of all, the years of the great spiritual work required for the inner transformation of the master, before he will be able to depict the essence of Daruma, to express Prometheus-like strength of mind of the Zen patriarch. In order for one to paint a picture of Bodhidharma, the characteristics of Bodhidharma must first be made one's own characteristics, and then an appropriate technique must be found to depict them. There are the remarkable words of one Zen master, who said that every picture of Daruma that he made might be called his own spiritual self-portrait. And this is exactly true in the case of numerous pictures of Daruma painted by Fugai, a hermit and Zen monk who lived in the eighteenth century.

Fugai's life was as individualistic as his artworks. He spent many years wan-

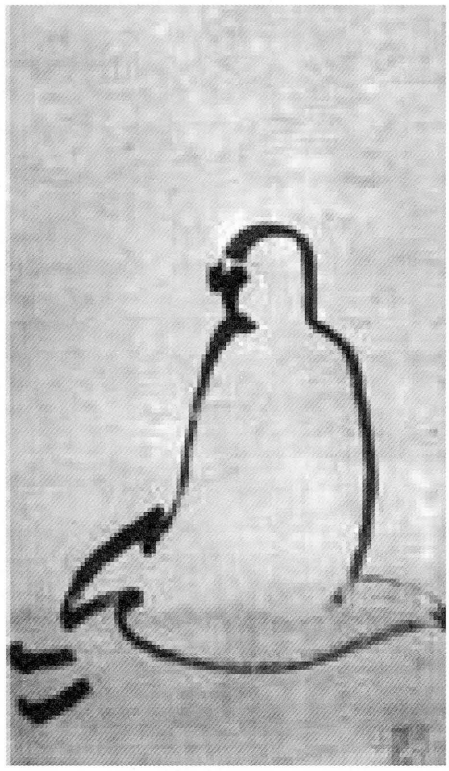

Fig. 4 (left). Much'i (Mokkei), "Daruma," fifteenth century. Daitokuji, Kyoto.

Fig. 5 (right). Much'i, "Meditating Daruma," 1465. Hayashibara Museum of Art, Okayama.

dering, living at times in caves. His final years were spent in nomadic travel; he died almost literally "on the road." Although he must have had a remarkably deep grasp of Zen, his only teachings are found in his poetry, calligraphy, and paintings. It seems that all the intensive spiritual life of Zen monk, the strong will of the person who overcame all his weaknesses, splashed out in the stringy strokes he put on the paper, turning each picture of Daruma into a spiritual self-portrait. Fugai brushed a number of self-portraits in which he looks very much like Daruma, an indication of Fugai's sense of identification with the patriarch. If some works didn't bear the title of "Self-portrait," we might wonder whether they were meant to portray Fugai or Daruma—the same severe and sharp look of the person, everything in the image of which reduced to the essence.

Fugai or other Zen monks didn't pretend to be called professional painters. The style of their brushwork, unlike that of almost all other religious art, is dramatically bold, bluntly immediate in effect. The transformation from mind and spirit to paper is spontaneous. These drawings are not intended to be watched from only aesthetic

point of view. These works distill the essence of the Zen experience into strokes of the brush.

For the almost five hundred years of existence of Zen painting some of the most popular subjects devoted to Bodhidharma appeared. His strict face, depicted by close-up, large, severe-looking eyes, can be seen in almost in every Zen temple (see, e.g., fig. 4). No less often the painters appeal to the image of Meditating Daruma, drawn, as a rule, in a single stroke; these are so-called "*ippitsu*-Daruma." The more abstract is the picture (often it is just a silhouette of a sitting in meditative posture Daruma, e.g., fig. 5), the closer this picture is to an *ensō* (the circle that is one of the most profound subjects in *Zenga*). The *ensō* is a symbolic representation of the All, the Void, Enlightenment itself.

Dramatic and emotional is the story that tells about visit to Bodhidharma his first student Eka, who later became the Second Zen Patriarch. Coming to Bodhidharma, Eka begged him to tell the secret of Zen teaching, but the Indian hermit paid no attention to the monk. Hoping to earn his teacher's confidence, Eka was ready to undergo any severe trial: one night, for example, he stood outside the teacher's cave naked until he was covered by snow up to his knees. Finally, the persistent monk cut off his own left arm and offered it to his teacher as an evidence of his devotion to the spiritual way of Bodhidharma. It is this moment that was often chosen for depiction by Zen painters. Daruma, sitting with his back turned to the supplicating monk, looks severe and unapproachable in the famous painting by Sesshū.

In the "iconography" of Zen painters there is a special artistic language, a "vocabulary" for the transmission of the idea of the violence, the state of frenzy, of the spiritual search. The symbol of the titanic efforts exerted to overcome the weakness of human beings' nature is the exaggerated facial expressions of personages: closed lips, knitted brows, strong-willed look. The face of Eka in Sesshū's painting is the face of a person who has made superhuman efforts, who has overcome incredible physical pain, who, with the help of his strong will, has overcome his low nature. It goes without saying that this story is just a metaphor: Eka never cut off his arm, although he did lose it much later fighting with robbers.

Another popular subject in Zen art is the Awakened person—the personage who has already attained the Serenity of Nirvana. It depicts Sakyamuni, who has pursued Awakening on the mountain, descending after its attainment. There is nothing already from the earthly fuss in the eyes of Sakyamuni. According to the words of Hisamatsu Shin'ichi, there could not be a more convincing example to illustrate the striking differences between Zen stylistics in the depiction of images Buddha and Patriarchs and the artistic style represented in orthodox Buddhist art. There is nothing transcendental in the image of Buddha from Zen point of view. Sakyamuni in the painting of Liang K'ai is nothing more than a human being who has attained Awakening, who has had the great spiritual experience of inner transformation. In comparison with Pure Land Buddhism, for example, Zen art could find the source of inspiration not only in sutras, but in ordinary life itself, which offers an infinite variety of subjects. Zen paintings

usually depict the actual world of such things as mountains and rivers, birds, monkeys, and flowers. According to the words of Hisamatsu Shin'ichi, in the picture of the bird sitting on a dry bough, there is much more true spirituality, true religious meaning, than, for example, in the picture, devoted to the gods of the Buddhist pantheon, and the condition that made this possible was that this picture was created by a painter who had already had this spiritual experience of Enlightenment, who realized the Oneness of the Universe, unity of all being things.

Thus, in the reality of our world, everything—it might be a laughing Hōtei or a wild goose—has the Buddha-nature, and is no less a sacred theme for Zen art than is the Bodhisattva, for example. In the collection of Daitokuji is a famous triptych, vertical scrolls of Kuan-yin by the Chinese painter-monk Mu Ch'i (Jp. Mokkei). Many Western art historians consider the "Kuan-yin" the greatest masterpiece in the entire history of Zen painting. Today the abbots of Daitoku-ji consider the "Kuan-yin triptych" as a religious icon, or *shōgon*.

The flanking of a Buddhist icon such as the "Kuan-yin" with a pair of animals or landscapes instead of with other deities as is customary on other forms of Buddhist art, was a means to express this idea of oneness or non-discrimination between the energy-essence of a deity and natural objects, like animals, trees, and rocks. This oneness resembles broken mirror, each fragment of which preserves in itself the integral image of the Universe. Thus, it is not surprising that the variety of natural things, like the images of saints, have a metaphysical depth and could be considered a religious art. According to the words of Heinrich Dumoulin, Zen art radiates the respect to the sanctity of the Universe.

Zenga is thus the most concentrated expression of Zen principles. It is remarkable fact that the most important monks of the past four centuries took up the brush, usually in their final years, to express their inner vision through painting and calligraphy.

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