

BOOK REVIEW

***Zen Paintings in Edo Japan (1600–1868):
Playfulness and Freedom in the Artwork
of Hakuin Ekaku and Sengai Gibon***

Galit Aviman

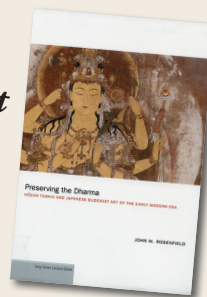
Ashgate, 2014
180 pages.



***Preserving the Dharma:
Hōzan Tankai and Japanese Buddhist Art
of the Early Modern Era***

John M. Rosenfield

Princeton University Press Tang Center Lecture Series, 2015
160 pages.



These two short books make a nice pair. After so long being told that Edo was an anti-clerical time of secularization with the Buddhist arts withering away, now, on the 400th anniversary of Tokugawa Ieyasu and Nankōbō Tenkai setting the shogunal religious order up, we finally realize how wrong that interpretation has been. The pioneering book of Patricia Graham, *Faith and Power of Japanese Buddhist Art* (2007), which took the story right up to the present, challenged art historians to look again. Rosenfield generously cites Graham as his motivation for the Tang Lecture Series at Princeton University, which resulted in this book, sadly published posthumously.

As a pair these two books elucidate the power and authority that Buddhism had in the period, as well as its spiritual depth and artistic practices. The shogunal regime was entirely Buddhist in orientation (claims of its Neo-Confucian bent notwithstanding), and the cities and landscapes of the archipelago were covered with the piety and visual apparatus of Buddhism: not just temples, but routes with pilgrims and semi-religious tourists, and monks and nuns soliciting alms or making their way between precincts.

The boy later known as Tankai was born in 1629 into a comfortable regional family near Ise, which Rosenfield describes as “site of the Ise Grand Shrines,” though we should recall that Ise was a Buddhist site until cleansed by the Meiji government. Tankai was ordained as a youth and went on to endure serious and exacting training over many years. He spent long periods in Edo at the Eitaiji in Fukagawa (from which the Eitaibashi, built in 1698, would derive its name). Tankai was in residence here for the dreadful Furisode fire of 1657, during which his temple was lost along with most of the city. It was here that Tankai developed a special devotion to Kankiten, also known as Shōten, a transformation of the Indian Ganesha. It was an odd choice, as Rosenfield notes, since this elephantine divinity

became sexualized in Japan as god of matrimony, its statues closely hidden. Tankai is said to have sculpted many himself, though only one has ever been revealed (given here as Figure 13). It shows two anthropomorphic elephants in a chaste enough embrace, though one wonders why the other examples remain unpublished. Tankai's own life was highly ascetic, and he left Edo for a remote temple on Mt. Ikoma (between Osaka and Nara), saving a collapsed temple and rebuilding it into a thoroughly flourishing place.

Tankai crossed a lot of barriers—as we might see them today. He moved repeatedly between the urban and the rural. Although abstemious (he was said to eat only once every several days), he was tremendously famous and was called to pray for the Kyoto and shogunal courts—not always successfully, it must be said, though with great rewards of some 10 *ryō* a time.

What attracted Rosenfield to Tankai was his art production. Tankai ensured his precinct on Mt. Ikoma, renamed Hōzanji, fairly brimmed with works of painting and sculpture, many of which he made himself. Or rather, he signed them. It would have helped to be told exactly what the signatures say. Do they claim Tankai *hitsu* or Tankai *saku*? Or are there other terms that stop short of implying he really made them, which he could not have done, for they are far too many and far too polished to have been made by anyone other than a professional. Patronage and production issues like this will not be resolved until more work is done on the Edo Buddhist arts. Rosenfield usefully investigates *bussshi* and *ebussshi* who might have actually wielded brush and chisel on Tankai's behalf, though most of their names are unknown. This again demonstrates how far we still have to go.

Sadly this is Rosenfield's last book. He was a powerful and much-loved presence over many decades. And how very like him it is to go out on a beautifully written and illustrated study, passionate and innovative to the last.

If Tankai shows the official side of things (even his austerities, grueling as they must have been, were all played by the book), the two artists treated by Galit Aviman are the opposite. It is all the more ironic, therefore, that the subjects of her book are widely known today, whereas oblivion has fallen on the great Tankai. Aviman discusses Hakuin Ekaku and Sengai Gibon, thus giving dates of 1686 (Hakuin's birth) to 1837 (Sengai's death), rather less than the title claims. It is the subtitle that describes the subject of this study, the title being wildly off the mark.

Hakuin and Sengai are the subject of many books already, but Aviman's proposition is to explore them under the rubric of "freedom." Much work has been done on eccentricity in the Edo period, and it is a pity that such scholarship was not integrated here. Aviman sets her scope narrowly on these two Zen artists, without questioning their canonization or looking at other areas that "Zen" meant to most people of the Edo period, namely the cult of powerful warrior ancestors, or perhaps Ōbaku Zen.

These two books are important steps in furthering research into Edo Buddhist art. Both being concise monographs on just one or two figures, they also point the way towards bigger and more contextualized studies.

Reviewed by Timon Screech