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ON ZEN ART[1]

SHIN'ICHI HISAMATSU

Generally speaking, religious art—to be properly so called—must be something which expresses aesthetically some religious meaning. However high a value as art some work may have, if it does not express a religious meaning, it cannot be called religious art. Similarly, however high a religious value may be expressed—for example, conceptually, as in the case of a holy scripture, or morally, as in the case of a religious precept—such expressions cannot *ipso facto* be said to constitute religious art. Religious art must not only be art; it must especially express religious meaning.

A point of view often encountered is that the ultimate in art is itself religious, that whatever possesses a high aesthetic value is understood to be by that very fact religious. Such a view rules out the possibility that something may possess high value as art and yet not express the slightest religious meaning. And thus, religious art becomes no more than art of high aesthetic value. What is religious art and what is not, becomes simply a matter of the difference of the degree of aesthetic excellence and not a difference of some more fundamental quality. It would, accordingly, become impossible to speak of religious art as art which *especially* expresses religious meaning. Is, however, the difference between religious art and non-religious art really no more than simply a difference in the degree of aesthetic excellence?

To be sure, something of the nature of godliness or sublimity

[1] This is a translation of "Zen Geijutsu no Rikai" (On the Understanding of Zen Art) from the author's book 東洋的無 *Tōyō-teki Mu* (Oriental Nothingness), Kyoto: Kōbundō, 1939. pp. 85–97.

emanates naturally from a work of art of high aesthetic value. That is, there are in fact instances where at first glance a superior work of art causes one to feel that it is a work of religious art. In such cases, the sublimity of the aesthetic excellence strikes one as being religious. But can we in fact declare such sublimity to be religious?

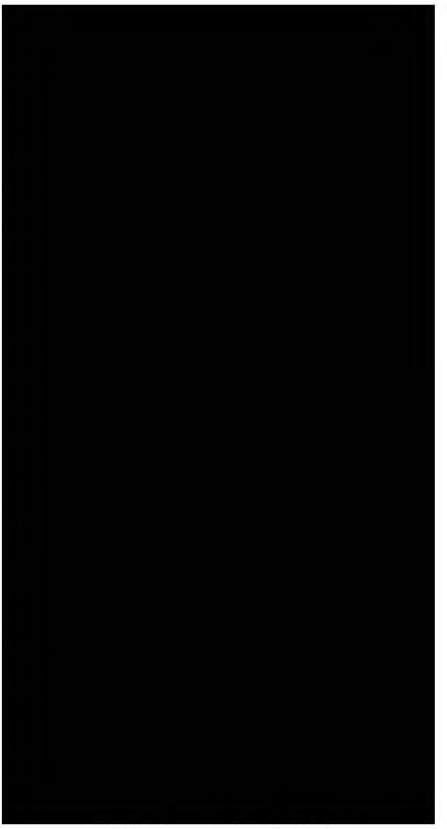
In my opinion, there are works of art which possess sublimity and yet are not religious, and there are works of art which are religious and yet do not possess sublimity. A sense of sublimity may naturally accompany works of high aesthetic quality, but I do not think it can be said that because a work of art has this sense of sublimity it is thereby religious. Sublimity and religiosity are not in my opinion synonymous concepts.

Sublimity, numbered as the first of the six rules of painting in Chinese classical treatises on painting, is no doubt the principal norm of aesthetics. Religiosity, however, does not constitute in any sense an element within any aesthetic norm. From the perspective of aesthetics, religiosity is no more than one possible theme which art may try to express. Accordingly, the presence or absence of sublimity is for aesthetics a most important matter, but the presence or absence of the quality of religiosity is for aesthetics *per se* of no consequence. The fact that an aesthetic work lacks religiosity does not lower its aesthetic value. If, however, an aesthetic work tries to express religiosity, but does not in fact possess religiosity, it must then be said that even its aesthetic value is low.

For example, if a landscape painted by Sesshū 雪舟 does not express a religious meaning, one does not, therefore, necessarily consider its aesthetic value to be low. But if a Bodhidharma painted by Sesshū does not express a religious meaning, probably no one could consider it to have much aesthetic value. If, however, such a painting is taken not as a painting of Bodhidharma but as a painting of an hysterical monk angrily glaring at someone,[1] then it is perhaps not necessary to speak of its aesthetic value as being low. If, on the other hand, Sesshū tried to paint Bodhidharma the Zen master, but painted something that can only be regarded as an hysterical monk,

[1] See Illustration 121 of *Oriental Ink-Painting* by Ernest Grosse.

then it is either because Sesshū did not succeed in understanding the characteristics of Bodhidharma the Zen master, or because even though he understood them, he was unable to express them. In either case, it is clear that Sesshū was not able to paint Bodhidharma.



Bodhidharma by Hakuin

In the Bodhidharma painted by Hakuin 白隠, however, the characteristics of Bodhidharma as a Zen master are really well expressed. Since Hakuin was not, however, a professional painter, from the point of view of technique we may feel that there are some things that he could have done a little better. Nevertheless, the Bodhidharmas painted by Hakuin are far more Bodhidharma-like than those of Sesshū, Jasoku 蛇足, or Kei-Shoki 啓書記, among others. This is because Hakuin first grasped thoroughly the characteristics of Bodhidharma and, in painting these characteristics, even though technically imperfect, created a suitable style for that expression.

In the case of the Sesshū "Bodhidharma," even though it should, from the standpoint of general technique, contain an epoch-making innovation, if the Bodhidharma painted by that epoch-making technique is not Bodhidharma-like, it goes without saying that, as a painting of Bodhidharma, it is without value.

In order for one to paint a picture of Bodhidharma, the characteristics of Bodhidharma must first be made one's own charac-

teristics, and then an appropriate technique must be found to depict them. Making the characteristics of Bodhidharma fully one's own, however, is not a matter of aesthetics but a matter of religion. Of course, the Bodhidharma which is made fully one's own through religion is not *as such* a work of art. In order for it to become a work of art, it must express itself aesthetically. Without, however, the religious realization of Bodhidharma's characteristics, one cannot produce a true picture of Bodhidharma.

Accordingly, the evaluation of a picture of Bodhidharma must be made by determining how well the depicted Bodhidharma expresses the religiously realized Bodhidharma. That is, in evaluating a picture of Bodhidharma one must consider to what extent the religiously realized Bodhidharma vividly and graphically appears in the portrait painted.

So it is when any religious matter, and not just a portrait of Bodhidharma, such as Buddhist *gāthās* or Buddhist chants (called *Shōmyō*) must likewise be evaluated according to how well the religious substance is being expressed, in the one case through poetry, in the other through music.

This being so, in the case either of the creation, the appreciation, or the criticism of religious art, the creator, the appreciator, or the critic must first fully make his own the religious substance involved. If he does not, the artist-creator will lose the religious object which should be expressed through the work of art, while the appreciator and the critic will not be able to understand the religious meaning which the work of art intends to express.

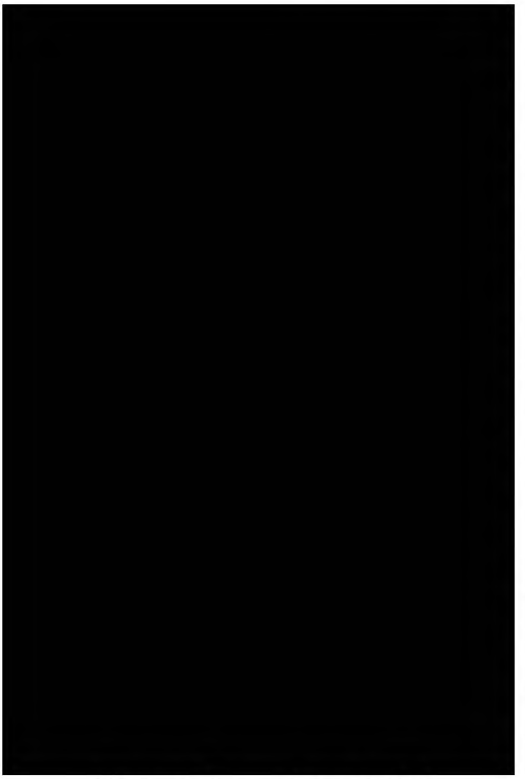
Of late, there has been very little religious art worth looking at, and, further, the instances of valid criticism of religious art have also been few. May this not be because the religious realization on the part of the artists and the critics has not been sufficient?

If religious art means, as described above, not simply great and sublime art, but art which expresses religious meaning, i.e., meaning which can be actualized only through religion, then that which I am here calling Zen art belongs to the category of religious art. This is because Zen art is art which expresses the Zen religious meaning

which has been realized through Zen as a religion.

Examples which belong to the main line of Zen art are; in the field of *painting*: in China, Shih-k'o 石恪 and Kuan-hsiu 貫休 of the Five Dynasties period; Liang-k'ai 梁楷, Mu-ch'i 牧谿, Jih-kuan 日觀 and Yü-chien 玉澗 of the Sung Dynasty; and Yin-t'o-luo 因陀羅 of the Yüan Dynasty; in Japan, Mokuan 默庵, Kaō 可翁, Bompō 梵芳, Josetsu 如拙, Sōami 相阿彌 and Shukō 珠光 of the Ashikaga period; Miyamoto Musashi (Niten) 宮本武藏 (二天) of the Momoyama period; Isshi 一絲, Hakuin, Sengai 仙厓, Seisetsu 誠拙 and Kōgan 弘巖 of the Tokugawa period. In the field of *calligraphy*: in China, Wu-chun 無準, Wu-an 兀庵, Hsü-t'ang 虛堂, Chung-fêng 中峯, Yin yüeh-chiang 印月江, Ning I-shan 寧一山, Wu-hsüeh Tsu-yüan 無學祖元 and Fei-yin 費隱; and in Japan, Shūho 宗峯, Kanzan 關山, Musō 夢窓, Ikkyū 一休, Shunnoku Sōen 春屋宗圓, Kokei 古溪, Genkō 玄興, Takuan 澤庵, Seigan 清巖, Tenyū 天祐, Daishin 大心, Daigu 大愚, Jiun 慈雲 and Ryōkan 良寬. In the field of *literature*; in China, the *Zenki-shū* 禪喜集 of Su Tung-p'o 蘇東坡, the poems of Han-shan 寒山, *Gōkofūgetsu-shū* 江湖風月集 and *Zengigemon* 禪儀外文; and in Japan, *Gosan* Literature 五山文學, the Zen records and the poems of the various Japanese and Chinese Zen monks; in the field of *theater arts*, there is the Nō drama; in the field of *ceremonial arts*, the tea-ceremony and the various ceremonial practices of the Zen monks; in the field of *architecture*, the construction and decoration of Zen temples and tea houses and their surrounding; in the field of *arts and crafts*, the various utensils used in the tea-ceremony: tea-bowls, tea-containers, incense-boxes, flower vases, tea-kettles and serving-plates for sweets; in the field of *garden construction*, the gardens of Zen temples and the paths leading to the tea-houses. There are, of course, other corollary works of art which contain a Zen influence received from this main stream of Zen art. In both religious and aesthetic respects, Zen art constitutes a major current which occupies an important, never to be overlooked position in the history of Oriental art.

It is generally recognized that Zen constitutes an essential element in the Oriental spirit and, likewise, that Zen art partakes of



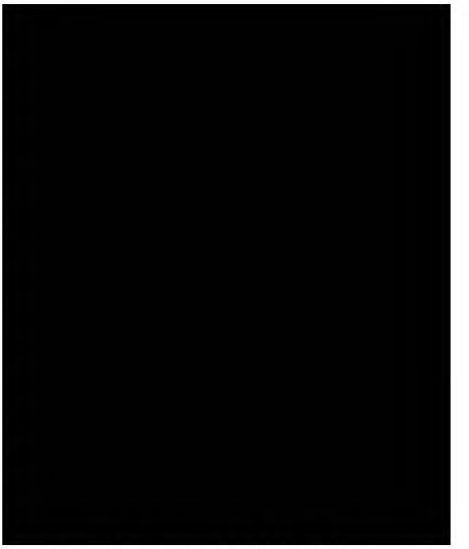
Shōkintei, Katsura Imperial Villa

the essence of Oriental art. But even if this were not so, that Zen art is a unique art form which thoroughly developed only in the Orient can probably be said without dispute.

Of course, in the West also there have continued to be from the earliest centuries until modern times instances of a religious realization extremely similar to Zen; for example, the mysticism of Plotinus, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Eckhart, and Boehme, among others. But while this mystical tradition did exert a rather deep influence on Western religion and philosophy, it was not the main line of Western thought. Accordingly, unlike Zen in the Orient, it did not take the form of an independent school and did not become the *Zeitgeist* of any specific age. It is perhaps for this reason that this Western mystical tradition did not reach the point of creating out of itself a unique art or culture.

In the West also, there are paintings which may perhaps be said to be mystical; for example, the paintings of Daumier, Courbet, Whistler, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Blake, and especially Millet. The paintings of Blake seem to express something more strongly religious than the paintings of the others just mentioned. This religious quality,

however, while it cannot be said not to be mystical, is a quality mixed with a great deal of the supernatural. It is not mystical in the pure sense of mysticism as found in such a figure as Eckhart. Millet is probably, by far, the most purely mystical. And in the field of literature, in the writings of Maeterlinck and Yeats, one can very likely find a great deal which is mystical. But it cannot be said that such art or literature thoroughly or purely expresses the kind of "mysticism" expressed in the Zen art of the Orient. Even less can it be considered that this Western art comprises a definite aesthetic current based



Persimmons by Mu Ch'i

Tea-bowl, 'Goshomaru' ware

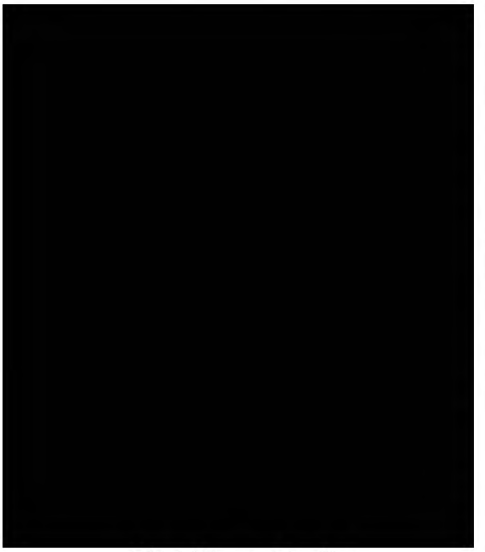
on mystical experience. In this sense, Zen art must be said to occupy an important position not only in the aesthetic history of the Orient but in the aesthetic history of the world.

Ordinarily, when people speak of Zen paintings they frequently have in mind simply paintings painted by Zen monks or paintings which treat of ancient Zen incidents. However, even though a painting has been painted by a Zen monk or is a painting which treats of Zen incidents, if it is a painting in which Zen meaning has not been expressed, it cannot be called a Zen painting. For example, even though they were Zen monks, the paintings of Tetsuō 鐵翁 and those of the early Sengai cannot be called Zen paintings. Again, even though they are paintings which treat of ancients, the paintings appearing in many early twelfth century Japanese exhibitions portraying Bodhidharma, Han-shan and Shih-tê 寒山·拾得 and Nanchüan 南泉 cutting the cat, cannot be said to be Zen paintings.

Crane by Mu Ch'i

In contrast to these paintings just referred to, even though they were not painted by Zen monks, such paintings as the "Su Tung-p'o" painted by Ashikaga Yoshimitsu 足利義滿,[1] the "Bodhidharma," or the "Wild Geese in the Reeds" painted by Miyamoto Musashi, the "Pu-tai," and the portraits of Hitomaro and Tsurayuki painted by Iwasa Shōi 岩佐勝以, all fully possess the essential

[1] See Illustration 101 of *Oriental Ink-Paintings* by Grosse.



'Gin' (*Singing*) by Jiun

characteristics of a Zen painting. Again, although they do not deal with ancient Zen incidents, such paintings as the "Six Persimmons," "The Wild Geese in the Reeds," the landscapes of Mu-ch'i, "The Orchids" of Gyokuenshi 玉畹子,[1] or the landscapes of Sōami, may very well be said to be excellent Zen paintings.

The same may be said regarding calligraphy. Just because a piece of calligraphy was written by a Zen monk, or just because it consists of Zen words or phrases, does not mean that it can *ipso facto* be said to be Zen calligraphy. On the other hand there are instances of calligraphy which can be said to be Zen calligraphy even though they are not the work of Zen monks and even though they do not contain Zen phrases. For example, although Isshi was a Zen monk, his calligraphy is not as Zen-like as the calligraphy of Jiun, who was monk of the Shingon sect.

The poem on the tomb of Emperor Wu cannot be called a Zen poem; however, when Genkō took it as the subject of a piece of calligraphy, his calligraphy of this poem became an excellent piece of Zen calligraphy. (It is preserved at Rinkō-in, Myōshinji Temple.) This being so, what is to be called Zen painting or Zen calligraphy is not a painting which has been painted by a Zen monk or a piece of calligraphy containing Zen phrases, but rather a painting or a piece of calligraphy which expresses Zen meaning.

When Zen meaning is to be expressed aesthetically, it must be expressed through a form which is both suitable and possesses a

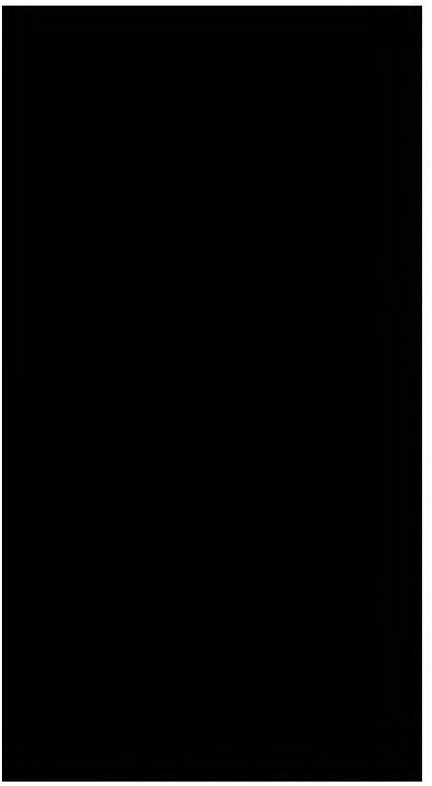
[1] Also known as Bompō.

necessary relation to the meaning to be expressed. It is precisely because it does possess such a form that a painting, a piece of calligraphy, a manner of living, a dwelling place, a face, a literary composition, or sportive play, is spoken of as "Zen-like." If a Zen monk wrote in the beautiful, delicate, haze-like, running *kana* style of ancient time, if he painted brilliant, gold Buddha images, or if he engaged in elegant, enticing behavior, he could not be said to be "Zen-like." In much of what is ordinarily characterized as "Zen-like," there is a great deal which has no necessary relation at all to the essence of a Zen man but which is, on the contrary, simply an accidental surface combination of factors or surface style. That which is to be truly called "Zen-like," however, has not any such accidental, superficial similarities to Zen; it must rather have those fundamentals which are rooted in the essence of what it means to be a Zen man.

This being so, no matter to what extent an act is actually performed by a Zen monk, that which does not derive from the essence of what it means to be a Zen man cannot be called "Zen-like." Therefore, in order to discriminate whether something is Zen-like or not, it is necessary to understand the essence of what it means to be a Zen man. And in order for the essence of what it means to be a Zen man to be understood, Zen-meaning itself must be understood.

The understanding of Zen-meaning must await Zen-religious realization. What I am here calling "Zen-meaning" is not an intellectual, conceptual meaning, but it is the living "Zen-Mind" itself. It is impossible to discern clearly whether or not Zen-meaning is being expressed in a given expression without a very firm hold on this living Zen-Mind.

Regarding such questions as whether or not a certain conceptual discourse is in accord with the basic meaning of Zen or again just what Zen incident a certain painting is expressing, if one reads a book written about the basic meaning of Zen or if one consults a reference book on Zen incidents,—even without any special grasp of the Zen-Mind,—these matters can be determined relatively easily. Although they cannot, of course, be said to be conclusive, it is in this regard that ordinary Zen scholarly studies or essays on Zen painting



Pu-tai by Liang K'ai

are sometimes helpful.

In order, however, to determine which calligraphic style or which style of painting or which music expresses a Zen style, one must have a thoroughly vivid Zen realization. If one lacks this realization, one probably will not be able to understand why a certain calligraphic style, a certain painting style, a certain piece of music or a certain living manner especially expresses Zen-meaning.

Historians say that Zen flourished in China during the Sung period, that it was at this time that the painting style of such artists as Mu-ch'i and Liang-k'ai was born, that in Japan the Zen school came into prominence during the Higashiyama period, that it was in this period that Sung art was appreciated, and that in this same period the tea-ceremony arose. But they do not give adequate answers to such questions as follows: Why was it that when Zen flourished, such a painting style as that of Mu-ch'i's and Liang-k'ai's arose? Why, under the same influence, did the tea-ceremony arise? Why, in the Higashiyama period in Japan, were such simple, primitive, and unpolished paintings as the Buddha paintings of Shih-k'o, Kuan-hsin, and Mu-ch'i appreciated even more than the brilliant gold Buddha paintings of the Heian and Kamakura periods? Even when historians do attempt to answer these questions, they do not do so from within the meaning of Zen itself. Rather their answers are no more than external explanations

given in terms of the attending circumstances.

For example, the reason given to explain the appearance of such people as Kaō, Mokuan and Sōami during the period from the end of the Kamakura era to the Higashiyama era, is that Japanese Zen monks of that period went to the China of the Sung, and brought back Zen paintings of Yin-t'o-lo, Mu-ch'i, and others. In this explanation, however, the questions as to why the Zen monks who went to Sung China brought back the works of Yin-t'o-lo and Mu-ch'i, and why Japan during that period took in these works and was so receptive to their influence, are not dealt with very satisfactorily. If these questions are not asked and are not answered, even the historical explanation cannot be said to have been thoroughly presented. But unless these problems are dealt with by one who has himself genuinely grasped the Zen-Mind, they cannot be answered.

This being so, in order to understand Zen aesthetics thoroughly, first the Zen-Mind must be vividly actualized and the question of why the Zen-Mind has to be aesthetically expressed necessarily through such and such a form must be determined. Following this, it must be clearly understood just why the several forms mentioned above as examples of Zen aesthetics—the paintings of Shih-k'o or Hakuin, the calligraphy of Su Tung-p'o or Jiun, the tea-ceremony, the gardens of Zen temples, etc.—constitute, each in its own way, necessary aesthetic forms for Zen.

To express the special characteristics of Zen aesthetics, the following terms are sometimes used[1]: "free from worldliness" (脫俗的 *datsuzoku-teki*), "crabbed with age" (蒼古 *sōko*), "serene emptiness" (空寂 *kūjaku*), "subtle tranquility" (幽閑 *yūgeki*), "*sabi*" (さび), "*wabi*" (わび), "aged naiveté" (古拙 *kosetsu*), "simplicity" (素朴 *soboku*), "unseizability" (沒巴鼻 *motsuhabi*), "untastableness" (沒滋味 *motsujimi*), "but elegance" (也風流 *yafūryū*), "directness" (端的 *tanteki*), "unrestricted freedom" (洒脫 *shadatsu*), "no-mind" (無心 *mushin*), "an unruly fellow" (盃八郎 *manparō*), "imposing

[1] The reader is warned that the translations of these terms are necessarily tentative giving only the general sense of the original meanings. English renderings are too often negative in their connotation. These terms in Japanese are positive expressions that describe the qualities associated with satori experience.

aloofness" (傲兀 *gōkotsu*), "mad" (風顚 *fūten*), "unyielding" (擔板 *tanpan*) and "purity" (清淨 *shōjō*).

For a clear understanding of the birthplace in ourselves of these characteristics, we must go through the same procedures that were cited above as the method needed for a thorough understanding of Zen aesthetics.

(Translated by Richard DeMartino in collaboration with Jikai Fujiyoshi and Masao Abe)