

Japanese aesthetic sense — Zen and Zen calligraphy, Zen painting, from Kamakura to Muromachi —

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[1] Introduction

1.1 The flow of Chinese Zen

Bodhi Dharma, the founder of the Zen school, the 28th in the lineage from Buddha, came over to China from India in early 6th century. He became the founder of Chinese Zen. Zen fitted in the spirit of Laotzu and Zhuangtzu which were very popular among Chinese people in those days. They loved Zen spirit. As time passed, they found originality in Zen. Soon, Dharma's Zen exceeded the limit of Zen school and investigated into human essence. In addition, his teachings had deep relation with emotional training in the teachings of Buddhism. They called his teachings 'Jōgaku' (samadhi or meditation learning). After Enō, the 6th patriarch in Zen lineage, Chinese Zen became divided into two sects, Rinzai and Sōtō. In the late Sō period, Chinese Zen declined due to the invasion by the other race and internal disturbances, and in the Min period, it almost vanished.

1.2 The flow of Japanese Zen (Kamakura-Muromachi)

In the Heian period Japanese envoy were no longer sent to China under the Tang Dynasty. As the result, Japanese own culture — 'Kana', 'Waka', 'Yamato-e' and others became prosperous. The spirit of the Heian Buddhism died out. The Kamakura period began when Samurai came into power, Chinese culture was

introduced through the trade between Japan and China (Sō). Then Zen in China was still prosperous. With a lot of Japanese Buddhist priests, Eisai and Dōgen, the founders of Japanese ‘Rinsai’ sect and ‘Sōtō’ sect, came over to China(Sō). They returned to Japan with Chinese culture (including Zen, Zen painting and Zen calligraphy). While famous Chinese Zen priests ‘Rankeidōryū’ visited Japan to propagate Zen. He became the founder of ‘Deizenin Kenchō’ temple in Kamakura. In the ‘Nanbokuchō’ period, ‘Gozan’ institution was established at Zen temples in Kyoto and ‘Kamakura’. Zen priests enthusiastically learned Chinese poetry and Zen paintings with Zen practice. In the Muromachi period, Chinese Zen already vanished in China. The first period of Muromachi was the era that ‘Ashikaga Shōgun Yosimitsu’ attached great importance to Zen. Zen calligraphy (Sho) and Zen painting (Sumi-e) were also prospering with Zen. In the latter period of Muromachi, ‘Gozan’ (Five Mountains) institution in Kyoto and Kamakura collapsed. The center of Zen moved to ‘Daitoku’ temple and local cities. This equally influenced Sho and Sumi-e: both Sho and Sumi-e concentrated not only in ‘Kyoto’, but also in local cities. After that, two sects of Zen have been prospering till today.

[2] Zen and Zen calligraphy (Sho)

Originally, Zen priests regarded Sho very highly. In the Tang period, youths of the nobility, who failed in ‘Kakyo’ Test (for public offices), loved Chinese poems in Zen temples, elevated their spirits, and created a lot of Zen paintings and Zen calligraphies. In the Sō period, the intellectuals called ‘Shidaifu’, sympathized with Zen spirit, longed for the freedom of soul or spirit not restrained by anything, and grappled with Sho and Sumi-e. In the late 12th century, Chinese Zen priests’ Sho (calligraphies) were highly regarded in Japan and was introduced thereto. From the

late 13th century to 14th century, many Japanese Zen priests drew Sho as a means to express their religious experiences.

2.1 Zen and Sho

There are deep relations between Zen and Zen Calligraphy. First, ‘Furyū-moji’, one of ‘four mottoes of Zen’, means that Zen teachings are not in doctrines or words (phrases), but in one’s own mind. Second, Zen teachings shouldn’t follow the Canon, but follow the revered master (‘Sonshi’), practicing asceticism and Zen codes, Third, Zen teachings held actual practice in high esteem and considered ‘Sonshi’ more important than the Buddha and Bohhisattva idealized in the codes. Therefore, young monks were always keeping the handwriting of their master with the fine personality and their master’s portraits (‘Chinzō’) by their sides. And these were the greatest support to practice asceticism.

Zen priest’s Sho and their handwriting are called ‘Bokuseki’ (trace of brush). It is not a right way of writing, but is Sho written with their own spirits and personalities, only done by Zen priests who could overcome severe self-training. In short, the spirit of Zen equals to ‘Bokuseki’.



1. Ungo kokugon ‘Inkajō’
Bokuseki Tokyo National Museum

Theme of Zen’s Sho doesn’t connect with doctrines of Buddhism. Common theme of this kind is ‘Ensō’ and ‘Kōan’. ‘Ensō’ is drawn beside a poem or a phrase to indicate a feeling of satisfaction, perfection, or completion. The circle normally begins at the bottom of its circumference and turns clockwise. This is opposed to circles of the west which start at the top and proceed in a counter-clockwise

direction. They can be tight circles or large thick ones. Some have ends that barely touch and other ends which overlap. All is in accord with the feeling the author hopes to convey. In other words, 'Ensō' is the freedom of soul and mind which are not restrained by anything. 'Kōan' is theme or Zen conundrum thinking in Zen meditation. Also, it is the thought problem used as an aid to attain enlightenment. Zen monks meditate on 'Kōan' and reveal and resolve Zen conundrum between master and themselves. Zen conundrum seems self-contradictory. Therefore, great questions, tricky questions, and real pleasurable questions come from Zen conundrum. Through the conundrum truth is found, Through such a strict training and long practice, Zen monks can attain enlightenment and get the ability to express their spiritual world, furthermore, to express it in 'Bokuseki'. Zen priests strike to portray the significance of the experience in simplicity.¹



2. 'Shoaku Mansaku'
by Ikkyū Sōjun
Bokuseki, Shinjuan,
Kyoto

The Sho of famous Zen priests such as Daitō Kokushi, Ikkyū Sōjun, Muso Soseki, Ryokan and more recently Hisamatsyu Shinichi who is best known for his 'Chowatai' (harmonious style) is displayed in Zen temples. Also, in the tea ceremony, 'Sarei' originates from Zen temple. A master of the tea ceremony hangs Zen priests' 'Bokuseki' on the alcove. Murata Jukō, Master Ikkyū's disciple, first hung 'Bokuseki', 'Kakemono' (hung-thing) in the tea ceremony. Its manner has been continuing till now.

[3] Zen and Zen painting (Sumi-e)

There was a division of the temples into public and private sectors. And it permitted several different kinds of

imagery in Zen paintings to coexist: traditional Buddhist themes being used for objects on public view, with motifs and styles more directly related to the Zen spirit for objects in the subtemples. Zen Buddhism's focus on universal truth expressed in the present moment vastly widened the range of themes painted by priests and for temples — from paintings of famous Zen eccentrics to evocative landscapes and themes reflecting the evanescence of nature. Furthermore, artists connected with particular temples developed considerable skill at working in very different styles and using different kinds of materials.²

3.1 Zen and Sumi-e

(1) The Kamakura period

Zen and Sumi-e were introduced into Japan from China during the Kamakura period. Most of Sumi-e were painted in Zen temples. Zen priests modeled 'White-robed Kannon', 'Dharuma', 'Hotei' and so on. By the invitation of the Kamakura Shōgun, Hōjō Tokiyori, the learned and virtuous priest, Rankei Dōryū, visited Japan. Figures of Rankei Dōryū and Dharuma were portrayed by his disciples. They are well-known as the work of the first stages of Sumi-e paintings.

(2) The Nanbokuchō period

The priest-painter Mokuan's 'Four Sleepers' is said to be portrayed in a Chinese Zen temple. He left excellent ink figure paintings in the 'Dōshakuga' tradition. His Kakemono 'Four Sleepers' depicts Kanzan and Jittoku entwined with the monk Bukan (who fostered Jittoku after he was orphaned) and his tiger, all four in sound sleep. He followed a formula for brush strokes and a gray ink medium. Fairly broad lines describe the bodies of the sleepers, while fine strokes are used for the facial features, and dark ink accents for such details as shoes, belts, and hair.



3. Four Sleepers, by MOKUAN REIEN. 14th century. Hanging scroll, ink on paper 27 $\frac{1}{2}$ ×14 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (70×36cm). Maeda Foundation, Tokyo

A light wash suggests rocks beside the figures and the shoreline in front of them, while dark strokes are used for vines, branches and river rocks.³ It evidences a sophisticated use of ink.

(3) The early part of the Muromachi period

The Samurais' tactful paintings and Zen priests' paintings were integrated at this time. The result was that Sumi-e was in all its glory. In those days, the Ashikaga Shōgun, Yoshimitsu, considered Zen very highly and established 'Gozan' institution. Each Zen temple was the center of its own culture. Especially, Shōkoku temple, as it became the center of Zen paintings under the Shogunate control.

Jōsetsu and Shūbun, Zen priests of Shōkoku temple, drew 'Catching a Catfish with a Gourd' and 'Reading in the Bamboo Study'. Their painting style represents a small world where Zen priests have dreamed of, with the integrity of an ideal residence far away from the world. This is a form of 'Shigajiku' (Kakemono with a poem or a painting). They were very popular among Zen priests in those days.

The priest-painter Jōsetsu left a picture of 'Catching a Catfish with a Gourd'. The painting is 'Dōshakuga' of a quite unusual kind, depicting a



4. Catching Catfish with a Gourd, by JOSETSU. c. 1413. Hanging scroll, ink and color on paper; 43 $\frac{7}{8}$ ×29 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. (111.5×75.8 cm). Taizoin, Myōshinji, Kyoto

‘Kōan’. The thought problem was used as an aid to attain enlightenment. We feel the following puzzle in this painting. The center of the foreground shows him holding a pale orange gourd in front of him as contrasted against the longer length of the wriggling gray fish swimming in the stream at his feet. The man cuts a strange and solitary figure, with his porcine face, his oddly animated clothing, and his stiff-legged stance, placed alone in the flat, barren landscape. The pointed peaks of three mountains can be seen above the mist far in the distance. Thus, there is a comment included in a detailed, multifaceted landscape setting in this ‘Dōshakuga’.⁴

Shūbun’s ‘Reading in the Bamboo Study’ suggests an almost unending procession of motifs carrying the eye far back into space. The brushwork emphasizes short, repetitive strokes that describe the natural elements but also give the painting a somewhat decorative effect. It is clear that Shūbun was familiar with the Sō Dynasty landscape painting, because he uses several stock motifs such as the scholar and his attendant crossing the bridge, the scholar visible through the window of his study, fishing boats close to land, and the temple buildings in the distance.⁵

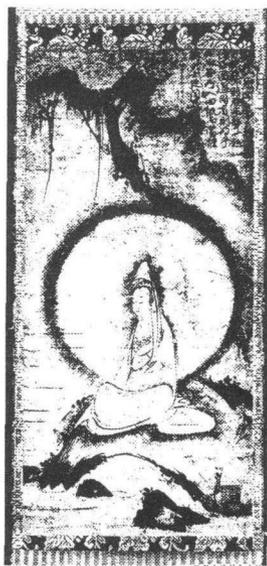
The priest-painter Minchō was a remarkably versatile artist and flourished in this particular type of environment. The ‘White-robed Kannon’ belongs to the ‘Dōshakuga’ tradition of imagery-descriptions of Buddhist themes intended to convey the subjective experience of receiving spiritual insight or revelations. The subject matter of ‘Dōshakuga’ includes such divinities as ‘Kannon’. Also, his ‘Cottage by a Mountain Stream’ is an example of ‘Shigajiku’, a hanging scoll combining poetry — often composed and copied by several different priests — with a monochrome image of an imaginary landscape. In these two types of paintings, ‘Dōshakuga’ and ‘Shigajiku’, the Zen priest — artist could give his brush and his imagination free rein and create images that embodied his religious beliefs and goals.⁶



5. Reading in the bamboo study, by SHŪBUN. c.1446. Hanging scroll, ink and color on paper; $53\frac{3}{4} \times 13\frac{1}{4}$ in. (136.5 \times 33.6 cm). Tokyo National Museum



6. Cottage by a Mountain Stream, by MINCHŌ 1413. Hanging scroll, ink on paper; $40 \times 13\frac{1}{2}$ in. (101.5 \times 34.5 cm). Konchiin,



7. White-robed Kannon, by MINCHŌ 1421. Hanging scroll, ink on paper; $24 \times 10\frac{7}{8}$ in. (60.9 \times 27.6 cm). Museum of Art, Atami, Shizuoka prefecture

(4) The latter part of the Muromachi period

The Ōnin War changed the world of Zen painting very greatly. Kyoto was almost reduced to ashes. 'Ashikaga Shōgun' lost its authority. 'Gozan' institution collapsed and during the latter part of 'Muromachi' the center of Zen was transferred to Daitoku temple and to local cities called small 'Kyoto'. Daitoku temple is the Zen temple built by 'Daitō Kokushi' in the early 14th century.

In that temple, Bunsei, Shūbun and Oguri Sōtan practiced Zen meditation and created Zen paintings. 'Yuimazu', written by Bunsei is a portrait, depicting a famous Indian lay Buddhist. The work has characteristics of a powerful painting with a sharp look.



8. 'Yuimazu' by Bunsei, c1457,
Ink on paper ; 92.4×34.3cm,
Yamato Bunka Kan, Nara



9. Winter Landscape, one of four
hanging scrolls of the four seasons,
by SESHŪ TŌYŌ. c.1470s.
Ink on paper ; 18¹/₄×11¹/₂in.
(46.4×29.4cm).Tokyo National
Museum

Ikkyū Sōjun moved to Daitoku temple in his late years and left a strange portrait which compared himself to Kidō Chigū, a Zen master he respected.

During the China's Ming Dynasty the trade between Japan and China prospered. Cities, such as Hakata and Yamaguchi, became the centers of culture. The Zen priest, Sesshū emerged from the creative atmosphere of Shokoku temple in those

days, but did not succeed there. Then he moved from Kyoto to Yamaguchi where the Ōuchi family ruled. And he went over to China along with Japanese envoys in 1467.

In China, he painted 'Winter Landscape', one of four hanging scrolls of the four seasons. The style of painting was an old-fashioned one, constructing a still landscape. One of his most characteristic landscapes is a winter scene, probably part of a set of landscape 'Kakemono' of the four seasons and thought to date from the 1470s. In this painting Sesshū wove motifs frequently found in Chinese landscape painting into an original and typically Japanese statement. Furthermore, a work that demonstrates Sesshū's facility with brush and ink is the 'haboku' or broken-ink landscape. 'Haboku' is a term denoting the very free and rapidly executed style in which ink seems to have been splashed on the paper surface of the painting.⁷

Shōkei, a Zen priest of Kenchō temple in Kamakura, went up to Kyoto, and studied under 'Geiami', learned the new style of painting, and then returned to Kamakura. When he painted landscapes, he always left a big blank



10. Landscape in the *haboku* technique, by SESSHŪ TŌYŌ. 1495. Hanging scroll, ink on paper; 58 1/4 × 12 7/8 in. (147.9 × 32.7 cm).
Tokyo National Museum

space like the old-fashioned style and printed in a clear, light tone of color.

The ‘Sesshū’s style of painting was succeeded by his disciples in each place. One of Sesshū’s disciples, Shūgetsu, who painted ‘Saiko zu’ in China, followed Sesshū’s style of painting. Also, the Shōkei’s style of painting was succeeded by many painters of the Kantō district. Keison, a descendent of Shōkei, painted

‘Chikurin Shichiken Byōbu Zu’ (Seven Sages in the Bamboo Grove). His painting was a curious picture with vertical bamboo and rocks painted by swift brushwork.

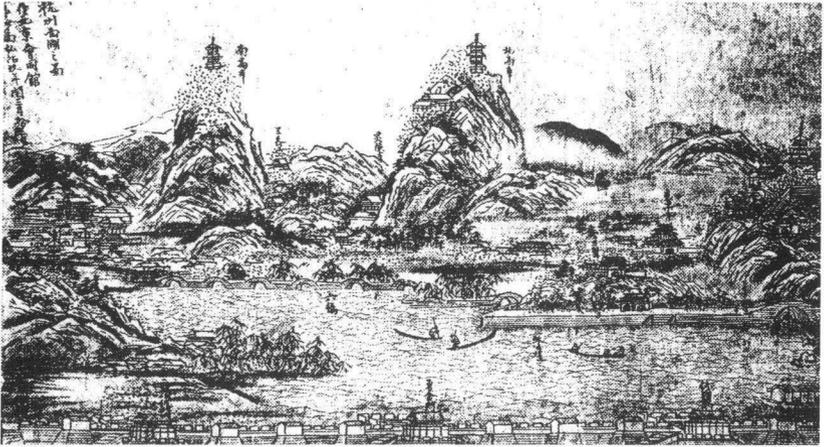
A Zen priest, Sesson, traveled around various parts of Japan and learned the Chinese painting of Mookai and Gyokkan. Also, he modeled himself on ‘Sesshū’ and left fine pieces of work. His ‘Kachō Zu Byōbu’ has a peculiarity of a stream flowing into the ground, occurring remarkably from the right side of the picture, with a carp of the left side foaming at its mouth and flying in the sky. It is not at all restrained by the old-fashioned style of painting.



11. ‘Kachō zu Byōbu’, by Sesson, Muromachi era. Ink on paper, 156.0×333.0cm, Yamato Bunka kan, Nara

Consequently, in the ‘Muromachi’ period, ‘Karate’ such as ‘Baen’, ‘Kakei’, ‘Ryōkai’, ‘Mookai’ and others were introduced to Japan from China. Their works were the highest grade works in those days. ‘San ami’ (‘Nōami’, ‘Geiami’, and ‘Sōami’) purchased these great works for decoration in ceremonies, and analyzed works of art for the Shōgun family. They were like directors who were called ‘Dōhoshū’ and painted Sumi-e though they were not Zen priests. Also, ‘Kanō Motonobu’ was

the founder of the 'Kanōs', and created the studio system of where painters could create many works and drew paintings on paper sliding doors and screens. But the Kanōs did not follow Zen. Moreover, the number of professional Sumi-e painters who had nothing to do with Zen was gradually increasing. In the next period of 'Momoya', there were few Zen painters.



12. 'Sai ko zu', by Shūgetsu. c.1496. Ink on paper, 46.8×84cm. Museum of Art, Ishikawa prefecture



13. 'Chikurin hichiken zu byōbu' by Keison, Muromachi era, Ink on paper, 155.5×365.4cm. Tokyo National Museum

[5] Agreement between Zen and Zen calligraphy, Zen painting

The mental state of enlightenment in Zen involves a mysterious expression. Ordinarily, we try to learn truth through symbols and language but truth is beyond their scope and can only be gained through communication from one mind to another. Zen priests painted their circumstances only with black in Sumi-e as ‘Zen ki zu’ (the expression of Zen spirit). Also, Zen priests expressed their mental states of enlightenment in ‘Geju’ (Buddhist teachings in Zen verses), in the form of Zen handwriting. ‘Geju’ by high-ranking Zen priests was a kind of guide to lead monks to enlightenment. And they hung it on the wall as Kakemono for their ascetic practice. They wrote ‘Geju’ in Sumi-e as ‘San’ (words, poems and so on to reveal the intent of Sumi-e). Calligraphies by Zen priests are not their handwritings, but paintings to directly communicate from mind to mind. In other words, it means that ‘Zen ki zu’ (Sumi-e) is equal to Zen calligraphy. The ascetic practice of Zen renounces materialistic desires, and is like a journey to an boundless and deep world, namely, the world of ‘emptiness’. It is said that ‘emptiness’ is best expressed in black. If all of the universal colors are mixed, they will make a very dark color. Dark black color includes all colors. Therefore, ‘emptiness’ which is expressed in a dark color is not ‘emptiness’, but unboundedness. The color embracing the whole universe is the world of both Zen paintings and Zen calligraphy, which is painted and written in black. It is also the world of enlightenment. In Zen, both calligraphy and painting have the same spirit.

[6] Conclusion

As Zen is the world of a spiritual enlightenment just playing with ‘emptiness’ or ‘boundlessness’, it is the world that is beyond letters and languages. In Zen we

can paint and write what no one can write and paint. In Zen we also can see the world no one can see. This is the soul of Zen. Indeed, many high ranking Zen priests underwent severe ascetic practice and expressed their mental state of enlightenment in a lot of calligraphies and paintings. The disciples considered them as a guide to enlightenment. Also, every time they saw their master's figure, they had a spiritual relation with their master. In Zen, calligraphy is 'a voiced painting' and painting is 'a voiceless poem'. We try to understand instantly the meaning of something written in letters, but Zen monks considered a calligraphy as a painting and considered a painting as a calligraphy every time they see them. Thus, in Zen, both calligraphy and painting have a deep relation with Zen's ascetic practice

- Note**
- 1 Christopher J. Earnshaw(1988), pp98~99
 - 2 Penelope Mason(1993), pp194~195
 - 3 Ibid',. pp199~201
 - 4 Ibid',. p201
 - 5 Ibid',. pp201~202
 - 6 Ibid',. pp195~197
 - 7 Ibid',. pp202~203

Refereces

- 1 Christopher J. Earnshaw (1988), '*SHO Japanese Calligraph*' Tuttle publishing co, Inc. Tokyo
- 2 Hakuho Hirayama (1979), *Sumi-E*, Kōdansha International , Tokyo
- 3 Penelope Mason (1993), *History of Japanese Art*, Harry N.Abrams, Inc. New York
- 4 Motoaki kawano (2002) *Japanese Art — Suibokuga*, Bizyutsu nenkan sha
- 5 Gakken (1994), '*Zen no Hon*'

- 6 Myochi Nancy O'Hara (2003), *Zen By The Brush* Stewart, Tabori & Chang, New York.
- 7 Stephen Addiss (1989), *The Art of Zen*, Harry N. Abrams, Inc.
- 8 Fujihiko Kaneda (1996), *Eazy Kanji*, Passport Books, NTC/Comtemporary Publishing Company
- 9 Rebecca Hon Ko (1987), *Chinese Calligraphy* Abbeville press. publishers, New York • London

