

COLLECTORS' PREFACE

This is not the place (and we are not the people) to define art, to argue that calligraphy is an art, and to examine the claim that art not only offers pleasure but also provides an entrance into another culture and in some degree transforms the viewer.

Rather, we want to say only that the works in this exhibition at the Freer and Sackler galleries have brought us immense pleasure and have stimulated us to study, admittedly in an amateur way in both senses of “amateur” — lover and non-professional, aspects of Buddhism and of Japan. Speaking generally, the works of art that we buy are things that attract us immediately — intensely black ink on creamy flecked paper, elegant gold calligraphy against a dark blue background, a moon brushed in pale gray ink above a poem written with the finest of brushes, or vigorous brushstrokes so full of life that some of them go beyond their normally allotted space — and they so capture us that we are impelled to try to learn about them. Why, we wondered, are some sutras (words of the Buddha) written in gold, some decorated with pagodas or with lotuses, and exactly what is the text of this sutra, and exactly what does this poem say about the moon?

Obviously we take no credit of any sort for the works in this exhibition: They chose us more than we chose them. We yielded to what Richard Anderson in *Calliope's Sisters* (1990), a study of the arts of non-Western people, calls “Culturally significant meaning, skillfully encoded in an affecting, sensuous medium” (page 238). Nor can we claim that when we began collecting, in the early 1960s, we were receptive to every object. All of the first calligraphies that we bought were boldly expressive works,

which is to say that for several years we passed over the quieter, more regular kinds of calligraphy, but, again, when we at last responded to certain kinds of things it was almost always the sensuous properties of the works that caught us, spoke to us, and we hope they will speak to you too. We heard them, but we knew they were speaking a language that, at most, we barely understood — after all, they were not only centuries old but they also were Japanese, often Japanese works using Chinese language. We were therefore impelled to try to learn something about them. Mysteriously moved by these hanging scrolls and small sculptures, we did some homework in an effort to learn more from them, to hear them speak more clearly, and — this may sound odd — to try to live up to them.

We have enjoyed living with these objects and learning about them. Our pleasure in them, great even when we first saw them, has increased steadily as we have acquired information about their contexts, and we hope that our attempt to provide contexts in this brochure will increase a reader's pleasure too, and also a reader's understanding. Essentially, these objects or forms communicate ideas that are beyond form: They let us glimpse what otherwise is invisible. Mindful that in works of art the form or the style — we take “style” to include all aspects of form, including the smallest distinctions — is the meaning, these pages are concerned not only with “What does the work mean” but also with the somewhat odd-sounding question, “How does the work mean?”

SCULPTURE AND OBJECTS

The Buddha at Birth

(Japanese: Tanjō bustu)

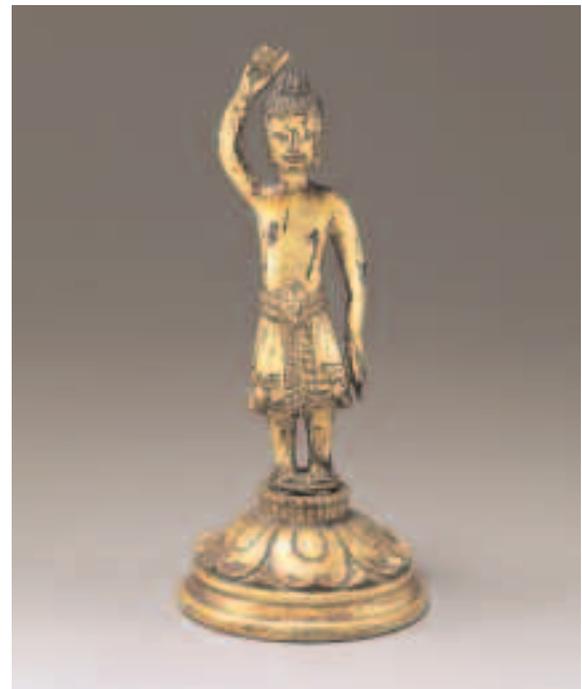
The Buddha at Birth (Japanese: Tanjō bustu)
Gilt bronze
Asuka Period (542–645), 7th century
H. 3 3/8 in. (8.5 cm)

According to legend, at his birth the Buddha-to-be miraculously took seven steps, pointed with one hand to heaven and to earth with the other, and proclaimed, “Between heaven and earth, I alone am honored”; lotuses flowered where each footprint had been, and two Serpent Kings bathed the newborn by showering him with pure water. The unnaturalness of this small totemic sculpture—the figure making this commanding gesture is both child and adult—demonstrates that there is a condition apart from the ordinary cycle of growth and decay. His gold skin, patterned hair, protuberance on the head, gestures, and the lotus pedestal are forms that set forth aspects of the Buddhist faith.

The Buddha at Birth was produced by the “lost wax” method: The image was made in wax, encased in a clay mold with a drain hole, and heated. When the melted wax ran out, bronze (copper, tin, zinc, and lead) was poured into the mold through an inlet, filling the space where the wax had been. When the bronze cooled, the mold was broken to free the bronze image. Details were perhaps refined, and the image was gilded—i.e. it was painted with powdered gold dissolved in mercury, and heated until the mercury vaporized, leaving gilt fixed to the surface.

Buddhism was introduced to Japan, from Korea, in the sixth century, but the earliest surviving Japanese Buddhist sculptures are, like this one, from the early seventh century. The present sculpture may be the earliest Japanese gilt bronze in the United States, and perhaps the oldest outside of Japan.

The Buddha’s birth is celebrated as a national holiday in Japan. On April 8 images such as this one are put in basins, and colored or scented water or sweet tea is ladled over them, commemorating the first bath and in a degree activating the religious power in the image. The liquid may then be drunk, or used to dissolve an ink cake, producing ink with which a sacred text is then written. Given such social and religious uses, it seems reasonable to say that the meaning, or, better, the significance, of this image—or of a comparable image such as a cross with a figure on it—includes not only its physical



form but also its history, the uses to which it is put, and the transformation it exerts on the participant in the ritual. Like Christianity and Islam, Buddhism is rooted in the teachings of an historical figure. Shakyamuni (Sage of the Shaka Clan, ca. 560 B.C.E. ca. 483 B.C.E), also called the Buddha (Enlightened One) or the Historical Buddha, was born into a princely family in north-central India, in the Himalayan foothills of present-day Nepal. According to semi-historical lore, as a child within the palace he was shielded from all possible pain, but when at the age of twenty-nine he discovered suffering in the outside world he left the royal household in a quest for a better way of life. After six years of asceticism and meditation he found the Middle Way, a path between the two extremes of self-indulgence and asceticism, which brought enlightenment (Sanskrit: *bodhi*; Japanese: *bodai*). For the next forty-five years he preached a doctrine that came to be called The Four Noble Truths:

All existence is characterized by suffering;
Suffering is caused by desire or craving;
There is a way to overcome craving;

The Buddha at Birth cont'd.

The way is the Eight-Fold Path, which involves leading a disciplined, moral life.

(The Eight-Fold Path is briefly discussed below, in connection with the Wheel of the Law.) Shakyamuni probably did not see himself as the founder of a new religion — his teachings concerned ordinary experience, not a new god or an immortal soul — but his followers developed a religion from his teachings, which perhaps can be briefly stated thus: Understanding the truth, achieved through moral and psychological preparation, enables us to escape from the delusory cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. In time these followers produced objects (often idealized images, such as this small sculpture) that convey insights wordlessly. Some religions discourage or prohibit the making of images of the deity or even of any aspects of creation. Early Buddhism in India, like early Christianity, did not depict the founder, but both religions later used images to envision experiences and ideals in order to assist viewers to meditate on some of the mysteries of life. Religious art, in its effort to heighten human awareness of spiritual aspects of existence, usually gives us images that we recognize, images drawn in part from our daily experience (think, for instance, of the Madonna and Child), but it also usually conveys their difference from the things of our daily experience. In this small statue of the Buddha at Birth, for instance, the Buddha is far smaller than a real human infant, his face is not that of a new-

born, his skin and clothing are gold, he has a full head of hair, and he is represented as gesturing and walking.

These points are worth brief amplification. Most works of art are smaller than life-size, and the discrepancy between the works and real life — the miniaturization — is one source of the pleasure we experience in viewing them. But other differences also offer pleasure. This particular sculpture in some ways catches the body of a child, but realism disappears with the long face, the archaic smile, and especially the gold skin, which symbolizes the light and the truth that the Buddha brought to the universe, and which is one of the thirty-two legendary signs of a superior being (Sanskrit: *mahapurusha*). Another unrealistic symbol is the cranial protuberance (Sanskrit: *ushnisha*; Japanese: *nikkei*), a sort of natural crown and the outward sign of his inner harmony and of his power.

Perhaps our aesthetic enjoyment of this infant-adult making object a confrontational gesture combined with our knowledge that he became a world-famous teacher, induces, however faintly, the thought that Rainer Maria Rilke gives voice to in his sonnet about perceiving an archaic marble torso of Apollo. Looking at the torso which seems “suffused with brilliance from inside,” Rilke tells us (in Stephen Mitchell’s translation) that it does not seem at all defaced by the ravages of time. It overpowers the viewer, causing the poet to say:

there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.

SCULPTURE AND OBJECTS

Pagoda and Darani Scroll

Pagoda and Darani Scroll

Nara Period (710–94), ca. 764–70

Pagoda: wood; Darani: paper

Pagoda: Height 8 5/8 inches (22 cm); Darani scroll:

An engaging legend holds that when the Historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, was asked how he should be venerated, he folded his garment into a square, placed it on the ground, inverted his begging bowl on it, and then stood his staff on top of the bowl, thereby suggesting the form of the Indian stupa or burial site of a venerable person. This form — a square platform with a hemisphere and a mast — is the essential Indian reliquary. A stupa may contain an actual relic of the Buddha's body, or it may contain instead a paper bearing a fragment of his teachings (dharma), since the Buddha's words are as much a part of his essence as his bones and ashes. Although tradition says that after Shakyamuni's death his ashes were distributed to the chiefs of eight tribes, each of whom built a stupa over the relic, in later times thousands of stupas in India were reputed to contain relics of his body, and additional thousands contained dharma relics. The stupa came to symbolize the Buddha's nirvana (Japanese: *nehan*), the enlightened state in which all desire is eliminated and highest wisdom is attained.

In China (and later Korea and Japan) the stupa became assimilated into the watch-tower, producing the multistory structure that we call a pagoda. The East Asian pagoda, like the Indian stupa, is conceived of as a reliquary. It is identified with the essence of the Buddha, symbolizing his transcendence, and the parts of this form are also symbolic: For instance, the finial is adorned with rings that doubtless are derived from the parasol held over a royal (powerful, sacred) person. The umbrella held over important persons is itself a solar symbol suggesting the dome of heaven, but in Buddhism the rings represent successive moral and psychological stages in progress not toward heaven but toward enlightenment (awakening), steps toward nirvana (release from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth). Above the rings, at the very top of the finial, is a ball (a form symbolizing cosmic plenitude) with a pointed top, a "precious jewel" representing spiritual wealth, in particular the truth of the Buddha and his Law.

The miniature pagoda illustrated here is one of a mil-

lion — literally one of a million — that were created between 764 and 770 in Nara. The Empress Shōtoku (718–770), acting in accordance with sutras that urged the construction of stupas, ordered the creation of one million miniature pagodas. Ostensibly the pagodas were produced to evoke the presence of the Buddha, thereby assuring the health of the state, which had been shaken by an attempted rebellion organized by the empress's uncle, but there may have been a further motive: The empress was suspected of sexual indiscretions with a monk whom she had elevated to high rank, and the vast project may have proceeded in part from guilt or from an attempt to demonstrate her piety. In any case, craftsmen did in fact produce a million miniature pagodas, which were then divided equally among ten major temples in 770.

Each pagoda, produced on a lathe, consists of two parts, a base with a three-story tower, made of *hinoki* (Japanese cypress), and a finial (five disks, surmounted by a "precious jewel" that itself rests on an elaborate base) made of a harder wood such as cherry or sandalwood. Conceivably the three levels of the base represent the Three Jewels of Buddhism — the Buddha, the Law (Truth), and the monastic community responsible for propagating the Law; the symbolism of the disks/umbrellas/sun/Precious Jewel has already been mentioned. The three-story tower was hollowed out to accommodate a rolled-up strip of paper with a charm printed on it, a *darani*, and the finial was then plugged into the hole. The word *darani* literally means "holder," the idea being that anyone who recites the words holds or upholds or preserves the Buddha's teachings. The paper cylinder in effect represents the pillar or mast that in a stupa connects the relic in the base to the top of the stupa, the *axis mundi* or pivot joining heaven and earth, and it is regarded as the body or essence of the Buddha in nirvana. Each pagoda holds one of four texts, all four of which come from the Mukujōko Daidarani Kyō (Sanskrit: *Vimalanirbhasasutra*), "Sutra of the Immaculate Light." The texts are regarded as comparable to bodily relics in sanctity and power. These darani, incidentally, are almost the world's oldest surviving printed texts, being exceeded in age only by a Korean Buddhist document that is a few decades older.

The pagodas were coated with lead white, and then painted-

Pagoda and Darani Scroll cont'd.

apparently most were blue or green, though some were red or yellow—but the coloring is almost entirely gone. The loss of the final color, which allows the wood and the base color to show, gives the pagodas an antique, austere, pure look that (like the loss of color on antique Greek marble statues) enhances them in the eyes of most modern viewers. Is our taste for antique objects that have been simplified by the passage of time mere modern Western sentimentalizing? Not quite: Something very like this taste is set forth in Kenkō's *Tsurezuregusa* (*Essays in Idleness*, ca. 1330, translated by Donald Keene), where we read a comment about the heightened pleasure of looking at a scroll:

“It is only after the silk wrapper has frayed at top and bottom, and the mother of pearl has fallen from the roller that a scroll looks beautiful.”

SCULPTURE AND OBJECTS

Wheel of the Law

(Japanese: Rinbō)

Wheel of the Law (Japanese: Rinbō)
Gilt Bronze
Kamakura Period (1192–1333)
Diam. 5 inches (13 cm)

The wheel is a pre-Buddhist Indo-European symbol of power, doubtless derived from the sun. For instance, a principal Hindu deity, Vishnu, is called Cakravartin, “He who turns the wheel,” i.e. he who rules the universe, and the wheel is seen as the weapon the Universal King uses to crush opposition. (The idea of a wheel as a royal weapon is evident also in ancient Hebrew thought: Proverbs 20:26, for instance, says, “A wise king scattereth the wicked and bringeth them under the wheel.”) The spokes, which in some Buddhist objects of this sort protrude beyond the circumference, suggest rays of the sun. Esoteric Buddhism adopted the symbol of the wheel as an emblem of power (Sanskrit: *cakra*; Japanese: *rinbō*), but for these Buddhists the power is the power of knowledge: The Buddha’s teaching crushes all delusion.

When the Buddha attained enlightenment and preached his first sermon, he is said to have “put into motion the Wheel of the Law,” or “turned the Wheel of the Law” (*Dharmacakra pravartana*), thereby conquering ignorance (delusion). This wheel, then, is the Buddhist response to the view that life is an endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth:

Ordinarily we live in a whirl of passion and suffering, but a life lived according to the Wheel of the Law can bring us to the moral and psychological condition in which we achieve nirvana (Japanese: *nehan*), the enlightened state in which all desire (and therefore all suffering) is eliminated and highest wisdom is attained. The most common mudra or Buddhist gesture to indicate the act of teaching is formed by touching the right hand thumb to the tip of the index finger, thereby making a circle or wheel.

The hub and the outermost circle of this wheel are adorned with chrysanthemum-like lotus petals. (The lotus, which rises from the mud and flowers in the pure air, is a common symbol of Buddhist enlightenment, and the chrysanthemum is another solar symbol.) Because the wheel is an emblem of power, it is not surprising that its eight spokes, decorated with petals, are in the shape of a powerful weapon, in Sanskrit the vajra (Japanese: *kongō*), the stylized lightning bolt that destroys illu-

sions. Further, the wheel (like the *vajra*) is gilded, the gold symbolizing perfect knowledge or truth, the truth that conquers illusion. The present example, tightly framed by an octagon, compact and powerful rather than elegant, dates to the thirteenth century; later *rinbō* tend to be more elaborately ornamented and more delicate in appearance, sometimes adorned with petals in the very center and with thinner spokes.

In Indian art the wheel often has twelve spokes, corresponding to the twelve signs of the zodiac, but Buddhist wheels have eight spokes because when he first set the Wheel of the Law into motion the Buddha spoke of an Eightfold Path. This path is to be followed by those who understand the Four Noble Truths: Suffering characterizes all existence; Suffering is caused by craving; The suffering inherent in the cycle of birth and rebirth (*samsara*) can be eliminated only by ceasing to crave; we can cease to crave only by attaining enlightenment, which is found by following the Eightfold Path, i.e. by leading a disciplined, moral life. This path does not consist of eight successive stages, but of eight practices that are to be engaged in simultaneously. In one version the faith that here is given the form of a wheel with eight spokes can be summarized thus:

1. Right Understanding or Right Views (accept the Four Noble Truths)
2. Right Thinking or Right Resolve (renounce desire, ill-will, and cruelty)
3. Right Speech (refrain from lying, angry words, gossip)
4. Right Action (refrain from stealing, drinking intoxicants, harming living creatures)
5. Right Livelihood (avoid of harmful professions, such as hunting, fishing, astrology, selling weapons)
6. Right Effort (direct the mind toward religious goals, cultivate what is wholesome)
7. Right Mindfulness (be aware of what one is thinking and doing; contemplating)
8. Right Meditation or Right Concentration (train the mind to achieve meditational trance, in which mental activity ceases and the mind is united with the object of meditation).

Wheel of Law cont'd.

In Esoteric Buddhism a wheel such as the illustrated example is regarded as a powerful aid that can help the celebrant to overcome delusions.

For secular viewers today, it is a work of art, but it is not merely a thing of beauty, something to be valued only for its own sake. It embodies meanings. Although this wheel continues to symbolize aspects of perfect knowledge, the condition of the object itself is no longer perfect; the passage of a thousand years has rubbed off much of the gilding that once symbolized the Buddha's perfection. Instead of looking at a bright, glittering object, we see a darkened bronze, an object with an antique, austere look. In the eyes of some modern viewers, however, the loss of the original color (like the loss of color on antique Greek marble statues) enhances bronzes. Is our taste for antique objects that show the passage of time mere modern Western sentimentalizing? Not quite: Something very like this taste is set forth in Kenkō's *Tsurezuregusa* (*Essays in Idleness*, ca. 1330, translated by Donald Keene), where we read a comment about the heightened pleasure of looking at an old scroll:

“It is only after the silk wrapper has frayed at top and bottom, and the mother of pearl has fallen from the roller that a scroll looks beautiful.”

And so we get back to beauty, to art, but even here we cannot quite go back to Ad Reinhardt's view that “When an art object is separated from its original time and place and use . . . it gets emptied and purified of all its meanings” except its meaning of “art-as-art.” Contemplating this highly geometric object a viewer inevitably brings ideas to it, for instance of otherworldly order and permanence, perhaps including reflections about the miracle of its survival. Why not, then, also try to bring to it some of the ideas held by those who originally saw and used the implement? Obviously it is impossible for a Western viewer today to think like a thirteenth-century Japanese Buddhist priest, but some awareness of Esoteric Buddhism can deepen our enjoyment of the *vajra* and may even give us a glimpse of “the state of perfection” that, as we mentioned earlier, Kūkai said is revealed by art.



SCULPTURE AND OBJECTS

Five-Pronged Vajra

(Japanese: Gokosho)

Five-Pronged Vajra (Japanese: Gokosho)
Late Heian Period (Twelfth Century)
Gilt Bronze; length 7 1/8 in (19 cm)

Although much religious art is figurative — chiefly images of deities or of saintly figures, sometimes with their tormentors — much also consists of objects such as reliquaries, ecclesiastical vestments, illuminated manuscripts, and ritual objects such as chalices, censers, and *vajras*. Portraits of high-ranking Shingon and Tendai monks show them holding *vajras*, emblems of their spiritual authority.

Ritual implements such as this *vajra* are essential in Japanese Esoteric Buddhism (Japanese: Mikkyo), whose two chief branches are the Tendai and Shingon orders. Speaking roughly, Esoteric Buddhism shifts the emphasis from faith and wisdom to consecration by means of actions of the body, speech, and mind. Whereas earlier Buddhism assumes the Buddha essence was incarnated in Shakyamuni (the Historical Buddha), and that his parable-based teachings in the familiar sutras are understandable, Esoteric Buddhism turns to the mysterious teachings of the primordial cosmic deity Mahāvairocana or Vairocana (Japanese: Dainichi Nyorai, Great Radiance of Illumination), which are intelligible only to persons who have been initiated by a master and who engage in certain rituals that join the practitioners to Dainichi Buddha. The entire universe is his manifestation, which is to say that everything emanates from Dainichi. Through rituals, practitioners can realize the unity of their own actions, voices, and minds with the otherwise unimaginably profound actions, voice, and mind of Dainichi. Implements such as the *vajra* are placed on an altar or are held by a celebrant in order to sanctify the space, to symbolize the Buddha's power, and to empower the celebrant so that he may understand the paradoxical concept that lies at the heart of Esotericism: There is no distinction between the profane and the sacred.

In Buddhist thinking, the *vajra* (a bolt of lightning or thunder) represents the indestructible truth of the Buddhist teaching (dharma), whose diamondlike nature shatters all obstacles (e.g. all delusions). The dazzling light, blinding us to the illusory world, forces us to shut our eyes and to meditate upon the truths provided by the inner light, the ultimate truths of the cosmic Buddha. Although the *vajra* was originally con-

ceived as a weapon, it has not normally been depicted as such in Japan, but in the present example the prongs are remarkably talonlike, menacing to the forces of evil but — for the believer — beautiful and productive of good.

Lightning symbolism long predated the rise of Buddhism and was spread across the ancient Mediterranean coast and the Middle East. Fire from heaven is described, for example, in the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Psalms 77:18, “The voice of thy thunder was in the heaven; the lightning’s lightened the world.”) and it is associated with other sky gods. It is found in Middle Eastern art as early as the eighth century B.C.E. In India the thunderbolt became the weapon of Indra, king of the Vedic gods and the god of rain, thunder, and lightning. When Indra became assimilated into the Buddhist pantheon, the weapon went with him, and thence to China. The thunderbolt also went westward: In Greece it is evident as Zeus’s weapon, and the Hellenistic rulers of Bactria, Afghanistan, and northwest India featured it prominently in their coinage. Later, on the standards of the imperial Roman army, the thunderbolt is clutched by Jupiter’s eagle as an emblem of heavenly power, and the thunderbolt or lightning bolt as a double-ended fork is disguised only slightly in the cluster of arrows and the branch of olive leaves held by the eagle on the Great Seal of the United States.)

In the early ninth century, Esoteric Buddhists brought the five-pronged *vajra* from China to Japan. Inevitably each detail of the implement acquired a symbolic interpretation, the form of the object embodying and revealing the basic principles of the faith: The four ovals in the center are symbols of the absolute, i.e. Dainichi, the center from which everything emanates. Moving outward from the center, the four bands each with four lotus petals symbolize such things as four forms of meditation, the Four Practices (peaceful in deed, word, thought, and vow), and the Eight Teachings that we summarize elsewhere in our comment on the Wheel of the Law. Altogether these elements symbolize the Buddha-nature, present in all beings and comparable to the lotus that is born in mire but rises into the pure air where it flowers.

The five prongs at each end of the *vajra* represent the five powers that destroy obstacles to enlightenment (faith eradicates doubt; zeal destroys slackness; memory obliterates error; concentration overcomes inattention; wisdom demolishes illu-

Five-Pronged Vajra cont'd.

sions). The five prongs also have other associations, for instance the five elements from which all matter is formed (earth, fire, water, air, void). The four outer prongs at each end represent knowledge of phenomena, and the inner prong at each end represents the knowledge of the Absolute. The fact that both ends of the *vajra* are the same symbolizes the identity of what unenlightened persons think is a duality, the Buddha World (nirvana) and the World of Becoming, the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (Sanskrit: *samsara*).

Unlike older forms of Buddhism, which believe that passions are obstacles to Enlightenment and must therefore be repressed, the Esoteric schools believe that the entire universe is an emanation of Dainichi and therefore passions — properly understood — are of the same nature as enlightenment. Thus, in the Womb World Mandala Dainichi is often depicted wearing a jeweled crown (an emblem of worldliness) but he is also surrounded by a flaming halo (an emblem of spiritual energies). Indeed, in esoteric thinking, normally destructive forces such as carnal passion and anger can be transformed into fuel that powers the practices leading to Enlightenment. The punitive weapon of Indra becomes in Buddhism a symbol of the strongest power in the universe, compassion.

Esoteric Buddhism recognizes that the experience conveyed by works of art — like the recitation of mantras or long hours spent in seated meditation — can lead to a perception of Ultimate Reality. As this brief comment on a single ritual object has indicated, implements and images convey meanings that transcend language, and it is not surprising that Buddhism (whose ultimate goal is nirvana, transcendence of the delusory world) sometimes created works of art that did not seek to reproduce the phenomena of our visible world. Explaining the importance of the arts to Buddhists, Kūkai (774–835), the founder of the Shingon sect in Japan, said quite directly, “Art is what reveals to us the state of perfection.”



SCULPTURE AND OBJECTS

Temple Roof Tile

Temple Roof Tile
Late Heian Period (ca. 900–1185)
Earthenware
2 1/2 x 9 1/2 in. (6.35 x 24 cm)

The architecture of the earliest Buddhist temples in Japan, in the seventh century, was derived ultimately from Chinese prototypes but it entered Japan via the kingdoms of Paekche and Silla (now Korea). The roofs normally were covered with two kinds of tiles: 1) rows of slightly concave tiles called pan tiles, running from the roof ridge down to the eaves end, formed most of the protective cover; 2) rows of narrower semi-cylindrical tiles, running between the rows of pan tiles, conceivably evolved on the continent in ancient times from lengths of split bamboo that may have been used to cover joins between pan tiles. At the eave-ends were mold-made decorated tiles — pan tiles with a broader front like the illustrated example for the rows of pan tiles, and circular tiles for the semi-cylindrical rows.

The illustrated example shows an eaves-end pan tile adorned with two Buddhist symbols, a *vajra* (stylized thunderbolt) bordered by pearls. The *vajra*, an implement used in Esoteric Buddhist rituals, is discussed elsewhere at length; here it is enough to say that the thunderbolt stands for the Dharma, the Buddhist truth that annihilates ignorance. The other symbol, the pearl, is one of the Seven Precious Substances or Seven Gems, variously identified but usually said to be gold, silver, lapis lazuli, giant clam shell, coral, pearl, and carnelian. These substances are associated with aspects of Buddhism, such as listening to the true teaching, believing it, and meditating on it. The earliest and by far the most common decorative motifs on roof tiles are lotuses, found on the circular tiles, and scrolling grasses or arabesques on the pan tiles, but from the eleventh century one occasionally finds other motifs, for example pagodas or Sanskrit characters or, as here, a Buddhist implement.

As Nikolaus Pevsner in an *Outline of European Architecture*, 6th ed. (1960) says, “The history of architecture is primarily a history of man shaping space. . . .” Pevsner is chiefly talking about interior space, the spaces established by a sequence of rooms, but because a building exists in an extended surrounding space, the first space that it shapes is the space it carves out



for itself. In any religion, sacred places where the faithful come into contact with the transcendent are marked off in some way. Thus, an altar, where rituals are performed, is elevated — an elevated place for an elevated purpose — even if it is only a flat rock. When Abraham prepared to sacrifice Isaac, he “built an altar. . . and laid [Isaac] on the altar” (Genesis 22:9). Or the sacred space may be marked off not by elevation but by a magic circle or by a gateway: The torii that marks the entrance to a Shinto shrine is an obvious Japanese example of a sacred gate, and the image of the triumphant Christ above the entrance to a Romanesque cathedral is an equally obvious Christian example. Buildings are built from the ground up, so of course one thinks that the definition of space is established on the ground, but it can also be established from above, from the heavens, so to speak, by the periphery of the roof: The roof of a Buddhist image hall normally has ornamented edges that protect the sacred space from the transient world of sun and rain. Here the decoration on the eaves-end tiles especially emphasizes the defining border, protecting the space from profane outsiders, announcing (and symbolizing) the truth, and (like an image of a Buddha in an altar within an image-hall) transforming the architecture into a local manifestation of the divine.

This particular tile comes from Rokuharamitsuji (Temple of

Temple Roof Tile cont'd.

the Six Paramitas, i.e. the Six Perfections) in Kyoto, a temple belonging to the Shingon sect of Buddhism, though before the seventeenth century it was affiliated with the Tendai sect; both sects use of the *vajra* in rituals. “*Paramita*” is a Sanskrit word meaning “crossed over” or “having reached the opposite shore”; the idea is that the enlightened being has crossed over from the shore of delusion and arrived at the shore of enlightenment, nirvana. The six *paramitas*, whose practice leads to spiritual perfection, are usually characterized along these lines: charity or generosity (giving in both the material and spiritual senses, i.e. charity and compassion); good conduct (moral behavior and eradication of the passions); patience or acceptance (a tolerance that arises from insight to the causes of problems); vigor or energy or assiduousness (ceaseless practice of the other *paramitas*; meditation (focusing one’s mind, getting through the illusion of individuality); supreme wisdom (insight). Images of beings who have “crossed over” are of course the images that are displayed in the Buddhist image hall, and, to repeat, the sacred space of the image hall may at the outset be marked by the eave-end tiles adorned with *vajras* and pearls or other symbols of the faith.

SCULPTURE AND OBJECTS

Head of a Monk's Staff

(Japanese: Shakujō)

Head of a Monk's Staff Bronze
Heian Period (794–1185)
H. 8 1/2 in. (21.6 cm)

Among the few possessions a monk may have is a staff equipped with a *shakujō*, a metal frame with free-hanging rings that jingle. The staff served as an aid in walking and in measuring the depth of any stream that the monk might encounter, and it could also serve as a weapon. The jingle or sistrum topping the staff served additional purposes: Because monks were silent, it alerted insects or small animals to the monk's approach, hence he would not inadvertently take life by treading on them. Further, the instrument alerted house-dwellers to the presence of the mendicant. Perhaps most important of all, the *shaku shaku* sound that gives the device its onomatopoeic name provided a sort of white noise, a sound that masked the distracting sounds of the world and thus it assisted the monk to contemplate.

Almost half the height of the finial consists of a socket into which a staff was inserted. The upper part of this socket is decorated with a bound group of lotus petals, symbols of the enlightened mind and also of the purity of whatever rests on them. What rests on this lotus base or stem is a pagoda framed by a sort of inverted heart, whose shape is probably derived from a stylized flower, and which supports five smaller pagodas, two within the frame and three at the top. In Buddhist thought, a pagoda is a reliquary, and therefore it is a symbol of the Buddha's body and by extension the Buddha's teachings. The mast of the central pagoda (imagined as running through the pagoda) extends heavenward, supporting the topmost pagoda. The three pagodas at the top form a triad, a unit that is common in Buddhist thinking as well as in Christian thinking. Buddhism speaks, for instance, of the Three Jewels: The Buddha (the Awakened One), the Dharma (the doctrine taught by the Buddha), and the Sangha (the monastic community living in accordance with the truth of the Awakened One). When lay persons become Buddhists, they repeat three times a

threefold prayer, "I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dharma, I take refuge in the Sangha."

All of the pagodas here are of the type that the Japanese called *gorintō* (tower of the five elemental realms), made up of five geometric forms symbolizing the five elements. From bottom to top a *gorintō* consists of a square or rectangle (earth = matter), a circle (water = knowledge), a triangle (fire = spirit), a semicircle (wind = the Buddhist Law), a circle topped with a triangle, called a pearl or flaming jewel (emptiness or void = the Supreme Principle). The floral frame and the lotus petals suggest the natural world, but, given their combination with the reliquaries the whole suggests the union or nonduality of the natural world and the spiritual world. The geometry and symmetry of the whole also suggest a world beyond flux, a concept reinforced by the essentially circular shape of the frame. Although some *shakujō* contain small images of Buddhas or bodhisattvas (enlightened beings) in place of the reliquaries, it is not surprising that most *shakujō* turn away from anthropomorphic images and instead offer stylized imagery that symbolizes the enlightened vision.

We began by saying that the *shakujō* is part of a staff, and that a staff in various ways supplements the strength of those who use it. It is an instrument of power, and in fact the staff is a common symbol of supernatural power: One thinks of the king's scepter, Hermes's and Asclepius's life-restoring staff entwined with two serpents (a symbol adopted as the insignia of the U.S. Army Medical Corps), the witch's broomstick, and the magician's wand. When Shakespeare's magician Prospero at the end of *The Tempest* announces that he will give up his magic power he says, "I'll break my staff, / Bury it certain fathoms in the earth." Whether the monk is enlightened or not, his staff, with its *shakujō* bearing emblems of the Buddha's body and therefore of his teaching, speaks of the power of enlightenment to him and to all who see it.

SUTRAS

A sutra is a Buddhist text, especially a text believed to report the life and teachings of Shakyamuni (Japanese: Shaka), the Historical Buddha, the Enlightened One, who two and a half millennia ago taught that we can avoid suffering if we properly understand the law that governs the physical and moral universe. The word sutra is Sanskrit for thread—the Sanskrit word gives us suture and sew—and metaphorically it came to mean a string of words, or aphorisms, hence its use for the Buddha’s sermons. The Buddha’s words, initially transmitted orally, were first written in Indian languages (Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Pali), and then translated into Chinese before Buddhism entered Japan in the mid-sixth century. It is the Chinese versions that the Japanese transcribed.

One commonly hears that Buddhism, unlike Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, is not a religion “of the Book,” and to a degree this is so. The first chapter of Genesis tells us that the Hebrew God created by means of the word (“God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light”), and Deuteronomy 11:18–20 tells us that he commanded his followers thus: “Lay up these my words in your heart and in your soul . . . Write them upon the doorposts of thine house,” words that many observant Jews affix to their doorposts in a small container as a sign of faith. It is not surprising that in early medieval art Christ is often shown holding a book, or that the evangelists and some apostles (especially Paul) are shown holding a book.

Although in East Asia the book—which normally took the form of a handscroll that is read by unrolling with one hand and rolling up with the other—does not play a role comparable to the book in the West, the book does occasionally appear in Buddhist art, especially in images of Manjushri (Japanese: Monju), a figure associated with wisdom. More important, although the book is not a common symbol in Buddhist art, the book itself is immensely important. Again, we are talking about a handscroll, sheets of paper glued together, one after another,

like a Roman book, instead of being fastened at one side, medieval fashion, into the form known as the codex (a block, from a Latin word for a block of wood). In Japan, scrolls usually consisted of some thirty sheets of paper (made of mulberry or hemp), about eleven inches tall and about eighteen or twenty inches wide, glued end to end, rolled on a stick attached to the beginning of the first sheet. Normally each sheet contained twenty-five lines of text, seventeen characters to a line.

In Japan as in China, sutras were most often written in the highly legible form that is called Regular script (Japanese: *kaisho*), usually with seventeen characters to each column. In Regular script, the brush is lifted after each stroke, and a single character may be built out of twenty or more strokes. Each stroke is individual, and each character stands by itself in an imaginary square. Uniformity of style is not surprising: Professional scribes produced versions of the sacred texts that by their mere existence rather than by any artistic power would become sacred, benefiting the places where the texts were lodged. The point of a copy of a sacred work such as a sutra is that it is accurate, not that it is original or distinctive in any way. Its eternal truth is partly conveyed by its impersonal unvarying style, each word of the Buddha accorded its own space in regularly spaced columns.

At first sutras were written by professional scribes but it became fairly common for private persons also to write the texts, as acts of piety. Reverence for the word was further shown by sometimes writing in gold or silver on indigo-dyed paper, and by further embellishing the scroll, for instance with a frontispiece, or with sprinklings of gold dust or silver dust, or with small pictures (e.g. lotus flowers, or birds and butterflies) in the upper and lower margins. In short, although the book—we might say the Word—does not figure prominently as a symbol in paintings, the words of the Buddha were much copied, and often ornamented with luxurious formats.

SUTRAS

Metal Lotus Sutra

(Dobanhokeyo)

Metal Lotus Sutra Heian period, 1141
Copper plate, incised
8 1/8 x 7 1/8 in. (21.1 x 17.9 cm.)

This metal plate, incised with the latter part of Chapter 24 and the beginning of Chapter 25 of the Lotus Sutra, comes from a set of thirty-seven plates—originally they were gilded—one of which is dated 1141. One plate from the set is in the Nara National Museum, another is in the Tokyo National Museum, and nineteen others, registered as Important Cultural Properties, are in Chōanji, a temple in Oita, on the island of Kyūshū. The other surviving plates are in private hands. A comparable set, complete with its original box and dated 1142, is kept in Kunitama Shrine, in Fukuoka Prefecture, where it is registered as a National Treasure. All of these materials were deliberately buried, and have been recovered by excavation. Museums around the world are filled with excavated material, but much of it was buried by accident (e.g. by the vegetation of centuries) or, if purposely buried—Chinese tomb figurines come to mind—was placed in grave sites for the use of the occupant in the next life. But why did the Japanese engrave sutras on metal and then bury them?

Japanese Buddhism developed the idea, imported from China, that beginning with the teaching of Shakyamuni (the Historical Buddha), Buddhism would go through three periods, *shōbō*, *zōbō*, and *mappō*, each inferior to the one before it, but at the end of the third period there would appear the Buddha of the Future, Maitreya (Japanese Miroku), who would act as a kind of messiah, rescuing mankind from degeneracy. The first person in China to specify the length of the periods was Hui-szu (515–77) of the Tiantai sect, who said the first period was 500 years, the second 1,000, the third 10,000 years. Later in China one finds a variety of figures, for instance periods of 500, 500, and 1,000 years, or 500, 1,000, and 10,000 years; in Japan the idea that the periods would take 1000, 1000, and 10,000 years became fairly standard. Whatever the precise spans, in the first period, *shōbō* (the period of Correct Doctrine or Righteous Laws), the Historical Buddha (Shakyamuni) appeared, and taught a doctrine that can guide human beings to enlightenment. Human minds were sufficiently clear so that they could understand and practice the teachings of Shakyamuni, and they could thus attain

Enlightenment. In the second period, *zōbō* (the period of Copied Law or Simulated Teaching), faith declines, and therefore people must build temples and pagodas and must copy sutras in order to gain merit; they can also achieve enlightenment through the grace of compassionate deities. The third period, *mappō* (End of Law, Latter Day of the Law, Degenerate Age), an age of chaos, is marked by natural calamities, weak rulers, a corrupt clergy, and civil strife. The Law still exists, and the Buddha-nature is still within all living things, but in this third period people are so overcome by greed, anger, and stupidity that they cannot understand the Buddha's teachings, which is to say that the teachings lose their power to lead human beings to Enlightenment, and help is needed from outside. In Japan, it was widely thought this period began in 1052 and would end with the appearance of Maitreya.

Around the middle of the eleventh century many Japanese, fearing that the words of the Buddha might be lost, sought to preserve the Buddha's teaching for those who would be on earth during the remote period when the next Buddha would appear on earth. To this end they copied sutras onto scrolls, placed them within cylindrical or hexagonal metal containers (sometimes the containers were placed within ceramic jars), and buried them in stone-lined pits about a yard deep and three to five yards in diameter, sometimes along with altar implements, small sculptures, paintings, and even lists of names of the faithful or of deceased parents whose rebirth and ultimate salvation might thus be facilitated. The pits, usually dug near Buddhist temples or Shinto shrines or on mountain tops, were covered with mounds of earth, and topped with a small stone pagoda. Some two hundred sites with mounds (*kyōzuka*) are known, chiefly from the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The goal, in short, was to be reborn during Maitreya's time, to hear him preach the Law, and ultimately to attain nirvana.

Such is the context in which sutras were written on substances more durable than paper: In an effort to make sure that the Law survived, the Buddha's teachings were sometimes incised onto tiles, or onto metal sheets, as in this example, which was originally gilded, the gold signifying the truth of the words and also their preciousness. These buried materials bear clearly legible texts—the rather angular or geometric writing in the style known as *kaisho* (regular script, a sort of

Metal Lotus Sutra cont'd.

equivalent to our block letters) is highly suited to carving. The words would thus endure until Maitreya appeared and initiated a new age of Buddhism: Persons reborn during Maitreya's time would hear him preach the Law, would understand, and would ultimately attain nirvana (enlightenment, i.e. release from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth).



SUTRAS

Segment from the Lotus Sutra

Segment from the Lotus Sutra, from Chapter 23
Late Heian Period, ca. 1150
Ink on paper; gold, silver, and painted decorations
9 3/4 x 16 in (24.8 x 40.6 cm)

Sutras are Buddhist texts that report the words of the Buddha. (Sutra is from a Sanskrit word that literally means thread—the Indo-European base gives us the English words sew, seam, and suture—but metaphorically sutra came to mean a string of wise words.) Originally written in Indian languages, Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Pali, the sutras had been translated into Chinese even before Buddhism entered Japan in the mid-sixth century. The Japanese used the Chinese texts, as in this transcription of part of the Lotus Sutra, an immensely popular document that emphasizes universal salvation: Nirvana (release from the painful cycle of birth, death, and rebirth) is available to all, Shakyamuni teaches, regardless of sex or rank. Just as the lotus rises out of the mud and pushes up through the water and at last flourishes in the pure air, so we all can find our true nature because we all contain within ourselves the lotus of Buddhahood.

In Japan as in China, sutras were most often written in the highly legible form that is called regular script (Japanese: *kaisho*), usually with seventeen characters to each column. In regular script, the brush is lifted after each stroke, and a single character may be built out of twenty or more strokes. Each stroke is individual, and each character stands by itself in an imaginary square. Uniformity of style is not surprising: Professional scribes produced versions of the sacred texts that by their accuracy rather than by any artistic power would become sacred, benefiting the places where the texts were lodged. The point of a copy of a sacred work such as a sutra is that it is accurate, not that it is original or distinctive in any way. The faith it sets forth (its eternal truth) is conveyed partly by its form (its impersonal unvarying style): Each word of the Buddha is accorded its own space in regularly spaced columns. Strict adherence to the form is what makes the object a fit repository for the believer's faith.

Still, despite the emphasis on accuracy, legibility, and uniformity, the texts were often richly adorned, especially in the twelfth century. Adornment was in accordance with the idea that so precious a thing as the word of the Buddha ought to be

treated appropriately. Hence, we sometimes find the text written in gold or silver (two of the Seven Precious Substances mentioned in sutras) on dark purple or dark blue paper (dark blue because sutras assert that the palace of a Buddha is made of lapis lazuli), or the text may be written in ink, as in the illustrated example, on paper that is enriched with bits of gold and silver. More than reverence for the words of the Buddha motivated these luxurious versions; the Lotus Sutra promises that those who recite or write or commission texts will gain spiritual merit, i.e. will overcome bad karma and will be reborn in favorable circumstances.

The lotus is used in Buddhist literature and art as a symbol of enlightenment: Although it is rooted in the foul mud (symbolic of evil, specifically of greed, hatred, and delusion) it flowers above water in the pure air. The bottom margin of this example, a sheet from the twenty-third chapter, is decorated with lotus leaves, buds, and flowers, the top margin with clouds, and the entire sheet is decorated with rule-lines of gold leaf, as well as with scattered silver dust and flakes of gold foil. After the sheet was prepared, a calligrapher wrote the text, imposing a degree of order on this random display of piety and abundance. This lavish decoration, in accord with the importance of the Buddha's teaching, offers an image of the Pure Land, the splendid paradise of precious materials, music, and lotus flowers that symbolizes the awakened mind.



SUTRAS

Segment from the Lotus Sutra

Segment from the Lotus Sutra, from Chapter 11
Late Heian Period, ca. 1150
Ink on mica-decorated paper
11 1/2 x 13 3/4 in. (29.2 x 34.8 cm)

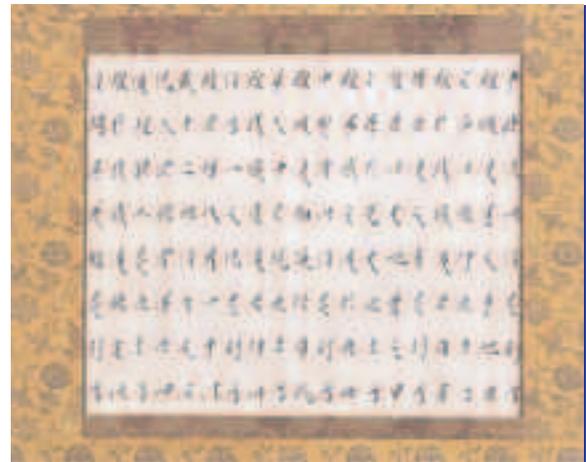
Sutras are customarily written in regular script (Japanese: *kaisho*), in which the brush is lifted after making each stroke or dot of a character (see the preceding illustration), but the present example is written in running script (*gyōsho*), which runs together several strokes or dots. Further, in regular script, each character is written within the confines of an imaginary square, but in running script strokes may extend beyond the imagined boundaries. Speaking very broadly, the distinction is somewhat comparable to the distinction in Western writing between carefully executed handwritten block capitals and cursive handwriting.

This sheet of the Lotus Sutra is from a group of scrolls attributed to Fujiwara Sadanobu (1088–1156), an aristocrat who lived in Kyoto. A devout Buddhist, Sadanobu determined to write the entire canon of Buddhist scripture—some five thousand scrolls. Beginning in 1129, he completed the gigantic task twenty-three years later. Perhaps Sadanobu (if the attribution is correct) chose to write in *gyōsho* rather than *kaisho* because writing in *gyōsho* is quicker, but he may also have wished to impart a personal quality to the work: Many Heian copies of sutras were motivated by a desire to gain personal merit for the writer, or a desire to gain merit for a departed member of the writer's family.

In any case, the writer further showed his devotion by inscribing each character within a pagoda, a building-type in East Asia that is conceived of as holding a relic of the Buddha. An engaging legend says that when the Historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, was asked how he should be venerated, he folded his garment into a square, placed it on the ground, inverted his begging bowl on it, and then stood his staff on top of the bowl, thereby suggesting the form of the Indian stupa or burial site of a venerable person. This form—a square platform with a hemisphere and a mast—is the essential Indian reliquary. A stupa may contain a relic of the Buddha's body, or it may contain some sort of symbolic material, for instance a paper bearing his teachings (dharma), since the Buddha's words are as much a part of his essence as are his bones and ashes. The

stupa thus came to symbolize the Buddha's nirvana (Japanese: *nehan*), the enlightened state in which all desire is eliminated and highest wisdom is attained.

In China (and later Korea and Japan) the form of the stupa became assimilated into the watch-tower, producing the multi-story structure that we call a pagoda. Although the pagoda that we are likely to see in East Asia is a tower with roofs at various levels, the kind of pagoda represented on this sheet—the Treasure Tower or Jeweled Pagoda (*tahōtō*), here printed in mica—still shows the Indian hemisphere quite clearly beneath the triangular roof. In each of these printed pagodas Sadanobu has written, quite freely (notice that some strokes extend beyond the pagoda) one character, thus enshrining as a relic each word spoken by the Buddha. The eleventh chapter of the Lotus Sutra, the chapter from which this sheet comes, describes the appearance of a jeweled stupa containing a Buddha who had preached the Lotus Sutra in the remote past. The sutra promises that those who construct pagodas will gain spiritual merit, hence the special appropriateness here of the pagodas enshrining each character.



PAINTINGS

Taizōkai Mandala

Taizōkai Mandala
Kamakura period, mid 13th century
Hanging scroll, gold and color on indigo-dyed silk
35 5/8 x 31 1/8 in. (90.3 x 79 cm)

What do non-Buddhist Westerners see when they confront this work? We think that even the viewer who knows nothing about Buddhism is taken — that's the word, since a work of art seems to reach out and hold us — by the abundant figures executed in fine gold lines on the dark bluish purple background. The severe geometry of the work and the multiplicity of seemingly identical and yet on closer inspection slightly varied figures give the work a disciplined energy. Probably even an unsophisticated viewer can guess that the central figure is a Buddha, and (such is the power of a figure placed in the exact center of a work) perhaps unconsciously the viewer senses that all of the surrounding figures are manifestations of this central figure, and thus all of the figures interact, from the center to the outermost precincts. This kind of mandala, called the Womb World Mandala (Japanese: Taizōkai Mandara), represents “innate reason,” and that it is only one half of a pair. (The other half, the Diamond World Mandala, representing “knowledge,” is lost.) A mandala of this sort is essentially the ground plan of a palace seen from an aerial perspective — the picture represents three dimensions — and it is symbolic of the Buddha-nature that is found in the human heart. The Womb World Mandala represents the ever-changing world of birth, death, and rebirth (*samsara*) in which Buddhas are born; the Diamond World Mandala represents the immutable world (nirvana). Properly understood, however, the worlds are seen to interpenetrate and thus are one, not two.

The central Buddha Dainichi Nyorai, The Great Illuminator, crowned and bejewelled, represents absolute truth. In the center of an open lotus flower with eight petals he sits in the lotus posture (legs crossed, each foot on the opposite thigh, soles of feet upward), his hands making a gesture symbolic of meditation (right palm resting on left palm, thumbs joined to form an oval). The gesture signifies nonduality, that is, the integration of human beings and Buddha. A wheel on his chest signifies the Law, the teachings of the Buddha, who is said to have “turned the wheel of the law” when he preached. The lotus on which Dainichi sits is a chief symbol of Buddhism: Just as the

lotus rises out of the mud and flourishes in the pure air, so we mortals, though born in the world of strife, may achieve the wisdom and compassion of Buddhahood. In Buddhist art, whatever rests on or rises from a lotus is pure.

If one imagines Dainichi as in the center of a clock, the figures at twelve, three, six and nine o'clock are four other Buddhas — actually emanations or manifestations of Dainichi, signifying various aspects of the truth — who, with Dainichi, constitute the Five Wisdom Buddhas. On the four other petals of the central lotus sit four bodhisattvas, beings who could enter the realm of enlightenment but who have chosen to remain in this world in order to assist others to achieve enlightenment. All of the figures (there are more than four hundred of them) and all of the objects (e.g. flowers, thunderbolts, altars, gates, vases) are symbolic. True, interpretations inevitably vary in some details, and indeed the placement of the figures varies slightly in some mandalas, but we can get a sense of the complexity and richness by briefly looking at the four Buddhas who surround Dainichi in the central court and who are images of different aspects of the awakened mind. In this mandala, directly above Dainichi is a Buddha whose right hand touches the earth. This gesture, symbolizing the subjugation of evil, was the gesture that Shakyamuni (the Historical Buddha) made when demonic hordes sought to impede his Awakening or Enlightenment: He touched the earth so that it would attest to his worthiness, the ground trembled, and the demons were defeated. The gesture thus symbolizes the subjugation of evil and the subsequent enlightenment (release from *samsara*, the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth). The Buddha to the right of Dainichi (from the spectator's point of view) makes with his right hand a gesture symbolic of a gift of fearlessness, i.e. he removes fear of the passions and of demons. The Buddha beneath Dainichi makes a gesture of meditation — hands on lap, palms up, the index fingers and thumbs making circles that symbolizes the perfection of the Buddha's Law (Truth) in the two worlds that the two mandalas represent. The three overlapping fingers symbolize the three elements (earth, water, fire) that conquer three evils (hate, greed, ignorance). The Buddha to the left of Dainichi, making a gesture of compassion with his right hand, symbolizes the quickening of the mind, the first step in attaining Buddhahood. The four bodhisattvas (enlightenment beings)

Taizōkai Mandala cont'd.

who alternate with these four Buddhas in the central part of the mandala, and indeed all of the other figures, are similarly rich in symbolism: These eight figures represent stages in the passage from the first Awakening of the Mind to the full attainment of Buddhahood.

As for the objects, we will comment only on the vases and the *vajras* and lotuses that they contain. The most useful part of a vessel is its emptiness, which allows it to contain something, e.g. a tea bowl is useful because it can contain tea. The vases here are receptacles of the truth: Viewers empty themselves of all delusions so that they can contain the truth of the Doctrine, symbolized here by the lotuses (symbolic of purity, because although the lotus is rooted in the mud it blossoms in the pure air) and the *vajras* (originally in India stylized thunderbolts, but in Japan regarded as made of diamond, whose truth shatters all illusion). Mandalas of this sort — constructed in accordance with detailed texts — are highly complex, and the more one reads about them, the more fascinating they become. For the believer they are profound religious texts that, properly understood, reveal the nature of things. Kūkai (774–835), the monk who founded of the Shingon (True Word) sect in Japan, and who introduced (from China) mandalas into Japan, argued that such images are essential because they convey truths that words cannot express. He wrote (in the translation by Yoshito S. Hakeda *Kūkai: Major Works* (1972), 145–46.):

Since the Esoteric Buddhist teachings are so profound as to defy expression in writing, they are revealed through the medium of painting to those who are yet to be enlightened.

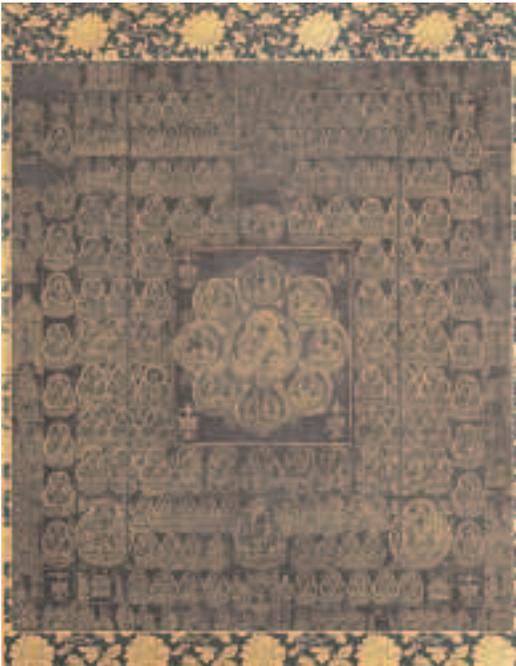
The various postures and mudras [shown in mandalas] are products of the great compassion of the Buddha; the sight of them may well enable one to attain Buddhahood. The

secrets of the sutras and commentaries are for the most part depicted in painting, and all the essentials of the esoteric Buddhist doctrines are, in reality, set forth therein. Neither masters nor students can dispense with them. They are indeed [the expressions of the root and source of the oceanlike assembly [of the Enlightened Ones, that is, the world of enlightenment].

Another translation helps us to grasp the last line: “Art is what reveals to us the state of perfection.” For the believer, these images are guides to reality, and even more important, they are also sites of divine forces that can be transferred to the practitioner who meditates upon them and masters their complexities. As ten Grotenhuis says (pp. 1–2), “A practitioner, visualizing and meditating on the mandala’s peripheral elements, unites these outer manifestations in the center of the mandala and then internally absorbs the mandala as a whole.” In any case, one thing is clear to all viewers: Mandalas are not merely aids to meditation but can be works of art that afford aesthetic pleasure. Surprisingly, these intellectually profound works have something in common with decorative art.

Decorative art is usually thought to be short on intellectual content, since its emphasis is on pattern, but in fact by its very tendency not to interpret experience decorative art suggests an ideal world. This implication in decorative art is easily seen in Islamic works, where geometric forms, having displaced natural ones, imply an alternative to the transient world. We see this in mandalas too — as well as in the Lotus Sutra in which each character is enclosed within a pagoda — partly because of the overall pattern and partly because many of the images are almost identical. Consider the dark blue background against which the gold figures gleam.

The blue functions rather like the gold background of much Western medieval painting, which by its color represents heaven, by its uniformity represents the unchanging nature of God, and by its very material — gold — represents God’s preciousness. As for the symbolism of gold and dark blue here, gold is the color of the Buddha’s great knowledge, i.e. his enlightened wisdom, and blue is the color of a Buddha’s palace built out of lapis lazuli, a semiprecious stone. (Interestingly, in the late medieval West, lapis lazuli — doubtless because of its great material value as well as its jewellike brilliance — was especially used in painting the Virgin’s robes, whose color symbolized her heavenly nature.) When the Taizokai Mandala is viewed as a whole, the profusion of gold figures geometrically arranged on a dark blue background conveys a sense of ordered, precious abundance — an organized world that, so to speak, we can strive to enter and to be worthy of. Books will elucidate the complex symbolism of the figures and of the arrangement, but only the picture itself — not books — will give us a bodily experience of a vibrant, ordered cosmos.



PAINTINGS

Kasuga Shrine Mandala

Kasuga Shrine Mandala
Kamakura period 1185–1333), ca. 1300
Hanging scroll, ink, color, mica, and gold on silk, 31 x 11 in.
(78.7 x 27.9 cm)

The Kasuga shrine, which housed the guardian Shinto deities (*kami*) of the Fujiwara family—the family that controlled the emperor—was founded in Nara in 709, adjacent to the Buddhist temple Kofuku-ji. In 768 or 769 it moved to its present location at the foot of Mt. Mikasa. This painting of the shrine in its landscape setting is the product of a concept called *honji-suijaku*, a fusion of Buddhist deities and Shinto kami (gods, especially in nature, for instance in a great tree, a waterfall, a mountain top, a great man). The idea is this: The Buddhist deities (*honji*, “root,” “essence”) came to Japan to assist the populace, where they became “manifestations” or “traces” or “emanations” (*suijaku*) in the world of phenomena. Almost all shinto shrines considered their *kami* to be manifestations of Buddhist deities.

A landscape painting, this picture has more in common with much Western art than does the Taizokai Mandala, but this Kasuga Shrine Mandala too is distinctively East Asian. For one thing, the point of view in this landscape is not what we find in Western art: We get a bird’s-eye view of the roofs of buildings, but we do not see the other objects from above. Rather, we look head-on at the deer (at the bottom of the picture), the trees, the sides of the shrines, and the mountains in the background. When we look closely at the blossoming cherry trees we admire the delicacy of their execution—the realism, we might say, but clearly this is not a realistic picture. At the bottom of the picture we go through the gate or torii, move up the golden path (which is sometimes obscured by band of mist), toward the shrine buildings, but the more distant trees do not diminish in size, as they would in a Western landscape painting. Further, although the shrine buildings probably are depicted quite accurately, and the deer (and to a lesser degree the flowering trees) can be called realistic, the mountains at the top (in the far distance) are stylized; indeed, the mountain at the left is golden, so we can suspect some symbolism here.

In all other known Kasuga Shrine paintings, the five Buddhist images that preside over the shrines are lined up across the top, but in this painting they appear within a celes-

tial disk attended by two flying angel-like figures. (This disk probably represents the moon, but in some Kasuga mandalas it is gold, in which case it represents the sun, and in some instances it perhaps is to be conceived as moon and sun at once.) The Buddhist deities, whose Shinto manifestations are housed in the shrines depicted in the painting are these: In the center, Shakyamuni, the primary deity of the Kasuga Shrine; to the right, the bodhisattva Jizo; to the left, Eleven-headed Kannon; above Shaka, the Buddha Yakushi; below Shaka, the bodhisattva Monju.

Clearly the idea is that this landscape is not merely lovely but is also divine, or protected by divinity. Glistening flecks of mica mixed into the pigment helps to suggest the otherworldly. Perhaps, too, the absence of the one-point perspective that characterizes (and rationalizes) Western landscape painting here suggests that this landscape cannot be reduced to the vision of a single person standing at a particular point.

The Kasuga Shrine Mandala exerts an enormous appeal, but the appeal is very different from that of the blue and gold Taizokai Mandala. Where the strange Taizokai deities challenge our understanding, the familiar landscape forms of the Kasuga Shrine Mandala charm us, invite us to enter. There is still (as in the Taizokai Mandala) evident geometry, in the shrines and especially in the centrally placed disk at the top, but there is also a delightful asymmetry, with the pagoda at the bottom and the shrines near the top being placed to the left of the axis, and the gold and silver path changing directions. We can value the image as art, mere art, sheer art, but once we are caught by the beauty, nothing prevents us from going further, and learning about the vision that is embodied in this painting, which in fact represents an important development in the history of religion and religious art in Japan.



PAINTINGS

Priest Shun'oku Myōha

Priest Shun'oku Myōha
Nambokuchō Period (14th century)
Color on silk, 45 x 20 in.
(114.3 x 52 cm)

This portrait of Shun'oku Myōha (1311–1388) is of a type known as a *chinsō*, a commemorative portrait of a Zen master, painted for a temple that he was associated with or perhaps for one of his disciples. Such a picture, inscribed by the sitter himself, was used for memorial services conducted on the anniversary of the master's death, when it would serve as an inspiration to those who had known the master. A disciple who possessed a picture of his teacher thus had a sign of a social connection and even of a spiritual connection with an enlightened being. A *chinsō*, then, can be both a treasured memento of a beloved teacher and also a venerated ritual icon; somewhat like a relic, it is a source of power to the faithful. A painting of a Buddhist deity gains its authority from its correspondence to sacred texts, i.e. by its strict adherence to established iconographic rules; by contrast, a *chinsō* gains its authority from its correspondence to local memories and traditions. But whether a traditional Buddhist painting or a portrait such as this work, the image — the form — actively reinforces faith.

A portrait supposedly reveals identity, but what sort of identity? In many ages, one's social status established the only identity that was significant: One was, for instance, a cleric or a noble or a king; this identification was revealed by the clothing or by certain attributes such as a crown, and that was as much identity as the portrait revealed. What we call personality or character was irrelevant. But ever since the Renaissance, Westerners have expected portraits to reveal more than social status and more than a mere representation of a face; we expect also a revelation of personality, of the individual's distinctive character. The assumption here is that the face reveals the inner person. (We put aside the post-Freudian view, dominant in an age of deconstruction, that the very idea of a fixed character is a fiction, a construction, and that in fact people are bundles of manifold shifting responses rather than coherent personalities.) George Orwell memorably summarized the view that faces reveal a coherent inner person when he wrote, "At 50 everyone has the face he deserves." The idea is powerful — we have all seen faces that radiate good will or untrust-

worthiness — but is it true? One thinks of, say, Charles "Pretty Boy" Floyd, who despite his sweet face was for a while Public Enemy Number One, and one thinks of a line in *Macbeth*, when King Duncan, speaking of how he was deceived by Cawdor's appearance, says to Macbeth, "There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face" — and this to the man who at the very moment is plotting to kill him. Still, most of us probably hold to the idea that faces are not mere expanses of skin stretched over muscle and bone, and that a portrait tells us not only what the sitter looks like but what the sitter is like. (This is not the place to examine the question, "Must a work of art have a meaning?" but here we can briefly mention that if indeed a work of art must be more than a mere copy of appearances, the meaning of a portrait is the thought about the subject that the painter embodies in the image.)

In this picture of Shun'oku Myōha we see — from the luxurious garments and the Chinese chair in which he sits — that the sitter is an important Zen priest. We also see the physical fragility of the body, here expressed only in the wispy gray hairs and in the face, for the body itself is covered. We admire the richly detailed fabrics that symbolize the social importance of the man who wears them, and we enjoy the contrast between the elaborately patterned fabric and the frail but strong face (here we go beyond social identity and get into subjective identity). The strength is communicated by the unwavering "iron-wire lines" (Japanese *tessen*), the thin lips, the firm nose (firm because in this three-quarter view of the face the nose is set more in profile than realism allows for), and the penetrating gaze. The lack of any modeling — that is, the lack of shadows, which in portraits by Rembrandt are so important in conveying the sense of a distinctive body — here helps to suggest the unimportance of the flesh. The physical (as opposed to the intellectual) man is, so to speak, dry and flat.

Western portraits usually show their subject in an appropriate environment: a nobleman in a stately room, a scholar in a library. But here the subject exists — strangely, to Western eyes, unless we are familiar with portraits by Velázquez and his followers — against a blank silk background. But perhaps the empty background in a *chinsō* is not really empty, or, rather, is not without meaning. Perhaps the empty space tells a viewer that the sitter is what he is, independent of a context other

Priest Shun'oku Myōha cont'd.

than the chair he sits in and the clothes he wears. The picture thus resembles the work of some modern photographers (notably Richard Avedon and Elsa Dorfman), who pose their sitters against a blank white background on the assumption that personality is best revealed when it is not set within a context. Second, Shun'oku Myōha has written an inscription at the top, and thus he has in a way taken possession of the background, and, so to speak, certified and enlivened the picture. Given the idea, which the Japanese derived from the Chinese, that calligraphy expresses the character of the writer, we can say, speaking only a little loosely, that the sitter has placed his self-portrait above the portrait. His inscription (translated by Anne Nishimura Morse and Samuel Crowell Morse) runs thus: "There are no eyes on the top of the head / There are no eyebrows under the chin. / This is everything; this is nothing. I also could not become a phoenix." The saying is typically Zen in its cryptic content: Stephen Addiss suggests it may say, "I am just as I look; everyday life, as it exists, is enlightenment."

Early in these comments on portraiture we quoted George Orwell and Shakespeare. We end by quoting Eric Ambler, an English writer of thrillers, who in *A Coffin for Dimitrios* (1939) has a comment about faces that seems to us as shrewd as the observations by greater writers:

A man's features, the bone structure and the tissue which covers it, are the product of a biological process; but his face he creates for himself. It is a statement of his habitual emotional attitude; the attitude which his desires need for their fulfillment and which his fears demand for their protection from prying eyes. He wears it like a devil mask; a device to evoke in others the emotion complementary to his own. If he is afraid, then he must be feared; if he desires, then he must be desired. It is a screen to his mind's nakedness. Only a few men, painters, have been able to see the mind through the face. (247-48)



PAINTINGS

Gyokuen Bompō

Gyokuen Bompō (1348–after 1420)
Orchid, Bamboo, and Rock.

Ink on paper.: 34 1/2 x 13 3/4 in. (87.6 x 34.9 cm)

At least as early as the Song dynasty (960–1279) Chinese artists caught the inherent fragility, sensuous appeal, tremulous balance, and vitality of lotuses, peonies, and orchids. In the thirteenth century the orchid, which earlier had been depicted with fine outlines and with color, became a subject for monochrome painting in calligraphic strokes, and in the late fourteenth century Chan (Japanese: Zen) monks took up the subject.

Zen painters used secular as well as religious motifs, so there is some controversy about what “Zen painting” is, or even if such a term is meaningful. In any case, paintings of Chinese orchids by Zen monks exert an immediate sensuous appeal, but they also may have symbolic implications. In China, where the orchid is a small flower, utterly different from the creatures that Western florists use for corsages, painters regarded the orchid as symbolic of purity of heart, the integrity of the scholar and the principled government official, of hidden rather than showy virtue; and doubtless it was partly this moral significance that made the subject attractive to Zen monks. Possibly, too, the orchid, modestly sending its fragrance through the air, was considered symbolic of Buddhism sweetening the life of those who were exposed to it.

Bamboo, like the orchid, is symbolic: flexible and hollow, bending with the wind but returning to its upright position, it symbolized a heart free from attachment to things, the emptiness so much discussed in Zen writing. And the rock, eroded by water and purified by the wind, was a Daoist symbol of the Dao or Way, the transcendental principle manifest in all phenomena, the seamless web of being, the unity beneath an infinitely varied surface. Buddhists found this Daoist concept harmonious with the concept of a universal Buddha-nature.

Of Bompō we know little more than that he was born in 1348, studied in Kyoto with Shun'oku Myōha (the subject of the portrait painting that we discuss elsewhere), became a priest and later the abbot of two important monasteries, and painted—over and over again—orchids with rocks and bamboo. As a student of Chinese culture, he wrote Chinese poetry, but even in his own time his verses were noted for their obscu-

rity. The poem written below the picture reproduced here is made yet more difficult by the obliteration of parts of some characters. The first line may say, “Retired in a small pavilion on the North Mountain,” or it may say something like “The North Mountain is half-hidden in tentlike clouds.” There is greater agreement about the gist of the remaining three lines: I can bear solitary thoughts. Now I will gather dew from flowers, to wash away sorrow and regret.” Like many other poems inscribed on paintings by his colleagues, this poem is not a description of the painting but an independent (though related) work of art.

Bompō's concern with a single theme—all but one of the twenty or so paintings firmly attributed to him are of orchids, bamboo, and rocks—may well have a Buddhist implication: devotion to a single motif may indicate a Buddhist desire to overcome the sense of self by concentrating the mind and by disciplining the hand. This view is, admittedly, only speculation, but it gains support from the occasional statements artists have made to the effect that to paint bamboo one must annihilate the self and become the bamboo; the brush, for such a painter, becomes the means of putting forth fresh growth.

But if part of the appeal of painting orchids, bamboo, and rocks lay in regarding the act as a spiritual discipline, and part lay in the symbolism of the motifs, some of the appeal to a painter-calligrapher must have come from the sensuous forms: The leaves of the bamboo especially lend themselves to sharp calligraphic strokes, and the long, thin, curving leaves of the orchid provide an ideal counterpoint. Any viewer must delight in the variety of Bompō's lines, lines that convey fragility and vitality (the orchid), vigor and endurance (the dark, sharp leaves of the hardy bamboo), and stability (the rock). The entire picture—even the rock, for the holes indicate that it, too, changes and now it harbors plants—seems alive, submissive to the slightest breeze, yet flourishing. The pattern, combining a sense of growth or process, is complex, yet there is a pattern, most obviously in the bamboo that, extending to the right from the hole in the rock, is echoed in the orchid leaf above it and in the tiny branch of bamboo below it. And so we get back to the Daoist idea of an underlying harmony or unity achieved not by chopping off apparent excrescence but rather by including opposites, a unity created out of complexity.

PAINTINGS

Jiun Onkō

Jiun Onkō (1718–1804)

Daruma

Edo period (1615–1868)

Ink on paper: 48 5/8 x 21 3/4 inches; 123.4 x 55.4 cm

Jiun was a Shingon priest, not a member of the Zen sect, but his work nevertheless is usually characterized as Zenga, literally “Zen painting,” a term applied to the work of later Zen monks, i.e. from the seventeenth century and onward. The present work shows Bodhidharma (Ch: Damo; Japanese: Daruma), the Indian monk who is said to have brought the Meditation Sect (Ch: Chan; Japanese: Zen) from India to China. When the Emperor Wu, proud of his sponsorship of monasteries, asked Daruma how much merit the emperor had obtained, Daruma said “No merit at all.” When the Emperor then asked, “Who is before me?” the monk replied, “Fushiki,” “I don’t know,” and (presumably seeing that he was wasting his time) he left the emperor’s presence and sought out a cave where he sat in meditation. Daruma Seated in Meditation is a common motif, but Jiun here combines the two episodes, presenting one in the calligraphy and the other in the minimal painting. Jiun’s image of Daruma, though composed of several strokes, is of a type called *ippitsu* Daruma (one-stroke Daruma), in which the seated figure is reduced to a minimal outline, almost a circle, a form sometimes said to symbolize to the faithful the “vast emptiness” that Daruma spoke of. (For a further comment about the symbolism of the circle, see the next comment, on Rengetsu’s calligraphy with a moon.)

Like late twentieth-century minimalists, Jiun gives us a heightened awareness of the materials—brush, paper, ink: By pressing hard on the brush (probably made of stiff bamboo) Jiun caused the tip to split, producing an effect called “flying white” (Japanese: *hihaku*). Perhaps this representation conveys something of what in Zen is called “dropping away of body and mind.”



PAINTINGS

Ōtagaki Rengetsu

Ōtagaki Rengetsu (1791–1871)

Hazy Evening Moon

Edo period (1615–1868), dated 1867

Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 38 5/16 x 7 7/8 in.

(97.5 x 20 cm)

Some aristocratic Japanese women achieved fame as writers in the Heian Period (794–1185)—the most notable is Murasaki Shikibu, author of *The Tale of Genji*—and some women of lesser birth were significant painters in later periods, but broadly speaking, after the Heian period it was not until early modern times—say the mid-eighteenth century—that women again became significant creators of art and literature. Among the women who earned a significant place in the world of the arts is Ōtagaki Rengetsu, the illegitimate daughter of a samurai and a geisha. She became a Buddhist nun in 1824 and later achieved distinction as a poet, painter, and potter. Indeed, it was chiefly by selling pottery inscribed with her poems that she sustained herself.

Rengetsu often uses moon imagery, perhaps because “Rengetsu” means “Lotus Moon.” In this painting, beneath a pale, silvery or even bluish gray moon she has written the following *waka* poem (translated by Pat Fister), a classical form that uses a 5-7-5-7-7 syllabic pattern, though as usual this pattern is not preserved in the appearance on the sheet. In contrast to the image of the almost hallucinatory moon, the text is written in thin but decisive lines of black ink. (In one of her poems she says that the calligrapher’s brush “leaves behind a trail / of lines that dance.”)

Refused at the inn—
But I took this unkindness
As a gracious act;
Under the hazy evening moon
I slept beneath blossoms.

We need not take the poem to be autobiographical, but we may see in it the quiet strength that characterized Rengetsu’s life. The system of writing is not *kanji* (Chinese characters, which are ideograms or signs—some built with many strokes—that stand for ideas, meanings), but *kana*, a Japanese system developed during the Heian Period. *Kana* is a phonetic syllabary, a system that uses relatively simple graphs to indicate syllables and these, in combination, form the sound of a spoken word. (Chinese is monosyllabic and uninflected, but Japanese is polysyllabic and inflected, i.e. the endings of Japanese verbs and adjectives change, so a single graphic form that expresses a meaning—a Chinese character—is not sufficient to write each Japanese word.) Our Arabic numerals are a sort of equivalent to *kanji* (the squiggle conveys a meaning, not a pronunciation), whereas our alphabet is a sort of equivalent to *kana* (the squiggles convey sounds).

The evanescent moon at the top of the scroll represents the moon of the poem, but it also suggests a circle, a common symbol of completeness or perfection not only in Buddhism but also in other systems of thought, as is evident for instance in the halo that appears on such deities as the Persian Mithras and the Greek Helios, and on holy Christian figures. Most especially in Buddhism, the circle (like the full moon) suggests emptiness, the freedom from attachment—the Buddha nature—that characterizes the enlightened mind. It is to such a symbolic moon that Rengetsu alludes when, in a very late poem, she expresses the hope that she will “pass away / while gazing at a round moon.”

BOKUSEKI (EARLY ZEN CALLIGRAPHY)

Sesson Yubai

Sesson Yubai (1290–1346)

Calligraphy: “My Thatched Hut”

Ink on paper: 16 x 23 5/16 inches (40.64 x 59.23 cm)

Zen Buddhism emphasizes meditation and the transmission of doctrine by means of personal relationships between teachers and disciples rather than by means of scripture and ritual. The writings of early Japanese Zen monks (thirteenth through fifteenth centuries), for instance letters of spiritual encouragement, documents certifying progress, poems of farewell when a monk was leaving one place of residence for another, or Buddhist aphorisms—always written in classical Chinese—are called *bokuseki*, “ink traces.” These writings, in classical Chinese, are not only traces of ink on paper but are also traces of the writer’s hand, or, better, of the writer’s heart, since the assumption is that a calligrapher expresses his personality, his individuality, his true self, in his writing. The reader of the calligraphy senses the presence of the writer. Perhaps a comparison with Action Painting is acceptable, especially since critics regularly say that Franz Kline and Jackson Pollock are “calligraphic.” The style of *bokuseki*, which is usually bold, is at least as important as the literal content. Because the strokes of Chinese characters are always written in a prescribed sequence, the knowledgeable viewer can follow the movement of the writer’s hand as he manipulates “the living brush” (usually animal hair but sometimes bamboo), “the living ink” (usually pine soot) and “the living paper” (vegetable material that absorbs to ink in varying degrees). The writing is read from top to bottom, right to left; in each character, the top leftmost element is written first, then downward to the end of the left side, then the right side of the character, again beginning at the top. If there is a strong central vertical, it is usually written last. But even without this knowledge a viewer can follow the motion of the brush in many strokes and can see where the writer paused to refresh the brush with ink.

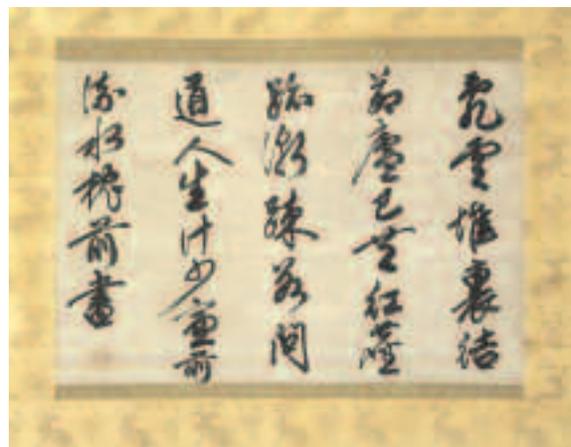
The illustrated example (translated by Stephen Addiss) expresses the monkish ideal of retirement from the world of busy-ness, of being in the world but not of it:

My thatched hut is woven with disordered layers of clouds
Already my footprints are washed away with the red dust
If you ask, this monk has few plans for his life:
Before my window, flowing waters; facing my pillow, books.

The last character is *sho*, or “writing,” or “books: The word usually translated as “calligraphy” is *shodo*, better translated as “the way of writing,” since the English “calligraphy” (etymologically “beautiful writing”) implies artisanship and decorative flourishes rather than a mind revealing itself in its way of writing.

This *bokuseki* is written not in the regular style (*kaisho*) that is seen elsewhere, where each stroke or dot is separate and each character exists within an invisible square, but in *gyōsho*, running style (also called semicursive), a more expressive, flowing script. In *gyōsho*, several strokes or dots may be written without lifting the brush, and in which a stroke from one character may enter into the area—usually an invisible standing rectangle but sometimes a square or a horizontal rectangle of the next character. For the most part, Sesson Yubai here writes his characters by pressing down on a fully loaded brush, but these fat, juicy strokes are varied by occasional thin strokes made with the tip of the brush. The whole, with ample spaces between the lines, conveys an assured, vigorous writer, one who (to draw on the content of the poem) has been purified of the world’s dust and is now at ease with nature and literature.

From the fifteenth century, *bokuseki* were used in the tea ceremony (*chanoyu*): Mounted as a hanging scroll, a work such as this one would be displayed in the *tokonoma* (alcove), where it would provide guests with aesthetic pleasure and would also help to induce in them an appropriately contemplative frame of mind.



BOKUSEKI (EARLY ZEN CALLIGRAPHY)

Seigan Soi

Seigan Soi (1588–1661)

Hell

Edo period (1615–1668)

Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 12 x 35 1/2 in. (30.5 x 90.2 cm)

In 1625 Seigan became the 170th abbot of Daitokuji, a major Zen temple in Kyoto. Daitokuji was especially known for providing calligraphy for the tea ceremony (*chanoyu*), a tradition said to have begun when one of its monks, Ikkyu (1394–1481), told the tea master named Murata Shukō (1422–1502) that contemplation of a work of calligraphy could bring enlightenment. Shukō is associated with a form of *chanoyu* known as *wabi* tea, “poverty tea,” a form that values the austere, the simple, the rustic, the frugal, the asymmetrical, the incomplete, the imperfect.

If one thinks in Western terms, one thinks of comfortable old slippers and worn flannel shirts open at the collar rather than highly polished shoes and starched white shirts with neckties. In fact, the price of the utensils and of the calligraphy displayed in *wabi* tea may be astronomical but their appearance is reassuringly humble. (A comment by Picasso comes to mind: “My ideal is to live like a poor man, but one with lots of money.”)

In essence, poverty tea brings together a few friends, who assemble in a simple setting (e.g. a room or a hut that imitates simple rustic circumstances), admire a work of calligraphy along with a simple flower arrangement and the assembled tea utensils, listen to the sound of water boiling in an iron kettle over burning charcoal, and achieve a state of detachment from worldly concern — a state of quiet, of awareness of the values of the simple life, of making do with the humble means at hand — as opposed to what the Buddha characterized as a life of craving.

Our concern is with calligraphy. The work may be hard to read, in which case perhaps part of the idea is to start by puzzling the guests, to get them thinking and talking about what confronts them in this small tea room rather than about the concerns of the outside world. The text may be almost anything, perhaps a poem or an epigram, but among the most valued texts are those written by Zen priests, and among these, an especially valued form is the *ichijikan*, the “one-word barrier,” a

single character that the guests contemplate and comment on. The word “barrier” or “frontier gate” (*kan*) appears in the title of a famous collection of Zen cryptic sayings and episodes, the Chinese Wumonguan (Japanese Mumonkan), “The Gateless Barrier. The basic idea probably is that logic cannot penetrate this barrier, and only some sort of intuitive understanding can enable the reader to pass through. This calligraphy by Seigan consists of two characters rather than one, but since it translates into a single English word, “hell,” we can bend the rules a little and consider it an *ichijikan*. (The first Chinese character, at the right, is *chi*, “earth,” and the second, *goku*, is “prison,” but, given the context of the word to which it correspond in Sanskrit sutras, the combination is aptly translated as hell.) What did Seigan’s contemporaries make out of “Hell,” and what do we make out of it? Let’s begin with the past. In Buddhist thinking, hell is not a place of eternal damnation. Rather, it is one of the six realms (*rokudō*) into which sentient creatures are born: Hell, Hungry Ghosts, Animals, Asura (Bellicose Demons), Human Beings, Gods. Residence in any of these realms, even the realm of the gods, is temporary; the goal is escape from the cycle of rebirth, and escape is achieved by arriving at the wisdom that the Buddha arrived at. Thus, if human beings behave badly in this life, they may be reborn — such is the karma of good and evil that they have achieved in their human life — as animals or, worse, as creatures in hell where they will be tortured. Their experience in hell, however, presumably will be therapeutic and in their next incarnation they may be born into a higher realm. The Buddhist hell therefore is more like the Christian purgatory than it is like the Christian eternal hell, over whose entrance is written (in Dante’s formulation), “Abandon all hope, you who enter here.”

Zen Buddhism, however, is not much concerned with punishments or rewards in a future life, and so, again, one wonders what Seigan’s contemporaries made out of this highly unusual calligraphy. On the other side of the world at this time, in England, John Milton’s Satan said, “The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.” (Paradise Lost I, 253). Or perhaps we can — perhaps we must — think about hell in modern terms. In T. S. Eliot’s *The Cocktail Party* Edward says,

Seigan Soi cont'd.

What is hell? Hell is oneself,
Hell is alone, the other figures in it
Merely projections. There is nothing to escape from
And nothing to escape to.

It is not our intention here to press Seigan's Jigoku to fit Milton's ideas or Eliot's—there are important differences—but we do want to say that friends participating in a tea ceremony, contemplating this calligraphy by a Zen monk might well find themselves thinking about the Buddhist concept that hell is a projection of the unenlightened mind, a mental representation, a condition of dis-ease (Sanskrit: *dukkha*). The individual whose mind is hell (this is the condition of Milton's Satan) nevertheless contains the potentiality for Buddhahood. Shakyamuni taught that in this world of rebirths (Sanskrit: *samsāra* literally "wandering"), "All is suffering," and that we can escape from it only when we understand it is illusory. Possibly by contemplating Seigan's Jigoku, sipping tea, listening to the sound of water boiling, a participant in the tea ceremony might be stimulated to think about hell in a way that was enlightening rather than merely ugly or terrifying. Possibly it brought to mind a Buddhist proverb, such as *Jigō jitoku* ("the fruits of one's own deeds [in a previous existence]"), or *Jigoku Gokurakuwa kokoro ni ari* ("Hell and Heaven are in the hearts of men") or *Jigoku nimo shiru hito* ("even in hell old acquaintances are welcome").

Although the subject is unusual, the calligraphy is typical of Daitokuji—regular script in a bold, angular mode, slashing strokes with "flying white" (passage in which pressure on the brush caused the bristles to separate, so that parts of the stroke are not inked). Stephen Addiss, in *The Art of Zen* (New York: Abrams, 1989) admirably describes this particular work: Especially notable is the horizontal thrust of each character. The first word is composed of two equal sections; the left side has been made more vertical than usual by the abrupt "open-tip" endings of the two horizontal strokes, where the brush was pulled rapidly away from the paper, leaving the rough edges of the strokes visible. The second of these strokes, however, con-

tinues by a fine brush-hair's width to the the right side of the character, itself composed of three movements that extend and hook back, swing down, and then circle in a wide sweeping gesture that ends with a turn upward. The dynamic composition of this graphic shape, however, is surpassed by its neighbor to the left. This character, made up of three vertical sections is even more creatively distorted by the artist. The first two elements on the left and center are squeezed close together so that the form on the right can expand outward. These are then balanced by the rich fullness of the dot and the dramatic long diagonal, with its bold use of "flying white," of the final hooking stroke. Here is Daitoku-ji style calligraphy at its most expressive. Seigan has stretched and extended the character shapes while leaving them perfectly clear and legible to even the most unsophisticated viewer.



SUGGESTED READINGS

The Asia Society has posted on the World Wide Web our Reader's Guide to the Arts of Japan, which lists and briefly comments on some 450 titles in English. An earlier version of the Guide appears in Penelope Mason, *History of Japanese Art* (1993), the best one-volume survey of the material.

If we were pressed to recommend only a handful of titles—in particular, titles especially relevant to the works in this exhibition—we would cite the following:

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