

The Influence of Zen on Western Art

When a Zen monk lights a stick of incense he invites the whole world to come and meditate with him. If the writer had been a privileged person who had been specially invited to sit with or by instructors in Zen, great or small, the purpose of Zen and the purpose of this book would both be destroyed. In the true Zen meditation one sits with the Universe, regardless of the number present. Every meditation, therefore, assists in the preservation and radiation of dharma.

The history of Zen has been so involved with the history of art in the Far East and especially so of Japan, that it is hard to distinguish them—and very inadvisable anyhow. But there is one danger in becoming attached to history and that is one tends to fix the consciousness in a time- or time-space of limitation. The Zen-consciousness, the Satori-experience is one of freedom from such time, such space, such time-space. And one can see this illustrated in the lives of friend and neighbors who have partaken of the Zen-discipline.

Sumi-painting is one of the best ways of conveying Zen to those not particularly interested in “religion.” There are growing numbers attracted to it, even studying it. Sumi is not just the science or art of calligraphy (in a very wide sense). It illustrates the manifestation of the unity-consciousness before our senses, and before ourselves. Whatever is produced is a spontaneous eruption into the manyness from oneself.

In Sumi the self is not the actor. In a wide sense the self or the trueness or the existence utilizes the universe; and in a reciprocal sense the universe exploits the personality of the calligrapher or artist. In order to obtain skill one must learn stages of non-activity as well as of activity, or rest as well of action, of not-being as well as of being—and to connect the two. The result is an action in which an arm moves, holding a brush and producing in an almost magical manner strokes or letters or forms, or smudges.

The observer may see an arm dancing until it performs on paper or some other medium. The artist may not be aware of this dance. He seems to be under spells of spontaneity or even inspiration.

In this one can behold various facets of dharma. We have phases of mind or consciousness called **manas**, the analytical mind; **vijnana**, the harmonizing integral mind; and **prajna**, the spontaneous intuition. Whenever one thinks, the following movements of the arm may seem mechanical, jointed, abrupt or slow, but not free. When the intuition utilizes the neuro-psychic system, there is spontaneity and release. There is a tenseness in concentration and a freedom in movement; when the ego prevails there is uncertainty in concentration and a controlled or controlling movement which brings on fatigue and even ennui and exhaustion. In other words, Sumi-painting brings one to the world, or that part of the world, beyond karma and the forces of cause and effect.

Gordon Onslow-Ford is one of the most preeminent artists who has shown serious consideration of Sumi. This is reflected in his life and works. The **prajna**-consciousness is beyond analysis and classification, in the ordinary sense. Spontaneity can give rise to an infinite variety. The devotion of Sumi is really a devotion to Zen-meditation and to the anatta way of life. Therefore one experiencing it may always reveal his knowledge of dharma-transmission.

This is quite evident from Onslow-Ford’s paintings. Just as true Buddhism has its **sunyata** or “emptiness” and its **asunyata** or “fullness” aspects, these paintings reveal a universe of many levels,

quite compatible to the teaching of the Upanishads or Vedanta or dharma, in the fullest sense. They take us beyond but not apart from the sense-words we refer to as “realistic” and “materialistic.” From the Zen point of view these last terms may prove to be misnomers, delusions.

At this stage of technology we can have an infrared-red, sunlight, ultra-violet and x-ray photograph of any “thing” —perhaps more—and the results will be compatible, and that may be all. So none of these pictures is, in a true sense realistic or materialistic. They are just derivative-forms. Should one try to assemble or synthesize he might come up with another answer. **What is occupying this particular space?** can not be answered, because it is assumed that the nature of space is known and it is not known. There may be several **spaces** in any space.

The rise of Metageometry, Non-Euclidean principles, and inventions or discoveries like those of Moebius are bound to have their influence on art as well as technology and ultimately into psychology (or what Korzybski calls “psycho-logics”). While the West is freeing itself from Greek and German traditions, it is also meeting the East, with its tremendous backgrounds. Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan has been selected by Western savants as one of the great men of the time, or of all time. And it is perhaps curious that the San Francisco Bay Area should become the headquarters of both the tangential movements associated with Zen; and the “Great Books Foundation” of Mortimer Adler which disregards all such efforts.

While Gordon Onslow-Ford, consciously or unconsciously, but invariably spontaneously, is demonstrating the “worlds” of asunyata and sunyata, Paul Reps is exploring the worlds between the arts. Reps does not state that he has practiced meditation or sat at the feet of Zen monks, but rather offers the fruits of such efforts. “Zen Telegrams” is illustrative, showing the same psycho-neural spontaneity, dominating always and never dominated by intellectual content. This proves that the Zen-experience, although non-mental or non-intellectual, is far from being idiocy. The mind is employed or not, similarly as the body is employed or not—perhaps by the universe itself.

The city of the Golden Gate not only hosted Shaku Soyen and saw the first Zendo established in 1926. The late Kenneth Saunders, though a Christian, was in his time the greatest authority, perhaps on Buddhist art and lectured in this region. And Perham Nahl, of the Art Department at the University of California became a “convert” to Buddhism. He brought over the Obatas who have been pioneers in the introduction of Japanese arts in general.

All these streams have met at the Rudolph Schaeffer School of Design. As truth is “neither of the East nor of the West,” neither is prajna, intuition. The influence of Zen in the Fine Arts, the principles of Zen within the arts themselves, shows that man is or has the faculty of direct cognition. However the arts of the Far East have involved a symbolism which, while universal, is not of itself entirely **free**. If one is confined to a world of “heaven, earth and man” he is still confined.

The Western man has his tradition of space, or spaces. He has his symbolism, or none. Working with **prajna** one feels the life-force within all things, and here one calls especial attention to the plant world.

This is not the place to write on Japanese arts. The same freedom that the arm finds, or that finds the arm, that results in Sumi productions, develops sensitivity to a degree of perfection. When this sensitivity develops along with the intuition, one can take any product of the vegetable world and direct it toward a desired goal.

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The immediate space may be a vase or a bowl (with or without a frog). This is space and not a prison, so one does not distort or crush. There are no traffic jams, or playing games of “sardine” with the specimen. Every sprig, leaf, frond, flower and what not is treated as a living being, but one need no longer be confined to symbolic heritages.

Perhaps a color harmony is desired, maybe it is always desired. So one either selects from a wide variety of possible material or else introduces principles as are found in music—resolutions of concord and discord to produce in the end, a greater harmony. But this must be done by feeling, not by calculation. The plant materials themselves communicate and the sensitive craftsman knows this.

These principles, introduced by Mr. Schaeffer into a true art of Flower Arrangement, not inhibited by traditions, have passed from this art into all the arts. This spirit dominates the School of Design and is reflected in the East-West Gallery where Oriental arts are taught and collections are being made.

Once a School establishes such a norm, then its influence is bound to spread, and it is spreading. One can only say here that the graduates have in large part been successful in many industries and crafts associated with Design, that they understand how to handle ‘living space,’ to utilize repose along with activity, and to assure a favorable response from clients. This illustrates, so to speak, what a famous Oriental sage once said: “Heart speaks to heart and soul to soul.”