

ZEN NOTES

THE ART OF SUMI-E

By KIMO MARTIN



The word *sumi-e* is from the Japanese *sumi*, meaning ink, plus *e*, meaning picture, and refers to the art of painting in black ink on silk or paper, as practiced in China during the later Sung Dynasty--in the Thirteenth Century and in Japan from the time of the Ashikaga *shoguns*, two or three hundred years later. Sumi-e, as distinct from other kinds of Far Eastern art, appeared as a school of painting at a time when Zen, or Ch'an Buddhism had come to be the dominant philosophy of China. It is, in fact, a Ch'an art: at a monastery in Southern China, two Ch'an monks known as Mu Ch'i and Liang K'ai established this school of painting as an expression of Ch'an, or Zen, destined to flourish among its disciples from this period onward. Later, when the Ashikaga emperors imported Ch'an Buddhism to Japan, renaming it Zen, they brought sumi painting with it. Since that time Zen, through sumi-e and other expressions of Zen philosophy, has permeated every aspect of Japanese culture.

For Westerners, sumi painting is not always to be comprehended at first glance; it is an esoteric art in that, like Zen, it is not easily grasped. If it is not the most accessible art, however, it can be considered the highest development of Oriental expression, and may possibly be looked upon as one of the highest developments in the arts of any time or any place. A claim of this kind can be made for it because sumi-e seeks, beyond any purely aesthetic expression, to reveal the illuminated vision of Zen itself. Although it approaches this vision through the aesthetic medium, it goes beyond that means, and the relativity of values inherent in purely aesthetic matters. Of the sumi-e painters, Arthur Waley (in *Zen Buddhism and its Relation to Art*) has this to say: "Art was regarded as a kind of Zen, as a delving down into the Buddha that each of us unknowingly carries within him."

Sumi-e was not only a way of approaching Zen awareness, and of expressing the vision found there; it became, incidentally, a means of communicating this inexpressible experience to others. The communication achieved was not of an easy or obvious kind but it may well have been the only kind, for the problem of communicating the profound inner experience of Zen is an almost insurmountable one. We in the West take for granted that the ordinary modes of verbal communication are

adequate to explain anything. But this is not to be taken for granted; Zen cannot be communicated in this way, because Zen is a matter of direct experience, grasped intuitively in a flash of illumination. Language translates experience into conceptual terms, destroying it in the moment of utterance, and substituting an abstraction of Reality in its place. The *mondos*--recorded dialogues between Zen Master and disciple--illustrate this point: the student who asks, "What is the secret of Reality?" "What is the Buddha-nature?" is never answered with a philosophical explanation, for this would be to lead him away from any true realization of these meanings. Like the Zen Master, the sumi artist communicates in a different way--on another plane. The process of learning, in Zen, does not involve understanding, in our sense, so much as "seeing"--seeing a deeper vision of reality in a direct and immediate way. Sumi painting transmits this vision on an intuitive, rather than an intellectual, plane of communication.

Sumi-e is a subjective art. Its theme is landscape, primarily, although sometimes birds, animals, fruit, and flowers are painted--and occasionally human figures out of Zen legend. These images, however, have meaning only as they embody an awareness that goes beyond them, and yet is somehow not separate from them. The pictures portray, not scenes or objects, but the painter's mind, which embraces these images out of its awakened knowledge. Waley says, "Through Zen we annihilate time and see the Universe, not split into myriads of fragments, but in its primal unity...The artist's work is imbued with this vision of the subjective, nonphenomenal aspect of life." Hence in sumi-e, a landscape, for instance, is never a portrait of a particular place, but a universal image, seen through the illumination of Zen. This is an interior, rather than an objective terrain that is depicted. In it, human figures occupy only a small place, for man occupies a subordinate role in the Zen scheme of things--a viewpoint very much in contrast with Western man's view of himself and his position in the Universe. In the East, man disappears before great Nature, seen as the mysterious force that underlies the appearance of things.

Sumi painting is subjective in another way: not only does the artist project his inner vision, but he enters into the external world in such a way as to become identified with the forms he contemplates. In painting things external to himself, his absorption in a kind of mystical knowledge of them causes, finally, the distinction between subject and object to be lost. There is a story illustrating this point about a Chinese painter who was commissioned to paint a waterfall; months went by, and the painting was not forthcoming. When questioned about it, he replied: "I go every day to contemplate the waterfall; when I have become the waterfall, I will paint it."

Whatever theme he treats, the Zen artist makes it share the picture with empty space, which he employs as a positive element in the picture--a kind of theme in itself. To a Western view, space, emptiness, is something negative--a vacuum to be filled. But the Zen meaning of emptiness is altogether different; Sunyata, the void, is a living emptiness, pregnant with the not-yet-embodied potentialities

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of all things. This is the source and the recipient of all phenomenal forms, the mysterious well-spring of Reality; "empty" is only a word, like "supra-sonic," we apply to the regions into which the senses do not penetrate. Hence, emptiness is not death, but life, in Zen art, and the faintly toned areas of dull gold silk which occupy large parts of sumi paintings are not vacuums but meaningful spaces, suggestive of the all-embracing medium which surrounds and underlies existence.

The methods even more than the subject matter used by painters of sumi-e are expressions of Zen principles. In the paintings, as in the *mondo* dialogues, Reality is never described, never expounded, for that would divert the truth; rather it is hinted at by means of the subtlest suggestion. It is only by his own efforts that illumination can be attained by an individual--not through having someone else attain it for him. Likewise, in sumi-e, the observer is required to enter actively into the experience of the picture; little is done for him, other than to hint, to suggest--with a few strokes--the outlines of a universe. Looking at such a painting is not a passive thing, but calls forth the imaginative vision of the observer, and requires him to take part, in a sense, in the creative act.

Central to the method of sumi-e is the complete spontaneity essential to the practice of it. Sumi-e adds another dimension to painting, combining into a space-art the characteristics of a time-art--an art that is performed. Unlike the Western painter, who can work piecemeal over his composition--changing, experimenting, retouching--the Zen artist must bring all the forces of his personality into focus, like a dancer, at the particular point in time of his performance. Every stroke must be the perfect stroke--it can never be changed; his actions as a painter, like those of an actor or musician, are irrevocable in time. This is not only because of the exigencies of the medium--(a false stroke on silk can never be disguised)--but because the state of mind of the painter must be above false strokes and their relaboring. If he is well disciplined in Zen, all his skill, insight, and vital force will be so integrated that he can dash his brush boldly and unerringly against the virgin silk without waverings before or after the act. And these qualities in him will be communicated directly, through his strokes, to the beholder. Thus the layman may learn, through experience of the painting, something of the Zen grasp on the immediacy of life--on the ever-evolving here-and-now, which requires of each one the courage to live creatively, in the center of the moment, with all the power and depth he can command.

But the integration of personal forces necessary to the artist who performs in this spontaneous, forceful way comes through the discipline of Zen training. Hence *zazen*, the practice of meditation, is a preliminary exercise for the artist, by which he prepares himself for painting. Here is an attitude at variance with the Western one regarding the creative process: the Western artist thinks in terms of his subject matter, or of his design, or of his medium; he does not think about the state of his own mind while painting. The Oriental artist on the contrary may spend days in self-preparation--clearing his mind, concentrating his forces, before approaching the undertaking at hand. For painting

is thought of as primarily a psychic activity; the actual laying of brush to silk may be a brief affair--the culmination of a long process of inner preparation.

Stilling within himself the endless circling of personal thoughts and feelings that make up ordinary subjective experience, the Zen artist becomes empty of self and receptive to the larger forces that work within his depths. He becomes then an instrument, a channel, through which these may work. He has known how to cultivate what some have called--without, perhaps, any deep understanding of the words--divine inspiration. When this comes, he acts without having to think out what he does, for his personal concerns have been put aside and his technical skills work automatically. He is able thus to capture the evanescent moment of awareness, and to transmit through his brush the illumination which has informed his vision--as the instrument of a Reality beyond himself and at the same time, somehow, within.

ON OCTOBER 31, 1956, THE ART OF SUMI-E was graciously demonstrated at the Institute by Shinji Ishikawa, a fine painter visiting the United States to display his traditional art and great skill in the cause of better intercultural understanding who, in one year, has quietly carried off five major American art-prizes. To prepare an audience composed mainly of artists and art-students for this unusual experience, we asked Kimo Martin, art instructor now working for his Ph.D. at Columbia, to introduce us to the subject. The above talk was so helpful in this regard we thought our readers might also find it of interest. For more details of the painter and his paintings as well as a brief account of the way of study of sumi-e, see the October issue of *American Artist* in which Mr. Ishikawa's work is featured. The "Zen" on pages 2 and 3 was one of several examples of calligraphy brushed for the occasion. Mr. Ishikawa's best-known paintings made locally (several were inspired by Central Park) may be seen at the Institute until shipment to his one-man show to open Dec. 1 in the Berkshire Gallery at Pittsfield, Massachusetts.

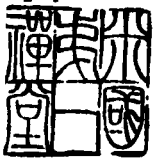
JAPAN: THE OFFICIAL GUIDE (a very useful 1000-page work edited by the Japan Travel Bureau) notes this on the subject of sumi-e: ...whereas in the West color is thought to constitute the life of a painting, in the East "black-and-white" art (sumi-e) is held in higher esteem. It is not that color-painting has not developed in the East; it has, but it does not occupy a higher level in popularity than "black-and-white." Both in China and Japan it was only after color-painting had reached its full growth that black-and-white art reached the stage of perfection.

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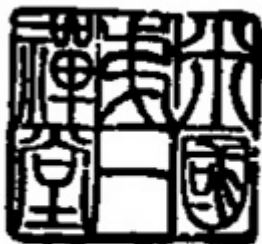
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