

Japanese Traditions and American Art

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We Americans have often given ourselves over to so-called fads in the arts. At one time it was Spanish colonial, at another eighteenth-century French. Perhaps this phenomenon of imported taste was more evident in the earlier decades when European influence was predominant and when there was more time and money to indulge in interior decoration. At that time there was also a European influence (mostly French) on modern American painting and sculpture. It took a longer time for this influence to reach the West Coast, although today in any of the Pacific states one can have a wet Picasso in twenty-four hours. I have often thought that if the West Coast had been open to aesthetic influence from Asia, as the East Coast was to Europe, what a rich nation we would be! When I was in Japan in 1933 there was a hiatus between the art of the East and of the West. Japan seemed to be experiencing a migration of artistic forms from Occident to Orient. What little Oriental influence there was in America had hardly penetrated the West Coast. But World War II broke this hiatus. Today the European influence is on the wane, and we are developing an indigenous style. However, we are growing more and more conscious of what I would term the Japanese aesthetic. This can be seen in residential architecture particularly in the West, in the decorative arts, especially in pottery and weaving, and recently in abstract painting and sculpture. Several contemporary American artists have expressed an interest in Zen Buddhism with the implication that this has influenced their work, and the subject has been much discussed in the galleries and art journals. What hold this philosophy will have on our national culture, how indigenous it might become as part of our aesthetic remains to be seen.

No doubt there are many people who understand Zen better than I do. What I have read about Zen is naturally limited by scarcity of translations. I have attempted meditation in a Zen monastery and have talked with a few abbots but still I have never experienced Satori or Enlightenment and I doubt if any other American has. Also, I doubt if the modern painters in the East have had this experience. I have noticed that many Japanese artists, like their European colleagues, have been clas-

ifying their aims by expressing them in words. While the result is interesting, the kernel is rarely revealed. From the articles written by Japanese painters I find that they take the word "abstract" as part of the Zen idea in painting, and it is beginning to be considered in the same way by certain American artists. This is no doubt due to basic ideas in Zen such as Simplicity, Directness, and Profundity. In the way of Zen this includes not only art in all its branches but also daily living. In other words it is an expression of the spirit. Similarly, Shinto with its accent on simplicity is beautifully expressed in the temples of this cult.

The Japanese artist Saburo Hasegawa wrote (in an article in *The World of Abstract Art*), "It seems to me that in general old Japan was newer than the new Occident, while new Japan is apparently more old-fashioned than either the new Occident or old Japan itself"—a statement that needs rereading and reflection. The old Japan with its Zen teaching and philosophy of Taoism found that what was in the empty cup was more palatable than what was in the full one. That is, the circle of emptiness freed by the imagination permitted one to reach a state of mind which released him from having to consider someone else's ideas. When I was in Japan in the early '30s, it seemed to me that in Japanese art (not including the westernized variety) there were two strong characteristics: concentration and consecration. That all of nature did not have to be shown as in a stuffed bird; hence there was more life for the imagination. I remember a Chinese painter friend remarking one morning while we were looking at a small aquarium with its swimming fish in a restaurant window in New York, "Why do Western artists only paint a fish after it is dead?" Shades of William Chase and Charles Hawthorne!

In a broad comparison between Eastern and Western art it could be said that in the East artists have been more concerned with line and in the West with mass. Certainly the Eastern artists were far from the Renaissance concept as expressed by my Chinese friend who observed, "The Western artists' paintings are framed holes." Of course, today the illusionistic style is dead and has been for some time. One hears it said often that Picasso marks the end of the classic period in the West. Where then shall we turn?

A few decades ago we went to the galleries to see herons in the marshes, winter scenes at twilight, apples on a table. Nowadays we go to see lines, squares, and great squashes of paint. Much that passes as abstract art whether in Asia or the U.S. and Europe is not necessarily related to Simplicity, Directness, and Profundity. Perhaps if we omit the last word, the other two tally. That abstract art has in many ways become an Academy appears certain. But somewhere in this, and in what we saw before, there were a few paintings that radiated the spirit and it is these we seek, no matter what garment is worn.

When I resided at the Zen monastery I was given a sumi ink painting of a large free brush circle to meditate upon. What was it? Day after day I would look at it. Was it selflessness? Was it the Universe—where I could lose my identity? Perhaps I didn't see its aesthetic and missed the fine points of the brush which to a trained Oriental eye would reveal much about the character of the man who painted it. But after my visit I found I had new eyes and that which seemed of little importance became magnified in words and considerations not based on my former vision. When I saw a great dragon painted in free brush style on a ceiling in a temple in Kyoto I thought of the same rhythmical power of Michelangelo—the rendering of the form was different—the swirling clouds accompanying his majestic flight in the heavenly sphere were different, but the same power of the spirit pervaded both.

"Let nature take over in your work." These words from my old friend Takizaki were at first confusing but cleared to the idea: "Get out of the way." We hear some artists speak today of the act of painting. This in its best sense could include the meaning of my old friend. But a State of Mind is the first preparation and from this the action proceeds. Peace of mind is another ideal, perhaps the ideal state to be sought for in the painting and certainly preparatory to the act.

This is not easy to accomplish, but in a highly industrialized and competitive society it could be a fine antidote. Not to look for fine draughtsmanship or fine color—perhaps no color—but directness of spirit will become for us a new point of view as the arts of the East and of the West draw closer together.