

ZEN & MODERN ART: East-West Rhythms & Reverberations
An Interview with Lanier Graham by Sylvia Medeiros
Copyright June 21, 2003 Lanier Graham

SM: HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE EXHIBITION, IN A FEW WORDS?

LG: An introduction to a little studied theme. Many will be surprised by how widespread the influence of Zen has been. There will be three parts to the exhibition. In the beginning, a gallery of traditional Zen painters and calligraphers. In the middle will be featured Surrealists such as Miró, Hayter, and Onslow-Ford as well as Tobey and Graves, then Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, and Franz Kline.

The last galleries will focus on notable Bay Area figures. This group will include both Zen masters such as Suzuki Roshi, founding Abbott of San Francisco's Zen Center, the first Zen monastery in America, and Zen-inspired individuals such as Sam Francis, one of the first Bay Area artists to gain an international reputation, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the poet-painter who is now the Poet Laureate of San Francisco, Sabro Hasegawa, who introduced Zen art to many painters in San Francisco and New York, and Alan Watts who introduced Zen to millions of people by means of books, radio, and television. Watts also taught at the California Institute of Asian Studies in San Francisco as did Hasegawa and Tobase, when Gordon Onslow Ford was a student there. Kasuaki Tanahashi, one of the best known Zen painters in the United States today, lives in Berkeley. He will create a special Zen painting on opening night.

SM: HOW WAS THE RESEARCH DONE, AND THE SELECTION MADE?

LG: When I decided to do this exhibition, I knew it would have to be very general survey, the highlights. I wanted to present key moments of the historical landscape and not just the late moments of the '50s and '60s. Historians of the Abstract Expressionist era know that Zen was important during the '50s in the US and in Europe. But when did this interest begin? For years I have been trying to "peel back the onion" on this question. When I began this study many years ago, as a young curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, my interviews with de Kooning, Motherwell, and Newman revealed that their interest actually went back to the '40s. (Another decade peeled away) Who turned them on to Zen? It turns out to have been Bill Hayter, the Surrealist who taught New York artists how to make spontaneous prints during World War II, and then San Francisco artists in the late '40s.

So I went to see Hayter in Paris. You may remember some of our conversations from my book *THE SPONTANEOUS GESTURE* [National Gallery of Australia, 1987]. Hayter told me his own interest in Zen and the interest of a number of Surrealists in Zen went back to the '30s. Other documents support his very clear memories. (So, another decade peels away; but more decades are unraveling). Hayter, who wrote the introduction to the American edition of Kandinsky's book, *ON THE SPIRITUAL IN ART*, also told me Tzara was comparing Dada with Buddhism in the '20s, and that Kandinsky and Arp also had been interested way back before World War I.

That documentation is interesting but not conclusive, e.g., Kandinsky reviewed a show with Zen art in 1909. Seeing those intensely dynamic abstract gestures may have inspired Kandinsky's historic leap into total abstraction. These possibilities are still under study. I've limited this selection to artists I know were interested in Zen and whose work reveals aspects of that interest.

Kandinsky is about as far back as Zen reverberations can be traced, because Zen did not come West until the turn of the century. But Zen is an aspect of Buddhism, of course. It followed after a general interest in Buddhism that in the late 19th century was becoming more popular in the U.S. and Europe than most people realize. All this history cannot be covered in detail in the exhibition, of course, but it will be in my book.

People seriously interested in Buddhism and Western art want to know how it began. When is the first evidence of modern artists being very interested in Buddhism? It's the Post-Impressionists and/or Symbolist years when van Gogh's paints a self portrait as a Buddhist Monk, when Gauguin prints Buddhist icons, and Redon paints and prints more images of Buddha than any other artist of the era.

My local research began when I started visiting San Francisco in the late '60s. With Suzuki Roshi developing the first Zen monastery in the U.S., and Watts being the popular voice of Zen nationwide from his houseboat in Sausalito, San Francisco had become the American capital of the Zen spirit. This spirit was being felt by many local artists in the '50s and '60s, and still is. Both this postwar history and the earlier history are just starting to be studied in depth because Zen and Western art is a very new field of research by art historians. There has been only two books published so far. I think there will be many more.

Much research is being done right here in the Bay Area. Important work is being done by Mark Johnson at SF State, by Jackie Baas in Berkeley, and by others. A recent study by Ian Harris, "Buddhism, Art, and Modernity" in WESTWARD DHARMA, 2000 was published by the University of California Press in Berkeley. He reviews Redon's many Buddha-based works between 1895 and 1906. Redon was so far into the depths of Buddhism that he understood we do not have to die to find peace ? that each of us can become a Buddha, that is to say, all of us can realize our Buddha-Nature here and now.

SM: THEN WHAT KIND OF PEOPLE WOULD WE BE?

LG: We would be Enlightened. We would be totally aware of the moment, not conceptualizing experience but being fully present in every experience. We would stand firmly between the experience of everything that passes by and nothing at all, while holding on to neither. We would "kiss the joy as it flies" to quote William Blake. We would continuously act directly, spontaneously, fearlessly, and lovingly. According to the teachings, selfishness will have disappeared, and our every thought, word, and deed will be an act of love.

This is not to suggest all the artists in this exhibition were Enlightened. Most of them were not Buddhists, and most did not even meditate in traditional ways. Very few were religious in any traditional way. They were reaching for new forms.

There were many degrees of Zen influence, some only formal influences. Some did not go beyond a fascination with the potential of singular spontaneous brushstrokes to the philosophy which animates this kind of brushwork.

However, most of these artists were engaged in a spiritual quest, a secular search for wholeness, and most of them regarded the process of making art as a kind of meditation. That can be said of much of modernism as a whole, but it is especially true of the artists represented in this exhibition.

Most of the leading abstract artists of the first half of the 20th century were engaged in a non-religious search for the transcendent. Zen was one of many inspirations along the way, along with Alchemy, Tantra, shamanism, etc. A majority of the artists in this exhibition went beyond merely formal influences into the psychology behind the forms.

They held up Zen ideals as goals and moved towards those ideals in their work by means of the meditative practice of making spontaneous gestures. Trying to set aside the rational side of their minds and trust the power of their intuition, they attempted to go beyond their mind-enclosed egos and compose spontaneously from a deeper dimension of their consciousness. They were not trying to imitate Zen art. Each of these artists took the idea of spontaneous gestures in the direction of their own sensibility, their own being.

It was a struggle, a great struggle. Our rationalizing minds do not give up control easily. The art of accomplished Zen masters was an ongoing inspiration for Western artists. The painting and calligraphy of such Zen masters does not show any signs of struggle, only pure spontaneity. They are beyond the pain of the monumental struggle to be free from the tyranny of the ego. They ARE free.

One can feel this kind of freedom in many forms of Zen art: figures, landscapes, etc. But it is calligraphy which seems to have been particularly influential. That is why we have gathered a selection of traditional Zen calligraphy at the beginning of the exhibition. Represented are some of the most respected Zen artists of the last hundred years. If all goes well, we will have masterpieces by Reiyo, Tesshu, Nantembo, and Bunsho. The most famous work in that first gallery will be a Zen circle, or *enso*, by Suzuki Roshi. Rendered with a single stroke, the *enso* is regarded by many as the essential Zen symbol. The spirit of this traditional Zen symbol has inspired many modern artists.

Western art, under the influence of Zen ideals and painterly techniques, primarily has been a record of painful, heroic journeys toward the finding of true freedom, sometimes with moments of luminosity breaking through.

For more information, contact Sylvia Medeiros at CSUH

510 885 4299