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The Beginnings of Zen Paintings

by Sally Swope

Monochrome ink paintings made in the Sung and Yuan dynasties, known as Sogen-ga, are somewhat offensive to Chinese.

“They’re a cross-cultural phenomenon — not exactly Chinese or Japanese art, made by amateur artists in China but collected, preserved and appreciated in Japan,” explains James Cahill. As curator of the current exhibit at the University Art Museum at the University of California at Berkeley, Cahill selected its 44 rare hanging scrolls and album leaves that date from the 12th through 14th centuries.

The Japanese often saw these paintings otherwise than as the Chinese artists had intended. Many of these paintings are considered to be Zen works, called Ch’an in China. The best clues about what is Zen painting lie in the subject matter, which includes panoramas of idealized landscapes, eccentric men from Zen and Taoist legends, and animals and plants selected for their natural symbolism. (Other kinds of Zen calligraphy, activities and portraits are not shown in this exhibit.)

Simply because of the religious affiliation of an artist the subject could be Zen, but not all paintings by that artist were necessarily Zen. The confusion deepens because some subjects such as wild orchids, spring plum trees and sturdy bamboo were painted by both Ch’an monks and the literati, amateur artists who painted for their own amusement.

The quick and spontaneous style of Zen painting represented an ideal of direct expression, which was also embraced by Taoists and Confucian scholars. Artists working in this manner used no under-drawings, and there was no erasing. If a mistake was made, they simply started over. Every stroke required both psychological and technical training, because each stroke became a reflection from the mind transmitted by the skill of the hand. Patrons of Zen—temples, monks, the warrior class and military leaders—collected these paintings by the thousands, beginning in the 13th century and continuing through the 16th century. Now only a few hundred remain.

Like the Renaissance in the West, the Sung was the great age of Chinese painting. Diverse schools, which coexisted, influenced later painting styles. Monochrome ink painting was practiced by the literati and monk-artists and was also popular with court artists, such as Li An-chung, who painted the “Quail.” One famous southern Sung painter was Ma Yuan who, with his son Ma Lin, is represented in this exhibit. Ma Yuan’s “Plum Tree and Ducks by a River,” one of many paintings never before seen in the United States, was admired by the Japanese artists for his brushstrokes, such as the ax-cut strokes of the rocks, the three planes of distance, and the principle of things as they move on.

The Japanese monks often cut up the paintings and remounted them, favoring asymmetrical compositions, unfilled space and an emphasis on line that suggest a sense of formal esthetics. "Han-Sban Reading a Handscroll," attributed to Lo-ch'uang, may be the most interesting painting in the exhibit; the figure's inner vitality is clearly stated in the man's firm pose, his expressive eyes as he reads the scroll, and his wild, unruly hair.

Realism, the romantic landscapes and the quick, spontaneous styles of painting represented in this exhibit contradict the stereotype that all monochrome ink paintings look the same. Chinese critics, even today, often think the brushwork in these paintings is coarse and the subjects, trivial.

The Japanese collectors, however, feel that many paintings express great control and freedom and add a dimension of intuitive understanding.