


# Medieval Japanese Zen painting in the Muromachi period. Study of a hanging scroll attributed to Sesshū Tōyō (雪舟等楊): Hánshān (寒山) the poet, or Zhutou / Zhimeng (猪頭 / 志蒙), the boar's head priest?

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**ENG Abstract:** If asked in a museum in Japan «how many are authentic works by Sesshū?», there is a traditional answer: «in theory, only six national treasures» (Kokuhō roku ten 国宝6点). Scholars attribute between twenty and thirty works to this legendary figure of Japanese painting from the Muromachi period (circa 1336-1573). This article analyzes an ancient vertical scroll attributed to Sesshū Tōyō and preserved at the Complutense University of Madrid (CUCJMP01), as a paradigmatic work of medieval Japanese painting of the Muromachi period. This vertical scroll exhibits a disconcerting apparition: a Zen monk, vegetarian, who carries with devotion, between his hands, a boar's head, severed, monastery up, hillside down. The importance of Sesshū Tōyō in the 20th and 21st centuries is evaluated, in which monasteries he resided and trained as a painter, who were his teachers, the type of religious portraits of spiritual character, differentiating between his self-portraits and portraits of coetaneous monks, the liturgical use of the scrolls. Prototypical prints of eccentric monks are analyzed, highlighting their iconographic affinities, as well as the details of the spiritual portrait of the monk illustrated in the aforementioned scroll. The calligraphic signatures and the seal of honor are pondered. There are affinities with contemporary European monk-painters such as Fra Angelico and Filippo Lippi, since all three share their fondness for observing nature and painting landscapes, the harmonious elaboration of the human figure in different poses, the refinement in the handling of the linear brushstroke, the peculiar handling of perspective, the ingenuity when introducing colors (in screens and sliding doors). These are elements that characterize the Muromachi style, which includes the early Kano school.

**Keywords:** Sesshū Tōyō, Shokokuji, Muromachi School, Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, Taikō Josetsu, Tensho Shubun, Sakyamuni Descends the Mountain, Zhutou, Hánshān.

## ES Pintura zen medieval japonesa en el periodo Muromachi. Estudio de un rollo colgante atribuido a Sesshū Tōyō (雪舟等楊): ¿Hánshān (寒山) el poeta, o Zhutou / Zhimeng (猪頭 / 志蒙), el sacerdote cabeza de jabalí?

**Resumen:** Si se pregunta en un museo en Japón «¿cuántas son las obras auténticas de Sesshū?», hay una respuesta tradicional: «en teoría, solo seis tesoros nacionales» (Kokuhō roku ten 国宝6点). Los especialistas atribuyen entre veinte y treinta obras a esta figura legendaria de la pintura japonesa del periodo Muromachi (circa 1336-1573). En este artículo se analiza un rollo vertical antiguo atribuido a Sesshū Tōyō y conservado en la universidad Complutense de Madrid (CUCJMP01), como obra paradigmática de la pintura medieval japonesa del periodo Muromachi. Este rollo vertical exhibe una aparición desconcertante: un monje zen, vegetariano, que traslada con devoción, entre las manos, una cabeza de jabalí, sajada, monasterio arriba, ladera abajo. Se evalúa la importancia de Sesshū Tōyō en los siglos XX y XXI, en qué monasterios residió y se formó como pintor, quiénes fueron sus maestros, el tipo de retratos religiosos de carácter espiritual, diferenciando entre sus autorretratos y los retratos de monjes coetáneos, el uso litúrgico de los rollos. Se analizan estampas prototípicas de monjes excéntricos resaltando sus afinidades iconográficas, así como los detalles del retrato espiritual del monje ilustrado en el rollo citado. Se ponderan las firmas caligráficas y el sello de pundonor. Existen afinidades con monjes pintores coetáneos europeos como Fray Angélico y Fray Filippo Lippi, pues comparten los tres su afición a observar la naturaleza y a pintar paisajes, la elaboración armoniosa de la figura humana en distintas poses, el refinamiento en el manejo de la pincelada lineal, el

manejo peculiar de la perspectiva, el ingenio a la hora de introducir colores (en biombos y puertas corredizas). Son elementos que caracterizan el estilo Muromachi que incluye la escuela Kano inicial.

**Palabras clave:** Sesshū Tōyō, Sesshū Tōyō, Shōkokuji, Escuela Muromachi, Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, Taiko Josetsu, Tensho Shubun, Sakyamuni descende de la montaña, Zhutou, Hānshān

**Summary:** 1. Introduction: Medieval painting in the Muromachi period. Differences with European medieval art 2. In the field of art history, is Sesshū Tōyō relevant or not? 3. Monasteries where Sesshū Tōyō lived and painted 4. Influential artists in Shōkokuji monastery 5. The spiritual portrait of a central figure such as Sakyamuni Buddha, in Shōkokuji 6. Spiritual Portraits of Eccentric Monks in Shōkokuji Monastery. 6.1. Humorous portraits of five eccentric monks. 6.2. Youth portrait of two great Zen masters. 6.3. What is this monk holding in his hands? 7. The Spiritual Portrait of an Eccentric Monk attributed to Sesshū Tōyō. 8. What is the source of this enigma? The seal, the signature, or the iconographically curious mind? 8.1. Is the seal a rubric, a reminder or a label? 8.2. Reading the signature as a gestalt or word-to-word coupling. 8.2.1. Gestalt in Sesshū Tōyō's signatures by columns. 8.2.2. Ideograms one by one by three rows 9. Conclusions 10. Sources and bibliographic references

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## **「室町時代の日本の禅画。雪舟等楊の作品とされる掛け軸の研究：詩人 寒山 か、猪の頭をした僧 猪頭(志蒙)か。」**

**要約:** 日本の美術館で「雪舟の本物は何点あるか」と聞かれたら、理論上、国宝は6点だけだとの答えが返ってくるだろう。室町時代(1336-1573年頃)の伝説的な日本画家である雪舟の作品は、研究者の間では20点から30点とされている。本稿では、マドリード・コンプルテンセ大学(CUCJMP01)に保存されている雪舟筆とされる縦巻を、室町時代中世日本画の典型的な作品として分析する。この縦長の巻物には、精進潔斎の禅僧が、切断されたイノシシの頭を両手で挟み、僧院を上にして山腹を下にしているという、不穏な幻影が描かれている。本稿では20世紀と21世紀における雪舟等楊の重要性を評価し、彼がどの修道院に住み、画家として修行したのか、誰が彼の師であったのか、精神的な性格を持つ宗教的な肖像画の種類、彼の自画像と共同制作の僧侶の肖像画との区別、巻物の典礼的な使用、風変わりな修道士を描いた典型的な版画を分析し、図像学的な親和性を強調するとともに、前述の巻物に描かれた修道士の精神的な肖像の詳細を明らかにする。更に書に記された署名や落款印についても考察する。そして、フラ・アンジェリコやフィリッポ・リッピのような、同時代のヨーロッパの修道士画家たちとの共通点、自然観察や風景画を好んだこと、さまざまなポーズをとる人物像の調和のとれた精巧さ、直線的な筆致の洗練、独特の遠近法の扱い、(屏風や襖に)色彩を取り入れる際の工夫など、初期狩野派を含む室町様式を特徴づける要素も考察する。

**キーワード:** 雪舟等楊, 相国寺, 室町派, 足利義満, 太閤上越, 天正修文, 下山する釈迦牟尼, 猪頭, 寒山。

## 1. Introduction: Medieval painting in the Muromachi period. Differences with European medieval art

The Muromachi period (1336-1573) is a key stage in the philosophical and aesthetic evolution of Japan, with a strong influence of Taoist thought and Zen Buddhism, both doctrines imported from China. During this period the adoption of the Sumi-e technique was consolidated, which became one of the most representative pictorial forms of Japanese medieval art, of which Sesshū Tōyō (雪舟等楊) is its most prominent representative. It was a new conception of pictorial expression in its totality. According to Tanaka, «the true emergence of a new art had to await until the Muromachi period (1336-1568), when the Ashikaga shoguns, establishing their seat of government in Kyoto, created a new artistic world and a new academy. It was only during the Muromachi age that the ancient period was at last overcome».<sup>1</sup>

The technique of «Ink Wash Painting) or *Sumi-e* (墨絵), reflects the philosophical conception of Zen Buddhism, especially from the essential aspects of *simplicity* (簡素, *kanso*) and *spontaneity* (自然, *shizen*), which lie at the basis of both Zen Buddhist spirituality and the aesthetic expression of Zen Buddhism in the fine arts. *Sumi-e* Style (墨絵) is one of the most traditional forms of expression in Japanese painting, and uses the different radiation of shades of laughter through the concentration of ink, so despite being very automatic it allows to create a wide spectrum of shades and textures. This style was imported to Japan from the Zen monks who brought it from China, and our author stands out for adapting this style and perfecting it from the Japanese cultural specificity, being one of the pioneers of such adaptation. It is not only a form of artistic expression, but a meditative practice deeply linked to Zen spirituality.

The spontaneity and simplicity of the «300 shades of gray between black and white» created by the dilution of black ink on paper reflect the impermanence of reality and the importance of emptiness, fundamental concepts of Zen Buddhism. On the other hand, his search for the essential is reflected from the capture of the inner nature of the object represented from a minimum number of strokes, eliminating any detail or accident that diverts us from the contemplation of the essential nature of the object.

Simplicity (簡素) is a central value in Zen doctrine, and it is also one of the aesthetic characteristics of its style. Simplicity does not mean only the elimination of unnecessary strokes nor the reduction to a minimum of the elements present in the compositions of the scrolls, but in the ability of the painting to reflect the greatest amount of reality with the maximum economy of means. Each stroke represents a form of union between the painter and the object represented, executed with simplicity and precision, freehand, in a single stroke, without corrections or hesitation. Each brushstroke is not only an aesthetic act, but also a manifestation of the deepest part of Zen philosophy. In his paintings landscapes, animals or human figures are represented in a minimalist way, but the energy does not come from objects

or characters, but from the negative space, from the areas of the scroll where the ink is absent. This emptiness (空, *kū*) is not a negative and inert element as it is usually understood in Western thought and aesthetics, but creates a sense of balance and harmony through the expression of the vital energy that unifies all objects.

Spontaneity in *Sumi-e* (自然, *shizen* in Japanese, *ziran* in Chinese) is another essential element of his work. In Zen Buddhism, spontaneity is not synonymous with uncontrolled improvisation, but with action arising from a state of mind of clarity and total presence. The concept is imported to Japan from Chinese Taoism, expressed in both the Liezi and the Zhuangzi. It represents the particular Tao of each being, its peculiar way of being, its way of expressing the cosmological Tao that is the starting point and end of all beings. Acting with spontaneity the Tao manifests itself in its fullness, allowing to know without any mediation the nature of the represented object. Moreover, bringing about the unification of the painter with the represented reality, of which the painter becomes the voice of the river or the mountain. The stroke must be unique, fluid, without doubts or hesitations, without subsequent corrections, definitive and without defect.

All this requires the painter's energy to unify in a moment of impermanence with the object, realizing the Zen doctrine that today we call mindfulness, that is, investment in the present moment, in the *here and now* (此時, *ima koto*). Each scroll is a unique and unrepeatable expression, an act of creation and unification represented by a genuine combination of mind-heart (心 Chinese *xin*, Japanese *shin*, ころ *kokoro*), brush and ink. His minimalist approach and focus on spontaneity and simplicity has a strong influence on the Zen painting of Sesshū Tōyō (雪舟等楊).

Undoubtedly European medieval art and Japanese medieval art of the Muromachi period arise in very different social and cultural contexts, although some parallels appear. In the European Middle Ages painting was associated with the doctrinal purpose of Christian sacred art, centered on the representation of religious figures and scenes for the purpose of worship or for didactic purposes of explanation of doctrine and expansion of the faith. In the painting of the Muromachi period in Japan a spiritual dimension is also present, but focused on the insertion of the human being in nature, in the cosmic order of the Tao understood as the unifying element of all the diversity of natural beings.

In the medieval Christian worldview, the story of the creation of the world by a personal God, and the incarnation of his Son as the culmination of a process of salvation of the world, plays an essential role. In this sense, Christianity presents the image of a personal God to whom we can pray, with whom we can dialogue. And it also represents the figures of the Virgin Mary and the saints as mediators between Heaven and human beings. These figures facilitate dialogue with a personal God to whom one prays with the dual function of asking for graces and expressing adoration and devotion.

However, in Taoism and Zen Buddhism there is no sense of prayer, because there is no personal god to whom we can address our prayers. The Tao is like rainwater, which pours down on the good and

<sup>1</sup> Ichimatsu Tanaka and Bruce Darling. *Japanese ink painting: Shubun to Sesshū*. Weatherhill/Heibonsha, 1972, 25.



the bad, on the crops and the weeds, without making distinctions. It is not a provident god who takes care of human beings made in his image and likeness, but a metaphysical entity of which we are all unfailingly a part. Union with the Tao is achieved through meditation, not prayer. Zen Buddhist philosophy promotes meditation and contemplation as the most perfect paths to enlightenment and liberation. Thus, Muromachi painting, especially in the Sumi-e technique, invites a meditative contemplation of nature in which the painter becomes the voice of the mountains, rivers and forests. Nature speaks to us through a painting that seeks to express its most essential reality, stripped of unnecessary ornaments or elements foreign to the spontaneity of the natural form that characterizes each being (*ziran*). Everything comes out of the Tao, and everything will return to the Tao in a revolving cosmic movement that is also natural and spontaneous. The influence of Shintoism is also constantly present in this vision of human integration with nature. Given the syncretism that characterizes the religious landscape in Japan, this thought of unification with nature characteristic of Shintoism and Taoism is always in tune with Zen Buddhism. There is therefore no infinite distance between God and the world in need of redemption, present in medieval European art.

Rather than emphasizing the divine or sacred character of its characters, Muromachi spirituality is a spirituality that finds transcendence in the immanent, that pays more attention to the representation of the totality of the real than to portraiture or other forms of human representation. The art of painting itself is a form of meditation in which the artist demonstrates a balance between spontaneity and mastery of technique, reaching a state of union with the Tao, with the permanent. And then there is the paradox of seeking eternity through the expression of the ephemeral. This perception of the impermanence of existence (*mono no aware* 物の哀れ) is present in the pictorial works of this period. Occasional moments are represented, such as a mist that hides part of the mountain, or fallen leaves on the ground representing the arrival of autumn. The cycle of the seasons and the circularity of his concept of temporality reflect the radical impermanence of individuality of all beings, a basic principle of Buddhist doctrine.

Another fundamental difference is found in the use of color and space. Sumi is an essentially chromatic, minimalist and essentialist technique, which uses the absence of brushstrokes to capture the energy of the scene, and which takes advantage of emptiness to represent the noumenal, the invisibility of essential realities, suggesting the presence of the Tao in each of them. In contrast, European medieval art, both Gothic and Renaissance artists, seek to fill all the spaces of the pictorial work through details and ornaments, with an exuberant use of color, fleeing from a «horror vacui», from a fear of emptiness. In any case, we also find resonances between both forms of religious representation with medieval European painters such as Fra Angelico, who sought to capture the nature of the sacred through light and proportion. In that sense it is close to Japanese aesthetics, for which it shares a common desire: to capture the transcendent through emptiness, through the immaterial.

In the collection of Chinese and Japanese art of the Complutense University of Madrid there is a vertical scroll with the reference CUC-JMP-01 that can be attributed to Sesshū Tōyō and that is a paradigmatic example of the aesthetic and doctrinal characteristics of the pictorial works of Zen Buddhist and Taoist roots of the Muromachi period. In this article we analyze this work, drawing consequences about the Japanese medieval religious art, and in particular the one corresponding to the figure of Sesshū Tōyō.



Figure 1. Box and scroll attributed to Sesshū Tōyō

Figure 1 shows the wooden box (A) used to preserve the integrity of this scroll and protect it from moisture and airborne particles. The handwritten calligraphy is close to the clerical style (*reisho*, 隸書), that was commonly used to inscribe official documents. The strokes are thicker and more uniform, taking into account the square space reserved for each ideogram.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the calligraphy of these inscriptions are closer to the *Gyōsho* style (行書), often considered an intermediate style between the clerical script and the *kai* style. It precedes the standard scripts and is closer to the *kai* script than the cursive script. While the latter was reserved in ancient China for letters and other informal writings, *Gyōsho* script was used for more formal documents, rituals and artists' signatures. Its expression can be quite varied: when written with more curves it resembles cursive, and when written in a straight line it is more similar to standard script. One can appreciate in the signatures of Sesshū the consciousness in the brushstrokes, characteristic of this style. In the process of inscription, the brush strokes are not connected by solid lines, but are connected with feeling. The streaks of the brush stroke appear as lines that are drawn vigorously but with less intensity so that

<sup>2</sup> Ichimatsu Tanaka and Bruce Darling. *Japanese ink painting: Shubun to Sesshū*. Weatherhill/Heibonsha, 1972, 25.

they are thinner and thus distinguishable from the solid lines. The first stroke is made more softly than in the standard style, and the turns and folds take on a curved and rounded form. Sometimes strokes are omitted, and the order of the brushstrokes may vary, also in dotted strokes.<sup>3</sup> The text reads *Sesshū Hitsu* (雪舟筆), which can be translated as «from the brush of Sesshū» and can be interpreted as a reference to the Japanese painter known as Sesshū Tōyō (雪舟等楊, 1420-1506). The author is an anonymous calligrapher, probably an archivist, with remarkable artistic skill because the vertical line is firm and balanced. The carbon-14 test of the box and the broken black cotton ribbon holding the scroll were not performed due to budget constraints. The box is custom-made from Paulownia (without going into details about its organic nature), a fire-resistant wood. The wooden profiles all fit together.

As for section B in Figure 1, the text on the outer spine of the scroll certifies «*Sesshū jinbutsu ga*» (雪舟人物画), which can be translated as «figurative painting of Sesshū», and it becomes an independent testimony, possibly by a librarian, accrediting what can be appreciated by whoever requests and uses the vertical scroll. The author uses a calligraphic style *Gyōsho* very close to *Kai Shu* (kaisho) (楷書, regular, standard) as seen before, and each ideogram (clear and legible) is placed in the vertical square advanced. A skillful brush is necessary because each ideogram must have its own proportional space.<sup>4</sup>

This work of art has been properly cataloged, protected, and located, as evidenced by the information provided by A and B in Figure 1. It could be displayed in a liturgical ceremony or exhibited for its quality to motivated and educated visitors.

The black ribbon of fine cloth used to tie the scroll to the wooden box in a sophisticated manner indicates care in preservation or high regard for the scroll by its owner, whoever he or she may have been.

## 2. In the field of art history, is Sesshū Tōyō relevant or not?

It's unclear whether he was the son of aristocratic parents in Nara, Kyoto, or Okayama. More precisely, Oda, his given name, may refer to a village or a samurai branch loyal to the Fujiwara clan (founded in 668 and a powerful influence at the imperial court until 1868). He spent his youth in the Hōfukuji temple (built in 1232), which still exists and can be visited, and is commemorated in the monolith in Yamaguchi, (Jōeiji temple). Another version is that he was the son of a temple priest (by default, they were necessarily celibate).

According to Carter-Cowell<sup>5</sup>, at the age of 10 Sesshū took refuge in Hōfukuji, a temple in Bitchū province, where he was born in 1420. Other sources attest that at the age of 10 he went to Shokokuji in Kyoto, where he studied painting with Tenshō Shūbun and Zen doctrine with Shudo Harurin, some

of the most prestigious masters of the time. From this time comes his religious name as a novice, Tōyō (等楊) given by his master, which in Chinese means *willow-like* and suggests that he was tall and thin. He preferred to practice painting rather than study Buddhist sutras. This was made possible by the structural division of the large monasteries in Kyoto into two preferred areas of activity. Monks who were skilled in painting were assigned to the administrative department, which included the maintenance of temples, economic management, and the care of the heritage, including artworks.<sup>6</sup>

One day, his master apparently tied him to a pole until night as punishment. In the morning, he thought he saw rats at the young man's feet when he released his grip. He had «painted the rats as his tears dripped onto the floor, using his big toe as a brush and his tears as ink. They appeared on the temple floor as powerful and alive as if they were running around».<sup>7</sup> This is probably an anecdote that was still a legend two centuries later. After that, the master allowed him to handle the brushes, papers and inks as needed. He assumed that memorization and recitation of sacred texts were not within his capabilities.

This reputation greatly facilitated the quality of life and professional career of a young novice with a talent for calligraphic expression, friendly style, and the art of painting variations on monastic, devotional, and classical themes.

Sesshū 雪舟 became his Chinese brush name when he was about 40 years old and can be translated as «snow boat». The choice was not improvised, as it was confirmed in writing with a poetic commentary by the senior monk Ryūkō, then resident at Shōkokuji Monastery in Kyoto. «Snow covers the whole world and symbolizes the spiritual substance of truth. A boat, which is always moving but can also be still, represents the ebb and flow of the mind».<sup>8</sup> If the anecdote is accurate, there is another version of what happened: in the middle of a sea voyage, «legend has it that his boat was so showered with poems and dedications on snow-white paper that the name Sesshū or Snow Boat clung to him».<sup>9</sup>

This is the question with which this article begins: are the images preserved by Sesshū still relevant in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? In 1941, Carter-Cowell successfully defended her doctoral dissertation on Sesshū at Columbia University. She prepared a private publication (which was required at that time), and in 1975 Hacker Art Books (a publisher specializing in art historical research) published it. She had direct access and permission to photograph and publish 18 plates. She located most of them in private collections and provides an extensive commentary for each one, as well as a detailed catalog of 136 paintings attributed to him. The location is not reliable because the thesis was written and defended before the bombing

<sup>3</sup> Shodo-kanji. *Acerca del Gyōsho*. Accessed 11/09/2024. [https://shodo-kanji.com/b1-1-3Gyōsho\\_semicursive\\_style.html](https://shodo-kanji.com/b1-1-3Gyōsho_semicursive_style.html)

<sup>4</sup> Paloma Fadón-Salazar. Breve historia de la caligrafía china. [Brief history of Chinese calligraphy]. Madrid: Historia Viva, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Shodo-kanji. *Acerca del Gyōsho*. Accessed 11/09/2024. [https://shodo-kanji.com/b1-1-3Gyōsho\\_semicursive\\_style.html](https://shodo-kanji.com/b1-1-3Gyōsho_semicursive_style.html)

<sup>6</sup> Van Briessen, Fritz. *The way of the brush: painting techniques of China and Japan*. Tokyo: Tuttle, 1990.

<sup>7</sup> Jon Carter-Cowell. *Under the seal of Sesshū*. New York: Hacker Art, 1975, [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1941].

<sup>8</sup> Fang Hui. *Sesshū Tōyō's selective assimilation of Ming Chinese painting elements*. Master thesis. Eugene: University of Oregon, Dept. of History of Art and Architecture, 2013, 24.

<sup>9</sup> Jon Carter-Cowell. *Under the seal*, 4.

of Pearl Harbor. This old list does not mention any figurative drawings that include monks walking alone. This is the target in Figures 5, 6, and 9.

In 1959, the Asian publisher Charles E. Tuttle reached an agreement with the head of the Japanese family Motomichi Mori to photograph and print the Long Scroll, a Zen Landscape Journey,<sup>10</sup> in book form with folded sheets. It is a 40-page start, without words, depicting only a landscape, of which at least 30 editions have been published. The cover of some editions is made of silk, others of wood. It is a complex and meticulous book that unfolds and folds like an accordion. It requires agile fingers.

In 1957, 61 prints from private and public collections were exhibited at the National Museums in Tokyo and Kyoto as a tribute to the 450th anniversary of his death. The exhibition commentary marked a milestone: «Far beyond any considerations of sheer ability as a painter, the artist is regarded as a 'great spirit,' a deeply religious being, a profound philosopher-scholar-poet, a personage of towering nobility».<sup>11</sup>

In 1990, a memorial museum in the city of Masuda, which includes some paintings as well as two Zen gardens, was dedicated to the teaching of his art and spiritual practice at Tokoji Monastery from 1478 to 1502, where he died at the age of 83. In 1690, his cell was moved to a hill known as Taiki-an (in Ikoji Temple), where it is still preserved.

In 2002, the Tokyo and Kyoto National Museums commemorated the 500th anniversary of Sesshū's death, and the catalog includes 152 prints: the majority are attributed to Sesshū, while the remaining painters were either his influences or those influenced by him. In 2024 the title was «The Legend of Sesshū: Birth of a Master Painter». The presentation of this exhibition points out that our author is referenced in Japan as the most important painter in the national history, and is frequently attributed the qualification of *gasei* or saint of painting. He is the leading paradigm of medieval art in Japan, and the fact that six of his works have been recognized as national treasures reveals the impact he has on contemporary Japanese art and aesthetics. However, this devotion is not a passing work, but is firmly in place in a constant appreciation throughout Japan's historical periods. The relevance of his work can only be understood from multiple perspectives, as there is no single factor that can explain how through different periods and styles his work has been elevated to the pinnacle of not only medieval Japanese painting, but to the status of legendary painter of oriental art. In this Kyoto exhibition one can appreciate the evolution of the recognition of his style by different schools, from the 16th century to the 19th century and the Meiji revolution. The Unkoku and Hasegawa schools, during the Momoyama period (1573-1615) became the proud successors of Sesshū's style. Later, the painters of the Kanō school, one of the most prolific of the Edo period (1615-1868) found in Sesshū's work the root of their stylistic identity. But his charisma did not only inspire the Chinese-style ink painters (*kanga*), but also

marked the path of various pictorial avant-gardes in their exploration of new forms of expression of the Japanese soul.<sup>12</sup>

There are also paintings attributed to Sesshū in the British Museum, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Freer Gallery of Art Collection in Washington, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Michigan Museum of Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Seattle Art Museum. When a Western or Japanese museum tells you that Sesshū's artwork is not currently on display, the curious person is left without satisfying the desire that has been brought to him.

Sesshū is viewed with kindness in Japan, and «many Japanese will recognize Sesshū as a great master only by name, with only a blurry image of the small illustration that appeared in a corner of the history textbook,» comments Prof. Yamashita.<sup>13</sup> He mentions that in the National Museum of Tokyo, foreign visitors are interested in the works of painters of the Muromachi school, while the Japanese prowl other rooms with works on loan from Western museums. The background of the complaint is common to many countries: in the history of art, priority is given to the famous universals, and only in passing is the remark «this is our greatest painter», of that century or of all time, and he is only mentioned in the history of art class without further comment. In other words, they're kind of ghosts who are used to not being exhibited. They are trapped on paper and faded by the light.

Sesshū's work is characterized by landscapes that are lyrically imagined and transcribed with monochrome strokes ranging from black to gray. In Japanese, the term used in Zen painting is *Shigajiku*, and it has to do with the handwritten inscription of a few verses at the top of the scroll, underlying the centuries-old belief that poetry and painting go hand in hand. The association of photography with captions has led to a revival of this belief in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Now then, in this article, the main focus is on the metaphorical thought that is pictorially expressed in the themes related to Buddhism. It deals with spiritual insights, revelations or suggestions emanating from Zen masters or eccentric monks. Zen mysticism has its feet on the ground, in everyday details, that can be enjoyed and suffered in an uneasy equilibrium. They are the obverse and reverse of the same coin. In Japanese, this Zen practice is known as *Dōshakuga*, where Shaku is Shaka and so Sakyamuni. In the following sections, it is treated as an artistic character by the use of simple brush strokes in black ink with little or no color.

### 3. Monasteries where Sesshū Tōyō lived and painted

At least for his mastery of the brush, there were open doors. The first teacher, a monk who was a painter of whom little is known except his name, Kōtoku. The second, a superior calligrapher and painter, Gyokuin Eiyo (1432-1524), who decades later became the 164th abbot of Kenchō-ji, the oldest Zen training monastery in Japan.

<sup>10</sup> Carter-Cowell, *Under the seal*, 15.

<sup>11</sup> Tania Nakamura and Elise Grilli. *Sesshū Tōyō*. Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1957, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Chiba, R. *Long scroll: a Zen Landscape Journey*, Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1959.

<sup>13</sup> Nakamura and Grilli, *Sesshū Tōyō*, 3.



As young monks progress, they change the names by which they provisionally identify themselves. That is, the spiritual master introduces an antidote to a permanent self, a promotion of an impermanent self. So Tōyō (等揚) was his official name. After a few years of practice, YōShika (揚知客) merged his name with the position and took care of guests from outside as well as new monks. The distinction between good manners and troublemakers when living together is relevant. «Later scholarship also suggests that he probably used the name Sessō Tōyō (拙宗等揚) in his early signatures, during the first half of his life. Even though there are no surviving paintings with the signature of Tōyō or YōShika today, some surviving paintings with the signature of Sessō Tōyō give us the opportunity to see the early styles of Sesshū during his stay at Shōkoku-ji». <sup>14</sup> This signature appears in works such as *Haboku Sansui-zu* and *Daruma*. This is the case in figure 6.

In the Rinza School, novices (i.e., Sesshū) were required to leave the temple where they started and join at least one or more priests in local temples when they reached the age of 20, according to current and traditional rules. In this way, the monks learned what steps should be taken to conduct daily or periodic ceremonies in different temples, how to provide pastoral care to parishioners, and how to handle organizational, operational, and executive aspects related to their monastic duties. In addition, a supervised period as itinerant beggars was an obligatory stage of training that permitted an unrestricted vegetarian diet that was open to the consumption of meat offered by their donors. In villages where the pig was cooked, a pig's head could be received and carried by the monk to eat. The same was true of fish, and its consumption could be more than a gift. Thus, the novice came to realize that every rule has its own exception. <sup>15</sup> Figures 5, F-4, 8 and 9 J-4 examine this case.

Sexual life was also affected by the exceptional nature of the rule. Beginning in the ninth century, monks began to agree to marry in order to leave the monastic life behind, and during the Muromachi period, this irregular practice was not considered something out of the ordinary. <sup>16</sup> When asked about the pros and cons of both options, Hōnen (1133-1212), the founder of the Japanese Pure Land School, replied: «If it is easier for them to express faith by reciting the Buddha's name alone, he or she should be celibate. If it is easier to do that with a spouse, it is better to marry. What is important is only how one expresses one's faith in reciting the Buddha's name».

And Morinaga <sup>17</sup>, head of Hanazono University and an abbot in the Rinza Zen tradition (the one with which Sesshū was associated), confirmed this

anecdote and the Buddhist view in his article written at the end of the 20th century and published on the ecumenical website of the Vatican City. Zen monks have had the support of their wives, their alter egos in the community, since the late 19th century. <sup>18</sup> The same is true of Zen nuns.

When he was 20 years old, he lived not only in Kyoto (then with a population of about a million) but also in a rather unique temple, Shōkokuji, which translates as «the temple of the ruler of the country by the will of heaven,» just over a kilometer away. It was the most notable of the five major surrounding monasteries because of its proximity to the daimyo and the imperial palace. It housed and fed more than a thousand monks who were qualified for various tasks, one of which was the export of hundreds of vertical and horizontal scrolls as well as painted silk fans that were to be presented to the Chinese emperors as an annual tribute. Orders were taken into account when loading the tally ships, and the monastery operated as an export-import company. To give just one example, at that time Shōkokuji was responsible for the management of 5 tally ships, their round trip scheduled in 1432 and back in 1433, 6 tally ships in 1434 and back in 1435, and 3 tally ships in 1476 and back in 1477. <sup>19</sup>

The military government had strong ties to the monasteries, because power and money could be combined even in the case of war (1336-1392), and maritime commerce with China was what mattered: «About the year 1400 a government department was set up to control this trade, but the actual conduct of it, down to the outfitting of the trading fleets, was delegated to the great monasteries in Kyoto, and especially to those of the Zen sect». <sup>20</sup> This was the continuation of the Ashikaga Shogunate (1393-1573). Its added value was that at least 6 of the 15 shoguns were devotees of Zen painting, meditation and music, such as Gagaku (in Shintoist ceremonies in the imperial palace since the 5th century) and Shōmyō in Buddhist ceremonies since the 3rd century. <sup>21</sup> «This close association with the source of governmental power made this temple a university of learning, an academy for art training, and even a foreign office, since Zen priests were often sent on cultural missions to China». <sup>22</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Tokyoartbeat. The Legend of Sesshū: Birth of a Master Painter, 2024. Accessed 14/05/2024. <https://www.tokyoartbeat.com/en/events/-/The-Legend-of-Sesshū-Birth-of-a-Master-Painter/67E82267/2024-04-13>

<sup>15</sup> Yuri Yamasita. Lo que se conoce de Sesshū [What is known about Sesshū] in Sureda, Joan and Cervera, Isabel. *Summa pictórica: de la prehistoria a las civilizaciones orientales*. [Pictorial summa: from prehistory to oriental civilizations]. Barcelona: Planeta, 2000. p. 271-281.

<sup>16</sup> Hui, Sesshū Tōyō's, 27.

<sup>17</sup> Pamela D. Winfield and Steven Heine. *Zen and material culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Bernard Faure. *The Red Thread: Buddhist Approaches to Sexuality*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

<sup>19</sup> Soko Morinaga. *Celibacy: the view of a Zen monk from Japan*, 1993. Accessed 30/08/2024. [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccclergy/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccclergy\\_doc\\_01011993\\_zen\\_en.html#:~:text=When%20the%20Japanese%20Buddhist%20Saint,it%20is%20better%20to%20marry](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccclergy/documents/rc_con_ccclergy_doc_01011993_zen_en.html#:~:text=When%20the%20Japanese%20Buddhist%20Saint,it%20is%20better%20to%20marry)

<sup>20</sup> Chadwick, David, *Crooked cucumber, the life and teaching of Senryu Suzuki*. 1999.

<sup>21</sup> Takeo Tanaka and Robert Sakai, Japan's Relations with overseas countries, in Hall, John, W, and Takhesi, Tōyōda. *Japan in the Muromachi age*, University of California Press, 1977, p. 159-178. [https://ia601604.us.archive.org/33/items/bub\\_gb\\_ailYQ22ohmkC/bub\\_gb\\_ailYQ22ohmkC.pdf](https://ia601604.us.archive.org/33/items/bub_gb_ailYQ22ohmkC/bub_gb_ailYQ22ohmkC.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Sullivan, Michael. *The book of art, Chinese and Japanese art*, volume 9. New York: Grolier, 1965.

List of Ashikaga shōgun – Kyoto Palace	Shōkokuji	Monks- Painters
1. <a href="#">Ashikaga Takauji</a> , ruled 1338–1357	} → ZEN	<i>Taikō Josetsu</i> 1405 -1496
2. <a href="#">Ashikaga Yoshiakira</a> , r. 1359–1368		<i>Tensō Shūbun</i> ? - 1463?
3. <a href="#">Ashikaga Yoshimitsu</a> , r. 1368–1394		<b>Seshū Tōyō</b> 1420 - 1506
4. <a href="#">Ashikaga Yoshimochi</a> , r. 1395–1423		----- <b>Direct Disciples</b>
5. <a href="#">Ashikaga Yoshikazu</a> , r. 1423–1425	} → ZEN	Shūgetsu Tōkan
6. <a href="#">Ashikaga Yoshinori</a> , r. 1428–1441		Josui Sōen
7. <a href="#">Ashikaga Yoshikatsu</a> , r. 1442–1443	} → ZEN	Tōshun - d 1520?
8. <a href="#">Ashikaga Yoshimasa</a> , r. 1449–1473		Keishoki 1478 - 1523
9. <a href="#">Ashikaga Yoshihisa</a> , r. 1474–1489		Sōami 1472- 1523
10. <a href="#">Ashikaga Yoshitane</a> , r. 1490–1493, 1508–1521		----- <b>School</b>
11. <a href="#">Ashikaga Yoshizumi</a> , r. 1494–1508		Unkoku Tōgan 1547–1618
12. <a href="#">Ashikaga Yoshiharu</a> , r. 1521–1546		Hasegawa Tōhaku 1539 –1610
13. <a href="#">Ashikaga Yoshiteru</a> , r. 1546–1565		Sesson Shūkei 1504 -1590
14. <a href="#">Ashikaga Yoshihide</a> , r. 1568		Yogetsu 1485 - ?
15. <a href="#">Ashikaga Yoshiaki</a> , r. 1568–1573		
Also the Kanō School 15th to 19th century		

Table 1. Zen monks and military leaders in the Muromachi period. Auhors’ elaboration based on Carter-Cowell (1975)



	<u>Categories used by archivists</u>	
雪舟: Sesshu	Inscription type: signature	
拙宗: Sesso	Inscription transliteration: Gyonen hachijusan	
拙宗等揚: Sesso Toyo	Sesshu hitsu	In the Style of Sesshū Tōyō 雪舟等楊 17th century
等揚: Toyo	Inscription translation: [From the] brush of Sesshu, aged 83 years [=1503]	Formerly attributed to Sesshū Tōyō 雪舟等楊 18th–19th century
雪舟等楊: Sesshu Toyo	Inscription note: <u>Spurious</u>	Formerly attributed to Sesshū Tōyō 雪舟等楊 19th century
Producer name	Inscription type: seal	
Painted by: <u>Sesshu (雪舟)</u>	Inscription transliteration: Toyo	
Claimed to be by: <u>Shubun (周文)</u>	Inscription type: signature	
	Inscription content: 周文	
	Inscription transliteration: Shubun	Museum purchase made possible by
	Inscription note: Added later.	<u>Inscription</u>
		Spurious signature and seal of Sesshū

Table 2. Annotations on signatures, seals, and attributions. Data updated to Sept. 2024.



A walk of about one kilometer separates the Imperial Palace and Shōkokuji in Kyoto. These comings and goings are suggested in Table 1. They shared time and effort in the practice of Zen meditation and painting. The movements of the hand with the sword and the brush are similar. Acting without error requires only careful attention and precision. Muromachi was the name of the district and the era. In many European capitals, the cathedral and the palace are in close proximity. It was important to strike a balance between the top decision-makers: «for the shogun, the young emperor, and the emperor's father, activities related to painting were closely tied to their social identities, shogunal and court politics, patronage of shrines and temples, and public and private literary pursuits».<sup>23</sup>

As mentioned in the introduction, the monasteries were organized into two sections: one focused on spirituality and the other on administration, including painting. A contemporary of Sesshū, Chūhō En'i 仲方円伊 (1355-1413), described how the monks interacted while painting a landscape, using Sesshū's specialty as an example. «First, an advanced Zen priest composed a Chinese poem on a narrow, long hanging scroll. Then a professional painter, probably a monk painter working in the temple, was asked to paint a picture to complete the poetic scene».<sup>24</sup> Thus, short texts for calligraphy were conceived by team members and approved by a monk of higher status. The final work was the result of collaboration, and individuals from different places were connected through their performance. In 21st century terminology, this is referred to as collective intelligence.<sup>25</sup> This pattern of behavior in the Zen monasteries of the Muromachi period justifies that Western museums choose the category of attributed, fake, even if a seal of the abbot or spiritual master is printed, validating the scroll. Table 2 illustrates this.

Table 2 reminds the reader that archivists are the backbone of a museum when a young researcher gets permission to access and study original works. It is a professional profile that is little or not noticed by visitors, because they are the counselors and guardians in the shadows who know where a piece is, and when or who brought it, or their current state or condition. Categories used by archivists to preserve specific assessments and decisions on the Sesshū's scrolls present in the collection, as well as annotations of registered details, are highlighted here.

Listed in the left-hand column are several variations of the name he used at different stages or circumstances in his life. These circumstances will be discussed in this article. Painters are known to sign their oils or watercolors with calligraphy, which is often a test of perceptive acuity. Sesshū used to write in monastic Chinese, but his writings should be understood within a Japanese cultural framework. Most archivists are not experts in this Zen Buddhist indoctrination language, but one archivist, years ago, left

written notes on inscriptions identified by experts in such a narrow field.

In the middle column, it is noted that a certain scroll has a signature that can be considered reliable; another scroll has a phrase that is transliterated; a third indicates the age of the painter. Another annotation points out the false character of the inscription as a value judgment on an annotation, and so on. In another, the content is the original Chinese inscription and later its transliteration.

In the right column, certain incidents regarding attribution of authorship to Sesshū are marked as corrected. There is another space to record donors or sponsors. A previous inscription makes it clear that a signature and seal are considered spurious. This does not prevent a subsequent inscription from stating that the seal or signature is valid and reliable.

The way to deal with and resolve these reservations in Western museums was simple: attribute them to Sesshū Tōyō and note the problems or discrepancies on the catalog cards. In Japanese museums, the tendency has been that what is available abroad is not reliable, hence the antidote, the distinction of being a national treasure (Cahill, 1995).

#### 4. Influential artists in Shōkokuji monastery

Taikō Josetsu's biography contains only a few precise details that stand out. For example, that he worked as a painter between 1405 and 1423. Probably a Chinese immigrant, he is credited with being the first to introduce Chinese monochrome ink into sophisticated artistic settings in Kyoto. He is best known for his scroll entitled *The Gourd and the Catfish*, which acknowledges multiple readings with humor and seriousness. It is dated around 1413. «A man standing on a bank, holding a gourd in both hands, is trying to somehow catch or pin down the catfish swimming in the stream below. This is clearly an impossible task, a nonsensical act, underscored by the awkwardness with which the figure struggles even to hold his gourd».<sup>26</sup>

But what happens in Figure 2 is that this impracticality is precisely the nonsensical Zen point. Nevertheless, the Shogun Yoshimochi commissioned Josetsu to delicately highlight the unthinkable taste, and both were delighted and determined when they saw the finished work. Each of the 30+1 abbots of the Zen monasteries in Kyoto was asked to compose a poem commenting on his understanding of the rationale behind the irrational behavior.<sup>27</sup> Each poem is inscribed at the top of the scroll. The observations of each Zen abbot can be read, interpreted, and taken seriously or in jest. It is wisdom literature. The hanging scroll is located at Taizō-in Temple, next to a Muromachi period water landscape garden and a 1966 walking pond garden.

<sup>23</sup> Tamba, Akira. *Músicas tradicionales de Japón de los orígenes al siglo XVI* [Musiques traditionnelles du Japon. Des origines au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle]. Paris: Akai, 1997.

<sup>24</sup> Nakamura and Grilli, Sesshū Tōyō, 3.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas W. Malone and Michael S. Bernstein. *Handbook of Collective Intelligence*. Boston: MIT Press, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Brock, Karen, L. The shogun's painting match. *Monumenta Nipponica*. 50 (4), 433-484, Winter, 1995, 435.

<sup>27</sup> Gregory Levine, Yukio Lippit Yoshiaki Shimizu. *Awakening Zen figure painting in Medieval Japan*, Tokyo: Japan Society, 2007.

C-2



C-1

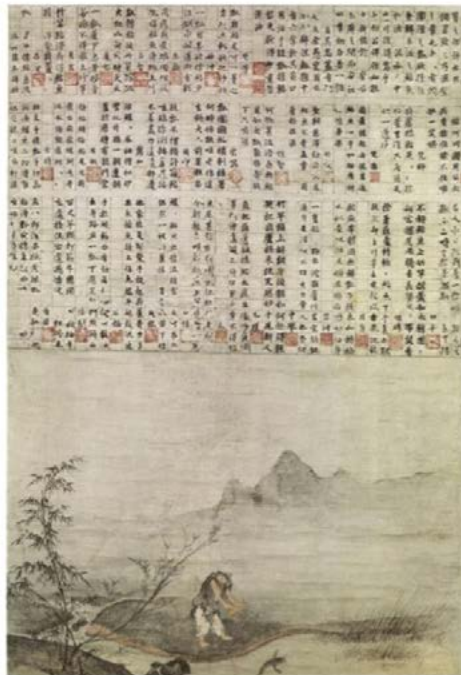


Figure 2. Josetsu's *Catching Catfish with a Gourd*, Hyōnen-zu, Taizo-in temple, Kyoto

The setting was the friendly atmosphere of several Zen-style gardens at Myōshinji Monastery in Kyoto. The banner in the anteroom was used to invite the guests of the supreme military commander in Japan to wait and reflect. The scroll is quite large, 111 x 76 cm, and the authority of the 30 +1 abbots' poems (fig. 2, C-1), responding to the enigmatic question posed by the shogun, and the iconographic illustration (C-2), made in soft colors by Josetsu. The invited participants stayed there for a while, concentrating on weighing how to interact and express themselves in front of the cryptic boss, who was listening and watching. It was an intentional challenge to test the visitors' mental, emotional, and will power.

In addition, the issue of interpersonal safety was addressed by wearing pants that were three feet longer than the visitor's legs. If someone wanted to get closer than they should, they had to know how to pull the pants. Besides being uncomfortable, they were an elegant trap for the fragile vertical balance of each courtier.

The other safety tricks were the nightingale floors (Uguisubari, 鶯張り), a type of floor that makes a squeaking/chirping noise when walked on. There is a piece of metal at a certain angle under the floorboards. The responsibility for maintenance, security, and decoration was given to those in the same organizational and occupational unit.

Tenshō Shūbun was not only a monk, sculptor and painter, but also the administrator of Shōkokuji monastery from 1425 to 1450. It is not clear whether he was a disciple of Josetsu or an associate with similar stylistic and religious inclinations that distinguished them both within and outside the Muromachi district. What is known is that in 1423 he joined a Buddhist mission in Korea, where he improved his skills in ink poetry and became the director of the painting office.

That is, the tradition started by the early Chinese literati<sup>28</sup> and present also in Korea.

«What is a Korean scholar? The academic tradition under royal impulse: the world of examination, elitism, and knowledge, where poetry and classical literature serve as a reference».<sup>29</sup> In other words, Shūbun was sponsored by the shogun Ashikaga Yoshimochi to return with an awareness of the cultural customs, decision-making schemes, and painting styles in the Korean imperial house. Figure 3 examines this interest of the shogun from a different perspective.

Kichizan Minchō (1352-1431) is another contemporary monk who excelled in the monochrome Chinese ink painting style. He serves as a contrast to the above three. He also resided in Kyoto, but at the Tōfukuji temple, and his status remained reliable because he was in charge of everything that concerned cleaning and order in the buildings. His specialty was human figures (such as his Portrait of Manjushiri with a golden headband on her forehead, in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts) and spiritual portraits, such as The White-robed Kannon, in the Tokyo National Museum. He was admired for his strong black strokes and vivid colors, which were influenced by the style of the Song and Yuan dynasties in China.<sup>30</sup> In Shōkokuji, landscape painting became the preferred style of the above-mentioned painters who were also monks.

Josetsu had access to the artistic and religious practice of Zen at the Ming court through his master and priest Chushin Zekkai (1334-1405). With funding from the shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, he spent ten

<sup>28</sup> Hui, *Sesshū Tōyō's*, 19.

<sup>29</sup> Pierre Cambon and Joseph P. Carroll. *La poésie de l'encre: tradition lettrée en Corée, 1392-1910*. Paris. Guimet, 2005, 11.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas W. Malone and Michael S. Bernstein. *Handbook of Collective Intelligence*. Boston: MIT Press, 2015.

years (1368-1378) in China, both visiting and staying, perhaps as an ambassador, in contact with political and religious institutions. He found himself a stranger in a bankrupt and chaotic country, with all that entailed, as his arrival coincided with the violent transition from the Yuan to the Ming dynasty. In 1376, Hongwu, the new emperor, invited him to an audience. After his return, he stayed at Shōkokuji several times, and after his retirement, he first became a monk and then an abbot in 1392.<sup>31</sup>

«Shūbun's reputation as a painter is extremely high, but we have almost no direct information about his works. Those attributed to him are monochrome, but there is none with an authenticated signature». <sup>32</sup> «Reading in a Bamboo Grove» is the title of the hanging scroll attributed to Shūbun by the Tokyo National Museum and a monk of Kyoto's Nanzen-ji monastery in the first half of the 15th century, as well as five poems and a preface added by Zen priests of the time.

At the age of 20, Sesshū began to study with Shūbun at Shōkokuji, where they both lived, and thus became his disciple. Apart from admiration, the connection with Josetsu is indirect. Sections 7 to 9 of this article are devoted to the analysis of details in the hanging scroll CUC-JMP-01 that have to do with its signatures, attribution, and authorship.

Eloquent collections of Zen scrolls and Buddhist sculptures for ceremonies were collected by Ashikaga Yoshimitsu and Ashikaga Yoshimasa, both of whom were willing to play an active role in tea ceremonies, which required appropriate Chinese utensils as well as formal dress; both of whom sponsored the construction and enjoyment of Zen gardens, the arrangement of floral sculptures elegantly distributed in rooms where ceremonies were scheduled according to the audience, and, of course, the theatrical and dramatic dance known as Nō. It wasn't necessary to go to China to study and reproduce what was displayed in various military and religious buildings in the Muromachi district.<sup>33</sup>

*The Golden Repair* (kintsukuroi (金繕い) or Golden Joinery (Kintsugi 金継ぎ) is the name, attributed to Shogun Yoshimitsu, of a technique for repairing damage to any object with gold or silver lacquer. His favorite teacup was broken, and he sent it to China for repair. What came back did not satisfy him. He Accessed renowned Japanese ceramists and came up with a solution: instead of hiding the cracks, he made them visible, enhancing them with gold or silver dust. They are beautiful, shining scars, even centuries later. In the 21st century, it is considered a therapy to comfort the mind, but also to heal the wounds of the heart and soul. A cup reconstructed with a touch has a scar because of its fragility, but it can be

restored with strength and beauty, and the admiration is derived from a transfiguration in perspective.<sup>34</sup>

To understand the importance of his son, the Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimochi, it should be made clear that he was the supreme commander in Japan and, in his spare time, a Zen Buddhist monk who enjoyed the practice of calligraphy and drawing with Chinese ink under the supervision of a worthy master. Sakyamuni Buddha's father was also a ruler, and as the first-born son, he had to practice self-defense and attack exercises, both individually and in groups, whose survival depended on not being surprised. The fact that one of the oldest Zen books in English is titled «The Religion of the Samurai»<sup>35</sup> expresses precision, not a desire to provoke. In the chapter devoted to the history of Zen in Japan, there are sections on «the manliness of the Zen monk and the samurai,» «their similarity,» «their courage and serenity of mind,» the alliance between Zen and the Regent Generals. «Not only did they patronize the faith, build great temples, and invite the best Chinese Zen teachers, but they also lived like Zen monks, shaving their heads, wearing holy robes, and practicing cross-legged meditation»<sup>36</sup>. It can also be said that they camouflaged themselves in their imperial or monastic residences. It is the art of stealth that the ninja cultivate.

Zen Rinzaï temples were the place where ink painting masters and disciples met. The ease with which tatamis could be stacked and rearranged to suit the needs of the moment was a practical advantage, and so one or more sections functioned as studios. Painted landscapes in sliding doors or room screens were relevant to the practitioner as prototypes to be evaluated for improvement, not just copied. It was an indirect path to enlightenment, to be guided by the hand that rubbed the brush on the paper. «The glorification of amateurism was a late step toward legitimizing painting as an upper-class cultural pursuit, not just an artisan's craft».<sup>37</sup>

## 5. The spiritual portrait of a central figure such as Sakyamuni Buddha, in Shōkokuji

When Japanese monasteries chartered ships to buy commodities in the port of Ningbo, about 150 km from Shanghai, the crew usually included monks of various ages. The youngest often acted as beggars (a direct consequence of their scarce possessions) and have a tendency to work long hours (a development of their motivation or vocation). Overseeing the buying and selling of goods across the seas was the primary responsibility of a senior monk like Sesshū. Displaying the youthful virtue of asking without hesitation, «Could you provide me with a memento of yours, such as a sketch?» It was common for the revered painter to quickly stroke a sacred figure, an abbreviated version of the contents of the praised scroll.

<sup>31</sup> Yukio Lippit. Apparition painting, RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics, No. 55/56, Absconding (Spring - Autumn), 2009, pp. 61-86. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25608836>, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Gregory Levine, Yukio Lippit Yoshiaki Shimizu. *Awakening Zen figure painting in Medieval Japan*, Tokyo: Japan Society, 2007.

<sup>33</sup> Jose M. Prieto. and Javier Bustamante Donas. Taoist, Buddhist, and Confucian artistic expression in the Tang Dynasty: The case of The Wangchuan River Hanging Scroll by Wang Wei (699-759), in *De Medio Aevo*, 12 (2), 2023. <https://revistas.ucm.es/index.php/DMAE/article/view/88818/4564456564679>

<sup>34</sup> Pierre Cambon and Joseph P. Carroll. *La poésie de l'encre: tradition lettrée en Corée*, 1392-1910. Paris. Guimet, 2005, 11.

<sup>35</sup> Yasuichi Awakawa. *Zen painting*. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1977.

<sup>36</sup> Japanese Wiki Corpus. Zekkai Chushin, accessed 07/09/2024. <https://www.japanesewiki.com/Buddhism/Chushin%20ZEKKAI.html>

<sup>37</sup> Awakawa. *Zen painting*, 182.



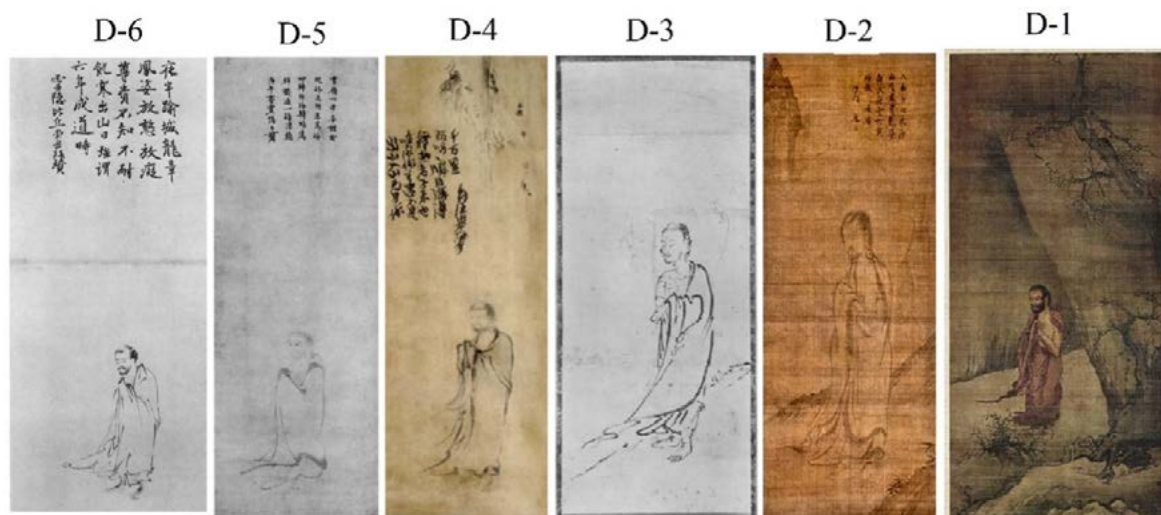


Figure 3. Sakyamuni descending the mountain: Evolution of a Chinese motif (d-1 and d-2) and the same motif in the Muromachi school (d-3, d-4, d-5, d-6).

«These paintings suggest that a small group of Japanese artists active in the late thirteenth century were trained to paint in a pseudo-Chinese manner. No doubt, all these paintings are quite naive, and their style and technique are still ill-defined. However crude and unsophisticated these works may appear, they obviously attempt to copy Chinese models then available to Japanese artists».<sup>38</sup> Figure 3 illustrates this transformation of a mystical theme from Chinese to Japanese monasteries: Sakyamuni descends from the mountain.<sup>39</sup>

Buddha was the central figure that each monk apprentice at Shokokuji learned to paint, and they were encouraged to create their personal variations. The priority of the other novices was their interest in studying sutras, hymns, and koan.<sup>40</sup> The focus of devotion was on visualizing images as opposed to rapid recitation of words. In other words, the distinction between the right (imaginative and creative) and left (verbal and rhetorical) hemispheres of the brain that has been studied in psychology and neuroscience in the 20th century and partially revised in the 21st century.<sup>41</sup> The consequence was an evolution towards unpretentiousness and sketching. Six examples are presented here:

- D-1: «Sakyamuni Descending the Mountains» is considered a masterpiece by the Chinese Zen monk Liang Kai (1140-1210). It was painted for the court, and his signature (御前圖畫樑楷) is an erudite one, for he was an honored member with a gold sash, «but it is done in such a free and easy way that it has no academic air. The quick and boldly drawn branches and rocks are even less academic. He wanted to convey a sense of

the ineffable, unconquerable inner spirit of the Buddha».<sup>42</sup>

In the years 844 and 845, a Buddhist persecution took place. The monasteries were destroyed, and the monks survived in the mountains. The emperor declared that Buddhism was a foreign religion, and to avoid this Achilles' heel, the surviving masters decided to create a new Chinese iconography. There is no nimbus around the head.

This theme arose in Zen circles because this episode is conspicuously absent from the canonical Mahayana texts, nor from classical Buddhist art of the first millennium, neither in the cave temples nor in the murals, not in the traditional pictorial sequences of the Buddha's life.» Sakyamuni's gaze does not seem to be fixed on any external object in particular: in profound and withdrawn composure he seems to be concentrated on his own inner Self» (Brinker, 1987, p. 54). The original scroll is in the National Museum in Tokyo, ink and color on silk, and in the British Museum, an 18th (or 19th?) century copy.

- D-2: A century later, a simplified and annotated version of the scroll showing «Sakyamuni coming out of the mountains» appeared in Choraku-ji temple. The author is unknown, but the inscription was written by the Soto Zen monk Tung-ming Hui-jih (1272-1340), who came to Japan in 1309. It can be translated as follows: «He penetrates the mountain and makes his way down from the mountain, / He flows rapidly in the east and disappears in the west, / He has the bearing of the phoenix and the manners of a dragon. / He's draped in silk and thin to the bone. / This is what he achieved in six years of asceticism: / he was surprised when it turned out he wasn't.» In the Shokokuji school, this kind of preamble became peculiar. The canvas is filled with empty spaces, as well as gaps where people walk or breathe. Walking on solid ground with a rock to his left, he reveals some fragility in his strength. This is another way of affirming that Sakyamuni has risen, that he is restored.

<sup>38</sup> Tamba. *Músicas tradicionales*.

<sup>39</sup> Tomás Navarro. *Kintsukuroi: El arte de curar heridas emocionales. [Kintsukuroi: the art of healing emotional wounds]*. Barcelona: Zenith, 2017.

<sup>40</sup> Kaiten Nukariya. *The Religion of the Samurai. A study of Zen philosophy and discipline in China and Japan*, 2013. Accessed 12/07/2024. <https://www.templeofearth.com/books/religionofthesamurai.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> Nukariya. *The Religion of the Samurai*, 35.

<sup>42</sup> James Cahill. Lecture notes on Sesshū Tōyō. Institute of East Asian Studies, 1995, 6. Accessed 12/08/2024. [https://ieas.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/aparv\\_postlude.pdf](https://ieas.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/aparv_postlude.pdf)

- D-3: Sakyamuni is currently descending from the mountain, as evidenced by his presence in this paper and ink. With the use of dry ink strokes, the diagonal line stands out. The left foot is deliberately enlarged, indicating that he is conscious of walking on it and leaving his footprints in the snow. The background is empty, and the ground is just two diverging lines. The wind gives wings to the lower folds of his robe. On his left arm, the folds give a hint of his strength.

Again, the painter is unknown, but in Zen terminology it emphasizes the perception of what is meant psychologically by anonymous. Two seals testify that this hanging scroll spent some time in Kozanji Temple, and «under the leadership of the monk Myoe Koben (1173-1232), it became an important center for the production of Buddhist paintings and the copying of newly imported Chinese works from which Buddhist iconographic sketches were made».<sup>43</sup>

In 1994, Kojanji was inscribed as part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site, section «Historic Monuments» of ancient Kyoto. «The historical Buddha Shaka is not treated [in this scroll] as the deity Shaka, but as the man Shaka coming down from the mountain after his enlightenment, thus representing his human, ascetic aspect».<sup>44</sup> Again, immanence. This scroll is in the Seattle Art Museum.

The colophon was written by the Rinzai Zen abbot Zhongfeng Mingben (1263-1323), and Rinzai is also Sesshū. The translation is «Coming out of the mountains and going into the mountains is originally you/ What is called you, ah, it is no more/ Old Master Sakyamuni comes/ Ha, ha, ha! Eyes flashing over a million-mile ocean». The abbot finishes by bowing with folded hands.<sup>45</sup> It is a pleasantry. The first verse is realistic, the second quixotic, the third a ghost, the fourth three laughs, and finally embodiment in the real world as achievement.

- D-4: The Museum for East Asian Art in Cologne exhibits a hanging scroll «Sakyamuni Descending the Mountain», ink on paper, by Chūan Shinkō, ca. 1450 (thus contemporaneous with Sesshū) in Kamakura, Kenchoji Monastery. «The elimination of any background detail directs our attention to the figure and his calm, stern face. The eyes, locked lips, bold chin accentuated by a darker shade of ink, and firm posture give the figure an intensity emblematic of a religious leader of great stature».<sup>46</sup> The brush was saturated with water, resulting in an enveloping cloak intended to conceal and a strong profile of the facial silhouette.

- D-5: It is in a private collection in Japan, and the painter is anonymous, but not the author of the colophon written by the priest Chijue Daochong (1169-1250) in 1246. It can be translated as follows: «I spent six years in the snowy peaks, discovering myself from head to toe,/ utterly mesmerized by the sight of the dawn star,/ Spinning is one skill, but turning yourself is another skill,/ One option is to join a mass debate, and another is to neglect how much you already have.»

Mount Tabai is the mountain where he became abbot of the monastery. As a young man, he was «extremely stupid,» which is what his name, Chijue, means. Is it his self-esteem as a beginner, or the name his teacher gave him to wake him up? The artist of this painting follows the 'apparition painting' style (which will be examined in section 6 of this article), which originated in the 12th century and remained popular in the Chan monastic community of China in the 13th century» (Shimizu, 2007, p.64). The background is a hollow and empty space, a perfect reflection of the transparency of nature.

- D-6: This is a section of a handscroll in the collection of the National Museum of Tokyo. The 12th century Chinese painter is not identified, but it is known that this is a copy made by a member of the Kanō school. They served the imperial palace and were featured on screens and in official portraits: they were secular. The calligraphic verses of Songyuan Chongyou (1139-1209) can be translated as follows: «Exploring the city walls at midnight / the beauty of a dragon and the air of a phoenix / leaving aside my madness and my idiocy, no matter how honorable he is / he emerged from the mountains just one day after enduring hunger and coldness / these six years were crucial to completing the path, if you let me comment on them».

This alludes to a norm in the daily practice of Zen. Only if the master insists does the practitioner share his experiences or the koan he has entrusted to him. No gossip, then, about the spiritual intimacy among monks.

Scrolls (D-3 to D-6) «are suspended as an isolated figure in the illusionistic space implied by the surrounding pictorial void. Of this last category, the surviving works are almost exclusively executed in monochrome ink».<sup>47</sup>

An increasingly deliberate simplification of brushstrokes can be captured by examining the six scrolls. The artist is asked to paint the earthly details as they disappear, and this involves «1) an extraordinarily pale use of ink to depict the subject matter; 2) jet-black accents for the face and selected attributes; 3) a blank background; and 4) a relatively detailed rendering of the face, combined with abbreviated brushwork for the clothing».<sup>48</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Shimizu, Yoshiaki. Sakyamuni descending the mountain, in Gregory Levine, Yukio Lippit and Yoshiaki Shimizu. *Awakening: Zen figure painting in medieval Japan*. New York: Japan Society of NY and Yale University press, 2007.

<sup>44</sup> Miyeko Murase. Farewell Paintings of China: Chinese Gifts to Japanese Visitors. Zurich: *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. 32 No. 2/3, 1970, 211-236, 222-223.

<sup>45</sup> Natacha Naranjo-Castaño. *Sakyamuni descendiendo de la montaña. Evolución iconográfica de un tema desarrollado en la pintura budista china*. [Sakyamuni descending from the mountain. Iconographic evolution of a theme developed in the Chinese Buddhist painting]. Universidad Complutense de Madrid. Master Thesis, 2013. Accessed 08/09/2024. <https://docta.ucm.es/rest/api/core/bitstreams/455b50ed-77e4-43f1-89b7-1a15a38874d0/content>

<sup>46</sup> Ichimatsu Tanaka and Bruce Darling. *Japanese ink painting: Shubun to Sesshū*. Tokyo: Weatherhill/Heibonsha, 1972.

<sup>47</sup> Robert Ornstein. *The Psychology of Consciousness*. New York: Malor books, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, 2021.

<sup>48</sup> Richard M. Barnhart. The five dynasties (907-960) and the Song period (960-1279). In Yang Xin, Richard M. Barnhart, Nie Chongzheng, James Cahill, Lang Shaojun, Wu Hung, *Three thousand years of Chinese Painting*. New Haven. Yale University and Foreign Language Press, 1997, p. 87-137, 136.

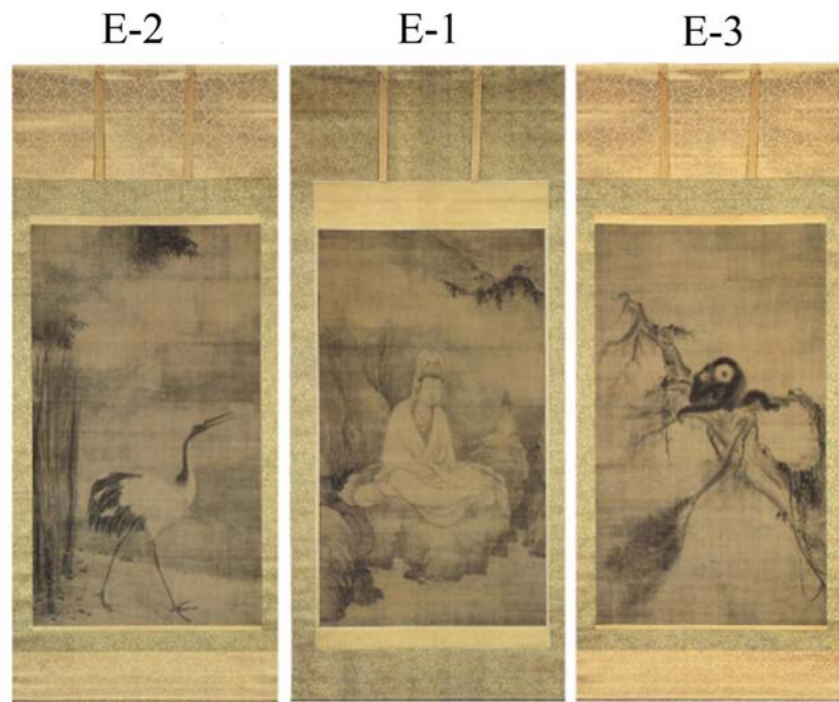


Figure 4. triptych by Muqi Fachang (1210-1279), guanyin, crane and monkeys, 13th century, in Daitokuji monastery, Kyoto, national treasure. Ashikaga Yoshimitsu' collector seal.

The crew boys got their big moment, because «it was more than just a sketch, and gradually they took control of the ship, that is, they began to use their brushstrokes, and eventually they became master painters attached to the management department in charge of the ceremonial ornamental units of the monastery».<sup>49</sup>

The way these scrolls were liturgically combined was standardized. For example, in the Rikkyoku'an chapel of Tōfuku-ji monastery in Kyoto, there is a triptych combination of scrolls with inscriptions made by Haku'un Egyō (1228-1298). The descending scroll of Sakyamuni (see fig. 3) is the centerpiece, and the flanking scrolls show scattered plum branches in blossom in wet and dry black ink brushwork. The scene is served, with the Buddha seated in the center and nature on either side, and thus the Buddhist experience of «Buddha Nature»: it suggests the unique spiritual power that resides within all beings, enabling them to achieve awakening. It's about the feeling of impermanence and the emptiness of all phenomena around us. «Buddha nature can be understood as a seed that, when cultivated through Buddhist practice, will eventually bear the fruit of acquired enlightenment».<sup>50</sup> This has nothing to do with the (Jewish, Christian, and Islamic) notion of the divine nature of all human beings, for they are made in the image of God, century after century.

In figure 4 of scroll E-1, a white-robed Kannon (or Guanyin, in Chinese) appears seated in a charming landscape setting, her name meaning «one who observes the sounds,» that is, a spiritual being of inexhaustible compassion and mercy, striving for enlightenment

(bodhisattva). The artist is the thirteenth-century Chinese painter and monk Muqi. Another scroll by this artist is shown in Figure 8.

The flanking scroll E-2 in Figure 4 is a) a crane in a bamboo grove with his white-feathered body (it is more than just a color match) and it suggest a) longevity, b) wisdom, c) endurance, d) flexibility, and e) true filial piety, because a young crane responds to the cries of her parents.<sup>51</sup>

Scroll E-3 shows a monkey with her baby in her right arm on a pine branch. It is an expression of «may your name be prosperous for generations to come!» (p.131). In Buddhist contexts, during the Tang dynasty, monkeys were worshipped as the Great Sage equal to Heaven and were regarded as the emblem of trickery (Williams, 1976).

In other words, this triptych in the Daitoku-ji monastery was intended for decoration in Buddhist wedding ceremonies or celebrations during the 13rd or 14th century.

## 6. Spiritual Portraits of Eccentric Monks in Shōkokuji Monastery

The central figure in the artistic and spiritual life of Shōkokuji was presented as a man, Sidhartha Sakyamuni, who had nothing to do with the Buddha of the past, present, and future worshipped in the Dharma Hall. This statement euphemistically affirms his mythological divine status, regardless of the date he remains relevant and influential in one's personal life.

<sup>49</sup> Shimizu, Yoshiaki. Sakyamuni descending the mountain, in Gregory Levine, Yukio Lippit and Yoshiaki Shimizu. *Awakening: Zen figure painting in medieval Japan*. New York: Japan Society of NY and Yale University press, 2007.

<sup>50</sup> Tanaka and Darling. *Japanese ink painting*, 61.

<sup>51</sup> Malcolm, L. McNeill. *Narrative agency in 13th and 14th century Chan Figure painting. A study of Hagiography text-image relationships*. University of London, Dpt. Of History of Art and Archeology SOAS. Doctoral dissertation, 2016, 325-327. Accessed 25/08/2024. [https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/24335/1/McNeill\\_4375.pdf](https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/24335/1/McNeill_4375.pdf)



Sakyamuni's father regarded him as an eccentric son, not only because some sorcerers prophesied at his birth the dilemma of becoming a warrior (like his father) or a guru (with no family history), but also because he chose to leave his newborn son in his mother's care and eventually became a great spiritual leader thousands of years later. In the words of William James (1842-1920), professor of psychology at Harvard University, «such individuals are "geniuses" in the religious line; and like many other geniuses who have produced fruit effective enough to be memorialized in the pages of biography, such religious geniuses have often shown symptoms of nervous instability».<sup>52</sup> In the 21st century, his irresponsible marital and filial paternal behavior is more than enough cause for slander.

At first glance, eccentric people are exceptional, let's say a monk. He doesn't conform to the society around him, let's say to the daily life in a monastery, and he chooses to leave it temporarily to live as a hermit, away from the humdrum of everyday life. He creates his own world and fills it with his own extravagance. He lives in a hut and writes poetry that is preserved in a dry jar until it is opened and read several centuries later. But was he mad? Absolutely not.

«Perhaps even more than other kinds of genius, religious leaders have been subject to abnormal psychic visitations. They have invariably been creatures of heightened emotional sensitivity. Often, they have led a discordant inner life and have been melancholy during some part of their career. They have known no restraint, have been prone to obsessions and fixed ideas; and to all sorts of peculiarities which are usually classed as pathological. Often, moreover, these pathological features in their careers have helped to give them their religious authority and influence. Frequently, they have gone into trances, heard voices, seen visions, and exhibited all sorts of peculiarities that are ordinarily classified as pathological. Often, moreover, these pathological features in their careers have helped to give them their religious authority and influence».<sup>53</sup>

Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, Laozi, Moses, Mohammed, Paul, Zarathustra, Zhuangzi, (whose existence or non-existence has provided much material for discussion) are not only the ancestors, but also thinking and feeling human beings who attracted followers, who built temples, who lit candles and burned incense in their honor several millennia later. Everyone had a dose or overdose of eccentricity.

Someone who is eccentric is someone who is rare, extravagant, and abnormal. Let's be specific: rare because he deviates from what is recurrent and commonplace; extravagant because he behaves out of the ordinary and what is typical; abnormal because he deviates from the existing standard and prevailing pattern in the human reference group.

### 6.1. Humorous portraits of five eccentric monks

The names of atypical monks portrayed in Figure 5, who were repeatedly painted by painter-monks, are worthy of mention:

- F-1: The eighteen arhats (in Sanskrit) or lohan (in Chinese) are the personal disciples of Buddha. Their legendary images are based on descriptions in sutras or the works of ancient painters, singularized and inconspicuous characters that are still recognized by copying or updating them. Supernatural powers are attributed to them. Often their aspect is disciplined and ascetic, but sometimes they can appear exuberant because they are in their inexpressibly happy weekend. This case history of enlightened spirits appears in the lower section of scroll CUC006266 (listed in the heritage of the Complutense University): they walk behind the steps of a geisha who doesn't want them around. This scroll has been studied in detail by Aono.<sup>54</sup> The parody as well as the invitation in Renato Casaro's 1992 painting 'The Last Supper of Hollywood Legends' has a certain similarity with the scenario in this scroll.

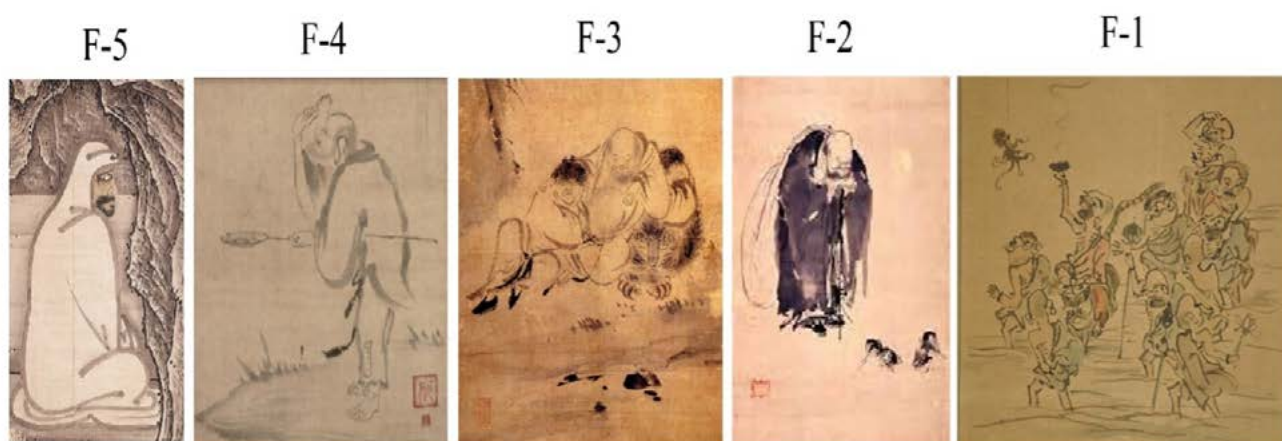


Figure 5: Five spiritual portraits of eccentric monks.

<sup>52</sup> William James. *The varieties of religious experiences, a study in human nature*, 1902, 9. Accessed 08/09/2024. [https://csrs.nd.edu/assets/59930/williams\\_1902.pdf](https://csrs.nd.edu/assets/59930/williams_1902.pdf)

<sup>53</sup> Eva Havlicova. Sakyamuni descending the mountain, in Gregory Levine, Yukio Lippit and Yoshiaki Shimizu. *Awakening: Zen figure painting in medieval Japan*. New York: Japan Society of New York and Yale University press, 2007, 70.

<sup>54</sup> McNeill. *Narrative agency*.

- F-2: Budai (Hotei). He was an itinerant and mendicant monk whose sense of humor, smiling attitude, and obesity, made him stand out. He died in a Zen monastery in 905 (or 916). His popular nickname is *Happy Buddha*. «Hotei Watching a Cockfight» is the F-2 illustration (in Figure 5) made by the notorious and bellicose samurai Miyamoto Musashi (1584-1645), not only a fine swordsman but also a skilled painter, with an amazing economy of strokes he invented his own style, direct and powerful, which appears in this scroll that belongs to a private collection. He boasted that he had faced bloody swords 60 times. The last one was the one he did not finish successfully.
- F-3: Tiantai Mountain became a Chinese National Park in 1988, but for at least 12 centuries it was the home of three poets who were Zen monks and close friends. The oldest, named Feng Kan, used to roam the monastery and surrounding areas with a tiger as his pet (or so the story goes). While climbing a mountain, he came across an abandoned child who was crying. He took him by the hand and opened the doors of the monastery where he worked as a kitchen maid. His name was Shih-te and he is often depicted with a broom. The third and most famous was called Hánshān, which can be translated as Cold Mountain. He died around 850, which is when people started writing stories about him.<sup>55</sup> This poet is relevant again in the next section of this article. As an example, here is poem 16 from his collection: «To check the flow of his jasper, I go to the stream/ or to the neighboring hillside to sit on the rocks. / My mind, lonely cloud, rests on nothing. / Things of the near world...why go after them?» (p. 372). At the bottom of a ravine, he found the cave that became his home. He was a hermit. In Japanese, his name is Kanzan. Known as the Four Sleepers (the tiger is included as a companion), it was made by Moku'an Rei'en (15th century), and this figure 5, F-3 scroll is available at Maeda Ikutokukai, a public interest corporation in Tokyo.
- F-4: Two Zen monks gave up their vegetarianism because every rule has its exceptions. They had a good palate. They knew what was in season. Fishing for shellfish was a hobby of one of them. His name was Xianzi (or Kensu, Shrimp Eater) and it is said that he «attained enlightenment while catching a shrimp».<sup>56</sup> Xianzi (賢祇) or Xianzi Shibe (賢祇石霏), was a disciple of Dongshan Liangjie (807-869), who founded the Soto school of Zen Buddhism. Xianzi played a very relevant role in the spread and advance of Dongshan's doctrine. According to Zen tradition, Dongshan Liangjie had several disciples who preserved and passed on the Soto lineage, and Xuanzi was one of them. Together with other disciples, he ensured the survival of Dongshan's doctrine, which was later spread to Japan and became the foundation of Japanese Soto Zen. In the Tokyo National Museum is the F-4 scroll shown in Figure 5, made by Ka'ō (可翁) (first half of the 14th century). He was a Zen Buddhist monk known for

his paintings in the Sumi-e (ink wash painting) style, which was deeply influenced by Zen teachings. Ka'ō's works often expressed the Zen concept of spontaneity and simplicity. His paintings were some of the earliest examples of the ink monochrome painting tradition that later became prominent in Zen circles. Ka'ō was a Zen Buddhist monk of the first half of the 14th century, in the Muromachi era of Japan. He is one of the earliest representatives of the technique of «Ink Wash Painting» or Sumi-e (墨絵), a technique that uses the concepts of *simplicity* (簡素, *kanso*) and *spontaneity* (自然, *shizen*) to aesthetically express Zen Buddhist spirituality in painting.

«When in Rome, do as the Romans do» is not just a euphemism. Understanding everyday life in its entirety is achieved through this method. «If there is a high consumption of pork in the neighborhood, the mendicant monk will have to accept what is left on the plate again, why not a pig's head, and pig's head was also his nickname and his favorite delicacy».<sup>57</sup> Zhutou (or Zhimeng) was his name or nickname, and appears in a significantly in figure 8.

- F-5: Bodhidharma (or Damo, Daruma), who was first an Indian or Persian prince, then a Buddhist disciple, and finally the wandering monk who founded the martial arts Zen school at Shaolin Monastery in China. «He is depicted in a great number of different situations, for example, there is the «Bodhidharma meditating against the wall,» the «rush leaf Bodhidharma,» the «one-shoe Bodhidharma,» and so on».<sup>58</sup> Sesshū Tōyō painted a different type of scroll in 1496 entitled «Hui Ke Offering His Arm to Bodhidharma», and in this image 5, the section shown as F-5 is dedicated to Bodhidharma meditating while looking at the wall and neglecting his first Zen disciple. This is a suggestion of what is meant by Buddhist detachment. It is preserved at Sainenji Monastery in Tokoname City. McRae<sup>59</sup> made it clear that «none of the various details of Bodhidharma's life is 'true' in the sense of being journalistically accurate. In contrast, Ferguson<sup>60</sup> followed his footsteps in the regions mentioned in his legendary biographies and was able to verify reliable findings «on the ground,» emphasizing that «an important interpretation of Bodhidharma's historical significance is that he symbolized resistance to the politicization of Buddhism in China».<sup>61</sup> This observation is relevant here because this article has emphasized from the beginning the shortening of distances between the imperial palace and the Zen monastery in Kyoto, the military leaders, and the teachers of the Zen painting school. During the Muromachi period, there was a great deal of nuanced covariation.

<sup>57</sup> Brinker, Helmut. *Zen in the art of painting*. London: Arkana, 1987.

<sup>58</sup> Helen J. Baroni. *The illustrated encyclopedia of Zen Buddhism*. The Rosen Publishing Group, 2002. <https://terebess.hu/zen/szoto/Baroni.pdf>

<sup>59</sup> Fang Jing Pei. *Symbols and rebuses in Chinese Art: figures, bugs, beats and flowers*. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2004, 52.

<sup>60</sup> William James. *The varieties of religious experiences, a study in human nature*, 1902, 9. Accessed 08/09/2024. [https://csrs.nd.edu/assets/59930/williams\\_1902.pdf](https://csrs.nd.edu/assets/59930/williams_1902.pdf)

<sup>61</sup> James. *The varieties of religious experiences*.

<sup>55</sup> Bill Porter and Red Pine. *Finding them gone: visiting China's poets of the past*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon, 2016.

<sup>56</sup> Yukio Lippit. Apparition painting,



Figure 6: Two figurative scrolls attributed to Sessō Tōyō: Sakyamuni and Bodhidharma

## 6.2. Youth portrait of two great Zen masters

In section 2 of this article, it was mentioned that Sesshū Tōyō signed under the name Sessō Tōyō as an inexperienced painter. But it is convenient to remember that «it is a hypothesis that Sessō and Sesshū are in fact the same person».<sup>62</sup>

These are two illustrative examples which have been identified. Drawing G-1, «The Buddha Sakyamuni Descending from the Mountain» in Figure 6 belongs to a private collection, and drawing G-2, «Daruma (Bodhidharma) Crossing the Yangtze River on a Reed Leaf» is in the Tokyo National Museum. Both portraits show the student's expertise in similar drawings made under supervision at Shōkokuji. It was his way of showing that he was making progress. These have been preserved.

Sessō depicts the body mass using simple but realistic lines. In G-1 he displays the inner temperament of Sakyamuni when he bids goodbye to the mountain and everything that does not characterize him. «Figures should in fact be depicted in such a way that people looking at the painting wish they could change places with them».<sup>63</sup>

In G-1 the dense ink is prominent but in G-2, the contrast is in the watery lines that are fragmented. However, Sessō suggests to the observer in the colophon that it has taken six centuries for the ink to dry

and so Bodhidharma has mastered walking on water with a firm foot. The colophon was written by the Zen priest Jikushin Keisen and it is known that he died in 1462. Thus, before his trip to China, which is when he begins to appreciate his own worth on the way back. It was restored in Kyoto and exhibited as «The brilliant artist Sesshū in his youth» at the Nezu Museum in Tokyo, in 2016.

The painted legendary character in each vertical scroll effortlessly floats in an empty space that is a free-falling gap for the observant human mind. It looks, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, like an *apparition painting* and so, «it seems to propose a certain implausibility to its subjects».<sup>64</sup> In certain Zen monasteries in China (Song and Yuan dynasties) and Japan (Muromachi period) visually conscious organization was used to maintain an unstable equilibrium in daily life affairs.

## 6.3. What is this monk holding in his hands?

Even centuries later, two monks who were skilled painters left a record of what they mentally visualized. They shared their approach to seeing a poet. Without saying anything, one clarifies the other.

Scroll H-1 is in the Okayama Prefectural Museum of Art, and the painter is the shogun Ashikaga Yoshimochi, commander-in-chief who ruled from 1395 to 1423 and honed his skills in Zen painting under the guidance of the Tensho Shubun, who was appointed director of his court painting office in Kyoto in 1404. Sesshū Tōyō was also a student monk at this school.

<sup>62</sup> Sumire Aono. *Análisis de un kakemono budista al estilo zenga*, [Analysis of a Buddhist kakemone, Zenga style], Master thesis, e-print. Madrid: Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2019. <https://docta.ucm.es/entities/publication/04046819-52bf-4ba6-850b-5ca9ce84f618>

<sup>63</sup> Bill Porter and Red Pine. *Finding them gone: visiting China's poets of the past*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon, 2016.

<sup>64</sup> Yukio Lippit. *Apparition painting*.





Figure 7. Eccentric Monks, What Is the poet Hánshān holding?

The person painted is the poet Hánshān (in Chinese) and Kanzan in Japanese. The eulogy can be translated as follows: «It's true, this poet is an atypical man. The painting of Kanzan by Shojoin-dono (the artistic name of the shogun) is shown in this scroll. His confidant, Zen monk Shunsaku Zenkou of Daitoku-ji, Kyoto Monastery, wrote this eulogy. The posture in this picture is similar to that of the scroll examined in section 7 of this article. Simply put, he stands out because of the scroll he is holding between his fingers.

H-2, the next scroll, is another image of the poet Hánshān (or Kanzan) made by Reisai, a student of Kichigan Minchō (1352-1431) and a contemporary of Sesshū. In 1463 he traveled to Korea and was received by King Sejo, who was interested in a scroll he had painted depicting a white-robed Kannon. This scroll bears his signature, and the seal invites the eyewitness to «plant one's feet on solid ground».<sup>65</sup> It is on display at the Gotoh Museum in Tokyo. The wind whipping at his back does not let Hánshān down; it is the central image of this scroll. He has enough mental strength to remain upright, on foot, in honor of the sacred sutra held aerodynamically between his fingers. The light treasure being protected is not yet able to fly on its own. Reisai has another religious painting in the National Museum in Tokyo.

Buddhist monks, and particularly Zen monks, adhere to vegetarianism, but not so much those monks who practice martial arts, as is the case with Shaolin monks.<sup>66</sup> However, considering its habitat, if it is wild, if it is a boar, then it represents the wealth and strength of the forest, and so different names are used, such as Chotou, Zhutou, Zhimeng, or Zouthou Hweshang.

The alternative interpretation cannot be discarded. The flesh of a pig's head is both prized and feared, as diseases such as trichinosis lurk in the waste it consumes.

Scroll I-1 is in the Tokyo National Museum and the title is Chotō (Zhutou). The author is unknown. His body language, with the animal's head at the level of the stomach, his waist bent back, floating in the air, emphasizes the sensation of flesh moving. The volume of the human body is emphasized by the contrast between the thick ink and the watery strokes. The effect is gigantic and frightening.

Yōgetsu is the artist of the I-2 version of the boar's head scroll. He is considered a disciple of both Tenshō Shūbun and Sesshū. He was a monk who worked (from 1521 to 1530) in the painting department of a monastery in Nara, the ancient capital, about 45 km from Kyoto. The scroll is now in the Minneapolis Institute of Art, Mary and Jackson Burke Foundation. The structure of the landscape is similar to that of the Chinese theme, Sakyamuni descending from the mountain, examined in Figure 3.

The author of scroll I-3 is Muqi (or Muxi or Mokkei) Fachang, with blurred dates of birth (1210) and death (1269). Once again, a monk who practiced Zen Buddhism as well as painting. With an air of exhilaration, the monk holds and displays the boar's head as if it were a football trophy.

Since Sesshū was a monk of the Rinzai tradition, it should be remembered that the use of concrete anecdotes (koan) is more than a didactic technique. Rather, it is a test of the level of awakening demonstrated by the student or parishioner. This anecdote from P'an-shan (Pao-chi, 720-814) takes the gloss off the words we have just heard: «One day he saw a man in the marketplace enter a butcher's shop to buy meat. He heard him ask, *Could you please give me a piece of meat that is the finest?* The butcher dropped his knife, picked it up and said: *My dear sir, what do we have here that is not the finest?*» Upon hearing these words, Pao-chi was suddenly enlightened».<sup>67</sup> How many people assume that their home-cooked meals are the finest and best?

<sup>65</sup> Helmut Brinker and Hiroshi Kanazawa. *Zen masters of meditation in images and writings*. Zurich: Artibus Asiae Publishers, 1996, 148.

<sup>66</sup> Shahar, Meir. *The Shaolin monastery: history, religion and the Chinese Martial Arts*. Honolulu: Hawaii University Press 2013.

<sup>67</sup> Helmut Brinker. *Zen in the art of painting*. London: Arkana, 1987.

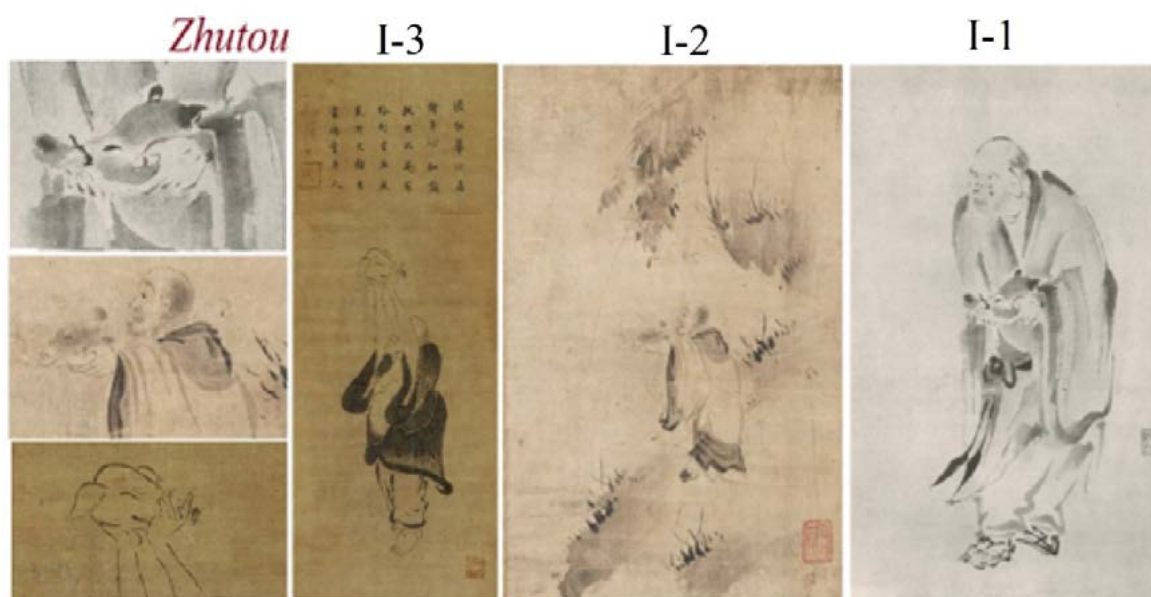


Figure 8. Eccentric monks, what does the monk hold in his hands?

## 7. The Spiritual Portrait of an Eccentric Monk attributed to Sesshū Tōyō

Uncovering the wooden box and unfolding the scroll in Figure 9 reveals the image breaking from right to left. It is a monochrome hanging scroll. The total area measures 147 x 34 cm and the painting section measures 79 x 26 cm (figure 9, fragment J-1). There are signs of aging and discoloration in the hanging loops, upper and lower staffs, and brocade and dividing bands, as well as wear and caramelization in the painting rectangle.

The top of a hanging scroll is known as heaven and the bottom as earth. The painted section is not neutral. The signature and seal appear in the upper right corner, and the monk floats without resting his feet on the ground. Somehow he is floating. There is little space below and, above his head, an exuberant emptiness in the heavenly heights.

The white paper rectangle with calligraphy and painting has caramelized over the past five hundred years. It is a patina sensitive to touch, sweat, and the scent of incense. Each of the three vertical calligraphic ideograms and the simplicity of each linear and independent stroke advocate that it is a meditation piece. It is a gift to the disciple who may become a master, a souvenir of hours of face-to-face dialogue, but also the result of a donation, from the grateful disciple who was happy, to provide his spiritual director with an informal income that made his ministerial daily life easier.

The handwritten text states that what is seen was made by «the brush of Sesshū Tōyō,» a Zen Rinzai Buddhist monk. In section 8 of this article, the signature and seal are discussed. For didactic and visual reasons, the scroll is divided into four winks to the reader in Figure 9.

Thus, in J-2 and J-3, it appears to be a silhouette floating in the air, appearing at first glance as an apparition, just as this intended phenomenon has been assessed by Lippit, using a Chinese term, «wanglianghua». «In classical texts, 'wangliang' seems to have designated not only the idea of a penumbra, but also

of a «shadow of a shadow,» a ghostly, tenuous quality that defies easy characterization or representation, which is why it is translated here as «apparition».<sup>68</sup> The monk's height, width, and depth are precise and proportionate, each articulation in its place, making him both palpable and dynamic.

The use of negative space in this hanging scroll is what makes it stand out. The monk, walking with slippery footprints that leave no trace, draws the eye to the area, simply transparent. It creates a sense of balance and emptiness, drawing the viewer's attention to the eccentric monk who is somehow moving aimlessly and who appears to be omnivorous, breaking the ascetic rule of being vegan. It is not a white space, it is not immaculate, it is as if it had never been painted at all. It creates a visual hierarchy, a religious figure who, unlike most of his parishioners, has a clear idea of where he is going amidst the daily noise and chaos. It is a body-face that is both metaphysical and ghostly.

Against the emptiness of an unpainted background, he stands inert, holding in his hands what could be a pig's or boar's head, (for others, it might be a scroll of poems or a prayer book). The left hand holds the skull, and the blurred segment stands out in J-4 with precision and detail. The enraptured expression of his face enhances the elegant presence of an ethereal, disembodied figure moving forward, totally absorbed in the evanescent incantation. A very delicate and precise brushstroke emphasizes the counterweight of the thumb and the counterpoint of the short abductor of his left hand. It has been brought out to be appreciated. The drawing, both of a compressing and an expanding hand, is a difficult art that this artist masters. He has a school as an observer and practitioner, because a beginner does not make it. The monochrome picture is attributed to Sesshū Tōyō, who is vividly portrayed as a fine artist by the small hand fragment that holds the animal's head in an unstable balance, showing the quality of touch that speaks for him.

<sup>68</sup> Lippit, Yukio. Apparition painting, 61.

The lines are all curved and oval. Their undulating motion is similar to that of those who practice Taichi or Chikung at a slow pace. The brush strokes that make up the boar's head, the monk's mouth, the left ear, the jawbone, the hands, and the texture of the robe «are executed with an extremely low saturation of ink, so much so that the details of the figuration are difficult to fully perceive. The darkness of the painting is only accentuated by the black touches of ink»<sup>69</sup> applied to the boar's left tusk and upper eyelid, as well as the monk's pierced eyes, feet in sandals and, enhancing the gestalt, the robe's folds and rounded profile in free fall.

The highly defined contours in J-3 are suggestive and explicit because the artist had fun with the brushwork. The silhouette cannot escape because it delimits two emotional spaces: the monk's universe is intimate and cozy, while the area where he never sits is transparent. He's still but moving, this is the way the two sensitive intervals interact. The balance between the painted and the unpainted is skillful, someone, anonymous, is loitering and interacting.

It is a painting that requires patience, that cannot be observed quickly, it must be contemplated lazily, a while yes, a while no. The wild boar and the hermit inhabit the same enclave, in the forest or above the tree line. They are alive because they are both supplied with acorns from oaks and fresh water between certain rocks that they know.

The beauty of this monochromatic scroll is similar to that of the Six Persimmons (in Daitoku-ji, Kyoto) attributed to the aforementioned Muqi Fachang in Figures 4 and 8.

In this hanging scroll, straight lines are conspicuously absent. There is another purpose, serpentine lines. The use of different shades of ink saturation suggests a deep understanding of the «ink wash» technique, where ink density is varied to create depth and texture. It adds a sense of realism as well as three-dimensional relief to the painting.

The artist uses varying degrees of ink saturation to create different tones and shades, which adds a sense of realism and texture to the painting. This technique, known as «ink wash,» allows the artist to

create a sense of depth and perspective even in a two-dimensional medium. It is the contrast between form and shape in 21st century art design.<sup>70</sup>

The paper appears to be washi, handmade from natural fibers that each artisan has optimized for durability and ingenuity to absorb ink without dulling. The texture suggests that the process of finding solutions to a raw material that has become more fragile over the years required a great deal of time and expertise. Due to lack of access to a reliable Japanese museum database, the paper has not been chemically tested.

The care with which the scroll has been preserved, the fact that at least three hands have intervened with their respective calligraphies mentioning Sesshū Tōyō as the author, are the bodyguards that allow us to affirm that it is a painting of great value, Zen style, made with Chinese ink in Japan in monastic environments.

The quality and the skill in achieving volume with few and careful brushstrokes allow us to say that this is a scroll painted with the maturity of a monk with many birthdays behind him, he enjoys juggling with the brushes and arthritis is conspicuous by its absence. It is known that when he was 80 years old, «the great artist again took up his 'worn brush' and painted for the same disciple», the talented priest Sōen, also known as Josui.<sup>71</sup>

The light of this scroll is medium gray because there are the marks of ink washes in various places such as the robe, the skull, the lips and the ear. In addition, five centuries have passed and the color of the paper reminds us that it is time for a latte.

The painting is monochrome, and the texture is emphasized with the side of the brush on the boar's self-absorbed eyelid, in the curves and folds of the robe, the slippers show shapes that are both black and intense. With the tip of the brush, the eyetooth of the slaughtered animal.

He spent his last years travelling; he had sponsors like the feudal families Ouchi or Masuda, with whom he was in agreement separately. These monasteries were according to his taste and accommodation: Jōoeiji in Yamaguchi or Tokoji (then Daiki-an) or Ikoji (then Mampuku-ji).



Figure 9. Zen Scroll attributed to Sesshū Tōyō: Hānshān or Zhutou?

<sup>69</sup> Awakawa. *Zen painting*, 64.

<sup>70</sup> John McRae. *Seeing Through Zen: Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism*. Berkeley: University of California Press 2003, 26.

<sup>71</sup> Carter-Cowell, John. *Under the seal*, 34.



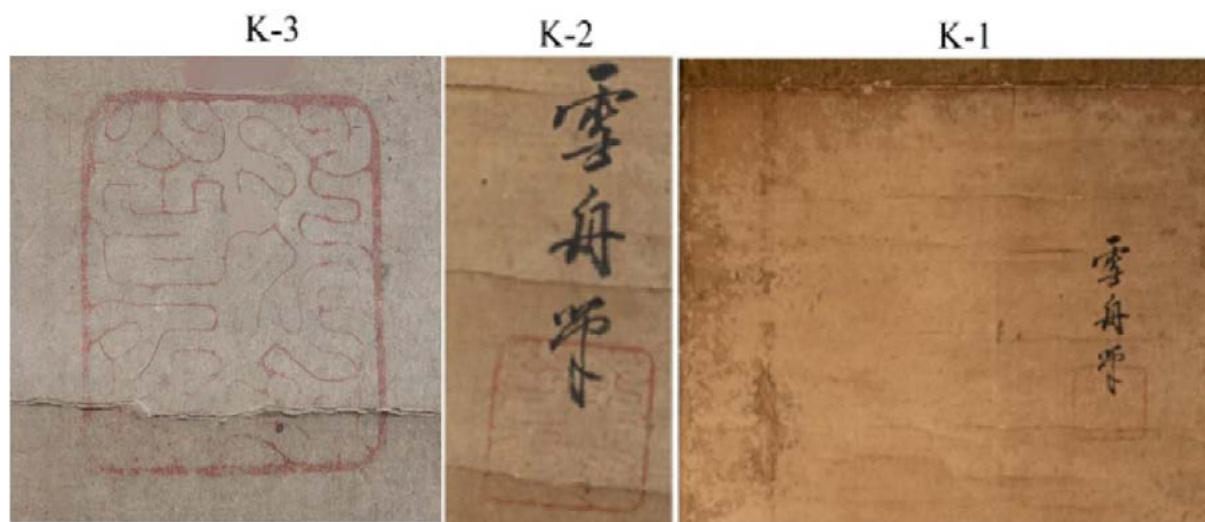


Figure 10. Signature and seal with and without the signature removed.

### 8. What is the source of this enigma? The seal, the signature, or the iconographically curious mind?

At this point we will address the conundrum that prompts Western Japanese museums to evaluate the attribution to Sesshū Tōyō of the works in their collections, since it is very problematic to declare the authenticity of each piece, especially when it comes to works contained in collections outside Japan. In the study of this scroll we start from the consideration of what is stated in the handwritten text on the scroll box (i.e., Figure 1, A) and on the spine of the scroll (Figure 1, B) as well as on the front of the scroll identified in Figure 10, details K-1, K-2 and K3. Although authorship is recognized in three different ways, it may not be entirely convincing.

It is worth keeping in mind Saussure's<sup>72</sup> distinction between *signified* (*signifié* in the original French, i.e. the semantic content, the concept, the nuanced meanings of a word) and *signifier* (significant in French, the visual or acoustic image, the concrete form that the reader sees, that the listener hears, and to which they may or may not pay attention).

Sesshū Tōyō's signatures and texts are written in Kanbun (漢文), literally *Chinese script* or classical Chinese. This is a category of Japanese writing forms that use Kanji (Chinese characters) with the inclusion of no form of kana, or with very limited use of these specifically Japanese alphabets. There are four types of kanbun. The first of these, Hakubun (白文, clean writing) is the use of classical Chinese without Kundoku or any reading aids. It is written with the Chinese grammatical order, and must be read either in Chinese or come Japanese by recomposing the word order and adding the unwritten particles and conjugations. Other forms of Kanbun are Kundoku bun (訓読文), in which markings are placed along with the characters to make them easier to read in Japanese; Kakikudashi bun (書き下し文), in which Kanbun texts are rearranged according to Japanese grammar and sentence structure, and

kana characters are included. Finally, Sōrōbun (候文) is the most widespread form of Kanbun hentai (dirty Kanbun) during the Edo period, thus later than Sesshū Tōyō. It was widely used in letters, records, petitions and other official documents. It uses a properly Japanese word order and includes extensive kanji, so that it would not be readable directly by a Chinese reader.<sup>73</sup> Sesshū signed his scrolls and wrote his texts and inscriptions in the early form of Kanbun, which during the Muromachi period was the proper literary language of intellectuals and artists, especially also of Zen Buddhist monks.

Another proof of the authenticity of this scroll is what has just been nuanced. Linguistically, it is faithful to the standards described, which are appropriate to that century and to Zen monasteries. Our author's name is composed of the characters 雪 and 舟, which are read as «Sesshū» thanks to the combination of the onyomi pronunciation (based on the phonetics of classical Chinese) of both kanji, and also thanks to the use of *ateji*. Thanks to this resource, in this case, as in many other words in Japanese, the kanji are not selected for their original meaning, but for the way they sound to the ear, i.e. their phonetic value. Therefore, the name Sesshū does not imply that it is a literal combination of the two kanji that compose it, but of the sounds that come together to form the phonetic reading corresponding to the painter's name.

«Brush - Boat - Snow» are three ideograms that make up his signature, his advertising sign. Each ideogram can be understood as a metaphor for what it describes.

- Snow (In Chinese 雪, pronounced (: xuě, xuè. In Japanese, in reading kan-on (onyomi): せつ (set-su), in reading Kun (kunyomi): ゆき (yuki, 雪, すずぐ (susugu, 雪ぐ)、そそぐ (sosogu, 雪ぐ), among others), evokes the idea of combining rain and broom.
- Boat (舟, pronounced zhōu in Chinese (Pinyin). In Japanese: Readings Go-on: しゅう (shu), Kan-on: しゅう (shū), Kun: ふね (fune, 舟), originally alludes

<sup>72</sup> Andy Ferguson. *Tracking Bodhidharma: A Journey to the Heart of Chinese Culture*. Berkeley: Catapult, 2012.

<sup>73</sup> Ferguson. *Tracking Bodhidharma*, 346.

to a boat for eight people. The image evoked by its oracular script derives from the curved wooden boats used at the time, and its current script has undergone few modifications since then. As a radical 舟, it appears on the left in words with the meaning of vessel, as: 船 (ship) and 舰 (warship).

- Brush (bǐ 笔, Go-on: ひち (hichi), Kan-on: ひつ (hit-su) Kun: ふで (fude) is the result of etymologically combining the radical 竹 zhú (bamboo), which represents the handle of the brush, and the bristles of the brush represented by radical 毛 (máo, hair). It also refers to a stroke made with a brush.

In the context of this painter and his work, the inscription «brush (of) Sesshū» becomes his artistic name by the kanji. Its metaphorical meaning emphasizes that it is the brush that has the initiative, for productive is the doll of the monk named Sesshū Tōyō. It is also the nickname given to the author by his faithful disciples and admirers of that monk. This double decoding gives rise to various appreciations and behavioral forecasts:

- a) Someone (an expert in the art of monochromatic brushstrokes in the Muromachi tradition) painted the monk that emerges from the paper without saying a word; it is a figure, a presence that silently preaches his existence in the scroll, where the unpainted space abounds, which is also deteriorated by the years that continue to add up.
- b) Someone claims to know who the painter of this figure was and names him in writing so that there is no doubt as to his identity.
- c) That person placed his or her stamp in the upper right corner and calligraphically revealed the author of those vigorous brushstrokes: that verticality is eloquent.
- d) A librarian reiterated on the spine of the folded scroll, in standard handwriting (*kaishu*) the name of the person who is said to have made those brushstrokes speak touchingly in black Chinese ink.
- e) An archivist recorded in the box the authorship of the scroll with the peculiar calligraphy, *Gyōsho*, a variation of the scribes' calligraphy (*reisho*, ornamental and easy to read calligraphy). Scribes are usually assertive in their opinions, as they are compelled to verify the veracity of what they write.

Throughout this paper we have focused on option A. In this section we will discuss issues B and C. Behaviors D and E were briefly addressed in section 1 when glossing Figure 1 A and B.

### 8.1. Is the seal a rubric, a reminder or a label?

It is a masculine (yang) character seal as it imprints the drawing in red lines on a white background in Figure 10, K-3. In Chinese the term for seal is *zhūwén* (朱文) which in Japanese is pronounced as *shubun*, i.e., red characters or design. The word seal in Chinese (印) is also illustrative: the palm of a hand ready to press. It is a reminder of how and what has been done.

Seals of an institutional nature are governed by precise guidelines, while those of a private nature are made at the free will of whoever orders them or whoever carves them with a punch. They are usually used as a recognized signature of artists on their works, or as a pre-signature on letters and important

documents. They enunciate and commit. This does not seem to be the case, since books and anthologies of paintings of the period have been consulted and no similar seal has been found<sup>74</sup>.

Another variant of Chinese seal features a phrase, a slogan that lyrically or spiritually portrays the author or the owner of the seal. We have the examples of the seals «Excelling at idiocy» by Shitao (1642-1707), or «Attaining immortality» by Zhu Da (1626-1705). Both painters are Zen Buddhist monks, calligraphers and Chinese landscape painters.<sup>75</sup> These are assertions that are known as «wishful thinking». This does not appear to be the case, as no engraved characters with recognizable meaning are glimpsed. Their availability in Figure 10 K-3 opens the door to further investigation.

A third use is that it is the marketing seal of the painter's studio, or of the place where he lives or creates his work. This may be the case, since the red lines delimit spaces that can be green areas, water ponds, hedges, play and travel areas, seats, buildings... in a Zen Garden, seen from a bird's eye view. Almost all possible routes are interconnected. The search for the meaning of this K-3 version seal is still open.

In this context it is worth remembering what was outlined in section 3, commenting on table 1: a monk from the area of study of sutras in a monastery proposes the theme, (in this case the legendary figure of a monk with a boar's head in his hands) and another, from the area of management, a habitual painter in Chinese ink, makes a pictorial interpretation that if it convinces is endorsed by placing the seal peculiar to the place where it was painted.

Upon his return from China in 1470 Sesshū, being almost 50 years old, devoted himself to painting subjects of a religious nature in the Rinzaï zen collection. During his stay at Tiantong Monastery (天童寺) he was treated with the appropriate obeisance as a visiting foreign abbot, just the monastery where, 200 years earlier, the Japanese monk Dōgen Zenji (1200-1253), founder of the Soto Zen tradition in Japan, had attained awakening and obtained certification to establish and govern congregations of monks.

Sesshū founded his own studio, and called it «Heaven-Created Painting Pavilion» (Tenkai Zugarō) located on the island of Kyushu, and it was not by chance, in Oita prefecture, famous then, and also now, for its numerous streams and spas of healthy hot springs. That is, in an economically solvent and pious environment, and akin to the samurai, as they used to stay, meditate and practice in Rinzaï temples (Kaiten, 1913).

One of his clients named Kanetaka, recognized as Fifteenth Feudal Lord of the Masuda clan, commissioned a statue and also the design of two Zen gardens, one at Ikō-ji temple (医光寺) and the other at Manpuku-ji (萬福寺), in Shimane-ken prefecture,

<sup>74</sup> Awakawa. *Zen painting*; Brinker. *Zen in the art of painting*; Tokyo National Museum (2002). *Sesshū – master of ink and brush*. Tokyo: The Mainichi Newspapers, 2002; Kyoto National Museum 京都国立博物館 (2023). 雪舟伝説—「画聖」の誕生— (*The Legend of Sesshū: Birth of a Master Painter*). 特別展図録 (Catalog of special exhibition). Kyoto: 日本経済新聞社 (Nihon Keizai Shimbun Inc.), テレビ大阪 (TV Osaka) and 京都新聞 (Kyoto Shimbun).

<sup>75</sup> Wang, Yao-t'ing. *Looking at Chinese Painting*. Tokyo: Nigen-sha Pub, 2000.

neighboring Hiroshima. Far from the imperial and military court in Kyoto.

Escaping from the wars, in the city of Yamaguchi, Sesshū recreated his second studio in the temple Unkoku'an («Hermitage in the Valley of Clouds») and, at the same time, in the monastery Jōeiji (常栄寺) a Zen Garden (possibly Kiyoshi). At 80 he was the head priest of Tokoji temple (in the 21st century it is called Daiki-an). He had important responsibilities and was a traveler in his advanced age.

In view of the seal (Figure 10, K-3) and knowing his dedication to the design of Zen gardens, in which his painting studio was located, and the expressiveness of the monk descending with a boar's head in his hands, it may be suggested that from the Tenkai Zuga-rō environment comes his workmanship. It descended, figuratively, from the mountain called Taibai which housed the aforementioned Tiantong monastery where, during the rainy and wintry months, Sesshū Tōyō stayed.

In short, the seal is mute, but it can be read as a religious or a mystical map. For example, the master is the steady mountain surrounded by disciples who are the voluble and humid clouds. They are either held back or blown away.

## 8.2. Reading the signature as a gestalt or word-to-word coupling

Painters do not usually improvise their signature, much less in the Zen tradition, which is consciously and constantly supervised by their masters. The «self» has to be blurred. The format is usually clear and consistent, for the self has to reappear in each of his works only when he considers it to be completed. A teenager as Sesshū was, imaginatively devises an aesthetic that he deliberately ponders. This differentiates complete works from anonymous works, those that do not have an explicit signature, for they suggest that they are unfinished or that the painter got lost.

The peculiarity of a signature is the attempt to make it unique, that is, a seductive calligraphy. The painter's name provides the meaning, but the peculiarities of his or her handwritten strokes (with pen or brush) are glimpsed and recognized by operating as a visual or acoustic signifier when vocalized.

### 8.2.1. Gestalt in Sesshū Tōyō's signatures by columns

Each artist creates his or her own gestalt coupling, that is, a stable structured form that suits them. The three kanji in Sesshū's signature enhance the distinction between figure (the calligraphic brushstroke) and the background which is the negative void that stands out in this scroll. «Calligraphy takes place in the mind and on paper simultaneously; in fact, at the moment of executing it, mind and paper are the same thing» (Fadón Salazar, 2002).

Figure 11 presents seven columns, the last of which, L-7, outlines the calligraphy used in this scroll at the Complutense University of Madrid, and the remaining ones are the signatures outlined in the catalog of the National Museum of Kyoto in the exhibition it promoted from March 12 to April 7, 2002. Pages 300 to 305 of the catalog present 32 rubrics extracted from the scrolls or drawings on paper exhibited. Here we have selected a representative sample, from L-1 to L-6, as they are the clearest.

These seven columns present the three ideograms, Brush (of) Sesshū, that make up his most stable signature. He uses a variant of the standard style (kaisho 楷書). It can be seen that there is harmony in the handwritten brushstrokes, which maintain the vertical inter-distance in the spellings L-2 to L-7. The author has mentally divided the space for the intended framing of the characters.

There is an exception in column L-1. Marked with a red box one can read a Kanji meaning calligraphy, text, tracing, writing (書 sho), mostly in the sense of classical Chinese writing. It could therefore be interpreted to mean that Sesshū is the author of his colophon text, and uses another signature in L-2 to underline that he is the author of the image and so he uses the term brush (bǐ 筆). Both, calligraphy and painting, entail action. Zen meditation is about being ready to do, to act. It is not introspection; it is not auto-hypnosis.

The first thing to note is that Sesshū's calligraphic strokes are not stable, they are not permanent, they mutate. He shows a great variability, they express his own freedom and spontaneity in writing. He is fluid, he is not precise. For example, the calligraphic signature on L-1 and L-2 comes from the same scroll, a gift to a disciple of his, Josui Sōen. In the lower left

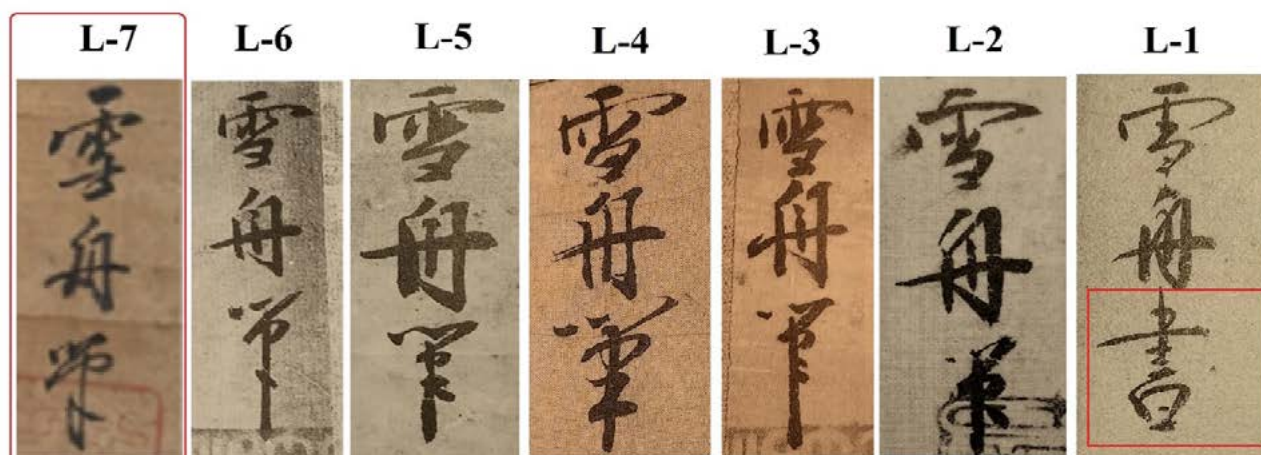


Figure 11. Sesshū's signature as a gestalt





Figure 12. Sesshū's Artistic Signature: word by word

appears his signature as a painter, and forty centimeters above, on the left, his signature as a calligrapher (framed in red) is dissimilar. It is difficult to claim that the first two ideograms in the signature (it is his autograph) come from the same human wrist, and the scroll has been validated for centuries, since, in addition to being accurately dated, it has five more inscriptions of praise.

In L-3 and L-5 the two museums compromise by deciding to attribute them to Sesshū. On the other hand, the two private collectors claim that they have sufficient guarantees to determine that they are authentic.

There are remarkable affinities between the signatures L-1 to L-6 in Figure 11 with the signature from L-7. There are therefore reasons to attribute to Sesshū the authorship of the scroll at the Complutense University of Madrid as it shares similarities reiterated in this sample of the 32 reproduced in black and white in the catalog.

Here is the list of the scrolls in which these signatures appear, with the museum details that allow the reader to contextualize the significant traces that demonstrate the authorship of Sesshū (by Sesshū), or what the museum assumes as a critical doubt without full certainty (attributed to Sesshū):

- L-1 y L-2, Haboku Landscape, by Sesshū Tokyo National Museum, dated 1495, inscriptions by Sesshū and five other painters who are zen priests. L-1 is the signature of the Sesshū inscription and L-2 the signature of Sesshū as author.
- L-3, Landscape, attributed to Sesshū, Kumaya Museum in Yamaguchi.
- L-4 Bishamonten (Vaisravana), by Sesshū, private collection.
- L-5 Jurōjin, attributed to Sesshū, Fukoaka City Museum.
- L-6 Landscape, by Sesshū, one inscription, private collection.
- L-7, Zhutou Zhimeng monk, UCMJMP01 Complutense University of Madrid.

### 8.2.2 Ideograms one by one by three rows

This section approaches the same issue from another perspective. The emphasis now is not on the verticals, but on the 'transversal lines'. From the set of 32 signatures appearing in the catalog of the 2002 exhibition sponsored by the Tokyo National Museum, 6 calligraphic variants of the same ideogram have been chosen. That is to say, the three concepts are weighed separately and horizontally (A, B and C) and the six scrolls from which the calligraphies of the signature exhibited in museums, plus one in a private collection (Figure 12, M-1 to M-6) are vertically delimited, contrasted with the ideograms appearing in CUCJMP01. The calligraphic variability word by word can thus emerge, and this allows us to affirm that according to Japanese museum criteria they match each other, and this scroll is comparable in its inscriptions. As a consequence, its reasonable attribution to Sesshū Tōyō seems feasible.

Here is the listing of the scrolls examined through their horizontal arrangement with the aforementioned kanji «Brush (of) Sesshū». By analyzing each of the seven ideograms in a line in detail, we can once again discover that the calligraphy of Sesshū's signature was evolving. There are the fewest variations in B and the most in C. The brush is obedient, the wrist apparently not. The greatness of this style of writing is that it is friendly and understandable to the eye of the reader.<sup>76</sup>

#### Brush (笔)

- M-1: Ox-herd after Li Tang, by Sesshū, Yamaguchi Prefectural Art Museum
- M-2: Ox-herd after Li-Tang, by Sesshū, Yamaguchi Prefectural Art Museum
- M-3: Landscape after Yu Jian, by Sesshū, The Okayama Prefectural Museum of Art
- M-4: Huang Chuping after Liang Kai, by Sesshū, Kyoto National Museum

<sup>76</sup> Van Briessen. *The way of the brush*.

- M-5: Plum tree, attributed to Sesshū, Tokyo National Museum
- M-6: Landscape scroll of the four seasons (long landscape), by Sesshū, dated 1486, Mouri Museum, Yamaguchi
- M-7: Zhutou Zhimeng monk, UCMJMP01 Complutense University

### Snow 雪

- M-1: Ox-herd after Li-Tang, by Sesshū, Yamaguchi Prefectural Art Museum
- M-2: Ox-herd after Li-Tang, by Sesshū, Yamaguchi Prefectural Art Museum
- M-3: Landscape after Yu Jian, by Sesshū, The Okayama Prefectural Museum of Art
- M-4: Huang Chuping after Liang Kai, by Sesshū, Kyoto National Museum
- M-5: Plum tree, attributed to Sesshū, Tokyo National Museum
- M-6: Landscape, by Sesshū, two inscriptions, Kosetsu Museum of Art, Kobe
- M-7: Zhutou Zhimeng monk, UCMJMP01 Complutense University.

### Boat/Ship (舟)

- M-1: Autumn and winter landscapes, by Sesshū, two scrolls, Tokyo National Museum.
- M-2: Landscape, by Sesshū, two inscriptions, private collection

- M-3: Hatsuboku (splashed ink), landscape, by Sesshū, one inscription, Idemitsu Museum of Arts, Tokyo
- M-4: Birds and flowers of the four seasons, attributed to Sesshū, Maeda Ikutokubai Foundation, Tokyo.
- M-5: Landscape with pavilion and figures, attributed to Sesshū, Yamaguchi Prefectural Museum
- M-6: Landscape scroll of the four seasons (long landscape), by Sesshū, dated 1486, Mouri Museum, Yamaguchi.
- M-7: Zhutou Zhimeng monk, UCMJMP01 Complutense University.

## 9. Conclusions

Throughout this article we have analyzed and compared drawings made in Zen monastic settings during the Muromachi period (1336-1573) and come is the time to make a revealing comparison through non-verbal language. It has to do with Ashikaga Yoshimochi (足利 義持, 1386-1428), identified in Table 1 and mentioned seven times in this article. He was the fourth shōgun of the Ashikawa shogunate. His father, Ashikawa Yoshimitsu abdicated when he was only eight years old, and he was appointed general-in-chief of all troops. He consolidated his power when his father died in 1408, and wielded it until 1423. At nearby Shōkokuji Shrine he practiced Zen meditation, and also spent time and effort with the brush to carry out exercises directed by his teacher Taikō Josetsu. The N-2 scroll in figure 13 was discussed as H-1 in figure 7. It is on display temporarily at the

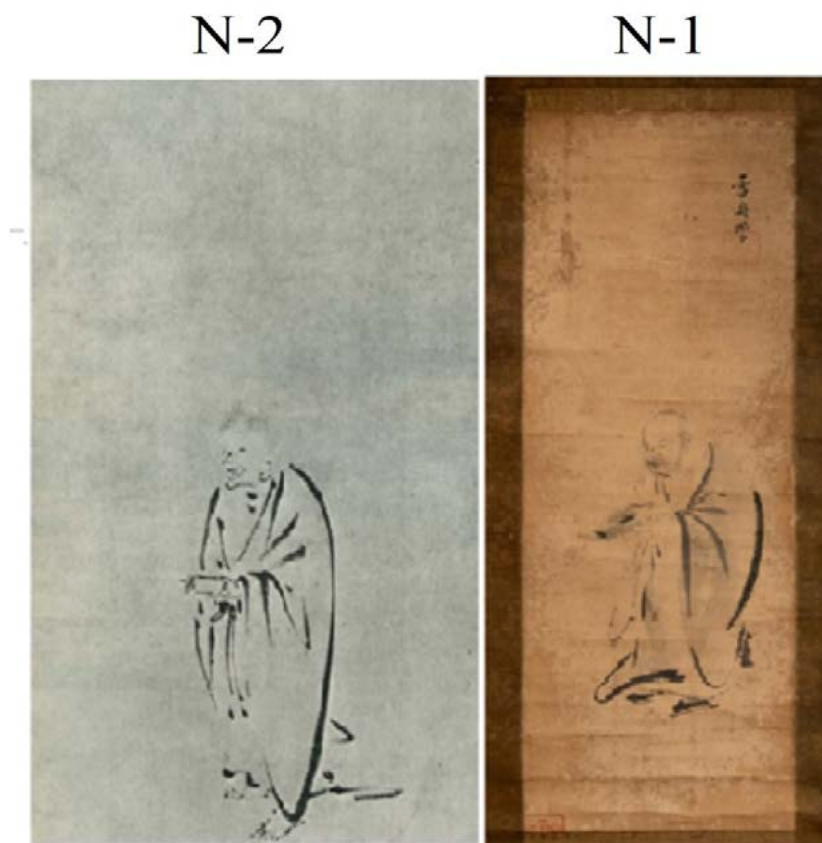


Figure 13. From the same Zen art school?

Okayama Prefectural Museum of Art. What does it have in common with the N-1 drawing? The answer to this question is the inquiry that has underpinned this article.

There is a remarkable parallel in the body language and in the manner of delineating corporeal movement in stillness. The blurriness of his skull, the two certain points that are his eyes, the prominence of the chin, the retention of something blurred and elongated between his hands, his robes billowing in a step-by-step ethereal recollection. Were Sesshū and Yoshimochi schoolmates? Yes... and no.

YES, because they had shared teachers (mentioned in table 1) and NO because Sesshū was eight years old when Yoshimochi died at the age of 42. At the age of 10 Sesshū was taken into the Shōkokuji monastery. The prescribed pattern for the usual learning in Shōkokuji was to imitate by painting the models that they consider as archetypes until getting the approval of the master, for example, Buddha descends from the mountain. The contrast between the drawing and calligraphy of the scroll at the Complutense University and those shown in Figures 3, 7, 8, 11, 12 and 13 suggests that the CUCJMP01 scroll emerged from that same clerical environment of Zen artistic roots.

Since it is a drawing, we have searched with pattern recognition programs such as Google Lens on several occasions over the past four years. No identical or similar image has been found. It can be stated, then, that this drawing of Sesshū is different, dissimilar, unique. The existence of a comparable image has been traced in spring and summer, in autumn and winter, in the much free time provided to the researchers by the confinement due to the Covid pandemic, working telematically from home consulting multiple catalogs of collections and museum exhibitions. Checking high and low-definition images. Barring errors or omissions, currently this scroll is unique, and some five centuries have passed since its creation. There is only one precedent of internal circulation, a master's thesis from the 2009-2010 academic year published as an e-print in the digital repository of the Complutense University of Madrid.<sup>77</sup>

As we have seen, it is a drawing that has as its antecedent the myth of the Buddha's mountain descent (see comments to figure 3). It is enough to compare scrolls D-3 to D-6 with rolls N-1 and N-2 (in figure 13) to see that there are remarkable affinities not only in the specific meaning of each of these scrolls, but with the signifier that is the staged corporal theatricality. It is not a pose; it is a way of walking forward without touching the ground. This walking can be considered a form of ecstasy.

The background is also a reference to the spiritual portraits of eccentric monks discussed in section 6, figures 5 to 8 because Figure 9 is the foundation of this research, providing context for what the drawing silently conveys. Most of these monks became legendary figures during the Tang dynasty in China, because they were the counterpoint to an imperial power that imposed its sense of order and correctness in everyday affairs. But every rule has its exception, and

they testify to this through their personal anecdotes that are immortalized in their portraits. Before or after being a Buddhist monk, a Zen monk may be a homeless person himself, and so he is an antidote to the established power.

Sesshū had a reputation as a good calligrapher (since painting and writing have to do with the craft that is the pulse that articulates the due intensity of the arm, forearm, wrist, hand and prehensile fingers). However, he was not so precise and reliable in the gestalt of the three kanji, combined by his own choice to express his creative identity through his signature as illustrated in six of the vertical inscriptions that have the support of museums or private collections in Japan, confronted with the seventh inscription, which is submitted for the reader's consideration in Figure 11.

The same is true of the calligraphic strokes in Figure 12. Examining the three kanji, separately, horizontally, the controlled spontaneity exhibited by the signer named Sesshū can be compared. There are affinities, approximations, but there is no detailed thoroughness. It is, once again, the monochromatic signifier. A more detailed observation of the drawing reveals a sophisticated use of empty space that not only creates a visual balance, but also invites contemplation, a central principle in Zen aesthetics. This minimalist approach is typical of Sesshū and other Zen artists, who sought to capture the essence of the subject with the fewest strokes.

The facial expression and posture of the figure suggest serenity and introspection, which is consistent with the Zen representations of monks and enlightened Buddhist prominent personalities. The ability to transmit subtle emotions through minimal strokes is a distinctive feature of Zen masters.

In the background is the Zen notion of «egoless ego»: the painter does not identify himself, nor do the witness or the librarians. However, all three mention the same person as the author. In Japanese the word used is Mushin (no = mu) and shin (which means «mind and heart» or «cognition and emotion»). Mushin has its origins in the martial arts, which is the root of Zen. When two people trained in martial arts interact, thinking or feeling can be the cause of a misstep. It is also a trap and a bad move to feel sorry when a blow hurts. It is also a defeat to consider the damage caused to the opponent.

In this emptiness, the painter is not the main character, but rather the ink, the stroke, the wrist, and the slow breathing (ki in Japanese, air, spirit, mood). «In fact, the most important element of Zen art is the degree of bokki present in the work. Bokki, «the ki projected into the ink,» activates the brush strokes («lines of the heart»). By observing the clarity, strength, intensity, extension, suppleness, scale, and sensitivity of the brushstrokes, the artist's presence of mind and level of enlightenment become palpable» (Stevens, 1986).

«And in Zen we train ourselves to recover equilibrium every moment. The ego is built up from a succession of internal pressures. When the pressures are dissolved, the ego vanishes, and there is true emptiness» (Sekida, 1975, p. 36).

As a final anecdote, two postage stamps issued by two countries in 1956, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of Romania, were dedicated to

<sup>77</sup> Rosae Martin Peña. El arte contemplativo zen: los siete principios de Shinichi Hisamatsu en acción. Master's thesis. Madrid: Complutense University of Madrid digital repository (e-prints), 2010.





Figure 14. Celebrating Sesshū Tōyō in the USSR and Romania, 1956

Sesshū Tōyō. Both countries, in their constitution, declared themselves atheists and materialists. In both cases they use the name «Tōyō Oda», referring to the Oda samurai family (小田家) to which he belonged. See Figure 14 below.

The initiative apparently came from the World Peace Council, an agency created in 1949 under the auspices of the Soviet Union. It still exists, with headquarters in Athens. They had decided to periodically commemorate relevant figures of culture and science to make them known by postcard. The print run was one million stamps in the USSR and the photogravure was designed by artist Alexander Zavyalov. The print run was half a million in Romania and the designer was Serban Zainea. It is interesting to note that other figures of science and culture honored in this philatelic collection were Pierre Curie, Benjamin Franklin, Heinrich Heine, Henrik Ibsen, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Rembrandt van Rijn, and George Bernard Shaw. The 450th anniversary of Sesshū's death was celebrated in 1956. It is a «Rara avis» such recognition of its ephemeris.

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