MISCELÁNEA

Eikón Imago
ISSN-e: 2254-8718

EDICIONES COMPLUTENSE

https://doi.org/10.5209/eiko.81715

'Emptiness' and 'Nothingness' as Key Elements to Conveying and Understanding Meaning in Japanese Calligraphy

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Recibido: 27 de abril de 2022 / Aceptado: 10 de noviembre de 2022 / Publicado: 28 de enero de 2023

Abstract. The article analyses one of Japanese calligraphy's (*shodō* 書道) particularities: the notion of "emptiness", "nothingness". This concept can be observed in different layers of the art: from the white of the paper, to the movement of the brush after it has been lifted from the paper, to the interpretative process. In this way, there are instances of "emptiness" during several stages of creation and understanding of a calligraphic work. In order to illustrate this, our article will analyse two *shodō* 書道 works, pinpointing the use of "emptiness", or "nothingness", and the effect they create for the calligraphic work as a whole. We conclude that in order to grasp the *transcendent* meaning, one must take into account all elements present within a calligraphic work, including the instances of "emptiness".
Keywords: Japanese Calligraphy; *Transcendent* meaning; *shodō*; Zen Buddhism.

[es] 'Vacío' y 'Nada' como elementos clave para transmitir y comprender el significado en la caligrafía japonesa

Resumen. El artículo analiza una de las particularidades de la caligrafía japonesa (*shodō* 書道): la noción de "vacío", "nada". Este concepto se puede observar en diferentes capas del arte: desde el blanco del papel, pasando por el movimiento del pincel después de haber sido levantado del papel, hasta el proceso interpretativo. De esta manera, hay instancias de "vacío" en varias etapas de creación y comprensión de una obra caligráfica. Para ilustrar este concepto, nuestro artículo analizará dos obras de *shodō* 書道, señalando el uso de "vacío" o "nada", y el efecto que crean para la obra caligráfica en su conjunto. Concluimos que, para captar el significado "trascendente", se deben tener en cuenta todos los elementos presentes dentro de una obra caligráfica, incluidas las instancias de "vacío".
Palabras clave: Caligrafía japonesa; significado *trascendente*; *shodō*; budismo Zen.

How to cite: Tudorică, I. C. "'Emptiness' and 'Nothingness' as Key Elements to Conveying and Understanding Meaning in Japanese Calligraphy". *Eikón Imago* 12 (2023), 179-186.

1. Introduction

Calligraphy, often defined as "beautiful writing"[2], retains this aspect in the case of Japanese calligraphy *shodō* 書道, but although *shodō* 書道 can be considered beautiful writing, it goes beyond this characteristic and extends it. In calligraphic writing and its interpretative process, the way the calligrapher emphasizes their thoughts and the way the receptor later manages to interpret the message become the central point of *shodō* 書道, moving away from the perception that calligraphy is, in general, predominantly beautiful, orderly writing.

Japanese calligraphy is a seemingly simple art that uses the artistic properties of the white rice paper and black ink, the only visible spot of colour being the red seal of the calligrapher. The absence of colour does not limit in any way the creativity of the calligrapher, but, on the contrary, enhances it by creating a system in which this combination of black and white manages to give rise to infinite possibilities of writing. Rather than being seen as a two-dimensional work based on the contrast between black and white, Japanese calligraphy is made up of light and shadow[3]. The two elements do not deny each other, but exist in harmo-

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[2] Patricia Lovett, *The Art & History of Calligraphy*, 2nd ed. (China: The British Library Board, 2020), 10.

[3] Kyuyoh Ishikawa, *Taction. The Drama of the Stylus in Oriental Calligraphy* (Tokyo: International House of Japan, 2011), 41.

ny, so that each manages to overcome the other's shortcomings.

The manner in which black and white intertwine in a calligraphic work illustrates how a *shodō* 書道 piece is created by balancing the traces of black ink, also known as the "substance"[4], with the blank space. *Shodō* 書道 calligraphy balances instances of light and shadow, of "emptiness" and "substance", in order to allow the calligrapher to expose to the public their deepest feelings, views and perspectives. "Emptiness" in *shodō* 書道 can, however, be observed on different levels, not only as far as the white of the paper is concerned, since the concept is important for both the calligrapher and the receptor.

This article analyses the ways in which "emptiness" is constructed in Japanese calligraphy and how it can become an important tool in understanding the meaning of a calligraphic work. The article will analyse the way in which meaning is portrayed and later perceived in *shodō* 書道, particularly how "emptiness" helps the calligrapher create calligraphic works and how it later supports the public in interpreting them. In order to observe this phenomenon, two calligraphic works created by the Romanian calligrapher Rodica Frențiu will be analysed, examining different instances of "emptiness".

2. Types of meaning of a calligraphic work

Successfully capturing the attention of both the public and researchers, no matter the era, the merit of the "image" is to stimulate the cognitive processes of the subject, to bring to the surface the mechanisms of its subjectivity and to use them to the maximum in the reception and understanding of meaning. The image can be processed on a purely sensory level, but this perception will often be followed by an elaborate process of understanding, as thinking is fundamentally associated with images or mental representations, and without images, many cognitive processes could not take shape[5]. Given the complexity of the image and the ways in which it can be perceived by the public, Jean-Jacques Wunenburger proposed two types of meanings in terms of the image: an *immanent* meaning, which can be perceived by the subject without too much speculative effort, and a *transcendent* meaning, specific to images with a complex informative load, which requires an elaborate interpretive approach to be able to access the meaning[6].

The alphabet and graphic symbols are perceived as having an *immanent* meaning, provided that knowledge of the conventions of a language is held in advance[7]. In *shodō* 書道, the *immanent* meaning is specific to writings that use exclusively the "correct" calligraphic style known as *kaisho*, a style of calligraphy in which every character's feature and the order in which they are written are strictly observed, and the calligrapher does not have much creative freedom. Because it is the style used in textbooks that teach Japanese and is often used in the brush-writing exercise known as *shūji*, the clarity of the *immanent* meaning is necessary for proper calligraphic writing.

By contrast, the *transcendent* meaning is often noticeable in art, becoming the key element for how a work of art has left its mark on the one who interprets or contemplates it. This type of meaning is never clearly and fully communicated[8], being accessible by connecting several existing meanings in the inner and outer universe of the work. Although the *transcendent* meaning is the one that brings immeasurable value, the worth of a work of art is not necessarily conditioned by its presence, because the dimension of meaning appears to the one who already presupposes meaning[9].

In the case of Japanese calligraphy, the interpretation of a calligraphic work can be done at the level of the *immanent* meaning, by understanding the meaning of the text written. Undoubtedly, in the case of *shodō* 書道, the interpretation of a calligraphic work remains at the discretion of the knowledge and openness to novelty of the subject, as in many cases, especially in the semicursive *gyōsho* 行書 writing style and the *sōsho* 草書 cursive writing style, the conventional character form has been visibly altered, making it difficult even for native speakers to read.

For this reason, in an exhibition, each calligraphic work is accompanied by a transcription of the work in the "correct" *kaisho* 楷書 style. The *immanent* meaning becomes easily accessible to the public, who, after reading the characters in the *kaisho* 楷書 style, can access the first level of meaning. Moreover, even if it is not perceived by the public, the *transcendent* meaning remains implicitly included in the calligraphic work.

However, images, from a semiotic or symbolic point of view, have not only expressive value, but also an inventive function[10]. Even if the *kaisho* 楷書 style has predominantly expressive function and *immanent* meaning, Japanese calligraphy possesses both expressive and inventive functions, revealing a *transcendent* meaning, particularly through the writing styles defined by cursivity (such as *sōsho* 草書 and *gyōsho* 行書). In order to activate this inventive function of the image, calligraphers learn the rules of the art of writing and then go beyond them[11].

Our research is built on the premise that a *shodō* 書道 calligraphic work is composed of two elements: a linguistic component (the word or the text written) and a visual component (the way in which the linguistic component has been represented visually). In order to understand the work and access its *transcendent* meaning, the receptor must pay equal attention to both components, as the *transcendent* meaning can be found where the two components are intertwined.

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4 Chen Tingyou, *Chinese Calligraphy* (China: China Intercontinental Press, 2003), 56.

5 Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, *Filozofia imaginilor* (Iaşi: Polirom, 2004), 247-248.

6 Wunenburger, *Filozofia*, 250.

7 Wunenburger, *Filozofia*, 251.

8 Wunenburger, *Filozofia*, 257.

9 Wunenburger, *Filozofia*, 259.

10 Wunenburger, *Filozofia*, 267.

11 Miyeko Murase, *The written image* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002), 30.

Figure 1. 無 (*mu*, "nothing, void") written by the author in the *kaisho* 楷書, *gyōsho* 行書 and *sōsho* 草書 styles (from left to right). Source: the author's personal archive.

3. The notion of "emptiness" and "nothingness" in *shodō* 書道

One of the instances in which the concept of "emptiness" can be identified in *shodō* 書道 is through the white space of the paper, which becomes an important element in the creative and interpretative process. White space in *shodō* 書道 is called *yohaku* 余白 ("white surplus"), referencing the parts of paper that have not been covered by ink, thus becoming a "surplus"[12]. *Yohaku* 余白 is not, however, a space that could not be used, or a useless space, but a space that must be "activated"[13]. For this reason, in the analysis of a calligraphic work, one can say *yohaku ga ikite iru* ("white space lives") or *yohaku ga shinde iru* ("white space is dead")[14]. When creating a *shodō* 書道 work, the calligrapher thinks of ways to "activate" the white space and integrate it within the final result, so that the black of the ink and the white of the paper complement and highlight each other.

The history of *shodō* 書道 is closely linked to that of writing and, as Japanese writing borrowed Chinese characters between the 4th and the 6th centuries[15], calligraphy in Japan was greatly influenced by Chinese calligraphy and the evolution of Chinese writing. Particularly, the writing styles mentioned in this article (*kaisho* 楷書, *gyōsho* 行書 and *sōsho* 草書) originate in China, as during the Han dynasty (206 B.C. - A.D. 220) a new script emerged that served as the origin of the formal *kaisho* 楷書 style and the semi-cursive *gyōsho* 行書 style[16]. The cursive *sōsho* 草書 script already existed at that point, being later followed by the formal and semi-cursive scripts.[17] By using these calligraphy styles, Japanese calligraphers copied the works of Chinese masters, ultimately elevating the art of *shodō* 書道. With the passage of time, changes in the Japanese writing system led to differences between Japanese and Chinese-style calligraphy, as the cursive script gave rise to the *hiragana* 平仮名 syllabary[18] and the formal, "correct", script to the *katakana* 片仮名 syllabary[19], the two being known as the *kana* 仮名 syllabaries. Structurally different from *kanji* 漢字 logograms, *kana* 仮名 syllabaries have made it possible for new styles of calligraphy to emerge, broadening the creative *shodō* 書道 horizon through the *chōwatai* 調和体 technique (cursive writing through the concomitant use of *hiragana* 平仮名 syllabary and *kanji* 漢字 logograms) and *renmentai* 連綿体 (a style of writing oftentimes used in *hiragana* 平仮名 writing in which characters are linked to each other in an uninterrupted line)[20].

Gradually, the journey to find themselves and their own style started to become a growing concern for calligraphers, and under the influence of Western thought, *shodō* 書道 has now become an art of self-expression[21]. Known as "the father of modern Japanese calligraphy"[22], the calligrapher who brought forth the perception of the line as a form of self-expression was Hidai Tenrai (1872-1939), as he highlighted calligraphy beyond its educational function by emphasizing the importance of the line[23] and the creativity of the calligrapher[24]. Putting in second place the linguistic component of a calligraphic work, the avant-garde calligraphers of the 50s of the twentieth century began to bring calligraphy closer to abstract art[25], aiming to arouse the interest of the international public, which was not familiar with Japanese writing, or the art of *shodō* 書道. However, over the years, the traditional roots of calligraphy have been preserved and as a result, calligraphers now balance the traditional and the modern, the rules of writing and personal expression, looking for a personal style[26].

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12 Christine Flint Sato, *Japanese Calligraphy. The Art of Line & Space* (Osaka: Kaifusha, 1999), 58.

13 Flint Sato, *Japanese Calligraphy*, 55; Rodica Frențiu, *Caligrafia japoneză în memoria clipei* (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară clujeană, 2021), 59.

14 Flint Sato, *Japanese Calligraphy,* 61.

15 Frențiu, *Caligrafia japoneză,* 25.

16 Christopher J. Earnshaw, *Sho. Japanese Calligraphy*, 5th ed (Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 2000), 93; H.E. Davey, *Brush Meditation: a Japanese Way to Mind & Body* (Berkeley, California: Stone Bridge Press, 1999), 17.

17 Ishikawa, *Taction*, 33; Earnshaw, *Sho. Japanese Calligraphy*, 93.

18 Ishikawa, *Taction*, 159; Cristopher Seeley, *A History of Writing in Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000) 70-71.

19 Davey, *Brush Meditation*, 18.

20 Earnshaw, *Sho. Japanese Calligraphy*, 96.

21 Flint Sato, *Japanese Calligraphy*, 50.

22 Eugenia Bogdanova-Kummer, *Bokujinkai. Japanese calligraphy and the Postwar Avant-Garde* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2020), 14.

23 Flint Sato, *Japanese Calligraphy*, 50-51.

24 Bogdanova-Kummer, *Bokujinkai*, 14.

25 Bogdanova-Kummer, *Bokujinkai*, 15.

26 Yuuko Suzuki, *An Introduction to Japanese Calligraphy* (Lower Valley Road: Schiffwe Publishing Ltd., 2016), 11.

When admiring a calligraphic work, the receptor notices two types of movement: the *seen* movement and the *sensed* motion[27]. The *seen* movement is the concrete, which is visible on the rice paper through the ink, while the *sensed* motion takes place when the calligrapher lifts the brush from the paper. The *sensed* motion can be tracked by the public by observing the direction of the beginning and end of the character strokes, as this makes the movement of the calligrapher's hand in the air visible. In *shodō* 書道, the movement does not stop when the brush has been raised from the paper, as the hand of the calligrapher continues to trace in the air the connections between each stroke of the characters. These links are visible to the receptor even in the absence of concrete representation, the white, seemingly empty, space between the strokes of a character being loaded with meanings. The visual component therefore consists not only of strokes of black ink, but also of the white spaces visible around and between them. The receptor perceives and "reads" the movements of the hand that "disappeared into nothingness"[28], which play an important role in understanding a *shodō* 書道 work.

At the heart of appreciating a calligraphic work is reliving the act of creation, this becoming the "essence"[29] of the act of admiring. Within ink traces, the calligrapher includes not only the two components (visual and linguistic) of the calligraphic work, but also the way in which they were created, allowing the receptor to relive the creative process. By reliving the act of writing, the public manages to understand, on an almost intimate level, how the calligrapher brought their vision to life, the viewer having access to spontaneous acts of creativity that took place days, months, or even years before the moment of admiration. Spontaneity is a common element for both *shodō* 書道 and the way enlightenment is perceived within Zen Buddhism[30]. If, for the calligrapher, calligraphy can be a way to obtain the enlightenment (*satori* 悟り), by reliving the creative act, the traces of ink can guide the receptor to understand what cannot be expressed through other forms of speech, but only revealed. This characteristic links the art of writing to spirituality and opens the path to perceiving the intangible for both the calligrapher and the public.

The concept of "absence", "nothingness" is relevant to Japanese spirituality, especially to the Zen religion-philosophy, which has had a great influence on Japanese arts, including *shodō* 書道. The idea of "emptiness" in Buddhism is known as *śūnyatā* शून्यता and was established by the Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna[31]. Although Buddhists have been criticized for their nihilism[32], the Buddhist perception of "nothingness" is considerably different from how the West sees the concept, particularly how nihilism is perceived. A translation of the "Heart Sutra" mentions that "nothing" does not differentiate between eyes, ears, or nose: "In emptiness there are no eyes, no ears, no nose"[33]. The verse does not deny the existence of eyes, ears, and nose, but illustrates that in the "void", in "nothingness", the difference between eyes, ears, and nose dissipates, illustrating the idea of infinity, rather than a nihilistic view of life[34].

In Buddhist spirituality and, implicitly, in the "Heart Sutra", "nothingness" has a profound reality and becomes the key to understanding both the inner and the outer world, opening the way to enlightenment. *Śūnyatā* शून्यता, therefore, does not negate anything, it is not the opposition of fullness, but rather embraces both emptiness and fullness simultaneously[35], transcending nihilism[36].

Similarly, in *shodō* 書道, "nothingness" and "emptiness" do not indicate absence, but rather a way in which all the separate elements of a calligraphic work come together in order to reveal abstract thoughts and notions. In art, "absence" and "nothingness" appear in the form of *ma* (間, "space", "interval")[37], this term defining a period of pause, in which apparently nothing happens. Far from being a dead moment, it is interpreted together with the dynamic moments of the work of art or the play and manages to offer new interpretive perspectives to the audience. Referring to theatre, Yoshiko Ikegami defines *ma* 間 as follows:

> 'Ma' is therefore a period of time in which apparently nothing happens. Paradoxically, however, it is exactly the timing of these blank periods that the actors and the players are told to learn and to pay full attention to. Nothing apparently happens in these periods, but they are by no means empty moments. On the contrary, they are conceived as fully significant moments – as significant as those moments at which something is really taking place[38].

While Western calligraphy is continuous, the words being written uniformly, taking the form of an "infinite horizontal line"[39], in *shodō* 書道, interruptions, moments of silence, are carefully and intentionally placed by the calligrapher in order to reveal meanings that cannot be rendered through ink alone.

This "empty" space is not synonymous and cannot be correlated with the idea of an unfinished work. On the contrary, it is an indicator of the expertise of the calligrapher and the uniqueness of the created work. The "empty" space, which plays a significant role in understanding the calligraphic work, is "filled" by the receptor with their own experience, who is in a continu-

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27 Ishikawa, *Taction*, 228; Frențiu, *Caligrafia japoneză*, 55-56.

28 Shutaro Mukai, "Characters that Represent, Reflect and Translate Culture – in the Context of the Revolution in Modern Art", in *The Empire of Signs: Semiotic Essays on Japanese Culture,* ed. Yoshihiko Ikegami (Amsterdam: John Benjamin, 1991), 67.

29 Ishikawa, *Taction*, 133.

30 Rodica Frențiu and Florina Ilis, "'Immanent' Visibility and 'Transcendental' Vision in Japanese Calligraphy", *Eikón/Imago* 10, no. 1 (2021): 318-319, https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/eiko.74154.

31 Masao Abe, *Zen and Western Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii press, 1985), 126.

32 Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (New York: Tuttle Publishing, 1988), 309.

33 Kazuaki Tanahashi, *The Heart Sutra. A Comprehensive Guide to the Classic of Mahayana Buddhism* (Massachusetts: Shambhala, 2014), 15.

34 Tanahashi, *The Heart Sutra*, 15.

35 Abe, *Zen and the Western Thought*, 126.

36 Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1982), 98.

37 Yoshihiko Ikegami, "Homology of Language and Culture – a Case Study in Japanese Semiotics", in *The Nature of Culture. Proceedings of the International and Interdisciplinary Symposium, October 7-11, 1986 in Bochum*, ed. Walter A. Koch (Bochum: Studienverlag Dr. Norbert Brockmeyer, 1989), 398; Mukai, "Characters that Represent", 67.

38 Ikegami, "Homology of Language", 398.

39 Mukai, "Characters that Represent", 68.

ous dialogue, both directly and indirectly, with the author of the work. Similar to the way in which *ma* 間 and *yohaku* 余白, although may seem to indicate something that is missing, become, in fact, an important aspect of the interpretive process, this "emptiness" is what facilitates the understanding of the calligraphic work.

The "empty" space present in *shodō* 書道 is similar to what Roland Barthes (2007) observes as being present in many Japanese cultural areas: "nothing" (*le vide*). This absence is identified by the French semiotician on many socio-cultural levels: the centre of a neighbourhood, the centre of Tokyo, the face of Bunraku 文楽 actors, Japanese food, the *haiku* 俳句 poem. "Nothing", the "void" are significant concepts for many areas of Japanese culture, starting with the Buddhist concept *mu* (無 "nothing", "void"), successfully integrated into traditional arts. In the case of calligraphy, it can be manifested at the level of the linguistic component by the content of the calligraphic work (by writing logograms such as 無 or 空), as well as at the level of the visual component, through the way in which the *yohaku* 余白 is used and activated.

An integral part of discovering the message –and possibly the self– by the receptor is the exploration of the many paths that a calligraphic work opens up to the public, giving the receptor the opportunity to go and explore any of them. Similar to the way in which a *haiku* 俳句 poem "never describes"[40], the calligraphic work itself does not exhaust all the interpretive trajectories that the receptor can follow:

> The calligraphic work of art, in the end, can be interpreted as a poem of the invisible, of the infinite unpredictable potentialities, a poem of nothingness given by a calligrapher who has no doubt regarding the visible concreteness of the world[41].

The art of writing reflects the deepest feelings of the moment of writing felt by the calligrapher, *shodō* 書道 becoming dominated by spontaneity, because "as emotions stir, so words are shaped"[42]. The calligrapher tries to capture their unfiltered inner universe, *shodō* 書道 turning into an expression of the calligrapher's feelings[43]. Just as poetry and calligraphy are connected in Western calligraphy (the case of visual poetry observed in writers such as Apollinaire), *haiku* 俳句 poetry and *shodō* 書道 calligraphy are closely linked, sharing similar elements, the main common denominator being the element of spontaneity. Due to its spontaneous character, *haiku* 俳句 acts on the very root of meaning[44], capturing, like *shodō* 書道, feelings and actions in their purest form.

Defined by its apparent simplicity, the *haiku* 俳句 poem presents, like calligraphy, an "emptiness", an absence that invites the reader to interpret[45], to discern the deep meaning behind the simplicity of the verse. *Haiku* 俳句 "resembles nothing and everything"[46], which allows the reader to follow any interpretive approach. Such a phenomenon is also present in *shodō* 書道, as the "emptiness" allows the viewer to analyse calligraphy based on personal knowledge and experience, the calligraphic work accepting and even encouraging numerous interpretations. As the discourse is found in moments of silence[47], the moments of "silence" of calligraphy (*yohaku* 余白, the *sensed* motion, the "emptiness" of calligraphic work) are extremely significant. *Shodō* 書道 becomes an art that simultaneously captures and suspends language, going beyond the limitations of the word through the way it connects the scriptural and visual.

4. Case studies

In order to illustrate the way in which the concept of "absence" becomes important in the art of *shodō* 書道, our focus will shift towards two calligraphic works made by the Romanian calligrapher Rodica Frențiu. Rodica Frențiu is a contemporary calligrapher who started the study of *shodō* 書道 in Japan, under the guidance of calligraphy master Nishida Senshū (1936-2015) and has been practicing the art for more than 20 years. In 2017 she received the Platinum Prize (Character Design section) at *Connect the World. International Japanese Calligraphy Exhibition. Global Shodo @ Yasuda* and in 2016 the Gold Prize (Brush Writing section) at the *1st International Japanese Calligraphy Exhibition, Yasuda Women's University in Hiroshima*.

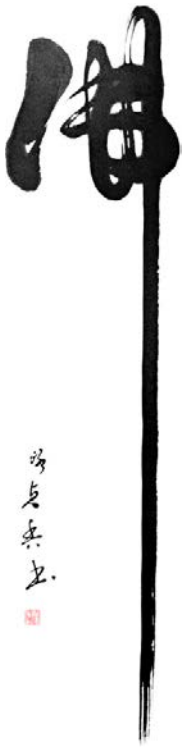

Figure 2. 佛 (*Hotoke,* „Buddha"). Source: Frențiu, Rodica. *Caligrafia japoneză în memoria clipei.* Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2021, 112.

40 Roland Barthes, *Imperiul semnelor* (Chișinău: Cartier, 2007), 83.
41 Frențiu and Ilis, "'Immanent' Visibility", 319.
42 Sun Qianli, "Treatise on Calligraphy (Shu pu)", in *Two Chinese Treatises on Calligraphy,* trans. Chang Ch'ung-ho and Hans H. Frankel (United States of America: Yale University Press, 1995), 11.
43 Makoto Ueda, *Literary and Art Theories in Japan* (Center for Japanese Studies, Michigan: The University of Michigan, 1991), 183.
44 Barthes, *Imperiul semnelor*, 81.
45 Ikegami, "Homology of Language", 389.
46 Barthes, *Imperiul semnelor*, 90.
47 Ishikawa, *Taction*, 265.

The first work we will be focusing on is 佛 *Buddha* (Fig. 1). The calligraphic work 佛 *Buddha* is an example of how *shodō* 書道 can evoke the spiritual dimension, in both the visual component and the linguistic component, as Zen has been a strong influence for Japanese calligraphy.

Semantically, the 佛 (*hotoke*) logogram defines the notion of "Buddha", being a pre-modern version of the currently used logogram 仏 (*hotoke*). The two logograms (佛 [*hotoke*] and 仏 [*hotoke*]) define the same word and concept, 仏 (*hotoke*) being created from the complex form 佛 (*hotoke*)[48]. The word "Buddha", meaning "enlightened one", is one of the Indian terms that indicate the founder of the Buddhist faith. Buddha is perceived as someone who has undergone a profound process of transformation, known as *nirvana*, and who, as a consequence, will no longer be subjected to the life-and-death cycle, teaching others what he has discovered[49].

In representing the logogram 佛 (*hotoke*) and the complex concept it refers to, the calligrapher used the cursive *sōsho* 草書 style, visibly altering the established form of the character. The writing was done with a thick brush, which allowed the creation of well-defined features that, in combination with the opaque black of the ink, create, through ample and confident movements, a piece full of vitality. Each line is strongly articulated, the brush allowing the white of the paper in some places to be visible inside the strokes, technique known as *kasure* 掠れ. *Kasure* 掠れ is one of the most specific visual elements of *shodō* 書道 calligraphy[50], managing to bring the balance between black and white within the strokes of a character. *Kasure* 掠れ thus allows the white, seemingly empty, space to shine not only around a character or logogram, but within it as well.

The radical 亻 (*ninben*, radical for "person" 人) was written in two movements that create a strong impact, and the first stroke, thicker than the rest of the elements, guides the receptor's eye to the starting point when the brush first interacted with the paper. The first strokes of the second component (弗, *zu*) were made by creating subtle transitions between each, allowing the effect of *kasure* 掠れ to combine the layers of white and black within the calligraphic work.

The prominent visual aspect is, however, the end of the last stroke, as it is extended vertically, having a considerably longer aspect than any of the previously written lines. The calligrapher creates a strong dramatic effect and the ending in *kasure* 掠れ seems to elongate the feature indefinitely, even in the absence of the movement of the brush, thus highlighting the *sensed* motion. However, visually, this extension creates a consistent white space, which can disrupt the harmony of the composition of the work and bring imbalance to it.

To "activate" the white space obtained by prolonging the last stroke, the calligrapher visually balanced the work by placing the signature and the seal on the left side of the paper. After finishing writing, the calligrapher can choose to use only the personal red seal or to write the name or information about the work. Even if the calligrapher's signature may be missing in some works, the seal will always be placed[51]. In the case of the work 佛 *Buddha*, the calligrapher used both techniques, these details that accompany the logogram managing to harmonize the visual component without distracting the viewer from the important aspects and the shape of the 佛 (*hotoke*) logogram. The white space created by prolonging the final stroke of 佛 (*hotoke*) has been "activated" by balancing the connection between black and white, shadow and light.

Figure 3. 時空 (*Jikū*, „Space and time"). Source: Frențiu, Rodica. *Caligrafia japoneză în memoria clipei.* Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2021, 79.

The second calligraphic work we would like to analyse is 時空 *Space and time* (Fig. 2). The style chosen for the visual component of this calligraphic work is the cursive *sōsho* 草書 style, which makes it difficult to precisely identify the two logograms, as their strokes have been simplified to give the calligrapher freedom of expression. The lines of the two logograms are written with a force that highlights each stroke and activates the surrounding white space. The simplification of the logograms is not an impediment in the creative process, but a way to discover new techniques for rendering the linguistic component. Using the cursive *sōsho* 草書 style,

48 Shizuka Shirakawa, *Jōyō Jikai*, 2nd ed. (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 2012), 604.

49 Robert E. Buswell (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism* (United States of America: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004), 71.

50 Yutaka Goda, Tsuyoshi Nakamura, and Masayoshi Kanoh, "Example-based Design of Artistic Calligraphy Fonts", *SCIS & ISIS SCIS & ISIS, Japan Society for Fuzzy Theory and Intelligent Informatics* (2010): 28, https://doi.org/10.14864/softscis.2010.0.28.0.

51 Earnshaw, *Sho. Japanese Calligraphy*, 14.

the calligrapher manages to bring the two logograms closer together, and since the calligraphic work was written in the tradition of vertical writing, the two seem to take the form of a continuous, uninterrupted line. Thus, the last stroke of 時 (*ji,* "time") and the first stroke of 空 (*kū,* "space") seem to be merged into a single movement, making it difficult to identify the exact point where the first stroke of the 空 (*kū*) logogram begins.

The effect achieved by merging the two logograms is reminiscent of the *renmentai* 連綿体 technique, in which all written characters are linked together, the final work taking the form of an uninterrupted line of ink. Although the abstract nature of the words created by using two or more *kanji* 漢字 logograms can give a rigid impression to a *shodō* 書道 work, the delicacy of the line reminiscent of the *renmentai* 連綿体 technique tempers the strictness evoked by the use of *kanji* 漢字. In this way, the audience manages to look back at the black line and, through the *sensed* motion, notice how the calligrapher's brush moved at the time of writing, reliving the artistic act.

The ink used is an intense black, the calligrapher working with a dry brush, which creates many instances in which *kasure* 掠れ can be observed. The most visually intense lines are the first features of 時 (*ji*), because as the calligrapher finished writing, the brush became drier and drier. This creates the *kasure* 掠れ effect, the technique being more pronounced in the 空 (*kū*) logogram, particularly in the case of its first strokes. The end of the logogram concludes the act of writing with a mirror effect, as the last three features that make up the component エ (*takumi,* radical for "work, skill") match the intensity of the first features of 時 (*ji*).

The linguistic component becomes extremely relevant to the way black and white, "fullness" and "emptiness", are perceived in Japanese calligraphy. The "space" (*kū*, 空) is what allows the calligrapher to create works that visually expose their ideas. In calligraphy, the "space", whether it is the parts covered by traces of ink or the white space *yohaku* 余白, is an active one, becoming an element appreciated by the receptor in trying to discover the *transcendent* meaning. Similarly, "time" (*ji*, 時) is essential in the context of Japanese calligraphy, as a work will be written in a single session, often the calligrapher inhaling before the brush touches the paper, so that the lines are written at expiration. Although, by their timeless nature, calligraphic works seem to not be influenced by the notion of time, through *shodō*'s 書道 ability to immortalize the feelings of the calligrapher at the time of writing, they become a way to honour the moments that led to the creation of a calligraphic work.

The calligraphic work 時空 *Space and time* is characterized by the vitality of the line, which is conferred through the *kasure* 掠れ technique. By highlighting the white of the paper inside the line, not just around it, the calligrapher creates depth and manages to make the features vibrate with a captivating inner rhythm, which seems to invite the viewer to become an active part of the *shodō* 書道 experience. The visual component created through these writing methods manages to simultaneously illustrate the content of the linguistic component, as well as the balance between "fullness" and "emptiness" in *shodō* 書道.

5. Conclusions

Japanese calligraphy is an art that combines the scriptural and the visual, being in constant search of new methods through which the two can be intertwined. Therefore, the advantage of the art of writing becomes the way in which it can transcend, through the two components, both the limits of the word and the limits of the image, reconstructing and redefining the way in which art can incorporate and transmit a message to the public. Through its apparent simplicity, following a centuries-old tradition, Japanese calligraphy proves the importance not of the visual, nor of the scriptural, but of the way in which the two coexist, overcoming together the individual shortcomings of each. The calligraphic work, therefore, invites the audience to admire and interpret, taking into account each component of the work individually (word, ink, calligraphy style, appearance of the scroll, type of brush used, etc.), but also all of them as a whole.

In the case of 佛 *Buddha* and 時空 *Space and time*, the *yohaku* 余白 completes the composition and highlights the traces of ink, while the cursive writing styles highlight the *sensed* motion, as each line gracefully flows one from another. By doing so, the calligrapher allows the public to observe the direction and the movement of the brush even when it has been lifted from the paper, these moments of "silence" becoming one of the particularities of *shodō* 書道 that creates a link between the creative act of the calligrapher and the interpretative process of the public.

Japanese calligraphy is a fascinating art, in which the apparent simplicity of a calligraphic work opens infinite possibilities of understanding and interpretation for the public. The practice of *shodō* 書道 requires the union between the movement of the body and the mind of the calligrapher[52], representing "real, graceful and natural feelings of an inner world of calligraphers"[53]. This factor has contributed to the perception of calligraphy as a meditative exercise, through which the practitioners can discover and rediscover themselves. The inner universe of the calligrapher is therefore laid open for the public to explore, each *shodō* 書道 work becoming a dialogue between the calligrapher's expertise and the receptor's experience.

The "emptiness" of a calligraphic work and the blanks that the calligrapher purposefully places within the work vividly shape the vision of the artist and become just as important as the traces of ink. When admiring *shodō* 書道, the receptor pays attention to these moments of "silence" and tries to understand them. Such was the case of the final stroke of the 佛 logogram in the work 佛 *Buddha*, in which the seemingly "empty" areas invite the public to meditate and actively try to follow and understand the act of creation, by paying attention to the traces of ink and the white space between them.

By combining the *seen* movement and the *sensed* motion, the calligrapher indirectly involves the public in the creative act, as the receptor can see in the final result the movement of the brush at any given moment

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[52] Frenţiu and Ilis, "'Immanent' Visibility", 317; Davey, *Brush Meditation*, 46.

[53] Tingyou, *Chinese Calligraphy*, 124.

from the writing process. This can be observed in both calligraphic works analysed, in the case of 時空 *Space and time* the writing becomes extremely transparent, revealing the way in which each character's strokes were simplified in order to create the cursive aspect specific to *sōsho* 草書.

The *transcendent* meaning of a calligraphic work can be perceived and understood through a process that involves taking into account each detail and element of the calligraphic work. Both the visual and the linguistic component play an equally important role, through its very structure a *shodō* 書道 work encouraging the public to contemplate and discover new facets of writing. The "absence", the moments of "silence" become extremely relevant elements in the interpretive process, guiding the receptor towards the *transcendent* meaning.

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