

ART

The Smithsonian unveils Buddhist paragons who put 'Mind Over Matter'



One of two panels from "The Four Accomplishments" by Kano Eitoku or Kaiho Yusho, late-16th century | FREER GALLERY OF ART

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Zen Buddhism had a profound impact on the course of Japanese art. It not only transformed architecture, landscaping and interior design, it also provided the aesthetic groundings of the tea ceremony and, crucially, refashioned monochrome ink painting into a major form of artistic expression. Across disciplines, Zen fostered a new spontaneity that reflected a belief that enlightenment could be sudden and unexpected, that it could happen under any circumstances and at any time.

One area in which Zen exerted a particularly strong influence was portraiture. While most Buddhist traditions favored the study of religious texts as the primary means of acquiring knowledge and spiritual insights, Zen stressed a more direct mode of transmission, one that prioritized, among other things, unmediated engagement with a master.

“There is in the arts related to Zen a strong focus on people, on actual role models of the past and of the present,” says Frank Feltens, the associate curator of Japanese art at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Asian Art in Washington, D.C. “This spiritual and visual contact is crucial and is one reason why there is so much portraiture in this particular tradition.”

Zen boasts a vibrant pantheon and many of its most significant characters appear in “Mind Over Matter: Zen in Medieval Japan,” a new exhibition that Feltens co-curated with Yukio Lippit, a professor of art history and architecture at Harvard University. Portraits account for just under a third of the 55 artworks displayed, all of which are on view until July 24. They include the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, the bodhisattva Kannon and a bevy of arhats (disciples of Shakyamuni who later became protectors of the faith), as well as various patriarchs and even fictional characters who, for centuries, have inspired devotees. Paintings are displayed along with tea bowls, vases and lacquer. All the objects are part of the museum’s collection.

The Smithsonian is ideally situated to organize such a show: About a quarter of its substantial collection of Asian art is composed of Japanese works, many of which have a connection to Zen. Feltens explains that while some of the objects in “Mind Over Matter” have been exhibited before, this is the first time the museum has surveyed the breadth of its Zen artifacts, from both Japan and China. As a complement to the exhibition, high-resolution images of the artworks are available online and a set of multimedia tools has been developed to demystify Zen and its culture. The result is an inspiring and perceptive overview of how this religious tradition developed and influenced the arts in both countries.

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One of two panels from 'The Four Accomplishments' by Kano Eitoku or Kaiho Yusho, late-16th century | FREER GALLERY OF ART

Zen traces its roots to Bodhidharma, or Daruma, as he is widely known in Japan. Though a hugely important figure, his biography is more myth than fact. For instance, he is said to have slit his eyelids during a nine-year meditation spell in order to stay awake. Historical doubts aside, tradition holds that early in the fifth century, when he was already more than 100 years old, Bodhidharma left his native India and traveled to China to spread his creed. Eventually, his teachings reached Japan — they were known as early as the Nara Period (710-94) — but for reasons that remain unclear, their initial impact was minimal.

It took another 400 years for Zen to put down permanent roots in the archipelago. At the time, in the early 13th century, a new warrior class had recently emerged and established the nation's first military government, in Kamakura, Kanagawa Prefecture, more than 400 kilometers east of Kyoto, the traditional seat of power. Its leaders

were keen to bolster their cultural credentials and in Zen, they found the perfect vehicle. Its teachings, which were less doctrinal and more intuitive than other strands of Buddhism, along with its pared down aesthetics, resonated deeply with the military ethos of this new governing elite.

Before long, the shogunate was supporting Zen temples all around Kamakura. One of the most important was Kenchoji. Established in 1253, it was the first to operate entirely along Zen rules and principles, and can still be visited today. Its founding abbot was Lanqi Daolong (1213-78), a Chinese monk who had been trained and ordained on the mainland before coming to Japan. This was not unusual: Over the subsequent century, at least 28 followed in his footsteps. At the same time, hundreds of Japanese trainees traveled the other way. Simply put, there would be no Zen today without the contribution of Chinese monks.

By the time the Kamakura shogunate fell in 1333, Zen was a force to be reckoned with. As it happened, Japan's new leader, Ashikaga Takauji, was also a warrior and a supporter of Zen establishments. To boot, he was a highly cultured man and so were his immediate successors, to which they added a fondness for Chinese art. Some of them also had voracious buying habits and, over time, the Ashikaga house built a large and prestigious collection. It became a source of inspiration for generations of Japanese artists.

This was fortuitous: "Much of the Ch'an paintings that were produced and kept in China have not survived the troubles of history," says Feltens, using the term by which Zen is often referred to in a Chinese context. But thanks to Zen institutions, vast numbers were preserved in Japan. In fact, a large part of the Smithsonian's holdings of Ch'an works was acquired from Japanese collectors and institutions.

To contemporary eyes, these works are indubitably "art," but the Zen clergy had a vastly different perspective, at least in the early days. To them, they were study tools. When trainees looked at the portrait of, say, the Chinese monk Gaofeng Yuanmiao (1238-95), they did not focus on the fine brushwork giving texture to his hair, nor did they ponder the brilliance with which a few broad lines amplify the volume of his robe. Instead, they saw the 28th Ch'an patriarch, a direct spiritual descendant of Bodhidharma and a man who, through discipline and long hours of meditation, had reached a state of understanding to which they were now aspiring. Basking in the aura of this revered teacher's image helped them establish a direct spiritual connection with him.

Over time, the beliefs and aesthetics of Zen spread beyond the confines of temples. This led to a secularization of the faith. "It was then that Zen objects stopped being religious implements and became art for secularized use," Feltens says. The appearance of professional ateliers in the 16th century provided further impetus to this process. Thenceforth, "artists no longer painted exclusively in a religious context, but also for public consumption and profit."

"The Four Accomplishments," a large two-panel screen often attributed to Kano Eitoku (1543-90) but most likely an early work of his pupil Kaiho Yusho (1533-1615), exemplifies this change. It illustrates the activities that a scholar-official was expected to master: painting, calligraphy, the game of go and music. The theme originated in China, but it became widely popular in Japan.

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'Portrait of a Gaofeng Yuanmiao, 1238-1295' by Chuan Kinko, mid-15th century | FREER GALLERY OF ART

It is unclear, however, that this work was destined for the monastery. The first generations of Japanese Zen monk artists were focused on creating small, portable images suitable for study. By the 16th century, however, painters like Kaiho, who trained at a Zen temple as a youth, had many lay patrons, and it was probably for them that this piece was intended. Zen purists might have frowned, but the result is ours to enjoy.

To view artworks from the Smithsonian's "Mind Over Matter: Zen in Medieval Japan" exhibition online, visit <https://asia.si.edu/exhibition/mind-over-matter-zen-in-medieval-japan> (<https://asia.si.edu/exhibition/mind-over-matter-zen-in-medieval-japan>).

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