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Visualizing the Divine
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Living with the Gods: Seeing the Divine in Our World

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Buddhism has long had a syncretic relationship to other religions, such as Hindusim and Daoism, incorporating both spiritual and visual traditions from both. Indeed, like early Christianity, early forms of Buddhist and even Hindu iconography were "unstable" as they sought both to visualize – and then to codify into canonical iconography – the Divine. However, in their pursuit of divine imagery, perhaps embodied most fully by the Buddha's ideal image on which one meditates, their innovations and adaptations often reveal more about the earthly world than the heavenly.

Relating Zen Buddhism to international religious and artistic movements, this lecture will examine how secular adaptation and religious reform, mainly espoused by the Rinzai sect monk Hakuin Ekaku (1686-1789), which shape our perceptions of Zen Buddhism and Japan today. Beyond his writings, much of his legacy and influence came from his Zenga, or "Zen Pictures," which are today regarded, albeit anachronistically, as works of art.

Recognized as one of the most remarkable artistic traditions of Japan, Zenga were created by monks who were not professionally trained as painters, but who instead painted as an extension of their teaching activity. As such, these works can be simple and amateurish in visual form but powerfully direct and profound in meaning. Zenga reflected the outreach of Japanese monks to commoners of their time, and thus engage allegory, popular references, and quotidian concerns to better convey their messages. Marked by innovation and improvisation, the world of Zenga is populated by Buddhist patriarchs and Zen eccentrics, Taoist immortals and folk deities, and celebrated monks and revered poets; they occasionally evoke unexpected moods of whimsy and humor; they are oftentimes irreverent and idiosyncratic, and always profound.

Formally, Zenga are typically distinguished by their gestural brushwork and use of black ink. Zenga can be deceptively simple in their appearance and often surprising in the depths of their meaning. In evermore visually appealing ways, these paintings convey the complex and seemingly ungraspable concepts of the illusoriness and mindlessness of the world and explore the rich potential of an artistic contradiction: How can emptiness be manifest in form? And how might the non-self be expressed through painting?

Zen, like all forms of Buddhism, is based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, also known as Prince Shakyamuni, who lived during the sixth century. However, Zen is distinguished by its emphasis on meditation, as opposed to mystic ritual and sacred scripture, as a means of achieving enlightenment. Another key component of the religion is the koan, often translated as an "unanswerable question," which presents students of Zen with queries that defy rationality and logic, leading to flashes of intellectual insight. Perhaps the most

famous koan was coined by the Rinzai Zen monk and painter Hakuin Ekaku: “Two hands clap and produce a sound—but what is the sound of one hand?”

Zen originated in China as Chan Buddhism and rapidly spread throughout Asia. Though it was first introduced in Japan in the late sixth century, not until the late twelfth century did it begin to truly flourish, and soon it was widely adopted by members of the samurai class. With the establishment of the Ashikaga shogunate in the late fourteenth century, Zen Buddhism became a dominant and guiding force among Japan’s ruling feudal lords, affecting everything from politics and policy to art.

Unlike other types of Buddhist painting, which can often be overwhelming in their use of bright colors, supernatural deities, complicated cosmic diagrams, and extremely detailed compositions, Zenga are typically monochromatic and are characterized by relatively simple designs, often expressed in a few confident brushstrokes. The mystic and at times terrifying deities of the Buddhist pantheon are replaced by playful and eccentric monks, who sometimes cavort with figures from native folklore—some sleep, whereas others sit in *zazen*, or contemplative meditation. Lengthy ritual texts, translated from ancient Sanskrit, are replaced with short, yet profound, calligraphic inscriptions, which can also include humorous puns and wordplay.

Beyond the influence of outside religions, Zenga was also profoundly impacted by the modernization of Japan and the introduction of public art and performance, which reshaped Zen pictures as performative and spectacular works of art, reforms pioneered by the Rinzai monk Nakahara Nantenbo (1839-1925), whose lineage can be traced directly to Hakuin.

Suggested Readings:

The Gitter-Yelen Collection, The MFA Houston Collections Online Catalogues, https://emuseum.mfah.org/catalogues/gitter-yelen-collection