

Zen Artistry's Desanctification of Buddhist Imagery

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In the first 500 years of Buddhism in India, artists were specifically barred by the teachings of Shakyamuni, the Historical Buddha, from representing his physical presence. As a result, early images of Buddha were aniconic symbols such as a tree, footprint and wheel. Probably through contact with the portrait tradition of Rome, iconic representations of the Buddha emerged in India around the first century before Christ. These first sculptures were introduced and developed by the Kushans,¹ who favored figures with foreign facial features and costumes reminiscent of Roman togas. Three centuries later emerged the Buddha image many Westerners consider to be traditional. Best exemplified in the *Seated Buddha* of Sarnath (Figure 1), these works possess a pervading spiritual beauty more in keeping with the contemplative nature of the Buddha.

Not until the T'ang Dynasty (618-907) of China does the traditional Buddha image emerge in painting, best illustrated in the now destroyed murals from Hōryū-ji (Figure 2) produced during Japan's Hakuho Period (645-710). Once rendered in magnificent color, these works emphasized the Chinese concern for balanced composition and linearity. Called *iron wire* (Japanese: *tessen*), the lines are of uniform thickness without variation in ink tone, while forms are rounded and fleshy, creating figures that are both worldly and spiritual.

By the Fujiwara Period (897-1185) many Buddhist works had become elaborate assemblies of figures in motion. In *Amida Raigō Triptych*, for example, Buddha floats toward the spectator while his attendants are actively engaged in dance, meditation or the playing of musical instruments. Careful study of these figures reveals a marked development in decorative detail, color and realism.²

It was not until the emergence of the spontaneity and irreverence associated with Zen, first evident in the tenth-century works of the Chinese painters Shih K'o and Kūan Hsiu, that this imagery began to change, reaching total desanctification eight centuries later in the Zenga³ of artists such as Hakuin Ekaku (1685-1769) and Sengai Gibon (1750-1837) of Japan. Because their works are such a departure from what is most valued in the Buddhist tradition, most Western art historians have paid little attention to Zenga artists, dubbing them caricaturists and humorists. When Zenga works are viewed individually, or out of historical context, these assumptions appear valid, but when they are studied as a result of an evolutionary process intent on desanctifying the traditional imagery of Buddhism, a reassessment of the significance of Zenga pieces is in order. Before this can be attempted, however, a basic understanding of traditional Buddhism and Zen philosophy is necessary.

To be a devotee of Buddhism is to believe that the universe is of indescribable age and one of many worlds like the "sands of the Ganges." Time is also limitless, sensitive, so responsive is the *sumi* to the mood of the artist using it.

stretching from the past to the future beyond measure. Furthermore, these vistas are rooted and unified in the individual's perception and intellect. By way of reincarnation, one has limitless lifetimes in which to cultivate and perfect this intuitive knowledge and intellect. Man's chief obstacles in accomplishing this task are his own concerns and desires. Perfect contentment and enlightenment (*satori*) are attained only when such thoughts are eliminated and the intellect is allowed to freely accept the realities of the world. This takes many lifetimes, but once accomplished, man will attain Buddhahood.

Although it is a branch of Buddhism, from its inception Zen differed from the other sects in its refusal to hold sacred the idols, scriptures and doctrine of traditional Buddhism. Zen followers, for instance, contend that supreme enlightenment does not necessarily take many lifetimes but is something so natural that it can occur at any point in one's life. Likewise, Zen questions the validity and authenticity of the sutras, the sacred scriptures.⁴ Over the years Buddhist doctrine developed an intellectual rhetoric that alienated the common man. Consequently, Zen followers favor an unwritten doctrine transmitted orally from teacher to pupil. Words are mere illusion; images of the Buddha are potential idols that will restrict the inner spirit and create attachments. Before human nature can be confronted directly, therefore, man must reject written texts and overturn all idols. Nowhere is this philosophy more effectively expressed than in Zen painting, in which the non-adherence to traditional rules transcends all words.

In their purest form, Zen works render objects shapeless through spontaneous strokes executed with lightning speed. While at times humor and non-attachment are the aim, artistic freedom is usually the result. Zen strokes, for example, never attempt to accurately delineate their subjects, but try to capture the rhythm and spirit of forms by moving the brush tip quickly and spontaneously, reflecting the Zen metaphysical interpretation of reality. While the Western mind thinks of reality as a collection of objects designated by specific names with fixed shapes, the Zen intellect thinks of reality as a continuous web of movement and fleeting images.

Thus, when one studies the works of Zen painters, it becomes readily apparent that lines never enclose or define an object completely. They will overlap, vanish into haze, multiply or unravel without a conclusion, never "pinning" the object down, all in an effort to show that life is not static but in a constant state of metamorphosis and interaction.

This interaction is enhanced by the use of only one non-color—black ink, or *sumi*. Color cheats the eye by covering up artistic defects and blocks the true feeling of the piece, while monochrome forces the viewer to experience the painter's moment of highly concentrated activity—so

By spreading the hairs of the brush to create a rough monochrome line, the artist likewise draws attention to the center area where the brush tip passes. This is accomplished most effectively by rendering only a suggestion of the object. In so doing, the viewer is allowed to pass from the most emphatic parts of the object, delineated by strong black contours, through regions of less defined blacks, until, finally, only limitless space remains on the empty surface. This void, when translated into visual terms, becomes the direct reflection of the profundity of the artist. In the unstrained and unrestrained naturalness of "no mind" and "no intent," the artist takes the viewer with him into his unconsciousness and enlightenment. No distance separates the artist, the viewer or the subject. In the end, all become one.⁵

In the need for austere sublimity, Zen pieces are simple, eliminating all superfluous details. Directness through economy frees the mind for enlightenment. As well as negating complexity, Zen works reject all that is unnatural, or man-made, such as symmetry, grace and the sanctity of deities. An excellent example of the latter is Zen artistry's interpretation of Fudō Myō-ō, one of the Five Enlightened Kings.⁶

In traditional works, Fudō Myō-ō is portrayed as the fierce and threatening defender of Buddhism against attacks by evil spirits. Thus, Fudō, meaning immovable, always carries a rope in his left hand and a sword on his right side. With the rope he binds and kills evil passions that harass the mind while his sword cuts asunder all ties which restrict the spirit. Meanwhile flames envelop the body of Fudō Myō-ō, burning every trace of defilement that prevents the world's purification.

Except for the absence of flames, all of this is conveyed in the Onjō-ji's *Yellow Fudō*, a traditional Buddhist work from the Fujiwara Period (897-1185). With the fangs of a wild beast and the skin of hardened leather, Fudō is the epitome of strength and determination. As he glares at the viewer and readies his sword, jewelry and drapery are motionless, creating a powerful mood of unyielding intensity.

By the thirteenth century a monochromatic version of *Fudō* by Shinkai (Figure 3) reveals a less intimidating, more earthly interpretation. Resting one elbow on the pommel of his sword, Fudō is relaxed while standing on a small rock in the middle of the sea. Flames and drapery move freely in the wind as he calmly meets the viewer's gaze from the corners of his eyes. Though it is a sketch for a painting, this piece offers a logical transition between the early Buddhist works and the more spontaneous Zenga of the Edo Period (1615-1868), as evidenced in the *Fudō* (Figure 4) by Sengai Gibon (1750-1837).

Through shifting tones of black ink, Sengai depicts the varying intensity of flames engulfing the figure. With eyes, sword and rope set, Fudō awaits evil. Here only one fang protrudes to defy imminent danger while drapery is scantily depicted. As in many early Fudōs, that of Sengai does not stand against evil but chooses to sit. Sengai explains:

The right moment he knows
To enter the world of pluralities;
Like unto a mountain
He sits immovable.⁷ [author's italics]

Ferocious as Fudō might appear in traditional Buddhist works, by the time of Zenga, only the topic is menacing. By

way of dark wash and an intentional crudeness, the artist creates a Fudō that seems surprisingly patient in his fight against Buddhism's detractors.

Dharma (Chinese: Bodhidharma), Zen's first patriarch but often considered part of traditional Buddhist imagery, similarly does not escape his sect's unique interpretation. The first full-length painting still extant of Dharma was done by an unknown artist in 1271 (Figure 5). Even in this early work the Zen cosmic laughter begins to emerge as Dharma, sporting a smile and a steady gaze,⁸ meditates on a rock form. His figure exudes foreignness in the simple robe, bearded face, chest hair and dangling earrings. Lines varying in thickness delineate his huge frame, imparting a dynamic quality to an otherwise motionless body. What is later to be associated primarily with Zen also begins to emerge in the relaxed spirit of the figure's pose that rests midway between a frontal, austere view, reminiscent of traditional works, and the less formal, three-quarter turn typical of Zen.

By the time of the Edo Period, however, Dharma's intense gaze is all that remains of the earlier works. In the Zenga painting by Fūgai Ekun (1568-1654), Dharma is dramatically simplified. Except for traditional elements such as ankle bracelets, piercing, knowing eyes, etc., all is reduced to the briefest of terms: one stroke from the top of the head to folds below; one from the clavicle across the chest to a point in front; and five to outline the face, figure and garment.

Fūgai's technique is also favored by Hakuin in his version of Dharma, entitled *Bodhidharma*. A one-stroke swoop and two intensely dark dots create dynamic contrasts against fields of light brushwork. Hakuin's brush twists and turns, literally carving the monk's features with ink, producing an immensely energetic being with the large distended eyes one would expect to find in the devoted ascetic.

Considerably more earthly is Sengai's *Bodhidharma* (Figure 6). Through the artist's use of clean, irregular lines, Dharma seems more sad than intense, more worn than energetic, more aged than timeless. Instead of seeing with intensely meditative eyes, he can gaze at the viewer only in silent disgust, tired from the effort of explaining that *satori* is found simply within oneself.

Perhaps the ultimate attempt at the desanctification of Dharma can be found in the Zenga work of Jiun Onkō (1718-1804) (Figure 7). For this piece Jiun reduces his depiction to a figure with minimal outline and no details—almost a circle and void. According to the great Zen master Dogen (1200-1253), the state of enlightenment is marked only when the mind and body drop away, leaving the spirit free to unite with the subliminal void, to become one with Buddha, one with the universe. Jiun depicts this impending event by *flying white*,⁹ where pressure on the brush causes it to skip and the tip to split, letting the essence of the paper show through like rays of light, bursting with the actual dissolution of Dharma's mind and body. Thus, in this work the Zenga artist has gone dramatically past the representation of the Dharma's gaze and his changing moods and roles. Now the very act of his dissolution is brilliantly and spontaneously captured in ink, revealing, in visual terms, the highest of spiritual planes.

With the rejection of Buddhist doctrine and the de-personalization of its imagery arose the need for Zen's own pantheon more in keeping with its untraditional humor. So blatantly comical are these Zen characters that they remind

one of court jesters. In the hands of Zen artists, for example, the majestic Maitreya, Buddha of the Future, becomes the pot-bellied Hotei (Chinese: Pu-tai). As an itinerant Zen monk who is said to have died in 916, Hotei derived his name "cloth sack" from the bag in which he stuffed all that he collected, however useless.

So spontaneous and minimal are Liang K'ai's brush and ink in his version of *Hotei* (Figure 8) that one must pause to realize that this is a thirteenth-century work. With a few strokes of the brush, the artist weaves before the viewer's eyes threads of cloth that stretch to cover the fleshiness of the monk's bulging belly. Much is left to the observer's imagination as only squinty eyes and a widely bowed mouth emerge amidst the dominating emptiness.

In his *One-Hand Hotei*, Hakuin portrays himself as the perpetual teacher of the masses who seek instruction from his many sketches. Strokes are delicate, fragile and serene. The only contrast comes in the heavily inked lines of the monk's robe that gently enfolds the figure, never entangling him.

In his self portrait entitled *The Yawning Hotei*, Sengai, on the other hand, is the Buddha (Figure 9). Dashes and circles denote the yawning mouth, subtly surrounded by a light wash from which a day old beard emerges. His toes gradually uncurl; his arms stretch slowly upward while his body is weighted down by a sagging belly, full and rounded like the universe. By the curled toes, Sengai could be referring to man's concern for things which bind him to the earth. In his struggle for *satori*, he twists and turns. As man nears Buddhahood and comes closer to paradise, he straightens like Hotei's upstretched arms that terminate in club-like hands, which some scholars believe is a symbol for inward enlightenment.¹⁰

Whether a teacher or the Buddha, neither Hakuin nor Sengai feels the need to exalt his external self, preferring to be lost in "selflessness," allowing his inner nature to emerge freely. But to be truly free from attachment, free to explore the inner spirit and to discover Buddhahood, man must dispense with his human form entirely. This explains why, at the height of his religious work, Sengai, an enlightened monk, chose to depict himself as a frog. In his *The Meditating Frog* (Figure 10), for example, Sengai has substituted this creature's image for his own. He believes:

If a man becomes a Buddha
by practicing *zazen*¹¹, . . .
A frog though I am, I should have been
one long ago.¹²

Whether resting or awaiting a hapless insect, the frog appears to be in constant meditation. If a meditative posture were the only requisite for Zen enlightenment, the frog could become Buddha. Even the frog, however, is not content merely to sit and wait. Suzuki observes that it is ever making its way somewhere, "crawling along with such composure and gravity; with Great Wisdom."¹³

With the frog motif, Sengai and Zen artistry pass the final point of the desanctification of Buddhist imagery. Sengai is the frog; the frog becomes Buddha; Sengai becomes Buddha. All of life's components, therefore, hold equal sanctity and are one in the Buddha brotherhood. Mountains, animals, water, man are no less sacred than Buddha himself. Because the Buddha nature is universal, however, a need exists for a universal imagery, accommodating reality while still adhering to the non-self. What

more appropriate image than the mountain to which Sengai earlier compared Fudō, the immovable.

While many mountainscapes depict soaring peaks disappearing amidst nature's foliage, in Sengai's *Mount Fuji* (Figure 11) the immovable mountain becomes Buddha, at one with earth and sky.

Looking up, the heavens are seen extending,
Looking down, the earth is seen stretched,
Both to the farthest ends of the horizon:
Beyond, there shines a white pearl,
The only one, and no second!¹⁴

For many Zen artists depictions of mountains are not literal translations. Awakawa explains:

To the enlightened eye, the mountain scenery looks precisely the same at whatever time of day it is viewed. However, the time when to the physical eye it appears most beautiful is when the mountains are illuminated by the glow of sunset. So it is with the supreme truth of the universe—its true aspect of the universe . . . is perfectly apparent at first glance to the enlightened eye. . . . The time when the truth is most easily perceived is when one is sunk in meditation and one's mind is turned inward to examine itself. . . . If one seeks to express this moment of liberation and enlightenment in terms of natural phenomena, the result is a portrait of Bodhidharma.¹⁵

Thus, as it relates to Zen, the mountain is the cosmic triangle that is the axis of the universe. When viewed alone, the triangle personifies bodily existence, representing the human form in its triple aspects—physical, intellectual and spiritual. When this triangle is doubled, becoming a square or rectangle, it denotes the objective world comprised of the four elements—fire, earth, water and air. When this doubling process continues indefinitely, man has at his disposal a multitude of objects that comprise the universe. This infinite process has "no beginning, no end," as the circle, or formless form, which, like nirvana, is a condition free from craving.

These abstract symbols, therefore, constitute not only the Buddhist cosmos but the entire universe, as in Sengai's *The Universe* (Figure 12). Worldly things as man traditionally perceives them serve only to mask the inner spirit, or Buddha nature. Such superfluities must be eliminated before Buddhahood can emerge. Through his use of the triangle, circle and square, Sengai captures the essence of Buddhahood and the all-pervasive quality of the Buddha nature. Unlike the early aniconic symbols of a footprint, tree and wheel, the comprehension of which requires education in Buddhist doctrine, Sengai's non-objective imagery conveys a universal truth that relates to all men.¹⁶

Western art historians would profit from the study of the works of Zenga painters, for, since the late nineteenth century, Western artists have striven to detach themselves from objective reality. Turner and Whistler, for example, tried to convey their inner selves through explosive color and powerful brushwork. A reduction of subject to its primordial essence was attempted by Mondrian, Picasso and Braque. The idea of emptiness in fullness and fullness through emptiness is evident in a color series by Rothko while expressive sensitivity through line dominates the

paintings of Kline. The twentieth-century scholar who is looking for a Rubens and a Rembrandt will not find them in the simple works of the Zenga painters, but the twentieth-

century practitioner who desires to elicit more from art than its technical excellence will find a kinship with these artists who transcend time, language and tradition.

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1 Second-century non-Indian rulers from Central Asia.

2 For more information on Amida and the Jōdō Sect during this period in Japan, see Sherman E. Lee, *A History of the Far East* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), pp. 299-300.

3 Zen ink paintings of the Edo Period (1615-1868).

4 Toward the end of his life Buddha, himself, questioned the effectiveness of words, including his own. According to Awakawa:

After all his years preaching (Buddha) came to the conclusion that what he had taught so far was nothing but words, and there was another, greater truth about which nothing could be said at all. So we find him declaring in the end that the only thing to do is to meditate—all his previous forty-nine years of teaching had meant nothing.

Yasuichi Awakawa, *Zen Painting* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, Ltd., 1970), pp. 26-27.

5 For more information, see "The Methods of Zen Painting," *Durham University Journal*, NS 28-No. 2 (March 67); Theodore P. Bowie, "Hokusai and the Comic Tradition," *College Art Journal*, 19,3 (Spring 60); and Shin'ichi Hisamatsu, *Zen and the Fine Arts* (London: Kodansha International, Ltd., 1971).

6 The manifestations of the powers of Dainichi (Vairocana). The five powers are those of faith, energy, memory, meditation and wisdom. See Robert Treat Paine and Alexander Soper, *The Art and Architecture of Japan* (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, Inc., 1969), p. 41.

7 D. T. Suzuki, *Sengai, the Zen Master* (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1971), p. 47.

8 According to legend, Bodhidharma sat so long that his legs fell off, and that once, after falling asleep during meditation, he became so enraged

that he cut off his eyelids. Sylvan Barnet and William Burto, *Zen Ink Paintings* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1982), p. 28. Supposedly, his eyelids later took root as tea bushes, the leaves of which, when brewed, banish sleep.

9 In Chinese: *fei pai*; Japanese: *hi-haku*; flying white is employed in this case to express, in visual terms, the dematerialization of Bodhidharma's mind and body as he attains enlightenment. To accomplish this so effectively, Jiun probably used either a stiff brush or split bamboo. Barnet and Burto, *Zen Ink Paintings*, p. 34.

10 Barnet and Burto suggest that the concealment of hands, prevalent in Zen works, is not only a statement of Zen's position on *mudra* (symbolic hand gestures), but the symbol for the invisible truth which the enlightened has grasped. See also *The Image of the Buddha*, ed. David L. Snellgrove (Paris: UNESCO, 1978), pl. 295.

11 Seated meditation.

12 Suzuki, p. 95.

13 Suzuki, p. 153.

14 Suzuki, p. 120.

15 Awakawa, *Zen Painting*, pp. 26-27.

16 Since ancient times scholars of both the East and the West have considered the triangle, circle and square to be derived from the basic laws of nature, or the divine being. The significance of Sengai's painting, therefore, lies not in its originality but in its simplistic universality. For a comprehensive study of primordial forms as perceived and utilized by the ancients, see J. Ralston Skinner's *The Source of Measures* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Wizards Bookshelf, 1972); and *The Book of Signs* by Rudolph Koch (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1955).



Figure 1, *Seated Buddha*, late fifth/early sixth century A.D., Sarnath Museum, Uttar Pradesh, India; David L. Snellgrove, ed., *The Image of the Buddha* (Paris: UNESCO, 1978), pl. 63.



Figure 2, *Amitabha Trinity* (detail), Hakuho Period (645-710), Hōryū-ji Museum, Nara, Japan; Sherman E. Lee, *A History of Far Eastern Art* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. Prentice Hall, Inc., 1973), pl. 199.



Figure 3

Figure 3, Shinkai, *Fudō Myō-ō*, 1282 A.D., Daigo-ji, Kyoto, Japan; Takaaki Sawa, *Art in Japanese Esoteric Buddhism* (New York: Weatherhill, 1972), pl. 108.



Figure 4

Figure 4, Sengai Gibon, *Fudō Myō-ō*, ca. nineteenth century, Idemitsu Collection, Japan; D. T. Suzuki, *Sengai, the Zen Master* (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1971), pl. 9.



Figure 5

Figure 5, *Red-Robed Bodhidharma*, ca. 1271 A.D., Kōgaku-ji, Yamanashi Prefecture, Japan; Sylvan Barnet and William Burto, *Zen Ink Paintings* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1982), pl. 28.



Figure 6

Figure 6, Sengai Gibon, *Bodhidharma*, ca. nineteenth century, Private Collection; Yasuichi Awakawa, *Zen Painting* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, Ltd. 1971), pl. 122.



Figure 7

Figure 7, Jiun Onkō, *Bodhidharma*, ca. eighteenth century, Private Collection; Awakawa (*cit.* Figure 6), pl. 134.



Figure 8

Figure 8, Liang K'ai, *Hotei*, thirteenth century, Private Collection; Awakawa (*cit.* Figure 6), pl. 4.



Figure 9

Figure 9, Sengai Gibon, *The Yawning Hotei*, ca. nineteenth century, Idemitsu Collection, Japan; Suzuki (*cit.* Figure 4), pl. 12.



Figure 10, Sengai Gibon, *The Meditating Frog*, ca. nineteenth century, Idemitsu Collection, Japan; Suzuki (cit. Figure 4), pl. 40.

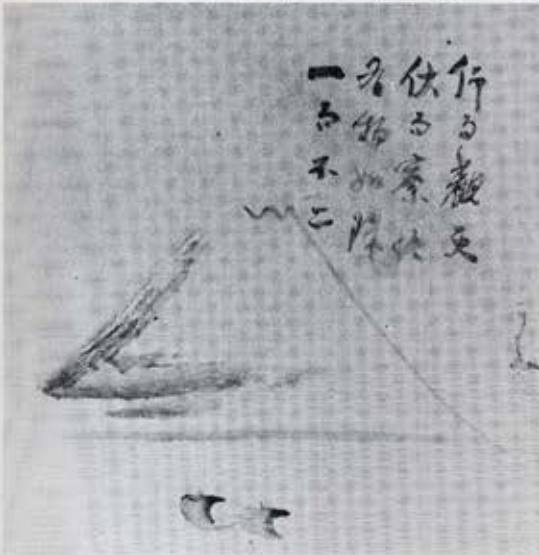


Figure 11, Sengai Gibon, *Mount Fuji*, ca. nineteenth century, Idemitsu Collection, Japan; Suzuki (cit. Figure 4), pl. 60.

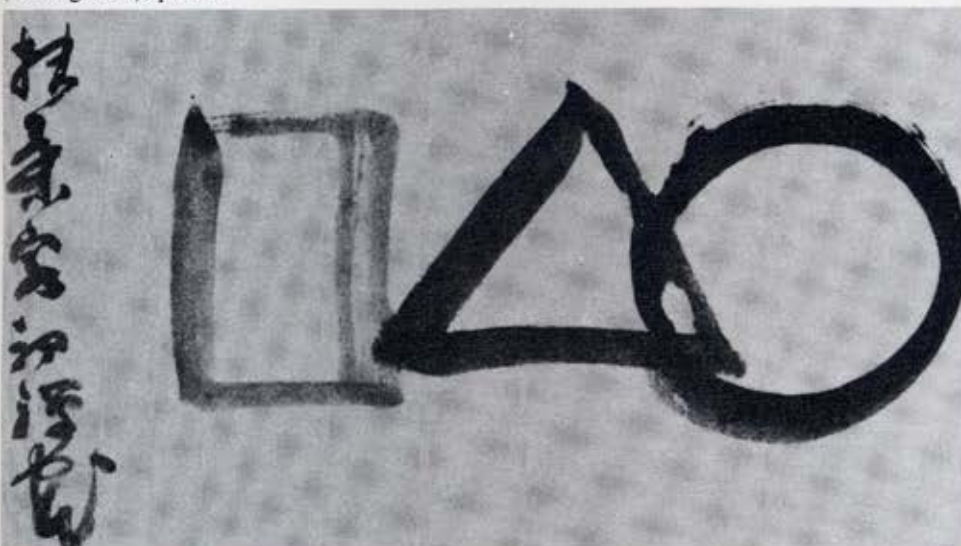


Figure 12, Sengai Gibon, *The Universe*, ca. nineteenth century, Idemitsu Collection, Japan; Suzuki (cit. Figure 4), pl. 1.