

The Sacred Art of Japan

Background notes

Dr Meri Arichi - 13 June 2018



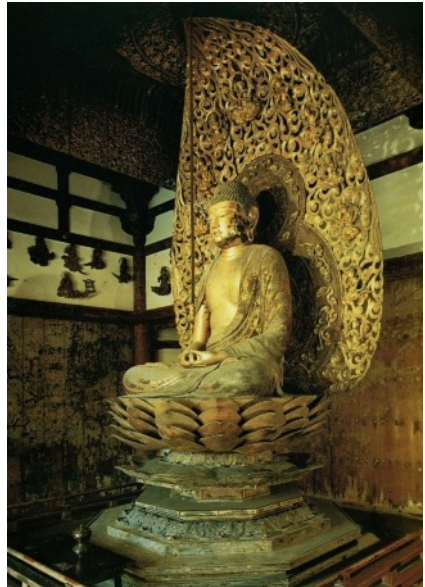
Phoenix Hall, Uji, 1052



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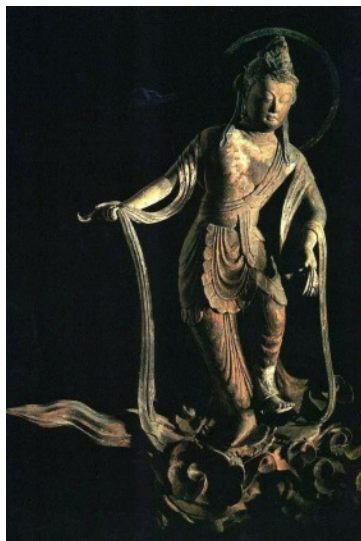
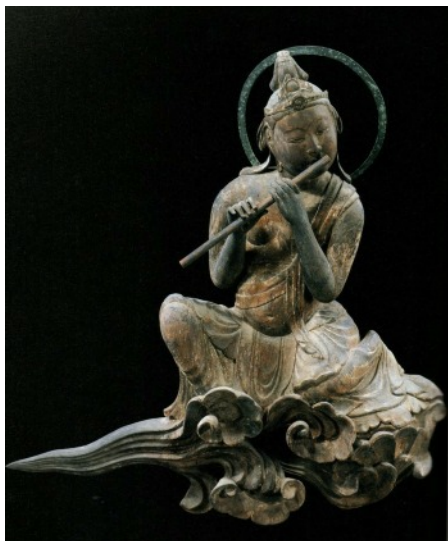
Part 1: Phoenix Hall: Images of Paradise in Japanese Pure Land Buddhism

The cult of Amida Buddha (Sk. Amitabha) gained an overwhelming number of followers from the 10th century onward in Japan, due to the apocalyptic theory which predicted that the world was to enter the period of “Mappo” (Latter days of the Buddhist Law) in the year corresponding to 1052 in the western calendar. During the dark age of Mappo when Buddha’s teaching would decline, the only hope of salvation was to be reborn in the Western Paradise (Pure Land) of Amida Buddha. The Phoenix Hall in the outskirt of Kyoto was created in 1052 by an aristocrat to house a beautiful statue of Amida Buddha. The architecture and the interior of the hall were designed to recreate the magnificent paradise where all devotees hoped to be reborn after their death. The Phoenix Hall is the oldest surviving Amida Hall in Japan, and it conveys to us the medieval Buddhist idea of paradise.

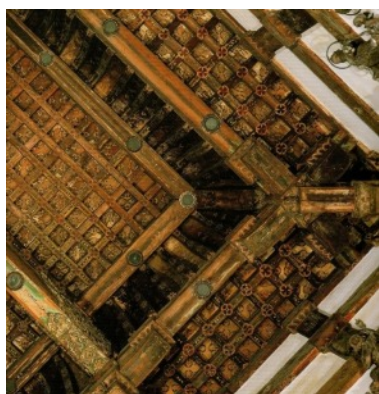


The image of Amida Buddha in the Phoenix Hall, 1053, Japanese cypress wood, H. 334 cm

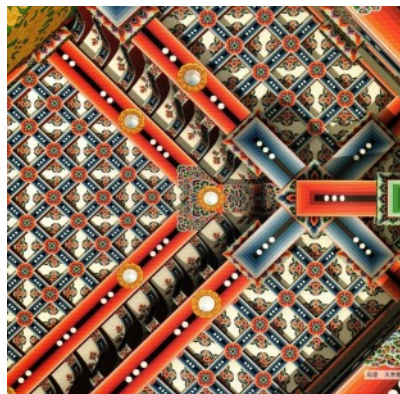
The statue of Amida Buddha was created by the sculptor, Jōchō (d.1056) who is credited to have perfected the technique of *yosegi zukuri* (multiple-block construction) of making sculpture. This technique prevented the wood from splitting and made it possible to create hollow sculptures which are light weight.



The upper sections of the walls surrounding the central icon are decorated with fifty-two small figures of heavenly musicians and dancers on floating clouds. These figures were created in the Jōchō's studio where the distribution of labour made it possible to create many sculptures in a short period of time. Although the original colours are lost today, the gentle and elegant expression of figures reflect the taste of aristocratic patrons of 11th century Japan.



The present state of the ceiling



Computer generated image of the original ceiling

Part 2: Arts of Zen: The Aesthetics of Simplicity

Zen Buddhism has exerted a profound influence on the formation of Japanese visual culture since its introduction in the 13th century to the present day. Zen Buddhism's emphasis on the practice of meditation, self-discipline, and the austere lifestyle appealed to the patrons from the warrior class, and the Zen teaching became the dominant philosophical basis that supported the development of the distinctive aesthetics of the 15th and 16th centuries. Many of the art forms, such as ink painting, dry landscape gardens and Noh drama developed during this period. This lecture will examine the beauty of simplicity, the spiritual essence, and the close affinity to nature that characterize the arts of Zen.

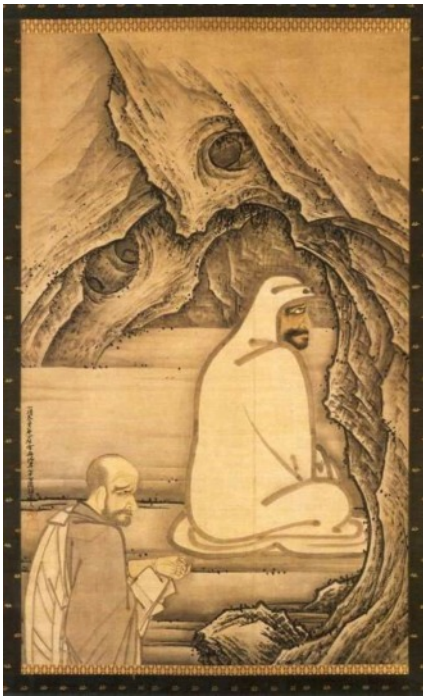


Rock Garden of Ryoan-ji Temple, Kyoto, 15th century

The dry landscape gardens were created in Zen monasteries to aid the practice of meditation. The large rectangular plot in the Ryoan-ji Temple is covered with white gravel and raked to make a wave like pattern. The fifteen rocks of various size are distributed almost randomly. There are no trees or flowers that one expects to see in a garden. What is this garden telling us? The symbolic representation of nature can be interpreted freely by the viewers and encourages the individual's search for the deeper meaning of life.

Daruma, the founder of Zen Buddhism

Bodhidharma (c.5th century CE), an Indian monk is the legendary founder of Zen Buddhism. He travelled to China to spread his teaching which was focused on the practice of meditation in search of enlightenment. He rejected all conventional Buddhist practices such as the study of scriptures, performing rituals, or creating expensive icons, and instead encouraged his followers to look for the Buddha nature in oneself. His teaching was introduced to Japan by two Japanese priests who travelled to China in the 13th century and the first Zen monastery Kennin-ji was established in Kyoto. The austere life-style and the emphasis on self-discipline appealed to the patrons from the warrior class and many Zen monasteries were established in Kyoto in the following centuries. Bodhidharma came to be known as the symbol of will-power in Japan and he is called affectionately Daruma-san today.



“Daruma meditating” by Sesshū
Tōyō, 1496



“Daruma” 15th century, ©
British Museum

Sesshū Tōyō (1420 – 1506) was a Zen monk who trained in the art of ink painting in the monastery Shōkoku-ji in Kyoto. In sharp contrast to the colourful paintings using thick mineral pigments on silk, the monochrome ink paintings were done on paper with expressive brush-strokes. Sesshū travelled to China to study the Chinese ink painting tradition, but he later established his own style incorporating his observation of real Japanese landscape. On his return to Japan he settled in the western province and spent the rest of his life as ink painter and teacher. His late work is characterized by the *haboku* style (broken ink style) with highly abbreviated motifs in spontaneous brush-strokes.



Haboku landscape by Sesshū, 1495
© Tokyo National Museum



“Monkey trying to catch the Moon” by
Hakuin (1685 – 1768) © Eisei Bunko

Zen Buddhism was revitalized in the 18th century by the priest Hakuin Ekaku who was deeply committed to the spiritual path. He devoted his life to teach the Zen philosophy to commoners in his provincial town and used his humorous images to convey the religious value. Although he was not trained as professional painter, his distinctive style of ink painting and calligraphy were highly regarded by his followers.

Zen Buddhism was introduced to the western audience in the mid-20th century by the scholar and author Suzuki Daisetsu (1870 – 1966) who spent many years teaching Buddhism in universities in America. The interest in eastern spirituality spread not only in America but in Europe as well in the first half of the 20th century, and his writings greatly influenced the development of the aesthetics of simplicity in the west.



Suzuki Daisetsu Museum,
Kanazawa Designed by
Taniguchi Toshio (b.1937)



“MU” (Nothingness), calligraphy
by Suzuki

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