

Koetsu & Tanaka: Zen Buddhism & Japanese Design

Often misunderstood and shrouded in mystery, Zen, in the West, has rapidly been co-opted by corporations to sell everything from startup businesses to mobile phones.¹ In Japan, it has become a religion that faces a troubling crisis. Perceived by the general population as a religion that primarily provides funeral services (even derogatorily referred to as “Funeral Buddhism”) there are predictions that almost one-third of its temples, dotted all across Japan, will close by 2042 simply because they do not have sufficient followers to keep them viable, at least not financially.² Although there are many wealthy temples in Japan, they are in the minority. Those that are affluent can sometimes appear aloof to the daily goings-on of people on this densely populated island. However, the Fukushima disaster may in some measure change these national perceptions through the subsequent relief efforts of many temples and Buddhist organizations, even though criticism against some of the larger, wealthier temples in the wake of nuclear tragedy continues to this day. And yet, for all the malaise and apparent stagnation, Zen has had a deep and profound influence on Japanese culture and design. Zen is a vast and mercurial subject but it might be useful to offer a brief background on how Zen came to be, and what aspects of its “philosophy” impacted design in Japan.

A distinctly Japanese form of Buddhism, Zen evolved over the centuries and adapted to its Japanese surroundings, something that Buddhism has done in every country it has taken root. Originally inspired by and imported via China in the form of Chan Buddhism in the 8th century it took until the 12th century to evolve into Zen in what was known as

the Kamakura Era.³ Within Zen, there are two prominent sects, Rinzai and Soto. The Rinzai school was founded by Eisai late in the 12th century while the latter was established by Dogen, another contemporary of Eisai, after his extensive travels in China. Rinzai focuses on *zazen* (seated meditation) and the study of *koans*, those notorious “riddles” that many in the West at least, associate with the study of Zen, while the Soto sect focuses more on “just sitting” or *shikantaza*. Dogen is not only revered in Japan as a major figure in Zen Buddhism, but also for his extensive writings. His *Shobogenzo* (or the “*Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*”) is considered one the most important works in Japanese letters.

For the purposes of this brief essay I would like to briefly discuss three tenants of Zen Buddhism. Firstly, *zazen*, or seated meditation, has become a fundamental practice within Zen. Practitioners sit, usually in silence, for varying periods of time depending on their ability. One goal of mediation is not to eliminate or stop thinking, but rather to realize that we are not our thoughts. Thoughts will come and go. They enter our mind but we don’t need to invite them in for tea or coffee. Eventually, we see them for what they, just thoughts, and let them be on their way. There are many “benefits” to this practice but an important one, in terms of this essay, is the development of *yoriki*,⁴ or concentration, a diligent attention to what is going on in each moment.

Secondly, the tea ceremony has long been associated with Zen aesthetics. According to Shin’ichi Hisamatsu in his “*Zen and the Fine Arts*,” the Way of Tea includes: “religion, philosophy, ethics, art, manners, clothing, food and architecture.” It is a prime example of laymans’ s Zen.⁵ This minimally inspired approach to life, is self-evident in much of Japanese design.

And lastly, the term emptiness, or *sunyata*, essentially means that everything is *empty* of any intrinsic existence or meaning. Nothing exists independently in and of itself, and we basically add meaning on *top* of phenomena, using language as a means to understand the world around us.

In the summer of 2007, I was fortunate to be given the opportunity to live and work in Tokyo during the summer months. My apartment, of course, was miniscule by my western standards but was adequately equipped with everything I might need to live and cook in such a compact space, everything that is, except for a decent sized rice bowl. So, one day I took to finding a local street market where I could find an inexpensive eating bowl. In a crowded street I came across a vendor selling all sorts of handmade and cheap kitchen items, and as luck would have it, a beautiful collection of rice bowls. As I wasn't in any particular hurry, I took my time picking up several bowls and looking them over before deciding on a cobalt blue bowl with an intricate pattern on the exterior of the bowl, that was mirrored with a pale and faintly debossed version on the interior. I turned the bowl over, and saw some beautifully inscribed calligraphic mark, and brought it to the vendor to show him I wanted to buy it. He of course smiled and bowed. He began to set his table in order to wrap the bowl. In my short time in Tokyo, I quickly understood that the Japanese love to wrap everything, and take the upmost care in doing so. I quietly continued to walk around his stall and look at some of the other utensils but all the while, out of the corner of my eye, I watched the vendor cut two sheets of newspaper and place them squarely on the countertop. He centered the bowl on the patterned newsprint and began to fold the stiff paper around the ceramic rim, not in a crushed way but as if folding some precious cloth. Halfway through the process, he paused. I saw him tilt his

head slightly — something wasn't quite right. He unfolded the paper and turned the bowl a few degrees before proceeding, once again, to finish wrapping. He bowed as we exchanged payment and we said our goodbyes amid smiles. This simple exchange, at least for me, embodies much of what I believe is a significant influence of Zen. That is that *everything* is important and you need to pay attention. Regardless of the task at hand, everyone has a role to play and should do so with all their attention, devoid of preconceived notions of what you *think* you should or shouldn't be doing at any given moment in time. Taizen Maezumi Roshi, one of the founders of Zen in the West, in his posthumous book "*Appreciate Your Life*" said: "Appreciate the world just as this! There is nothing extra. Genuinely appreciate your life as the most precious treasure and take good care of it."⁶ It is one of the fundamentals of Zen that we pay attention, without prior judgment to each moment, and every task.

Considering the expediency of this essay form, and to search for a prime example of the interplay of this meditative focused, historically and culturally inspired approach to design, I will concentrate on two designers/artists that span centuries of Japanese art and design: Ikko Tanaka (1930 – 2002) one of Japan's exemplary 20th century graphic designers and Hon'ami Koetsu (1558–1637) one of Japan most admired artists. Both of these artists/designers show, through their unique work, several aspects of Zen inspired action.

In 2003 I visited the retrospective exhibition of Ikko Tanaka's work at the Museum of Contemporary Art, in Tokyo, and was overwhelmed by the sheer scale and scope of Tanaka's work over a 60-year career. Born in Nara in 1930, he later studied in the Kyoto City School of Art before moving to Tokyo in the late 50s. Tanaka created over 5000

pieces of work, or roughly one piece of work every three to four days since graduating from Kyoto in 1950, until his untimely death in 2002.⁷

Despite the volume of the work displayed at the exhibition, none of it was slipshod in any way. In fact, one of my enduring memories was the obvious attention to detail in every single piece displayed: a series of oversized posters; a range of book covers each incased with exquisite lettering and perfect cloth binding; or a stunning collection of calligraphic images beautifully rendered on bold colors. Nothing was left to chance. From the paper selection, to the perfect printing, everything was executed just so. Frankly, it took my breath away, and inspired in me a desire to emulate in my own work, that singular attention to each detail.

Tanaka lived his early childhood in two historically and cultural significant cites, Nara and Kyoto (although a majority of Nara was sadly destroyed, fortunately Kyoto was spared the destructive wrath of American fire bombings during World War II) and no doubt made a lasting impression on the young man and imbued him with a strong sense of Japanese traditions in the arts.

One of Tanaka's formative influences came from the Rinpa School, which flourished in Nara, Kyoto and Osaka the 17th century. This influential school was founded by one of Japan's most revered artists, Hon'ami Koetsu, who also happens to be one of Tanaka's favorites. Tanaka remarked about the Rinpa style, "To me, Rinpa is a dangerous world, it comes close to you with various seductions...[the Rinpa's] a style that's always infallibly elegant, free, generous, so wonderful...From our contemporary point of view, the sense

of self is always in stress and pushes to conflict. The Rinpa style purveys an idea of beauty that's too far away from what we are.”⁸

Koetsu's works are now national treasures, and admired in Japan for their simplicity and beauty. While not much is known of Koetsu's private life we know he was both an artist and a spiritual man. A painting (based on an earlier sculpture) of Koetsu, shows him dressed as a lay Buddhist priest, robed and smiling, and possibly holding a sutra scroll.⁹

A direct thread of connection between Tanaka and the Rinpa school, across many centuries, is Koetsu's (the calligrapher) and Tawaraya Sotatsu's (the painter of the deer) collaborative *Heike nokyo* scroll (also known as *the Deer Scroll*) and Tanaka's *Japan* poster, which he created for the JAGDA exhibition in 1986.¹⁰ Both pieces use the image of a stylized deer as its central visual element. The deer's body in Tanaka's poster is oddly contorted, a direct relation to Sotatsu's delicate abstraction. Traditionally, in Japan, the deer symbolizes Autumn, and a sign of impending winter and the associated melancholy, evident in both works, becomes accentuated with the simplified shapes set against the bold palette of flat colors. Although separated by centuries of time, in both pieces there is time for the viewer to take their time, and ponder the story being told.

Both Tanaka and Koetsu were also active practitioners of the tea ceremony. In fact, one of Tanaka's last projects was for an exhibition “*The New Way of Tea*” in the Asia Society Museum and Japan Society Gallery in New York. “When he [Tanaka] held a Tea Ceremony, he liked to entertain his guests with his own cooking and homemade sweets, and perhaps he enjoyed living his daily life, according to its precepts...this perhaps explains his inclination toward the Tea Ceremony which is in itself a kind of

performance”¹¹ Koetsu too, immersed himself in the Way of Tea, especially toward the end of his life, living in an artist’s commune of sorts, called Takagamine, where he worked alongside Raku potters and created one of Japan’s National Treasures, a teabowl known as “*Fuji-san*.” Correspondence between Koetsu and fellow artists revolve around tea ceremonies, and the resulting invitations and thank-you notes.¹² According to D.T. Suzuki the tea ceremony embodies Zen’s tendency toward simplification. “Zen also aims at stripping off all the artificial wrappings of human wrappings humans have devised, supposedly for its own solemnization. Zen first of all combats the intellect; for, in spite of its practical usefulness, the intellect goes against our effort to delve into the depths of being.”¹³ No doubt, both Tanaka and Koetsu love of the tea ceremony and its rituals, informed their work, its sense of elegance and restraint and drive toward “the elimination of unneccessaries.”¹⁴

And lastly, calligraphic artistry is another fundamental passion of both these artists. Widely regarded as one of Japan’s great calligraphers, Koetsu’s beautiful brush strokes adorn some of Japan’s most treasured scrolls. Both Tanaka and Koetsu experimented with calligraphy in both its form and expression. One noteworthy example of this experimentation is a scroll of poems called *Poems on the Moon from the “Shinkokin wakashu.”* with both sides of the scroll woodblock printed using the calligraphy of Koetsu as a template. Tanaka also worked with what he called *bokugi*,¹⁵ or using brush and ink not to create specific characters but rather to concentrate on the flow and movement of ink on the page. Some of these experiments would later be incorporated into his design work, especially in his posters. I remember seeing these brushworks in his retrospective exhibition and being particularly impressed by these calligraphic objects.

⁶ Taisen Maesumi Roshi, *Appreciate Your Life*, Shambala Publications, 2016, p. 21

⁷ Kashiwagi Hiroshi, *Ikko Tanaka: A Retrospective*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, 2003, p. 4

⁸ Gian Carlo Calza, *Tanaka Ikko: Graphic Master*, London, Phaidon, 1997, p. 14.

⁹ Felice Fischer, *The Arts of Hon'ami Koetsu*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2000, p. 14

¹⁰ Nagai Kasumasa, *Ikko Tanaka: A Retrospective*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, 2003, p. 15

¹¹ Kashiwagi Hiroshi, *Ikko Tanaka: A Retrospective*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, 2003, p. 8

¹² Felice Fischer, *The Arts of Hon'ami Koetsu*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, 2000, p. 23

^{13, 14} Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, Bollingen Series, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1959, p. 271 – 272

¹⁵ Kashiwagi Hiroshi, *Ikko Tanaka: A Retrospective*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, 2003, p. 9

¹⁶ Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, Bollingen Series, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1959, p. 257