

None What soever: Zen Paintings from the Gitter-Yelen Collection

Introduction

Among the most famous episodes of Zen lore is the exchange between Bodhidharma (active 5th or 6th century CE), the Indian patriarch credited with spreading Zen Buddhism to China, and China's Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty (502–557):

Emperor Wu: "I have built many temples, copied innumerable sutras, and ordained many monks since becoming Emperor. Therefore, I ask you, what is my merit?"

Bodhidharma: "Nonewhatsoever."

Emperor Wu: "Why no merit?"

Bodhidharma: "Doing things for merit has an impure motive and will only bear the puny fruit of rebirth."

Emperor Wu: "What then is the most important principle of Buddhism?"

Bodhidharma: "Vastemptiness. Nothing sacred."

Emperor Wu: "Who is this that stands before me?"

Bodhidharma: "I do not know."

This exchange underscores qualities associated with Zen Buddhism: the concept of emptiness, of finding the Buddha Nature within oneself as a means to enlightenment, and contrarianism vis-à-vis mainstream

expectations of religious practice and patronage. These themes also appear in Zenga, paintings and calligraphies made by Japanese Zen monk-painters, beginning with Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768), as an extension of their teaching activity. Though sometimes simple and amateurish in visual form, they are direct and profound in meaning, using allegory, popular references, and quotidian concerns to convey their messages. They also occasionally evoke unexpected moods of whimsy and humor. *None Whatsoever* introduces Zenga through select works from the renowned collection of Kurt Gitter and Alice Yelen Gitter. #NoneWhatsoever

Hakuin Ekaku and the Creation of Zen Painting

The single most important figure in the emergence of Zenga as a tradition is Hakuin Ekaku (1686–1769). In religious history, Hakuin is a towering figure; he helped to revive the moribund Rinzai school of Zen Buddhism, and his reform of Zen practices such as the use of koan (Zen riddles of language and logic) are still the basis of Zen practice today. In artistic terms, Hakuin simplified the visual language but greatly expanded the thematic repertoire of Zen paintings. In previous centuries, Zen paintings were made primarily for elite audiences. However, Hakuin created works for all status groups; he included cartoonish renderings of Zen patriarchs, such as Bodhidharma, with simple messages inscribed above, and Zen eccentrics, such as the portly priest Hotei, in different poses or settings to convey religious themes more directly and compellingly.

One of Hakuin's great legacies was his proselytizing activity, which resulted in an expansion of the social demography of Zen followers. Accordingly, Hakuin's disciples ranged from daimyo lords to other Zen priests, urban commoners, and rural farmers. Hakuin used paintings and calligraphies as a way of reinforcing his teachings and mediating relations with followers. For more sophisticated audiences, he was fond of using parables, such as "Two Blind Men Crossing a Bridge," in his lectures. For commoners, however, Hakuin sometimes created calligraphic works that had nothing outwardly to do with Zen teachings; instead, they touched upon themes important to the daily lives of merchants and agrarians, such as prosperity, long life, and filial piety. Hakuin understood that sometimes the best way to achieve spiritual advancement was to work through quotidian concerns, rather than shun them.

1

Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768), *Enlightenment Certificate – Dragon Staff*, 1762

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“On Buddha’s Birthday [April 8] in Hōreki 12 [1762], Nomura Magobei from a county in Suru [Shizuoka] penetrated my two massive barriers and heard the sound of one hand. I therefore brush this as a certificate for this heroic person.” Hakuin painted certificates like this one for his followers who reached enlightenment. The inscription references the Zen Buddhist koan “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” At center is a walking staff in the shape of a dragon with a fly whisk (*hossu*) in its mouth. Such whisks were often carried by monks and passed down from teacher to student over generations.

2

Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768), *The God of Medicine*, 18th century

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“Understanding grasses to use as medicine; cutting trees in order to plow; teaching how to cook using fire; teaching the benefits of strange beasts – a virtuous man of great scholarship and healing.” Here, Hakuin reached outside the traditional pantheon of Buddhism for a subject that would have been familiar and popular with laypeople: the medicine god Shinno, who originated in China but was incorporated into the Japanese Shinto religion. Shinno often appears in a robe of grasses with leopard-skin sleeves and carrying a staff; the small horns sprouting from his head indicate that he is a chimera, part wise man, part goat or ox.

3

Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768), *Hotei Juggling*, 18th century

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“Don’t let it drop – Nagamatsu! Nagamatsu!” Hakuin made several versions of the monk Hotei juggling, indicating how useful, effective, and indeed charming he must have found the image, which toys with both traditional depictions of Hotei and the supernatural abilities of Buddhist deities. One of Hakuin’s most effective strategies for translating Buddhism’s esoteric and at times frightening descriptions of deities and their otherworldly powers was to depict figures from the pantheon of Buddhism performing skillful acts of entertainment, which were more commonplace and thus comprehensible to laypeople.

4

Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768), *Zazen Hotei*, 18th century

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“Mr. Monk! How unusual! Today you are actually doing zazen ...
Yeah, so what?”
This inscription is characteristic of playful dialogues between a Zen master and a student. Hakuin depicts the monk Hotei atop his iconic sack in zazen, or seated meditation. Yet the inscription also implies that meditation alone will not bring about enlightenment and that Hotei does not even regularly engage in the practice. This painting is characteristic of Hakuin’s often irreverent approach to Zen portraiture, imbuing sacred figures with playful – and approachable – human qualities.

5

Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768), *Giant Daruma*, 18th century

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“Direct pointing to the human heart, see your nature – and become Buddha!”

The scale and confident, sweeping brushstrokes of this portrait of Daruma are evidence of Hakuin’s mastery of ink painting and his familiarity with Daruma’s iconic features, including his large, open eyes, furrowed brow, and immense forehead, which suggest a fearsome master engaged in unbroken meditation. The inscription encapsulates Hakuin’s interpretation of Zen, urging students to look within themselves for enlightenment, as we all contain the Buddha nature within our hearts. Hakuin’s Daruma embodies this concept: the dark brushstrokes of his robe form a stylized version of the character *kokoro*, or “heart.”

6

Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768), *Daruma with Shoe*, 18th century

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“His shoes were split apart [in different locations], the barefoot master.”

This large and powerful image of Daruma illustrates one of the most popular legends about the Chinese Zen patriarch. According to legend, a Chinese court official by the name of Song Yun, while traveling through the Pamir Mountains in Central Asia around the year 520, encountered the already deceased Daruma carrying one shoe. When he reported this to the Emperor, the latter had Daruma’s grave opened, revealing a missing body and only the other shoe. The legend underscores the supernatural powers that were associated with Daruma.

7

Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768), *Death Koan*, 18th century

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“Death – the great activator of the patriarchs of old and the basis of human life.”

This calligraphy is one of several by Hakuin to feature insouciant inscriptions about death. As this inscription indicates, Hakuin did not regard death as something to be feared. Instead, death offers the opportunity for transcendence, change, and renewal. By referring to death as “the great activator of the patriarchs of old,” Hakuin implies that his Zen forebears had a richer existence after their passing, as the study of their words and teachings transformed them from mere mortals into legends – something that would eventually happen to Hakuin.

8

Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768), *Toku (Virtue)*, 18th century

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“If you pile up money for your descendants, they will be sure to waste it; if you collect books for them, they will probably not read a word. It is better to pile up secret virtue – such a legacy will last a long, longtime!”

Hakuin’s inscription quotes the 11th-century Chinese sage Sima (1018–1086), who advocated for the private performance of virtuous deeds, rather than conspicuous acts of Buddhist patronage. Hakuin used a thicker ink for the character “virtue,” making it darker and more saturated. To emphasize his message, Hakuin wrote certain phrases, such as “pile up money,” in oversize characters.

Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768), *One Hundred “Kotobuki” (Longevity)*, 1767

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Gitter-Yelen Collection, gift of Dr. Kurt Gitter and Alice Yelen Gitter, 2021.205

“Venerate the 100-seal script characters for longevity, each one is a lotus pedestal of the marvelous law, a source of miraculous, unsurpassed magic and a picture of the golden body of a Buddha. Those who bow, respect, and believe in them will avoid thunder and fires, be safe from the seven disasters, and bring forth sevenfold good fortune.”

Hakuin painted several versions of this composition, which repeats the character for “longevity” in different scripts. An inscription on this one reads: “The old monk Hakuin under the trees of nirvana, 83 years old, burns incense and prostrates nine times. 1767, seventh month, an auspicious day.”

Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768), *Kumagai Naozane – Priest on Horse*, 18th century

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“Originally named Kumagai Jirō, after becoming a monk he called himself Renshōbo. Visiting Kamakura, he rode backward on his horse, so he could always face toward the West. At the time of becoming a monk, he composed a verse: I’ve decided upon facing to the West and never looking back. Recently, someone turned this around: Even devils would cry out and turn away if ever he turned around.”

Kumagai Jirō (1141–1208) was a well-known warrior for the Minamoto clan who later became a Pure Land Buddhist priest. Hakuin expands the Zen pantheon by incorporating a popular historical figure from a different sect of Buddhism.

Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768), *Kannon Emerging from a Clamshell*, 18th century

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“The one who can become enlightened in the body of a clam ... suddenly emerges from the clam.”

Hakuin was fond of painting the Bodhisattva Kannon. Here, he whimsically renders Kannon emerging from a clamshell, one of the thirty-three manifestations of Kannon as described in the *Lotus Sutra*. The subject also evokes a famous anecdote in which China’s Emperor Wenzong (808–840) attempted to eat a clam but the shell refused to open; upon lighting incense, however, the shell popped open and gave rise to Kannon. This work illustrates in a straightforward fashion the otherwise complicated concept of the Buddha nature, which resides in all things over the course of several lifetimes, and that anyone may ultimately achieve enlightenment.

Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768), *Seven Gods of Good Fortune*, 18th century

Hanging scroll; ink and color on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“If you are loyal to your lord and filial to your parents
You will receive my straw raincoat, straw hat, magic
mallet, and bag.”

Here, Hakuin incorporates Japan’s Seven Lucky Gods (*shichifukujin*), each identifiable through canonical attributes: the god of prosperity, Daikoku, holds his magic mallet at right; Hotei appears with his large sack at left. At lower left, the god of longevity, Fukurokuju, distinguished by his oversized forehead, reads: “Shōki hides his sword under the eaves, and stealthily, stealthily guards the palace.” This text references the figure at center, Shōki, the demon queller, who has replaced the warrior god Bishamonten.

Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768), *Daitō Kokushi as a Begging Monk*, 18th century
Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“At the end, all those idlers who lazily fool around, spending their money vainly and not respecting their parents will look like this: very hungry.”

Daitō Kokushi (c.1283–c.1338) was the founding abbot of Daitokuji, one of Japan’s most important Rinzai Zen temples, in Kyoto. He was also a Zen prodigy, achieving enlightenment after only 10 days of koan study. Hakuin wrote numerous commentaries on Daitō’s texts. Despite this reverence, this painting lightly satirizes Daitō, showing him begging for food and alms, a common practice for Zen monks; his inscription humorously feigns ignorance about Daitō’s true identity and enlightenment.

Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768), *Two Blind Men Crossing a Log Bridge*, 18th century
Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“In both spiritual training and dealing with the world, keep in mind the example of blind men crossing a log bridge.”

With relatively little brushwork, Hakuin conjures a vast emptiness that can only be traversed via a log. Hakuin instructs that we should proceed slowly and methodically across the “log bridge” of life, implying that, without the enlightenment of the Buddha, we are all effectively blind, riddled with uncertainty as we inch forward across it. Hakuin’s metaphor also implies that enlightenment could occur suddenly, at any moment, for the blind men do not know when they will reach the otherside.

Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768), *Mount Fuji, Eggplants, and Hawk Feathers*, 18th century
Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“What is this?”

The scale of this large painting indicates that it was likely made for a temple. Its subject matter is typically associated with the New Year, specifically the *hatsuyume* or the “first dream” of the New Year. To dream of Mount Fuji, eggplants, and hawks was thought to be especially auspicious: Fuji represents a sacred location; hawks were associated with the pursuits of warlords; and eggplant (*nasu*) is a homophone for the verb meaning “to become” or “to achieve.” As such, their combination in a New Year’s dream was thought to indicate great achievement or ascent in the year to come.

Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768), *Kannon with Color (Lotus Pond Kannon)*, 18th century
Hanging scroll; ink and color on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“She looks upon all sentient beings with eyes of compassion, an unlimited ocean of good fortune and succor.”

Though Hakuin is mostly associated with black-and-white ink painting, he was also known to incorporate colored pigments. Hakuin’s depiction of the genderless deity Kannon as a kindly female was meant to convey the supernatural protective powers of Kannon in a nonthreatening and peaceful manner. Hakuin further deemphasized her supernatural attributes by transforming her lotus throne into floating flowers and her gleaming halo into the circular illumination surrounding her head, which could be simply the moon.

17

Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768), *Fukurokuju*, 18th century

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“Longevity, good fortune, and wealth – we want to be long-lasting, but life itself will be long enough in the long run.”

Hakuin depicts the longevity god Fukurokuju in a pose and robes similar to his portraits of Daruma. The brushstrokes of the robe form the character *kokoro*, “heart,” alluding to the Zen master’s exhortations to look inside oneself for enlightenment. While overtly about a long life, the inscription also references the massive, phallic head of Fukurokuju and could read: “If it stays long and hard like this, that will be a real treasure, and you will have a pleasant and productive life.”

18

Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768), *Ant on a Stone Mill*, 18th century

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Gitter-Yelen Collection, museum purchase funded by the Brown Foundation Accessions Endowment Fund, 2021.208

“An ant circling the hand mill – a hint for the world.”

Hakuin painted this subject, an illustration of a koan, several times, using the same inscription. It illustrates the restricted worldview of the ant. Though the insect walks endlessly around the stone mill, expending great effort, he does not actually move forward; all his work is but an illusion, imperceptible to him but clearly visible to the viewer. In addition, Hakuin’s use of a humble, quotidian object, such as a mill to grind tea, makes his teaching even more comprehensible to everyday people.

19

Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768), *Monkey*, mid-18th century

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Gitter-Yelen Collection, museum purchase funded by the Brown Foundation Accessions Endowment Fund, 2021.206

“Yoshida is no better than a fly’s head!”

This painting by Hakuin satirizes the Buddhist monk Yoshida Kenkō (1283–1350), known for his popular writings. In East Asian painting, monkeys frequently hang from branches and grasp at the moon’s reflection in a body of water, mistaking reflection for reality. Here, Hakuin extends a monkey’s arm to an impossible length to touch the ground, in emulation of the Buddha’s “earth-touching gesture” (*bhumisparsha mudra*), which signaled his enlightenment and his triumph over the demon Mara. Hakuin implies, through image and inscription, that even this playful monkey is more enlightened than Kenkō.

20

Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768), *Running Hotei*, 18th century

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“What a heavy mallet – It will be the death of me!”

Hakuin shows the venerated monk Hotei with a large mallet instead of his signature sack, running full tilt and almost exposing his hind-quarters. The inscription, written in loopy cursive script, contains a clever pun: “heavy mallet” (*omoi kine*), when read aloud, is a homophone for “mallet of thought.” Given this, an alternate reading of the inscription might be: “This mallet of thought – It will be the death of me!” This wordplay suggests that even the monk Hotei might fear the weighty revelations that come with the achievement of Zen enlightenment.

Sengai Gibon

Along with Hakuin, Sengai Gibon (1750–1837) is among the most important Zenga artists of the Edo period (1615–1868). Although active three generations later, Sengai similarly painted Zen themes in ways that were direct, abbreviated, unassuming, and focused on quotidian themes. In contrast to Hakuin, however, Sengai developed a light, whimsical approach to painting that appears to have much in common with haiku poetry and its accompanying pictures (*haiga*). He spent much of his career in and around the city of Fukuoka in Kyushu Prefecture, where he developed a strong local following that continued well into the modern era. Sengai's artistry is represented here by several works from the Gitter-Yelen Collection, including the artist's only handscroll known to exist.

21

Sengai Gibon (1750–1837), *Hotei Waking from a Nap*, late 18th or early 19th century
Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“What a pleasant nap! I dreamt I was the Duke of Zhou!”

With its loose, almost cartoonish style, this portrait of Hotei typifies Sengai Gibon's Zen paintings. The inscription states that Hotei, Sengai's favorite subject, has awakened from a dream in which he was the 11th-century Chinese statesman Zhougong, the Duke of Zhou. According to legend, Confucius dreamt so often of the duke that he eventually believed he had become him. This painting suggests the ability to transcend illusory dreams. Sengai's treatment of Hotei may also support this reading: Hotei's large belly resembles an *ensō*, implying his spiritual wholeness, while the brushstrokes forming the hem of his robe resemble the character for *kokoro* (heart), signifying the inner Buddha nature.

22

Sengai Gibon (1750–1837), *Famous Moments in the Lives of Zen Monks*
late 18th or early 19th century, Handscroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

This handscroll, the only known example by Sengai, features episodes in the lives of historic Zen monks, immortalized in the artist's playful style. In one vignette, Kanzan and Jittoku read to each other as their friend Bukan approaches them atop his tame tiger. Another shows the Tang Dynasty sage Kensu (Xianzi, in Chinese), notorious for eschewing vegetarianism and dining on clams and prawns. Yet another depicts the monk Nansen (Nanchuan, in Chinese) threatening to flay a cat if his disciples could not properly speak about Zen.

Sengai Gibon (1750–1837), *Kanzan and Jittoku*, late 18th or early 19th century

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

[Kanzan]: “A thousand grasses weep with dew, the wind sings in the pines. Sengai”

[Jittoku]: “Dew soaks a thousand grasses one shade that reflects the autumn moon. Like a song, the sound of the wind in the pines. Sengai”

Kanzan and Jittoku (or Hanshan and Shide, in Chinese) were beloved 7th-century Chinese figures who embody the carefree nature of Zen. Often shown playing or wandering aimlessly, here they read and translate a poem for the benefit of the viewer. Kanzan, at right, reads first in Chinese, and Jittoku repeats it in Japanese. Sengai shows his mastery by signing each inscription.

Zen Painting: Constructing a Lineage

Zenga can be understood as originating with Hakuin. During the modern era, however, as Zenga gained in popularity, scholars attempted to explore the prehistory of Zenga and identify precursors to Hakuin’s artistry. The result was the elaboration of an unusual Zenga lineage extending back to the late 16th century and consisting of artists who, in many cases, had no direct relationship to or influence on Hakuin. Instead, they are associated with Zenga because of their treatment of similar themes or their abbreviated, straightforward approach to painting and calligraphy. This “invention” of Hakuin’s artistic genealogy might be likened to Jorge Luis Borges’s famous comment about Franz Kafka, in which he asserts that Kafka essentially “created” his precursors. This section showcases precursors for Hakuin, including the works of the mysterious monk Fūgai Ekun and the tea master Shōkadō Shōjō.

Ike no Taiga (1723–1776), *Bamboo with a Stone*, 18th century

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Gitter-Yelen Collection, museum purchase funded by the Brown Foundation Accessions Endowment Fund, 2021.242

A literati painter, Ike no Taiga favored traditional subjects and painted numerous compositions featuring bamboo, possibly to satisfy customers in Kyoto. Bamboo sprouting from rocks and withstanding wind and rain is a potent metaphor in Zen and Japanese culture: despite harsh weather, bamboo bends but does not break. Though Taiga painted this traditional scene derived from Chinese precedent, he cleverly truncates the leaves of the plant and renders the rock flat, as if pressed against the surface of the painting. In so doing, he implies, in a few confident brushstrokes, that a vast landscape extends beyond the boundaries of this scroll.

Fūgai Ekun (1568–1654), *Hotei Pointing at the Moon*, late 16th or early 17th century
Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“His life is not poor but neither is it rich. Pointing to the moon, gazing at the moon, this old fellow really enjoys himself.”
Fūgai Ekun’s charming painting of Hotei shows the popular figure as happy and carefree, untethered from worldly concerns – so much so that he looks up and away from the earth, pointing at the moon, which the viewer cannot see. In a way, Hotei’s gesture represents a playful foil to the famous earth-touching gesture of the Buddha, which signaled his enlightenment. Instead, Fūgai’s painting suggests a monk on pilgrimage who nonetheless stops on his journey to enjoy the ephemeral pleasure of a moon viewing. The dynamic, curling line of the string from Hotei’s sack, however, indicates that even this pause is only momentary.

Isshi Bunshu (1608–1646), *Daruma from behind with Calligraphy*, 17th century
Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Gitter-Yelen Collection, museum purchase funded by the Brown Foundation Accessions Endowment Fund, 2021.256

Isshi Bunshu painted this subject several times, often using soft, gently curving lines to delineate Daruma’s robe. His portraits of the Zen patriarch are not as abbreviated or abstracted as later examples by other painters, with Daruma’s profile slightly visible.

Shōkadō Shōjō (1584–1639), *Portrait of Shunzei*, late 16th or early 17th century
Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

An abbot of the Shingon sect, Shōkadō Shōjō was also one of the finest calligraphers of the early Edo period. In Kyoto, he developed a refined and elegant, if at times eccentric, personal style of calligraphy. The subject of this portrait is similarly refined: Fujiwara no Toshinari (1114–1204) was commissioned by the Emperor in 1183 to compile a volume of the most important Japanese poetry of the last thousand years (*Senzai Wakashū*). Though a successful poet, he later became interested in Buddhism, assuming the name Shunzei. By painting him as a monk, Shōkadō elevates the poet to the pantheon of Buddhist holy men.

Daishin Gitō (1656–1730), *Daruma on a Reed*, late 17th or early 18th century
Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“Using heaven as a hat and a reed as a boat, he floated across 10,000 leagues of waves; when he went back to the west he left a single sandal; he roared like a tiger in 3,000 worlds ... He wears a thick straw hat; know the principle behind the meaning of the first patriarch’s coming from the West in India to here in the East. – First Patriarch Engaku Daishi, brushed and inscribed by his 47th descendant with deep gratitude and respect”
This large-scale Daruma is unique in Daishin Gitō’s oeuvre. The overall size, detailed painting, and formal inscription likely indicate that this work was commissioned by a Zen temple.

Itō Jakuchū (1716–1800), *Kanzan and Jittoku*, 18th century

Ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

Itō Jakuchū's playful and charming painting shows the legendary 7th-century Chinese figures Kanzan and Jittoku (or Hanshan and Shide, in Chinese) at rest, something strongly associated with the pair, who lived in the wilderness and did not work. The painter emphasizes their idle natures by including the disused broom, whose bristles are rendered as a single dark brushstroke. Jakuchū uses this same technique for their hair, suggesting the unkempt pates of the two figures, beloved in the Zen pantheon, who lived together peacefully as itinerant hermits, unconcerned with material gain or conspicuous religious virtue.

Itō Jakuchū (1716–1800), painter, Tangai (Musen Jōzen) (1693–1764), calligrapher

Giant Daruma, late 18th century, Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Gitter-Yelen Collection, gift of Dr. Kurt Gitter and Alice Yelen Gitter, 2021.204

“A mind like a thick wall. Eyes as bright as the sun and moon. Vast emptiness, nothing holy! Behold a dragon manifest right here! Respectfully inscribed by Tangai”

Tangai's inscription vividly describes Daruma's imposing and impenetrable appearance but, like Ito- Jakuchū's charming portrait of the Zen master, also gently satirizes the monk by invoking one of his most famous quotations from his dialogue with Emperor Wu Liang (464–594 AD). When asked about the first principle of Zen, Daruma replied, “Vast emptiness, nothing holy!” In this image, however, this quotation also references the “vast emptiness” of Daruma's forehead, behind which lies great wisdom.

Ōbaku Sokuhi (1616–1671), *Dragon and Tiger*, 17th century

Pair of hanging scrolls; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

The pairing of a tiger amid bamboo and a dragon emerging from clouds is a classic and ubiquitous one in East Asian art, as the two creatures represent opposites: one an earth-bound predator, and the other an auspicious heavenly beast. In the context of Zen, this pairing is thought to represent a harmonious balance between the spiritual (embodied by the dragon) and the physical (symbolized by the tiger). Above each animal, Ōbaku Sokuhi has written the characters for tiger and dragon, respectively, using bold, gestural strokes that add to the action and movement of each panel.

Following the Master

Many of Hakuin's religious disciples continued his practice of using paintings to emphasize Zen teachings and engage with followers. Although most lacked his breadth of subject matter, especially with regard to allegorical painting, they nevertheless developed their own approach and have their own distinctive appeal. This section highlights several of the most notable monk-painters in the Hakuin School, beginning with his two most prominent successors, Tōrei Enji (1721–1792) and Suiō Genro (1717–1789).

Tōrei's output is the more artistically dynamic, and his *ensō* (Zen circles) are particularly distinctive. Suiō's paintings are marked by subtle idiosyncrasies and humble humor. In recent years, Chingyū Zuikō has attracted attention for his singularly eccentric approach to Zen figure painting. Although Hakuin's artistic disciples are usually understood to be fellow Zen monks, it is now recognized that he exerted a considerable influence upon professionally trained painters working in 18th-century Kyoto as well. The most famous among them is Ike no Taiga (1723–1776), who is known to have met Hakuin and co-authored works with the Zen master. However, Hakuin's approach to painting may also have had a significant influence on other artists working in Kyoto and who painted Zen themes, such as Soga Shōhaku (1730–1781), Itō Jakuchū (1716–1800), and Maruyama Ōkyo (1733–1795). Although fully trained in polychrome painting and virtuosic ink painting, these painters occasionally adopted the powerfully simple, gestural approach of Hakuin to generate works of similar appeal.

32

Reigen Etō (1721–1785), *Mount Fuji*, 18th century

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Gitter-Yelen Collection, museum purchase funded by the Brown Foundation Accessions Endowment Fund, 2021.214

“Number one, Fuji; number two, a hawk; number three, eggplants.”

Reigen Etō was one of Hakuin's most important disciples, eventually becoming the head abbot of Tenryū-ji, a Rinzai Zen temple in Kyoto, where he spread his master's teachings within the formal Zen Buddhist establishment. Hakuin's influence can clearly be seen in this spare yet striking work, which depicts the three components of an auspicious *hatsuyume*, the first dream of the New Year. The playful inscription reproduces the recitation taught to children to memorize the auspicious elements in the correct order to foretell a prosperous year.

33

Jiun Onkō (1718–1804), *Daruma from Behind*, 18th century

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“I don't know.”

This painting illustrates how the Zen patriarch's iconic form and utterance can be made manifest in only a few confident brushstrokes. There is perhaps a hint of irony in Jiun's invocation of Daruma's words about accruing merit and good karma through acts of devotion, considering this painting is in some ways just such an act, making this painting the embodiment of Zen's philosophy of nonduality, both virtuous and pointless at the same time.

Yamaoka Tesshū (1836–1888), *Talismanic Dragon*, 19th century

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“The dragon feasts on the sun and the water of the four seas! – Brushed by Tesshū Kōhō”
An accomplished swordsman and prolific calligrapher, Yamaoka Tesshū was also an adviser to the Meiji Emperor. This work, signed with one of his stylized art names, is characteristic of his dynamic and energetic calligraphies, which number more than a million identified paintings. The description of the dragon’s power is reinforced by the movements of Tesshū’s brush, which swirl and twist like the tail of the auspicious flying beast.

Shunsō Joshu (1750–1839), *Daitō Kokushi*, late 18th or early 19th century

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“Feasting on air and lodging on water, no one has recorded the twenty years he lived under the Fifth Avenue Bridge.” A pupil of Reigen and Suiō, Shunsō Joshu is of Hakuin’s direct lineage. The master’s influence can be seen in this portrait of the monk Daitō (Shūhō Myōchō [1283–1337]), particularly in the monk’s wry expression. Daitō, founder of the temple Daito-kuji, lived beneath a bridge in Kyoto for two decades before an aide to the Emperor lured him out by offering him a melon, which the monk holds in this portrait. The phrase “no one has recorded” is a reference to a famous poem by the monk Ikkyū (1394–1481) that states that if “no one has recorded” then “everyone has forgotten.”

Tōrei Enji (1721–1792), *Ensō*, 18th century

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“In heaven and earth, I alone am the Honored One. – Tōrei”
Tōrei Enji was one of Hakuin’s most important disciples, and, as Hakuin’s successor, he systematized many of his master’s reforms to the Rinzai sect of Zen. He was also a prolific painter and calligrapher and made numerous versions of the *ensō*, a circular form typically made with a single brushstroke. Simultaneously full and empty, it is an important Zen symbol of nonduality and wholeness. Tōrei’s inscription quotes the Buddha, who is supposed to have made the declaration immediately following his birth. By invoking this phrase, Tōrei suggests that we all contain the Buddha nature and, like the *ensō*, are whole within ourselves.

Chingyū Zuikō (1743–1822), *Fuke*, 1818

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“Come in brightness, and I will smash that brightness! Come in darkness, and I will smash that darkness! – Brushed by the 76-year-old fellow, Lazy Ox.”

Fuke (Puhua in Chinese) is a legendary figure who lived in 9th-century China. According to legend, the itinerant man wandered through villages, ringing his bell and screaming the quotation that Chingyū cites in this inscription. The phrase, which is often found on paintings of Zen staffs, famously concludes with: “Come with nothing, and I will smash that too!” In this painting, Chingyū places Fuke atop clouds, signifying his ascent into heaven, a reference to another episode from the end of Fuke’s life, in which he had himself nailed inside a coffin to be buried, but his body miraculously vanished before he could be interred.

Reigen Etō (1721–1785), artist, Eryu Ishin (1720–1759), calligrapher

Daruma on a Reed, 18th century, Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“Fate brought Daruma across the river. Where is he? Among the thorns. — Respectfully inscribed by Old Cloud.”
Both Reigen and Ishin were students of Hakuin. Though Ishin made few paintings, Reigen made many works that reflect his master’s style, as seen here in Daruma’s expressive face and the dramatic brushstrokes of his robe. Daruma was said to have crossed the Yangtze River on a single reed, and Ishin’s inscription compares Daruma’s river crossing to the master’s act of introducing Zen to the world by declaring that he is now “among the thorns,” a poetic metaphor for the corruption and material concerns of the world, which, like thorns, can ensnare the undisciplined mind.

Suiō Genro (1716–1789), artist, Gessen Zenne (1701–1781), calligrapher

The Zen Monk Bukan, 18th century, Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“All the virtue is not in the future. The old mirror and the stable platform are shattered. ‘Whenever! Whenever!’ He makes Amida Buddha blossom all at once in this world. — Respectfully inscribed by Zenne. Painted by the old monk Futo.”

The Chinese monk Bukan (Fenggan in Chinese) is typically shown with his pet tiger, here suggested by the paw prints at lower left. Bukan is the embodiment of an eccentric Zen monk whose wisdom is often expressed in strange or confounding acts. Suiō treats the monk as a humble figure with a massive robe and walking stick. Gessen’s inscription suggests that one need not wait for the afterlife to see the virtues and beauty of the Pure Land, which is inhabited by Amida Buddha. Instead, Gessen quotes Bukan, who shouts that it can be experienced “Whenever! Whenever!”

Suiō Genro (1716–1789), *The Staff of the 6th Patriarch*, 18th century

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“When you come to the Naraya in Otsu, you also learn to pound a mortar.”

The “staff” in this painting is actually a *karausū*, a mortar used to pound rice. In Zen painting, it represents the Sixth Patriarch of Zen, the Chinese monk Eno (in Chinese, Huineng [638–713]), who pounded rice for a monastery. Otsu, near Kyoto, was a pilgrimage site for monks, and the Naraya was one of the city’s renowned brothels, adding a titillating, suggestive meaning to the phrase “pound a mortar.” Nevertheless, the meaning of this work is profound in the context of Zen, for enlightenment can be achieved suddenly and surprisingly, as a result of ordinary acts like rice pounding or even sex.

Chingyū Zuikō (1743–1822), Gōchō Kankai (1749–1835), *Kanzan and Jittoku*, 1818

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“One character that cannot be seen even with two eyes and one roar that is not yet a hundred claps of thunder. Inscribed in the 10,000 Pine Zen Cave in Ōshū by the 70-year-old Gōchō. Spring 1818, painted upon request by the 76-year-old Lazy Ox.”

Chingyū Zuikō painted this work as a commission during a visit from Gōchō, who added his own calligraphy to the painting. Chingyū painted numerous versions of *Kanzan and Jittoku*, though this example is distinct, showing the beloved pair reading from an apparently blank scroll. As Gōchō’s inscription suggests, *Kanzan and Jittoku* have a deep understanding of Zen that transcends the written word; it also points out that, in Zen, a thunderous flash of enlightenment can occur at any moment, building from a single roar to a deafening sound. The notion of sudden enlightenment is a hallmark of Zen teaching, which eschews the rigid programs of other forms of Buddhism.

Suiō Genro (1716–1789), *Kanzan and Jittoku*, 18th century

Pair of hanging scrolls; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

Kanzan and Jittoku were popular subjects in Japan since at least the 14th century. Their identities are usually discernible through their accoutrements: Kanzan, an eccentric Zen poet, is typically shown reading from a handscroll, while Jittoku is most often depicted holding a broom, a reference to his role as a kitchen cleaner at the Zen temple. In this version, however, Suiō Genro shows Jittoku standing with his hands behind his back, removing any semblance of Jittoku's work and obligations, as if to further emphasize the eccentric nature of the pair who lived fully apart from society. Indeed, Kanzan is shown reciting verses from a blank scroll, indicating the power of Zen thought and the monk's voice to transcend the written word and physical page.

Yamaoka Tesshū (1836–1888), *Iroha*, 19th century

Pair of six-panel folding screens; ink on paper with silver leaf

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“Although its scent still lingers on the form of a flower has scattered away. For whom will the glory of this world remain unchanged? Arriving today at the yonder side of the deep mountains of evanescent existence We shall never allow ourselves to drift away intoxicated, in the world of shallow dreams.”

The *Iroha* is a pangrammatic poem, using every syllable of the Japanese alphabet exactly once. In existence since the Heian period (794–1185), the poem is thought to be an adaptation of a Buddhist sutra, though it is now commonly used in Japan for sequential ordering, akin to alphabetical order in English. This imposing pair of screens allowed Tesshū to show his dynamism and calligraphic mastery while also engaging in a long-standing Buddhist tradition.

Zen Painting in the 20th Century

The beginning of Japan's modern era is often traced back to the Meiji Restoration (1868), when the feudal regime of the Tokugawa shogunate was overthrown and a group of oligarchs led the nation's rapid industrialization. The Zen establishment was greatly affected by these changes, and reform from within was led by monks such as Nakahara Nantenbō (1839–1925). Nantenbō was a fiery figure who used painting and calligraphy to convey teachings in the tradition of Hakuin and earlier Zenga masters. However, his works were often larger and even more gestural than those of his predecessors, possibly reflecting the changing circumstances and audiences for religious proselytization and art making in modern Japan.

One of the most interesting and influential monk-painters represented in the Gitter-Yelen Collection is Shaku Sōen (1860–1919), a key figure in the spread of Zen teachings internationally during the modern era. Among other things, Sōen is known for delivering the first lecture on Zen in English, at Chicago's World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. The author Paul Carus, upon hearing Sōen lecture, solicited the master's help in translating key texts of Zen Buddhism into English for the first time. In Japan, Sōen

became the abbot of the venerable Zen monastery Engakuji in Kamakura and developed a large following of elites. His student Daisetz Teitaro (D. T.) Suzuki would become a famous popularizer of Zen in English, and his lectures at Columbia University in the 1950s influenced a generation of artists and thinkers. His popular classes attracted students such as John Cage, Philip Guston, Ad Reinhardt, Betty Parsons, and others. Suzuki's liberal interpretation of Zen was foundational for many of the aesthetic and philosophical concerns of 20th- and 21st-century art, especially Abstract Expressionism and Conceptual art.

44

Nakahara Nantenbō (1839–1925), *Staff*, late 19th or early 20th century

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

Though there is great variation in the lively inscriptions on Nantenbō's numerous staff paintings, nearly all of them show an identical staff, which faithfully replicates the master's actual staff. Carved from the wood of the nandina shrub (*nanten*), these staffs were literally the monk's namesake. In addition, as can be seen here, two votive plaques, inscribed by the prolific 19th century calligrapher Yamaoka Tesshū, dangle from the staff. Like Hakuin, who championed this genre of Zen painting, Nantenbō often made these works to commemorate the achievement of a student, to honor an individual, or even by request, as the inscription on the painting's right margin implies.

45

Nakahara Nantenbō (1839–1925), *Daruma*, late 19th or early 20th century

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

Nantenbō was renowned for his performances of paintings and the seemingly careless speed with which he painted, especially his calligraphies. In fact, the master once boasted he could paint as many as sixty in a single day, owing to his creatively connected script and economic brushwork, which fills this work. Further evidence of his dynamic painting style can be found in the daring splashed line that makes up Daruma's robe; cleverly, this splattered ink forms the shape of a Buddhist ritual fly whisk, famously associated with the Zen monk Ikkyū, while the Indian patriarch's canonical earring has been shaped into an *ensō*, typically associated with Hakuin. As such, Nantenbō has inscribed, quite literally, Daruma's legacy onto the beloved monk himself.

46

Nakahara Nantenbō (1839–1925), *Half-Body Daruma*, 1917

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

"I don't know!"

With this creative composition, Nantenbō introduces several elements that elevate the painting beyond a standard portrait of Daruma. The dynamic brushstroke that makes up the patriarch's shrugging shoulder is connected with sweeping, gestural forms that suggest Daruma is holding a Zen staff, not unlike Nantenbō's famous accessory; however, the staff is also a calligraphic inscription, which gently parodies the wise Daruma. As an additional flourish, Nantenbō has rendered Daruma's earring in a single, dark, circular stroke, which also evokes the iconic Zen circle, the *ensō*.

Nakahara Nantenbō (1839–1925), *Monk Procession*, 1924

Pair of hanging scrolls; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“In the autumn, in their round hats, they return from the villages with the alms-baskets. All the wandering monks throughout the world – their begging bowls resound like thunder.”

Nantenbō painted several versions of this subject, a line of monks heading out to cadge for alms or beg for food. This procession is representative of the monks’ collective ability to transform their village and even the entire world through their acts of devotion and the spread of the dharma. Nantenbō’s treatment of the monks, individually indistinguishable and merging into a singular line of round hats and dark robes, conveys the concept of Zen lineage and the transmission of teachings between generations of teachers and students – something important to Nantenbō, who shared Hakuin’s lineage and his passion for reforming Rinzai Zen.

Nakahara Nantenbō (1839–1925), *Snow Daruma*, 1921

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“A Daruma is made of piled-up snow – as the days pass, he disappears, but where did he go?”

This charming and playful Daruma is actually an image of subtle profundity, incorporating a vernacular image into the Zen pantheon: the snowman, which in Japanese is literally called a *yuki-daruma* or “snow Daruma.” By painting a snowman instead of the traditional portrait of the Zen patriarch, Nantenbō expounds upon the concepts of transience and death using a familiar form. The inscription on this work quotes the Zen calligrapher Yamaoka Tesshū and encourages us to accept the rhythms of life, for, like snow melting in the warm sun, they are both completely natural and entirely outside our control.

Deiryū Kutsu (1895–1954), *Portrait of Nantenbō*, 20th century

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“Nantenbō has used up heaven and earth! Respectfully brushed by the Monk Deiryū.”

Deiryū was Nantenbō’s principal disciple, and his respect for his teacher is made clear by the numerous portraits he painted of Nantenbō, which, like this example, emulate images of Daruma in their composition. The variation between the abbreviated gestural strokes composing his body and the softer, more detailed ink washes used in his face is also characteristic of Hakuin’s paintings of the patriarch. Deiryū’s inscription is both a comical lament and a declaration of reverence, expressing the challenge and honor of inheriting the mantle of his renowned master.

Shaku Sōen (1859–1919), *Daruma*, early 20th century

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

The Gitter-Yelen Collection: Kurt A. Gitter, M.D. and Alice Yelen Gitter

“The gods have no way to offer flowers; the demons have no way to peek inside. – The old auspicious philosopher Reigaku”
The abbot Shaku Sōen first introduced Zen Buddhism to the West in 1893. Here, the bulging eye of his fearsome Daruma resembles an *ensō*. The inscription describes a Zen patriarch who has transcended the duality of good and evil, so much so that neither powerful gods nor evil demons can affect him. The word for “philosopher,” *koji*, typically refers to a lay practitioner of Buddhism, hinting that perhaps Sōen longed for a simpler life, one without his responsibilities as the abbot of an important temple. The word choice may also suggest that wisdom can be achieved irrespective of formal status and hierarchy.

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