“EVERYONE’S LOOKING for something.” Some of us have found it, or part of it, in Zen Art, though the types of things we look at and the sorts of Zen we draw from them may differ dramatically from one person to another. Indeed, the easily joined words “Zen” and “Art” exist in tense conjunction (and bring to mind other intersections: “East” and “West,” practitioner and scholar, past and present). This essay explores some of the tensions, or perhaps currents and cross-currents, inherent in modern looking at and thinking about Zen Art, which I italicize, as if it were a term of foreign origin, to render it less familiar and perhaps open to reconsideration. Shared reflection and reappraisal are, in fact, what I have in mind here, for we have been in dialogue about Zen and Art for some time now and I suspect we will be for years to come.

For religious masters and practitioners in Chinese Chan, Korean Seon, and Japanese Zen religious lineages, paintings and calligraphies by monks and nuns are saintly relics, cherished in religious practice as embodiments of the awakened teachings of the Buddha, of patriarchs of old, and of living teachers. Viewers not inclined to practice Zen meditation or to seek “enlightenment” may find that the same types of scrolls focus spiritual attention, offering a way to be religious without official religion. For practitioners of Chanoyu (one Japanese tradition of tea-based culture), Zen scrolls are indispensable in the tea room: they evoke Buddhist philosophical concepts and religious presences that resonate with tea culture’s tradition of teachers, aesthetic precepts, and social aspects. Many of us are drawn to intimations of “Buddha mind” in Zen Art, and made meditative by the “Zen aesthetic.” Others of us simply like the monochromatic minimalism of an ensō (“circle”) in ink (complete but incomplete against white paper), enjoy the kinesthetic traces of the spontaneous painterly or calligraphic body, and smile at the pictorial antics of “Zen Tramps” and “Zen Zanies.”

Maybe Alan Watts (1915–1973) had it right when he described Zen Art as the “art of artlessness, the art of controlled accident.” Zen and Zen Art certainly inspired artists of the Western avant-garde during the 1950s and 1960s, whose affinity for Zen Buddhist philosophical concepts and perceived formal characteristics, often exclusive of the practice of zazen (“seated meditation”) or of a single mode of spirituality, arose in large measure in response to the writings and lectures of D.T. Suzuki (1870–1966), Hisamatsu Shin’ichi (1889–1980), and other Japanese scholars and philosophers. For John Cage (1912–1992) and other Western and transnational artists, Zen Art, as process and portal to unmediated creativity, opened their eyes to unfamiliar modes of representation seemingly free of rules and schools and suggested the expressive possibilities of inward subjectivity, spontaneous gesture, silence, imperfection, empty fields, and the unity of subject/object, art/life. Since the 1950s Zen Mind has for some been counter-mind and Zen culture counterculture.

Each time we purchase a miniature rake-it-yourself rock garden, simulating the famous dry landscape garden at the temple Ryōanji, or a facsimile of a famous Zen painting, we participate in the postmodern cult of the simulacrum. Followers of postmodernism’s high priests may see Zen Art, often mediated by the concept of ma (space-time interval), as a visual...
verification of the postmodernist critique of representation, or a Heideggerian sense of nothingness, or Japan being, as Roland Barthes (1915–1980) saw it, full of empty signs. For some, Zen Art may be a visual expression of engaged Buddhism, a bridge to one’s family heritage, or a shorthand for distant “Japan” or “Asia.” Perhaps it preserves a sense of tradition that softens the edges of scientific rationalism, capitalist consumerism, and hyper-connectivity. Zen Art is also an established, accessible, and relatively affordable field of art collecting. And academics of varied ilk apply scholarly skill sets to mine the visual fields of paintings, calligraphies, and sculpture produced within the Zen tradition in order to reveal biographic traces, expressive form, and layers of poetry and performance, doctrine and discourse.

These and other responses converge around Zen Art as if they were, to invert a metaphor, ripples returning to a stone cast into a clear pool. But perhaps the pool is less limpid than we imagine, for Zen Art inspires not only enchantment, but also critical comment, a gnashing of teeth, even flat disinterest. This divergence of opinion is hardly one of our so-called “culture wars,” and Zen Art ripples come into view only occasionally, in a review, an article, a book, a conference, an exhibition. Still, some believe they “know it when they see it,” others are not sure and wish to know more, and yet others doubt that there is such a thing as Zen Art.

Zen Art, frankly, can put an art historian in a bind. According to my colleagues in religious studies, we art historians have for decades missed the point in our emphasis on aesthetic quality, artist identity, and the development of pictorial style and our simultaneous tendency to ignore ritual and the miraculous powers often attributed to images within Chan/Zen monastic contexts. Our bread-and-butter practices as interpreters and curators of the visual are also called into question by the Zen establishment. The abbot of a renowned Zen temple, for instance, politely refuses requests to reproduce or exhibit paintings in his collection: they are not art objects, nor are they for art-historical analysis, publication, or public display. At a lecture, a lay Zen practitioner barks at my historical analysis because I lack long experience with authentic zazen and dokusan (private meetings with a teacher). Even students in a college-level survey of the arts of Japan may gripe because my lecture on Zen Art doesn’t provide enough Zen or enough Art, or, because, in the spirit of “critical thinking,” I eschew a packaged answer suitable for pre-exam memorization. As a historian, meanwhile, I wince at all too frequent statements about Zen Art that traffic in free-floating generality and obscure the complex and changing lives of Buddhist communities and the specific contexts of visual representation past and present. Hence, a flash of unease as I write these words.

We may not all see Zen Art eye-to-eye or think about it mind-to-mind, therefore, but I would offer that such differences are Zen Art’s fascination rather than its bane precisely because they adumbrate questions that, if explored thoughtfully, may help us walk through the shadowy landscapes we call “religion,” “art,” and “culture.” Is Zen Art sui generis and inherent to the entire culture of Japan and “Japanese mind,” or is it a product of multifaceted exchanges and even competi-

Zen and Zen Art have been objects of enthrallment, skepticism, and debate in the West throughout the twentieth century and especially during the postwar period. Once Zen had taken root outside Japan, its followers emerged as an uneven bunch. Alan Watts’s famous essay “Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen” (1958) captures one moment of slippage (and recovery). Watts suggests that the allure of Zen arises from “the modern” spirit in the West, the work of D.T. Suzuki, the war with Japan, the itchy fascination of “Zen-stories,” and the attraction of a non-conceptual, experiential philosophy in the climate of scientific relativism. But he is skeptical of the “Bohemian affectations,” “protestant lawlessness,” and stridency of the Jack Kerouac-associated “Beat Zen” crowd and, equally, the hunger for orthodoxy and institutional affiliation on the part of those “Square Zen” Westerners who believe that Zen is to be found only in temples in Japan. For Watts, both Beat and Square Zen are just so much fuss; both miss what he believes is the real Zen, which is devoid of affectation, of the need to justify unconventional behavior, and of “anything special.” Nevertheless, in the spirit of “non-grasping,” he offers that, “fuss is okay too” and, waxing libertarian, concludes that, after all, “it’s a free country.” Another skeptic of the “self-styled Western Zennist” was Ruth Fuller Sasaki (1892–1967), who in 1958 became abess of the subtemple Ryōzen’an within the Zen monastery Daitokuji, where she hosted numerous foreign students but, as her comment below suggests, took issue with the Zen Boom in the West.

Today, due in large part to D.T. Suzuki’s voluminous writings in English on Zen . . . Zen is known about in almost every part of the civilized world. Furthermore, Dr. Suzuki’s numerous followers have written on Zen from almost every possible angle. Zen has always been credited with influencing various forms of Far Eastern art and culture, and quite correctly. But now the discovery has been made that it was existing all along in English literature. Ultra-modern painting, music, dance, and poetry are acclaimed as expressions of Zen. Z is invoked to substantiate the validity of the latest theories in psychology, psychotherapy,
philosophy, semantics, mysticism, free-thinking, and what-have-you. It is the magic password at smart cocktail parties and bohemian get-togethers alike. . . . How far away all this is from the recluse Gautama sitting in intense meditation under the Bodhi-tree trying to find a solution to the problem of human suffering!

Sasaki’s opinion of Suzuki aside, her point is that Occidentals simply need to sit zazen and not confuse the “by-products” that arise from Zen with “Zen itself.”11 In a sense, her words were a sermon on religious authenticity and a critique of the “Zen flânerie.”

The establishment and growth of Japanese Zen in the West has had its share of tussles between “purity” and “assimilation,” yielding various interpretations of Japanese monastic ritual and teaching and, occasionally, scandal.12 In certain respects these tensions and exchanges were embodied in D.T. Suzuki, often viewed as the “founding father” of Zen in the West: a lay Buddhist spiritual insider who experienced satori in 1895 at the Kamakura monastery Engakuji but remained an outsider to the monastic institution per se; an affable monkish figure who was also a modern statesman in a suit; a scholar who published dozens of books and essays but who insisted on the nonverbal, nonrational nature of spiritual Truth; and a Japanese nationalist schooled in Western thought.13 Perhaps because of the pervasiveness of his writings and the mythic “Suzuki scene” that arose from his lectures at Columbia University in the 1950s—attended by, among others, Thomas Merton (1915–1968), Eric Fromm (1900–1980), Philip Guston (1913–1980), John Cage, and Arthur Danto—we tend to forget that he was not without critics even in his own time and was by no means the single fount of Zen to the West.14 Contemporary historians of Chinese literature, religion, and Chan/Zen, such as Arthur Waley (1889–1966), Hu Shi (1891–1962), and Heinrich Dumoulin (1905–1995), challenged the ahistoricity, scholarly limitations, and inconsistencies of Suzuki’s explanations of Zen and Zen Art. Arthur Koestler (1905–1983), who called Suzuki the “sensei of Zen senseis” and relied upon his writings, nevertheless seems to have found his version of Zen a bit absurd. The Japanese philosopher and cultural critic Umehara Takeshi, meanwhile, confronted Suzuki’s Zennification of Japanese culture and the militarism implicit in his espousal of Zen and Bushido.15

English-language reviews from 1959 and 1960 of Suzuki’s adored and oft-cited Zen and Japanese Culture, which has had almost incalculable impact upon postwar perceptions of Zen and the arts, suggest as well friction between different authenticities. Although Nancy Wilson Ross (1913–1986) gushed in the New York Times about the “delightful book” and its description of the “inexpressibly soothing . . . old Japanese virtues of wabi and sabi,” critics within the scholarly establishment were dubious of its history and art history.16 One reviewer noted that Zen and Japanese Culture had been written for the lay public and might therefore be excused for its lack of a “consistently historical scheme” and “technical presentation of Zen,” while another noted that “Occasionally [Suzuki] descends to pure nonsense or to unbearable repetition.”17 One critic praised the book’s copious plates, but questioned Suzuki’s inattention to works of art themselves:

. . . this book seems at first sight to promise enlightenment on the relation of Zen to Japanese painting. In this the reader will be disappointed. Dr. Suzuki dwells at length on Zen and swordsmanship, Zen and the samurai, Zen and the art of tea, but his remarks on painting are meager in the extreme. The illustrations are left to speak for themselves.18

The eminent art historian Alexander Soper (1904–1993), surprised as well by Suzuki’s emphasis on the samurai, was similarly unconvinced:

The book is generously illustrated, chiefly with reproductions of Chinese and Japanese paintings and calligraphy. By no means all of these have any connection with Zen: some provide pictorial footnotes to Japanese history . . . and others summarize the interests of rival sects of Japanese Buddhism. At the same time one finds no chapter with a title like “Zen and the Art of Painting”; and the one entitled “Love of Nature” makes no use at all of the whole sumi-e tradition.19

Perhaps Suzuki and his followers viewed such comments as scholarly claptrap, reflecting their critics’ lack of Zen spiritual experience, but Suzuki’s descriptions of individual works of art, even as they contributed to the Zen Art canon, were cursory at best. For Suzuki, sumi-e, literally “ink pictures,”20 didn’t require the searching gaze and explicit prodding preferred by art historians because they are self-evident embodiments of the mystical Zen experience of nothingness, which is manifested visually in suggestion, irregularity, and unexpectedness; within the confines of a piece of paper, we find infinity and absolute being. As Suzuki slyly put it, they “may not be art” but instead “perfect in [their] artlessness,” because the sumi-e painter engages in the spontaneous transfer of artistic inspiration without the intrusion of logic or deliberation; artist and brush fuse together such that the “brush by itself executes the work quite outside the artist, who just lets it move on without his conscious efforts.” This implies that the sumi-e painter works in an artistic void, exclusive of surrounding pictorial traditions and taste. Sumi-e rejects mimesis and is indifferent to form, for resemblance is subordinate to each brush stroke, within which moves the spirit of the sumi-e painter. The sumi-e artist paints, therefore, with the same mushin (“no mind”) and munen (“no thought”) of the awakened Zen master, and strives to give “form to what has no form.”21 Mushin, in fact, “is where all arts merge into Zen,” while the Zen-man transforms his own life into a work of creation.22 Flavorsome and convincing as such exegesis may have been to some—and indeed the brush moving by itself seems to have become a trope of twentieth-century notions of mystical Asian culture—Soper and other art historians and critics found it wanting, though not so much with regard to the importance of Zen or to Suzuki’s claim that Japan’s artistic practices embody and express the non-duality and formlessness of Zen Mind. Rather, Suzuki didn’t do the hard looking and archival digging needed
to sense the visual and historical warp and weft of specific paintings, styles, and painters. Instead of letting the paintings recount their own stories, Suzuki gave them all the same tale to tell.

Suzuki was not an art historian, and we should not insist upon his allegiance to this discipline’s peculiar practices. Art historians, for their part, have been hard at work crafting differing explanations of Zen Art. Scholars active in North America and Europe during the second half of the twentieth century, such as Shimada Shūjirō (1907–1994), Wen Fong, Yoshiaki Shimizu, and Helmut Brinker, and formidable scholars in East Asia, including Ebine Toshio and Shimos Arata, focused upon the historical study of medieval Chan and Zen painting and calligraphy through exceedingly close visual, textual, and historical analysis of particular heirloom works. Their groundbreaking publications marshalled the energies of postwar art history, with its shift from traditional connoisseurship to a more “scientific” formalist method, and drew deep from the equally vibrant disciplines of Sino-Japanese and Buddhist studies. What has resulted from their efforts is a strikingly new platform for the study of Zen Art, distinguished by deliberately shaped understandings of pictorial styles such as “apparition painting” (C. wanglinghu, J. mōryōga), and of the careers of specific artists such as Muqi Fanchang (act. mid-13th c.), Mokuan Reien (d. 1345), Kao (act. first half of 14th c.), and Sesshū Tōyō (1420–1506) as they developed within monastic contexts and in relation to elite patronage of the arts. More recent scholarship builds upon this highly disciplined foundation, while sometimes bending the resulting structure in surprising directions or even knocking out some of its footings.

It almost goes without saying that the postwar art-historical community and more recent scholars, who usually prefer the term suibokuga (literally, “water-ink painting”) to suini-e, have begged to differ with the still influential psychological, mystical readings of visual form that characterize Suzuki’s Zen Art. They have been equally skeptical of the concepts and schematic terminology deployed by Suzuki’s colleague Hisamatsu Shin’ichi. Hisamatsu, a follower of the renowned philosopher Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945), was the founder of the lay Zen society F.A.S. (Formless self awakening itself/All humankind/Suprahistorical history) and an avid campaigner for Zen as a transcultural truth of “Oriental nothingness” (Tōyōteki mu) that was simultaneously unique to the Japanese. His lavishly illustrated and widely-read Zen and the Fine Arts, first published in Japanese in 1957 and appearing in English in 1971, argued that all works of Zen Art, whether painting, calligraphy, Chanoyu ceramics, Nō drama, or landscape garden design, are creative expressions that emerged from the “unitarian cultural complex” of Zen and are distinguished by Seven Characteristics: Asymmetry, Simplicity, Austere Sublimity or Lofty Dryness, Naturalness, Subtle Profundity or Profound Subtlety, Freedom from Attachment, and Tranquility. This is, to put it one way, Hisamatsu’s “Magnificent Seven” of Zen Art: idealistic, bold, and disciplined, they ride in to save the day.

Hisamatsu was eager to clarify for his Western audiences that all seven of his psycho-aesthetic principles are Zen because of their fusion with the Self-Awareness of the Formless Self. They are, moreover, always interrelated: one of the seven “standing alone, unrelated to the other six characteristics…remains unsuitable as a description of Zen culture.” It is this aesthetic-spiritual symbiosis, in fact, that differentiates Zen Japan from the West. Thus, the architect Bruno Taut’s (1880–1938) “beauty of simplicity” finds embodiment in Japan’s renowned Ise Shrine but is entirely different from the simplicity evident in Japanese Zen-influenced teahouse architecture, where all the other six characteristics are also present. Modern architecture in the West, to the extent that it lacks this interfused aesthetic structure, cannot be “Zen” architecture. Never the twain shall meet. And although Hisamatsu explained that the experience behind the Zen aesthetic is fundamentally timeless and universal, he pointedly declared that to really grasp the characteristics of Zen Art you must await Zen-religious-realization.” The Zen master or awakened lay practitioner, therefore, retains authority over experience and interpretation; if you haven’t attained Hisamatsu’s Zen Mind, you won’t be able to see Zen Art.

Many postwar historians of religion and some art historians have discounted Hisamatsu’s Seven Characteristics as unproductive, because they have little historical traction for medieval Chan and Zen. Moreover, scholars of East Asian painting traditions have been concerned first and foremost with the study of paintings as visual objects grounded in historical circumstances, and less interested in philosophical tropes that organize and explain paintings and other works of art irrespective of period and pedigree. In the art-historical gaze, paintings, their inscriptive content, and their contexts of production reveal their “Zenness” in rather different ways. Instead of discussing Zen Mind, postwar painting scholars raised their voices in discourse about painters and calligraphers related to Chan or Zen communities: how they worked within established Buddhist visual traditions, appropriated non-Buddhist pictorial modes such as the “untrimmed style” (C. yipín), formulated distinctive Chan/Zen pictorial styles (such as mōryōga) and themes (such as Bodhidharma Crossing the Yangzi or Chan encounter narratives), or dispersed Chan/Zen styles outside monastic settings and practice.

Method matters, therefore, and disciplinary and interpretive deviation, if not friction, characterize postwar Zen and Zen Art in the academy. Indeed, in the wake of Edward Said’s (1935–2003) Orientalism, Michel Foucault’s (1926–1984) writings, and the postmodernist critique of the author and grand narrative, strikingly different counterarguments about Chan/Zen and the arts washed ashore. Scholars of religious studies in particular have offered a sophisticated reassessment of the Chan/Zen tradition and its origins, practices, beliefs, and institutions, rendering vulnerable what seemed monolithic and customary. In their view, popular notions of Zen enlightenment, and mystical “mind-to-mind” transmission from master to disciple, commonly held notions of kōan as non-rational and psychotherapeutic riddles, and an iconoclastic emphasis on Emptiness are in large measure a product of twentieth-century Buddhist modernism.
that the Chan/Zen textual record and present-day practice preserve in large measure from centuries past: exacting regulations, pervasive ritual, copious ornament and offerings, broadly Buddhist doctrine and devotional practices, and a profusion of iconic forms. It is Zen that disparages the magic and veneration of numinous objects that was current during the medieval and early modern period, and is defined instead by particularly modern notions of experience and a psychological state of “enlightenment,” absent history, culture, rational discourse, and ideology. It shies away from the rhetorical and ritualized “performances” through which Chan and Zen masters have long manifested awakening and unfettered freedom (many in fact used tried and true scripts and props). This particular sort of modern Zen finds the apogee of its heritage in medieval Japan, and asserts (incorrectly) that in China Chan simply died out after the Southern Song period and in Korea Seon never found significant purchase. Study of the precise dialogue between art and monastic life and what monks and nuns wrote about works of art (often focused upon patriarchal lineage, veneration of ancestors, and broadly Buddhist ritual) is replaced with anecdotes about the antinomian behavior of Zen patriarchs and the “psychosphere,” as Suzuki put it, of artistic practice within non-duality.

Disseminated actively from the 1930s onward by Japanese lay Buddhist figures such as Nishida, Suzuki, Hisamatsu, and Abe Masao (1915–2006), this sort of Zen was formulated not solely out of the Chan/Zen past, but also in response to Western philosophy, psychology, theology, and scientific rationalism. As Thomas Merton put it in his eulogy for Suzuki, the latter was so effective in the West because “he had a rather remarkable capacity to transpose Zen into the authentic totalities of western mystical traditions that were most akin to it.” In other words, don’t be surprised if Suzuki-style Zen has in it traces of the medieval Christian mystic Meister Eckhart (1260–1328), the American psychologist and philosopher William James (1842–1910), and the American philosopher and educator John Dewey (1859–1952). This Zen is also Janus-faced: universal and therefore somehow available to East or West, it is simultaneously nationalistic and implicated in assertions of Japanese uniqueness and in Japanese militarism. Japanese culture writ large and across time, meanwhile, was measured according to “Zen characteristics” of modern conception and was colonized internally by Suzuki, Hisamatsu, and others in order to assert the superiority of Japanese Zen and culture over Asia and, indeed, the West: Zen Art, in turn, became part of “Zen nationalism.”

The universalist allure of this sort of Zen in the West during the twentieth century can be easily imagined, for it seemed able to assuage certain anxieties about modernity and to fulfill desires for spiritual experience without the encumbrances of “traditional” religion in the post-Enlightenment and postindustrial age.

But Zen and Zen Art, some now argue, are about power; no one who speaks, writes, paints, sculpts, inscribes, or views is neutral, and acts of expression, explanation, or interpretation, be they ancient or modern, are inherently partisan. The consternation that can be felt along certain hallways of the academy, meanwhile, is due not strictly to the ideas of Suzuki and Hisamatsu but rather to their reception:

I am dismayed by those Western scholars who uncritically accept these Japanese missionaries as living representatives of an unbroken tradition, and who refuse to acknowledge the ideological and rhetorical dimensions of the Zen of men like Suzuki. It is time to demand the same critical and dispassionate rigor in the study of Zen that we casually demand in the study of other religious traditions.

These are clearly fighting words, and they are applicable to the study of Zen Art. Whereas some argue that the interpretation of Zen Art, because of its metaphysical nature, should be left to awakened masters or knowledgeable practitioners, others (including myself) counter that the tradition’s self-portrait is only one of many possible likenesses.

One thing appears almost certain. Most writers find that to explain Zen Art they must first explain Zen. This has certain pragmatic value, of course, but countless books and articles condense “all you need to know” into a paragraph or two or a scrawny chapter. D.T. Suzuki’s Zen and Japanese Culture begins with a shockingly brief exegesis, “What is Zen?,” which comments impressionistically on Chan’s emergence from Chinese culture as a transformation of Indian Buddhism and on its departures from the prayers and texts of typical Buddhism; offers stories about Chan patriarchs and about peculiarities of “Zen verbalism” and “actional” behavior as integral within satori; explains the presence of Zen in daily experience as “being itself” and an “iness” free from conceptualization; and speaks of the attainment of a “structure of mentality which is made always ready to respond instantly.”

As illuminating as this précis (and many others like it) may be in certain respects, Suzuki collapses a colossal and complex institutional, doctrinal, philosophical, and social tradition into a touchstone that can turn art into Zen. And if Suzuki’s Zen is a particular sort of Zen, as many have noted, this explanatory strategy leads naturally to a particular sort of Zen Art. Put differently, when an author begins a book on Zen Art by indicating, in a prefatory chapter, the wish to “acquaint the reader with the rudiments of Zen, its characteristics and those of Zen art,” we find ourselves in a land of congenial generality whose inhabitants choose not to question the “gods.” For scholars as well as practitioners who believe that Zen should be more of an open question, susceptible to cultural and epistemological critique, an explanation of Zen Art that fails to treat Zen itself as unstable in meaning sets forth on rather wobbly legs.

As any exploration of the inscriptions found upon paintings produced within the Chan/Zen monastic milieu during the medieval and early modern eras quickly demonstrates, quotation from and allusion to canonical works of Buddhist scripture, Zen discourse and koan records, and Chinese literature was a central preoccupation and enjoyment. During the twentieth century, however, Zen Art acquired a different sort of
interactivity. Countless publications on Zen Art cite as their primary sources of information and interpretation modern authors such as Okakura Kakuzō (1862–1913), R.H. Blythe (1898–1964), Nishida, Suzuki, Watts, and Hisamatsu. In essence, texts such as Suzuki’s Zen and Japanese Culture, Yasuichi Awakawa’s (1902–1976) Zen Painting (1970), and Hisamatsu’s Zen and the Fine Arts, became a canon of "secondary scripture." This recent canon has in many instances overwritten itself across the copious and not-always univocal writings about the visual arts of Chan, Seon, and Zen communities, and has become irreducible truth for many subsequent writers. Indeed, if one looks at citations of textual authorities, and the recursive references to modern authors as primary voices, one discovers a series of "begats" in anglophone explanations of Zen Art. Okakura begat, among others, Ernest F. Fenollosa (1853–1908). Suzuki begat Eugen Herrigel (1885–1955), famous for his Zen in the Art of Archery; the Zennophile Christmas Humphreys (1901–1983); Watts; and the art historian Hugo Munsterberg (1916–1995). Watts, in turn, begat the art historian Langdon Warner (1881–1955), while Hisamatsu begat the postwar art critic Helen Westgeest, and so on to the present. Scholarship always has its lineages, but these prophets and their modern canon who speak so loudly for the past rankle some whose allegiances lie with the delicate negotiations inherent in close historical, textual, and art-historical study. To be fair, however, the art historians and Buddhologists themselves have their own patriarchal figures, hallowed modern scriptures, and family myths that may not make sense to outsiders.

In the modern and postmodern world, therefore, the act of explaining Zen and Zen Art reveals something of a divide between believers and atheists/agnostics, between the metaphysical tradition and the secular humanist tradition of history. Recent critique of the "Suzuki effect" and arguments regarding Zen modernism are likewise a meeting between Zen and critical theory and an effort to "discover the recent origins of 'age-old' Japanese traditions." Alongside Bushido, which even in 1905 was deemed by one prominent Japanologist as "fabricated out of whole cloth, chiefly for foreign consumption," Zen and Zen Art—especially as they are popularly understood—are wholly continuous with the ancient past and with Chan/Zen monastic communities only, one might say, in our wildest, or most cherished, dreams. While this need not compel anyone to discard beloved Zen scrolls or to suppress fondness for nonattachment, Nothingness, or the Zen aesthetic, it asks us to consider the following: far from being a free-floating, timeless, or inherent Truth, Zen and its expressions in Zen Art, like all religions and cultures, take shape within specific moments of realization, production, reception, and rhetoric.

If history is relating questions and ideas to particular places, things, and stories, one quickly discovers that there have been multiple sorts of Zen across time. And if Zen is full of historical diversity, then it is not surprising that there is a growing "counterhistory" of Zen Art. The postwar creation of the category of Japanese art known as Zenga—paintings of Daruma, Zen patriarchs, allegorical themes, and ensō produced by monks from the Edo period (1615–1868) onward—has become part of art history’s recent reconsideration of commonly held assumptions about the visual traditions of Japan. Art historians, directly questioning the Suzuki-Hisamatsu model of Zen Art, now examine the role of "traditional" icons in Zen monasteries, aside from paintings of the fierce Daruma and quirky sketches of eccentrics, and also particular ways of adorning and ritually activating and encountering images. Regarding ink paintings of the Muromachi period (1392–1573), there has been a sea change from fuzzy statements about the spirit of the sumi-e artist on the one hand, and from predominantly biographical and formal evaluations of pictorial hand and style on the other, toward more sophisticated examination of the philological content of, and aesthetic, philosophical, social, and soteriological practices behind, Zen Buddhist literary and painterly production. Ink monochrome is no longer perceived to be the sole medium of Zen Art, gender figures in our interpretation of Zen culture, and Zen monks and nuns appear far more art-historically savvy and commercially entangled than previously acknowledged. In film studies we are now apt to be suspicious of critics who characterize Kurosawa Akira (1910–1998) and other Japanese directors as "Zen artists," a notion which is often symptomatic of essentialist assumptions that Japanese film, as purportedly embodying a "collective essence called the 'Japanese mind'," must necessarily be Zen inspired. If the two do meet—Kurosawa and Zen—we learn more by understanding this encounter within the particularities of postwar intellectual and religious discourse than through generalized notions of Zen and Japanese film. Similarly, if the work of avant-garde artists of the postwar period is to be interpreted as "Zen," it is so by virtue of the particular understandings of Zen and Zen Art then in circulation. Stimulated by the explications of satori, Emptiness, spontaneous gesture, sumi-e, and the like offered by Suzuki, occasionally engaging in serious zazen, and bouncing off Dada, psychoanalysis, and Surrealism, these artists generated their own understandings of Zen and Zen Art as sets of affinities, resemblances to the modern; they lengthened the chain, creating Cage’s Zen Art, Ad Reinhardt’s (1913–1987) Zen Art, Yoko Ono’s Zen Art, and so on, jazz riffs off "Suzuki Zen-like art." Zen Art, in other words, has been changing before at least some of our eyes.

Does this sort of reappraisal matter if our responses to Zen Art are aesthetically subjective or guided by practice and faith? Does not an idealized, ahistorical sort of Zen still lead us to appreciate non-Western religions and visual traditions? Perhaps it’s a tussle over who has the authority to pass judgement on Zen Art, but a historian’s reply might be: if we’re talking about here-now, fine, but don’t impose today on yesterday (or vice versa), for the past is another country; they do things differently there. An art historian mindful of Michael Baxandall’s concept of the "period eye," meanwhile, might ask us to explore the distinctive cultural and visual skills and
knowledge that different communities at different times employed when making and looking at Zen Art, whether a monk or nun of the fifteenth century, an avant-garde artist of the 1950s, a designer of the twenty-first century, and so forth. Postcolonial critics might caution that appreciation, however sincere, may cloak unequal power relations and that fantasies of the exotic and ethnic stereotyping can sneak in and do harm. Witness art criticism that seems almost invariably to see in the work of contemporary artists and architects of Japanese nationality or heritage (regardless of where they work, their dialogues with diverse currents of art and design, and so on) a "riddling Zen reticence" or "the Zen stillness of his native culture's art." Those with affinities for New Historicism and Visual Culture Studies might propose that we consider the "mutual embeddedness of art and history" and allow our favored assumptions about Zen Art to be jostled, even upset, by varied categories of visual imagery (especially those previously overlooked) that flash before or subtly lure the eyes of Zen communities and sympathetic observers.

Rather than producing cultural anxiety, the loss of an idealized, simplified Zen Art is our gain. For one thing, we are likely to ask more and new questions about still more intriguing works of art, expanding our gaze beyond the canon and its "usual suspects." A rougher but nonetheless pleasing texture may become noticeable as we trace the in-between (for example, the exchanges between monastic and professional artist, patron and consumer, native and foreign, abstract and mimetic, center and margin) or risk a touch of the unexpected (that monks were often players in the art market and even art forgers, and that there are aesthetic dimensions to Zen Art that the normative lexicon fails to account for). We may, in turn, come face to face with yet deeper artistic and spiritual energies, past and present.

When we look at works of art and discourses about them as visual and verbal moments that occurred in the past and kept going until they meet our eyes and thoughts, we also learn about ourselves in relation to our imaginings of the past. By risking the complications of history, moreover, we may find new meanings in the "timeliness of things" that compel us toward wonder. In fact, many of us already give Zen Art more than one sense of time. A Chan/Zen painting may have historical gravitas and the capacity to elicit a sense of astonishment as if we were actually "there" in medieval China or Japan when brush met paper. We may thrill equally to the sense that a painting has an eternal now-ness because it captures a glimmer of truth. We adore works of premodern Zen painting held in museums and cloisters because they are old and accompanied by encomia (National Treasure and such), but we may be just as awed by a traditionally garbed present-day Zen master performing calligraphy before our very eyes.

Ultimately, a painting of the Sixth Patriarch attributed to Liang Kai (act. early 13th c.) and a tattoo of Liang Kai's painting posted on a website become meeting points, places for us to think about making and viewing art and how images mean and change meaning.

Whether or not one agrees with such views or finds them interesting, the ripples appearing on the surface of Zen and Zen Art seem less concentric and or smoothly dissipating than one might think. Put differently, they suggest a sort of differential gear set, which allows several wheels of understanding to turn at different speeds. Surely we benefit from such variation and plurality, and Zen art followers as well as Zen art skeptics are more dependent upon each other (and even alike) than we may imagine. This brings to mind two venerable doctrinal formulations in Chan/Zen and Mahayana Buddhist discourse: the dialectic of "sudden" versus "gradual" enlightenment, on the one hand, and the doctrine of the "two truths" on the other. Some Zen practitioners and aficionados of Zen Art might be likened to followers of the sudden camp in Chan/Zen who say, "I see it, it's Emptiness, satori right now, right there in the painting—you either get it or you don't, and in any case stop mumbling over the details, for they are impediments to awakening to Zen or to art." Those scholarly inclined, meanwhile, might be likened to proponents of the "gradual" model: whatever initial wonderment and insight the painting may elicit, sustained and deliberate investigation is required to dig incrementally through the historical facts, scrutinize the pictorial and inscriptive surface, and penetrate the accumulated rhetoric of tradition before one can grasp what is really there. Each takes the other to task for particular failings. The academics just don't get it—or, more properly, see it with a genuine flash of realization; the wide-eyed aficionados occasionally seem overzealous in their pursuit of Truth and unaware of power relationships, ideology, and the exoticism often lurking in modern explanations and reception of Zen and Zen Art.

This is tongue-in-cheek, of course, and no matter what way one unpacks Zen Art, one always unpacks it in one way or another. It is also true that many monks, nuns, lay followers, and collectors do hard scholarly work while art historians, for all their aesthetic reverie or insistence on the historical, may practice zazen alongside what they preach and publish. For this reason, Zen Art is perhaps more usefully described as a shared dream, a "necessary fiction," to borrow from Wallace Stevens, or as an amenable sign that encourages realization and knowledge. It allows us to ask questions and seek answers, to believe certain things and build upon them and renew our thinking. This is not to say, à la Oscar Wilde's comment about Japan, that the whole of Zen Art is pure invention or, à la Roland Barthes, an empty sign. Rather it is to suggest that it might be likened to a Buddhist "expedient means" (S: upāya, J: hōben) that bridges between the Two Truths: absolute and conventional, transcendent and immanent, emptiness and form. After all, it is the bounding contour of the ink circle that suggests emptiness, the use of language that loosens our reliance upon language, and the painting of a Buddha statue being burned that urges us to move beyond outward form. Difficult to come at head on, therefore, Zen Art seems at its clearest today when imagined as a field of converging and colliding objects, notions, and interpretations in which the visual is open to debate. Authenticity, adaptation, interpretation, and performance—this is arguably what Zen Art has always been and perhaps what it will always be.
Notes


9. A full history of the reception of Zen and Zen Art in the West is beyond the scope of this essay, but both were objects of fascination and knowledge formation from the first Western contacts with East Asia in the sixteenth century through the nineteenth-century “opening” of Japan to the West.


20. *Sumire* (sumi-e) functions in Suzuki’s description as a totality for Japanese *“ink painting”*—his use of the word homogenizes and conflates a historically diverse field of pictorial practice in ink monochrome, with antecedents, schools, styles, subjects, and commentaries that have little or nothing to do with Zen. The term *sumi-e* has often been applied by Western commentators to Chinese and Korean paintings as a result of Japanese art-historical writing.


24. Charles Lachman, for instance, points out that “the term Chan painting does not occur in any Tang or Song dynasty texts, and does not appear to have been recognized as a category of painting by traditional Chinese writers. . . .” and that masterworks of Chan painting such as Muqī’s *Six Persimmons* owe their status more to modernist sentiments than to monastic Chan understandings of painting. Charles Lachman, *“Art,”* in *Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism,* ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 41, 46.


27. Hoseki Shin’ichi Hisamatsu, *“Seven Characteristics of Zen Art by Hoseki Shin’ichi Hisamatsu,” It Is,* vol. 5 (Spring 1960), p. 64.


37. Sharf, "Whose Zen?", p. 46.

38. Sharf, "Whose Zen?", pp. 49–50; King, Orientalism and Religion, p. 156; Faure, Chan Insights and Oversights.

39. Suzuki, for instance, was partisan to his Rinzaï lineage and disdainful of the Soto tradition. See Faure, Chan Insights and Oversights, pp. 55–58.


42. See Westgeest, Zen in the Fifties, p. 8.


44. Okakura Kakuzō’s Ideals of the East (1903) and The Book of Tea (1906), which hold formative positions in twentieth-century writing on Zen Art, must be dealt with elsewhere. The exceptions are a handful of books and exhibition catalogues written by art historians, including Fonten and Hickman, Zen Painting and Calligraphy and Brinker and Kanazawa, Zen: Masters of Meditation.

45. Indeed, the authors of this catalogue’s essays and entries largely embody one particular lineage of Zen and Zen Art study within the academy, one evolving from Princeton University.

46. Faure, Chan Insights and Oversights, p. 89.


60. Gallagher and Greenblatt, Practicing New Historicism, pp. 7–9. Images often overlooked in discussions of Zen visual culture include those depicting local divinities, secular patrons, and "traditional" Buddhist deities.

61. On the sense of "being there," see Bohrer, Orientalism and Visual Culture, p. 2.


63. See Bohrer, Orientalism and Visual Culture, p. 3. "Necessary fiction" was suggested to me by Jay Fliegelman, Stanford University.


65. On the burning of images, see Yukio Lippit’s essay in this catalogue.