Lippit, Yukio


Later this year, Kyoto National Museum will hold its 120th Anniversary Commemorative Special Exhibition of National Treasures, which will include around two hundred Japanese masterpieces. Among those treasures will be a painting titled *The Gourd and the Catfish* by Taikō Josetsu, a Zen monk who was active during the Muromachi period (1336–1573). Museum visitors trying to understand the painting, as well as readers, will be very grateful, if they come across *Japanese Zen Buddhism and the Impossible Painting,* a new book by Yukio Lippit, professor of the History of Art and Architecture at Harvard University, who presents a guide to this work.

Josetsu’s painting features a man standing on a winding riverbank, holding a gourd in both hands and attempting to capture or pin down a catfish swimming in the stream. The shogun Ashikaga Yoshimochi set a riddle that is thought to have inspired the image: “How do you catch a catfish with a gourd?” Lippit’s book examines the painting’s subject matter, innovative technique, manner of display, and literary and artistic responses to it. It concludes that the painting mobilizes a new mode of artistic representation to depict the nonsensical nature of a Zen *koan* and by extension the relationship of such paintings to various social contexts of medieval Japanese culture.

In addition to the untitled, six-page introduction, the book consists of four sections: “Word and Image,” “A Zennish Painting,” “Space and Place,” and “The New Mode.” It argues that the content of the painting—including thirty-one poems and a preface inscribed above the painting (originally on the back)—should be understood as a Zen *koan*; in terms of the place and space in which the painting was hung, it carries significant cultural, religious, and political undertones; and, due to the pictorial practices utilized, the painting not only serves as a ground for a Zen discourse but also embodies a new mode of Zen painting that was “incomparably more sophisticated than what had come before.”

The advent of the book is timely. Based on a lecture the author delivered at the Getty Research Institute, it brings the painting to the attention of the US public in conjunction with the lecture, which is available online. Though merely sixty pages, it is the first book in English that focuses on the painting and is particularly significant considering that, although Joseph D. Parker mentions the painting several times in *Zen Buddhism Landscape Arts of Early Muromachi Japan* (1999), he dismisses it from the central discussion because it is not a typical Zen landscape painting. Obviously, this new publication is long awaited.
The book is successful on many levels. It makes a very good case for why the painting is a Zen koan. After introducing the concept of koan, “A Zennish Painting” traces various interpretations of the painting. By connecting the fishing scenario with the illusory nature of the human mind, the section underscores the Zen nature of the painting. It effectively uses a leading Japanese expert on Zen Buddhism, Yoshizawa Katsuhiro’s philological analysis of the inscriptions. Due to the author’s sensitivity to space and architecture, the book’s explication of the painting’s format and structure, especially in the “Space and Place” section, is illuminating and impressive. The section also captures subtle cultural transformations the painting reflected: the shogun palace became more public; the painting in the screen form achieved dual architectural and pictorial functions; Yoshimochi was identified as a Zen Buddhist sovereign; and the painting thus reflected Japanese regime changes. “The New Mode” section also makes several cogent arguments: Josetsu’s rise in status typifies that of other monk-painters; Josetsu’s painting absorbed the most advanced artistic practices from China; and the painting visualizes the elusive mind.

Indeed, the adroitness with which the book unveils the mysteries of “the impossible painting,” along with carefully selected artworks for comparison, contrast, and points of reference, eventually results in a challenging study. For instance, the author points out that the thirty-one monks who wrote the poems and the preface inscribed on the painting belonged to the Gozan, or the Japanese Five Mountains, sect who modeled their life style and religious thought directly on Chinese Zen practice (some sources even allege that Josetsu came from China), which prompts a series of questions: Besides artistic evidence the book acknowledges, what verbal evidence do the inscriptions provide for deducing influence from continental traditions of literati culture and other mainstream aesthetics, religions, and philosophies or indicate tensions, rivalries, or alliances of any sort? How articulate were the monks in composing response poems? According to Sherman E. Lee, the Japanese arts were open to embracing a combination of native and imported religions. Are there signs suggesting syncretic beliefs, weakened religious spirit and interests, hypercritical manipulation of ideas, or genuine religious revelation? This list can go on and on.

Unfortunately for uninitiated readers, the book is very sketchy when it comes to the inscriptions. The introduction of the book highlights the painting’s two major characteristics: First, the painting is truly Zen in subject matter. Second, besides being Zenkizu (a painting of incidents and encounters taken from the Zen textual tradition), the painting is also a poem-picture scroll, or Shigajiku (a painting that is accompanied by poetry and has its roots in China where the painting and the poetry are inherently connected). Yet, as impor-