

Truth in Artlessness

By Nobuo Tsuji



Shussan Shaka-zo (detail), collection of Shoin-ji

Painting has always been an important teaching tool for Zen Buddhism, and many Zen masters are also accomplished painters and calligraphers. Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768) is one of the better-known and perhaps best-loved. Two of his favorite subjects were Gautama Siddhartha, the historical Buddha, and Bodhidharma, who was born in India in the 5th century and later founded Chinese Zen Buddhism.

Gautama Siddhartha, the historical founder of Buddhism, sought far and wide for enlightenment, at one point spending six hard years in austere meditation in the mountains. Here, Hakuin depicts an emaciated and disappointed Siddhartha descending the mountains after having failed to achieve nirvana. This was an especially popular subject among Zen painters.

Few, however, had Hakuin's forceful touch. Hakuin's Siddhartha is highly stylized, his hair, eyebrows, and even the hair on his chest, shoulders, arms and feet, painted in a tattoo-like motif of concentric half circles. The Buddha's robe is

executed in clumsy brush strokes resembling a child's artless experimentation. Yet the picture has a profound sense of dignity and holiness that belies its lack of sophistication. The Buddha's face is especially memorable, some even claiming to see a resemblance in the face of Christ by the French painter Georges Rouault (1871–1958).

Hakuin was the abbot of a small temple in the village of Hara in what is today Shizuoka Prefecture. Far from the influences of Kyoto and Edo, Hakuin became famous for breathing new life into the stagnating Zen sect. His greatest efforts were spent in making Zen Buddhism more accessible to the common people, and this he did through many mediums. He adapted Buddhist scripture to popular tunes and folksongs, explained how to cure neuroses through hypnosis, and gave away numerous ink paintings such as those shown here.

Hakuin probably painted more pictures of Bodhidharma, affectionately known as *Daruma* in Japan, than of any other figure. The one shown here (right) was painted in 1751 when Hakuin was 67

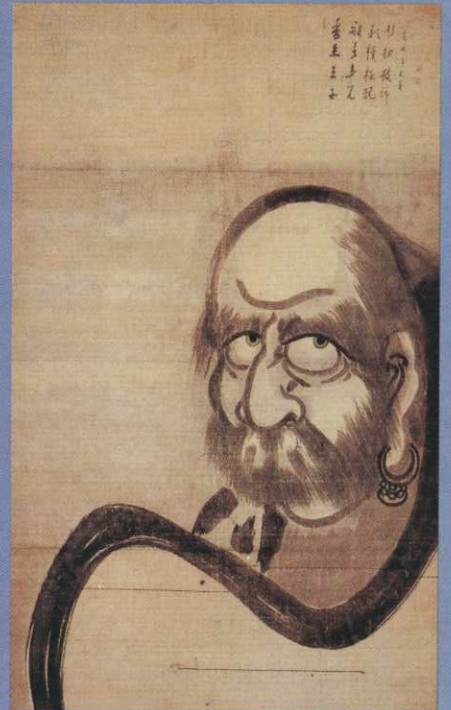
years old and is typical of his work. Executed in a brusque, sweeping style, *Daruma* glowers at the viewer from a large 220 cm long panel. His robe is only suggested with a few abstract brush strokes. The work lacks professional refinement, yet like the picture of Siddhartha descending from the mountain, it has a magnetism that is hard to resist.

The Japanese are acclaimed for their refinement and attention to detail, but as Hakuin so eloquently demonstrates, there is also a less sophisticated, artless aspect to Japanese expression that is perhaps closer to reality. A contemporary of Hakuin's, an artist named Nagasawa Rosetsu (1754–1799), did a full-sized painting of crashing waves, but that dynamic scene pales in comparison with Hakuin's portrait of the Zen patriarch. Looking at the two side-by-side, it is as if Hakuin were admonishing Rosetsu: "Discard your pretensions. Be honest in your painting."

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Shussan Shaka-zo



Daruma-zo, collection of Shoju-ji