

An East-West Trans-Cultural Study: Zen Enlightenment in Asian and John Cage's Visual Arts

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Abstract : American composer John Cage (1912-1992) is an influential figure in musical, visual and performing arts after World War II and has also been claimed as a forerunner of the western avant-garde in the artistic field. However, the crucial factors contributed to his highly acclaimed achievements include the Zen enlightenment, which he mainly got from Japanese Zen master D. T. Suzuki (1870-1966). As a kind of reflection and afterthought of the Zen inspiration, John Cage created various forms of arts in which visual arts have recently attracted more and more attention and discussion, especially from the perspectives of Zen. John Cage had started to create visual art works since he was 66 years old and the activity had lasted until his death. The quality and quantity of the works are worthy of in-depth study— the 667 pieces of print, 114 pieces of water color, and about 150 pieces of sketch. Cage's stylistic changes during the 14 years of creation are quite obvious, and the Zen elements in the later works seem to be omnipresent. Based on comparative artistic study, a historical and conceptual view of Zen art that was formed initially in the traditional Chinese and Japanese visual arts will be discussed. Then, Chinese and Japanese representative Zen works will be mentioned, and the technique aspect, as well as stylistic analysis, will be revealed. Finally, a comprehensive comparison of the original Oriental Zen works with John Cage's works and focus on the influence, and art transformation will be addressed. The master pieces from Zen tradition by Chinese artists like Liang Kai (d. 1210) and Ma Yuan (1160-1225) from Southern Sung Dynasty, the Japanese artists like Sesshū (1420-1506), Miyamoto Musashi (1584-1645) and some others would be discussed. In the current study, these art works from different periods of historical development in Zen will serve as the basis of analogy, interpretation, and criticism to Cage's visual art works. Through the perspectives of the Zen authenticity from Asia, we see how John Cage appropriated the eastern culture to his innovation, which changed the art world forever. And it is believed that through a transition from inter-, cross-, toward trans-cultural inspiration, John Cage set up a unique pathway of art innovations.

Keywords : John Cage, Chinese Zen art, Japanese Zen art, visual art

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