

# The Buddhist Works of Isami Doi

Seeing is a mixture of immediate experience and previous background. Often backgrounds are foreign to a scene, developed in different physical and mental climates. Such differences—or the gaps between experience and mental expectations—can prompt an artist to create new ways of seeing. Those are as valuable for him as they are for others. For the meeting of cultures can be as disorienting and painful to the artist in his life as it can be in his work. A special debt is owed to pathfinders.

The wide variety of backgrounds in Hawaii gives local visual arts an extraordinary richness and also poses special problems of understanding. An artist's home culture interact with the other cultures found here and with the special environment.

This is the framework within which the works of Isami Doi (1903-1965)—especially those with overt Buddhist imagery—can be understood. I will concentrate in this column on one aspect of his background, the minority sect by which he was influenced: Shingon, True Word Buddhism. That religious aspect of his work can in turn help us

understand the mystical dimension in the work of local artists he influenced, such as Tadashi Sato and Satoru Abe.

Like so many founders of religions, the historical Buddha, a Northern Indian teacher of the 500s B.C., was exalted by his later followers. Some regarded him as a sort of god. Others began to think of him as reality itself, the reality behind appearances. Humans, as all things, have a Buddha nature, but it is like a diamond covered with mud. We must cleanse ourselves of our desires and impurities to reach our "diamond body."

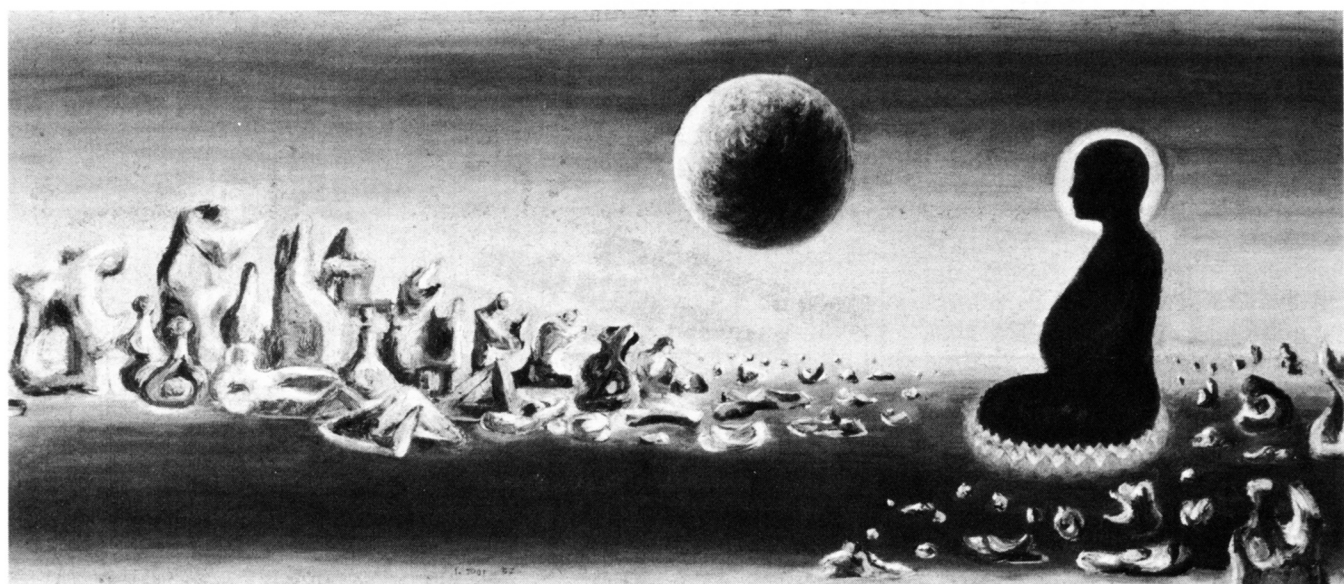
Shingon Buddhism was brought from China to Japan by Kukai (774-835 A.D.), a great scholar, poet, painter, and calligrapher. The sect believed its teachings had been given, not by the historical Buddha but by the eternal one, who is beyond the universe, but, at the same time, in all things as their Buddha nature. Human beings must realize that nature within themselves which unites them to all things in the universe and to the eternal Buddha beyond it. To do this, they must unite themselves with the cosmic forces and use their power to



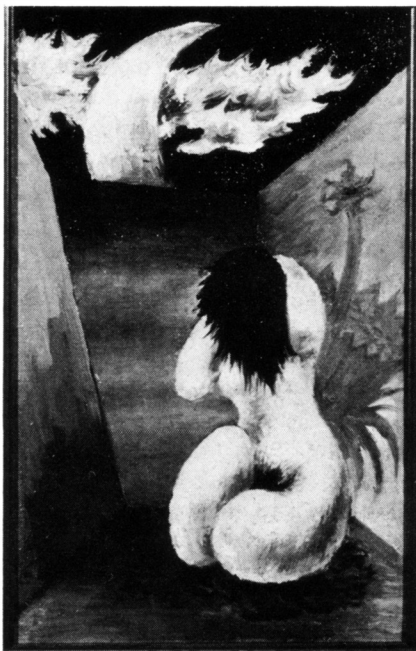
*"Man Carrying Woman" (1952) indicates a Western influence in Doi's painting.*

propel themselves into the beyond.

Trying to express in words the simultaneous immanence and transcendence of the Buddha leads inevitably to contradictions. A better tool for communicating and understanding is art. Monks went to the mountains to meditate and expressed



*Isami Doi's painting, "Buddha Talks to People of Another Planet About Earth" expresses the artist's faith that "Buddha was not only of the East, but of the universe."*



*An early Doi painting (dated either 1946 or '47 by the State Foundation for Culture and the Arts) entitled "Nocturne"*

the truths they reached in carvings on living trees and rocks.

Their art was as different from conventional Buddhist works as were their teachings. Most Buddhist art comforts the viewer, promises peace. The Shingon artist, on the other hand, seems terrified by the forces to which, by an immense effort of his will, he is entrusting himself. That religious mood is expressed in images of startling originality.

Doi's art is a non-verbal True Word search for truth: "Each piece is an adventure in thought."

His art was also a tool for teaching, an expression of his compassion: "Relentless and swift is the flow of the great river. Just a ripple on the timeless tide, seen no more, heard no more, how many will be swallowed by the darkness, how few will see the blessed light."

His art, his teachings, emerged from the conflicts he experienced. Born on Oahu, raised on Kauai, he early became interested in painting and took as his first subjects the mountains of that island. But he soon began the traveling which characterized his life and work.

After graduating from Columbia in 1928, he went to Paris to study. "Paris boasts of the highest achievements of luxury, wealth, culture and beauty, but also, utmost poverty, filth, morbidity and vice. Beauty and ugliness depend upon each other, they exist for each other, each enhancing the other . . . I shall be studying, and I believe I shall enjoy my short stay in Paris. But my paradise will always be Hawaii, and I shall be immensely happy when I hear once more that beautiful word: Aloha!"

All his life, he was to travel between the mainland United States, where he enjoyed honors and fame, and the Hawaii of his birth and youth. This was a search for his art. He stated later that, in his youth, he had wanted to be recognized as an outstanding Oriental artist. As he came into contact with contemporary Western art, his goals changed. "When I went to New York, I went completely abstract."

But Hawaii and the art it inspired kept welling up in him. "I find myself going gradually into impressionism again." He stated on returning, "I

think this will be home. I'm always fascinated by New York but it's better to think of it from a distance. I should have come back much sooner."

This search for art was a search for truth. "I still have a lot to learn," he told an interviewer. "It's good to be immature. That way, I have something to look forward to."

The conflict between East and West in his work was the expression of a struggle in his own life, symbolized by the contradictory modes of attraction to Oriental and non-Oriental women. "Should you ask where my feet carry me in search of happiness; it's in such a place as Kumanuwai Lane, where the monkeypod spreads its parasol over the old houses. Here my nostrils breathe deep the scent of human flesh, decaying wood, and unseen roses of the backyards. I don't know who lives there, nor what dramas transpire within, I only know that a lovely damsel walks out each day."

The intensity of the struggle caused the break-up of his cultural views. In a series of canvases, he shattered the elements of Western culture into pieces and scattered them chaotically.

But he could not continue in chaos. He had to find a way of seeing East and West together. He returned to the Hawaii and Buddhism of his youth.

In a series of works with titles such as "Buddha preaches to the Nations" and "Buddha preaches to the Inhabitants of Other Planets," he expressed his faith that the Buddha was not only of the East, but of the universe. The Buddha was beyond the world and thus could make us transcend it, solving the pain of our desiring. But the Buddha was also in all things, the Buddha we can search for everywhere and ever deeper.

In his last Buddhist paintings, Doi found a strange and original symbol. Japanese gangsters, masters of the martial arts, would tattoo themselves in brilliant colors. When trapped, a gangster could, at the last moment, throw off his kimono. His enemy would be momentarily startled by the colors, giving the gangster a split second to kill or escape.

As Doi crept up on the Buddha and felt he almost grasped him, the Buddha threw off his robe.

Doi's last paintings of Kauai are the after-image.