

***Imago Mundi* and Metaphysical Knowledge in Japanese Calligrams and Byzantine Icons**

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Abstract: The present study tries to analyze the relation between written and visual image both in the Japanese calligram and the Byzantine icon, searching the possible meeting points between the two types of art. On the other hand, our research is meant to inquire the way in which the global meaning of these iconographic arts can be instantaneously deciphered through a hermeneutic and cultural semiotics approach, or whether it reveals itself gradually as the intuitive perception of the icon-replaced reality results in either a “spiritual painting” or a “sacred image”. Epiphanies of a world hidden under a veil of mystery and mystical communion, the Japanese calligram and the Byzantine icon are open to perpetual discovery. By renouncing the principle of representation of the visible structure of the world, they become metaphysical spiritual documents and means which reveal the absolute.

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*The tip of the brush turns the sun and
the moon, and the vibrancy of the characters
moves heaven and earth.*

Anonymous, Tang Dynasty

In Japanese culture, writing, built on a system of ideographic characters which are not only a mere support for the sounds of the spoken language, makes its physical presence strongly felt in poetry, calligraphy and painting, thus helping to create a particular type of image in which various languages oppose and influence each other.

As presence-signs rather than tool-signs,¹ pictograms and ideograms give the impression that they can access the dynamic laws of transformation. Calligraphy, pointing out precisely this ability, has therefore become a major art form in this cultural space, whose signifying process follows the rules of the semiotic stratum of spoken language: pitch, intonation, gestures. Allowing not only to get into contact with the self, but also communion with a universal vital rhythm, the art of calligraphy is based on an

¹ See François Cheng, *Le « langage poétique » chinois*, in Julia Kristeva et al. (eds.), *La traversée des signes* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1975), 46.

intuitive perception of reality. Thus, it becomes a “spiritual” painting¹ that ceases to reproduce external aspects of the visible universe and attempts instead the creation of a particular image, configured according to its own philosophical and aesthetic principles, in which the subject has been objectified and the object has been subjectified.

Situated at equal distance between concrete and abstract, real and imaginary, sensitive and intelligible, the image has recently become a centre of interest for a wide array of approaches in the socio-humanistic as well as in the scientific field, as it permits not only the mere preservation of the real due to a material support, but also the revelation of a secret world in a realm of mystery it can provide with meaning. Defined as the concrete representation of a material or ideal object (public image, mental idea, painting / that which can be seen, a description, similarity in form or content), perceptively present or absent, the image still maintains a relationship with its referent, thus allowing us to know the latter.²

Not merely seen as a cultural heritage, calligraphy still finds its place in contemporary Japanese society as an art that is permanently being rediscovered without ever having been forgotten. A traditional art, a “social grace”³ and object of academic research, calligraphy is seen in Japan as an integral part of the Japanese spirit. Able to adapt to the world around it, calligraphy can translate the sensitivity of a new era as, beyond its ornamental role, a calligraphy work preserves a status and meaning expressed through images and words as the spiritual testimony of a particular metaphysics.

In Europe, any attempt to define something usually becomes increasingly remote and abstract.⁴ According to some researchers, this is probably also due to the writing system of this geographic area. It is known that humanity had, at its origins, two types of writing systems: one based on sound, the other based on sight.⁵ The difference between the Western phonographic system and the Eastern logographic one still defines the cultural contrast between the two types of writing.

As they are not conventionalized signs, unlike the alphabet, which developed a linear form of representation, Chinese ideograms are a unique instance of balance⁶ in the history of writing. They can easily turn into “a means of transmitting and registering thought”⁷ while remaining graphic signs with high imagistic potential. Due to its graphic quality, a Chinese ideogram activates a rhythmic form⁸ with a particular meaning, thus

¹ See Ibid.

² Cf. Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, *Filozofia imaginilor* (Philosophie des images), trans. Muguraș Constantinescu, ed. and afterword Sorin Alexandrescu (Iași: Polirom, 2004), 13.

³ Cecil H. Uyehara, *Japanese Calligraphy. A Bibliographic Study* (New-York: University Press of America, 1991), 11.

⁴ See Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (London, Boston: Faber and Faber, 1979), 19.

⁵ See Kyuyoh Ishikawa, *Taction. The drama of the stylus in Oriental Calligraphy* (Translated by Waku Miller, Tokyo: International House of Japan, 2011), 249.

⁶ Cf. Shutaro Mukai, *Characters that Represent, Reflect, and Translate Culture – in the Context of the Revolution in Modern Art*, in Yoshihiko Ikegami, (ed.), *The Empire of Signs: Semiotic Essays on Japanese Culture* (Amsterdam: John Benjamin, 1991), 72.

⁷ Pound, *ABC of Reading*, 19.

⁸ See Mukai, *Characters that Represent, Reflect, and Translate Culture – in the Context of the Revolution in Modern Art*, 77.

becoming a visual sign that, while representing a concept,¹ also allows the direct recognition of symbolic thinking. It is a graphic quality generously exploited by the art of calligraphy, revitalizing the functions of the sign freed from its object. Through dot, line, surface, light, space, sound, rhythm, movement and time the calligraphy sign manages to stimulate not only the sense of sight, but also that of touch,² turning from a two-dimensional into a three-dimensional form of art.



物の哀 [Mono no aware]
*The Beauty of Simple and Ephemeral Things**

Japan adopted Chinese pictograms and ideograms (Jap. *kanji*) in the 6th century, at the same time it adopted Buddhism. *Kana* silabaries developed here later, between the 9th and the 12th centuries, through the graphic deformation of current Chinese characters, and built with *kanji* a mixed writing system that has since been successfully exploited by the art of calligraphy:

“Our writing system with its mixture of *Kanji* and the syllabic letters of *Kana* is more varied than alphabetical writing systems. For just this reason, each incorporates a different feeling. Is it not the integration of feelings in *Kanji* which permits the original form of the cosmos of a language to live on? *Kanji* – to

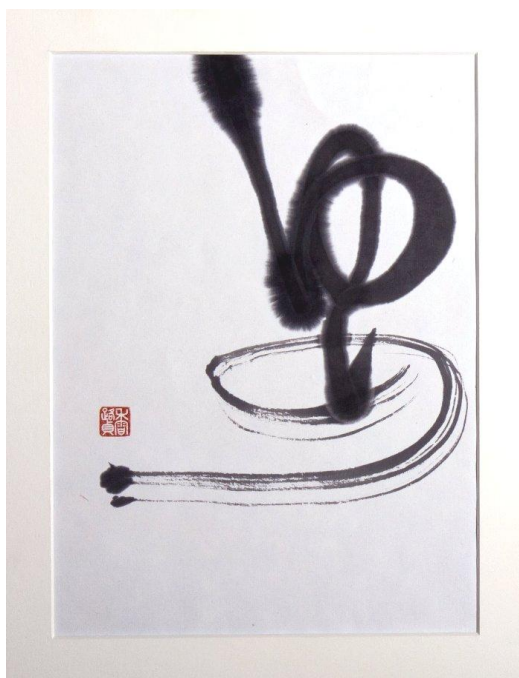
¹ Cf. Ibid., 65.

² See Ibid., 74.

* All calligraphy works belong to the author of the present article.

prescribe it somewhat roughly – incorporates painting, poetry, music, sculpture and even gesture in their original form in the words.”¹

In calligraphy, the written sign combines pictographic and phonetic features: the former “visualizes” a referent, while the latter allows the “oral reading” of a word or statement.² The graphism of calligraphy signs is capable of revealing meaning so that the visual form of writing with a brush, depending on the message, may become a medium for unwritten poetry.



ゆめ [Yume] *Dream*

In Japanese calligraphy, there are two image registers: a visual image related to intuition and a verbal one related to the function of abstract analysis. Thus, a calligraphy work presupposes both sensorial perception, due to its pictorial character, and a distancing from this type of perception, due to its being a linguistic image. Sight is strongly related to intuition, rendering the viewer an active participant to the birth of something in space, while the linguistic image is dependent on the linearity of discourse and the temporality of signs.³ In the final analysis, calligraphy presupposes the representation of the world by means of the black line and the white space as well as the progressive discovery of the meaning of the painted signs. The global meaning may be

¹ Ibid., 66.

² Wunenburger, *Filozofia imaginilor*, 251.

³ See Ibid., 34-35.

deciphered instantly as well as gradually, rendering the calligraphy work a unique way of manifesting being-in-the-world.

However, the relationship between the visual and the scriptural image in a calligraphy work may be interpreted from two contradictory perspectives. On the one hand, the signifier-signified relationship it generates seems to refer to a signified that is not reducible to a model revealed by and through writing, as it is known in a mystical communion – compared to this model, the image would seem to be merely a degraded message. If the visual image is an object by definition, writing enjoys in this case the privilege of immateriality. Writing thus seems to be the apanage of an élite for which it is both reading and practice, and the image, marking the separation between deciphering and practice, may become subservient to writing. An inverted perspective sees the visual image as a panoramic, synoptic one in which everything is displayed at once, while the linguistic image is dependent on the linearity of discourse, the temporality of signs written one after the other.¹ Calligraphy seems then to offer a totalizing vision in which the visual combines with the scriptural in order to create a harmonious whole.

A painting of the invisible reality, the calligraphed word seems to have access to true knowledge, to the “metaphysics”² able to go beyond the exterior appearance of phenomena in order to reach their inner essence. By specific pictorial means, the word revealed through calligraphy has a vision of the deeper reality, upon which it acts magically, trying to evoke it in its entirety. By refusing colour, calligraphy chose to enter the world of the spirit through a special kind of analogy, correspondence and affinity.



心 [Kokoro] Heart, Spirit

¹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 35.

² Alain Besançon, *Imaginea interzisă. Istoria intelectuală a iconoclasmului. De la Platon la Kandinsky* (L'image interdite. Une histoire intellectuelle de l'iconoclisme), trans. Mona Antohi (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1996), 369.

Denotation and connotation at the same time, a calligraphy work may answer questions such as “What is this?” or “What does this mean?”, deciphering a cultural and spiritual meaning. However, while the object and its interpretation are in an interdependent relationship, such an image must be first understood not only in its nature but also in its finality, as the meaning of this image is beyond the significance of calligraphy signs, which in fact concentrate a vast experience. Visual and verbal images elude intellectual understanding and, although recognized in its literality, the calligraphic work masks a hidden face of meaning understood as “the source of a different truth”.¹ Still, it is a meaning that does not refer to a univocal concept but rather to an ideatic network that can even combine contraries. The encounter of pictorial and textual language becomes in this case a revelation, although the ultimate truth seems not to exist or, if it does after all, what matters is not the goal but the way to the illumination that is part of the search for the ultimate meaning.

The attempt to capture the transcendental “directly”² may also be seen in various Western popular traditions where beliefs, particularly religious ones, have an iconographic expression. Unlike the Latin Church, however, which places the image in the field of rhetoric, the Greek Church sees the image from a metaphysical perspective, where the figurative tries to contain the absolute and the Christian orthodox icon becomes the image of an “existentially assimilated revelation”³. Thus, in the icon, the visual image is combined with the verbal one and God’s manifestation goes from the Word revealed and written in the Scriptures to the representation in the painted image. The art of icons in Byzantine Christianity, through the founding myth of the icon not painted by human hand (*acheiropoiètos*), has its foundation at the “limit of the similarity principle”⁴, while the man-made icon becomes the image in which the absolute Being manifests itself without alteration. The icon as “theology in images”⁵ results, thus, from a change in attitude: God becomes visible by taking a human path; his unrepresentable face receives an expression through being “enclosed”⁶ within the spatial limits of the visible world. The icon is the image that does not hide (as semblance) but reveals (as appearance),⁷ taking active part in man’s regeneration. The icon bridges the ontological gap between the natural and the supernatural, the visible and the invisible, by accepting the secret presence of the model in the image.⁸ The calligraphic image also associates its plenitude with the “emptiness” or “void”, the only path to the invisible that both hides and reveals the sacred. Both the icon and the calligraphy work challenge thus the viewer towards a particular way of seeing in order to be able to access that which is hidden. The mystery or the enigmatic horizon of the icon or calligraphy work can only be either

¹ Cf. Wunenburger, *Filozofia imaginilor*, 257.

² See Paul Evdokimov, *Arta icoanei - o teologie a frumuseții (L’art de l’Icône. Théologie de la Beauté)*, trans. Grigore Moga and Petru Moga (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1992), 67.

³ Leonid Uspensky, *Teologia icoanei în biserica ortodoxă (Théologie de l’icône dans l’Eglise orthodoxe)*, introd. and trans. Teodor Baconsky (Bucharest: Anastasia, 1994), 15.

⁴ Wunenburger, *Filozofia imaginilor*, 143.

⁵ Uspensky, *Teologia icoanei în biserica ortodoxă*, 183.

⁶ Wunenburger, *Filozofia imaginilor*, 154.

⁷ See *Ibid.*, 203.

⁸ Cf. Evdokimov, *Arta icoanei - o teologie a frumuseții*, 78.

assumed or missed. An aesthetic emotion is mystically transfigured into a “sacred image”¹ and divinity is directly revealed through word and image; the unseen becomes visible and the unrepresentable becomes representable.



無 [Mu] *Nothingness, Void*

In a religious icon, it is not only the subject that is essential, but also the manner in which it is approached, its means of representation. It is natural to develop thus a pictorial language corresponding to the divine revelation according to which the icon can express the “spiritual experience of sanctity”² through form, colour and symbolic lines, all parts of a harmonious whole. Thus, in order to comply with tradition, the icon-maker must discard all individual elements and, as the icon’s composition is already established, he is no longer allowed to deviate from the canon. Without the features of the visible world, without shadows, the characters in the icon, shown frontally, communicate directly with the viewer³, speaking to him of a spiritual, sacred world.

The delight the eyes take in the icon and the solar mysticism given by the gold and the shining colours of the rainbow become almost sonorous,⁴ as the liturgical function of the icon culminates in the contemplation of mysteries. This is what Andrei Rublev’s (1370-1430) famous *Trinity* (1425-1427) attempts, where the three characters gathered around a table may be “read” as an image that has become a support for meditation, attempting to represent a central mystery of the Christian faith and of Revelation.⁵ Three angels are seated around a table with a cup reminiscent of Abraham’s biblical hospitality in Genesis 18, although the hosts Abraham and Sarah are not in the

¹ Uspensky, *Teologia icoanei în biserica ortodoxă*, 15.

² Ibid., 118.

³ See Ibid., 46.

⁴ Cf. Evdokimov, *Arta icoanei - o teologie a frumuseții*, 141.

⁵ See Gabriel Bunge, *Icoana Sfintei Treimi a Cuviosului Andrei Rublev sau “Celălalt Paraclet”* (The Trinity Icon of Andrei Rublov), accompanying note by Acad. Serghei S. Averințev, preface and trans. Ioan I. Ică jr. (Sibiu: Deisis, 1996), 92.

picture, as the monk-painter seems to have wished to turn an ancient event into the “image” of a timeless present, instead of a historicized “recounting” of events. Moreover, Andrei Rublev manages to create a paradox in this icon, making movement and the lack of it become one. Thus, in spite of the impression of rest that the three angels create, a closer look immediately reveals a circular, counterclockwise movement created by their position: it starts at the left foot of the angel on the right, continues with the inclination of his head and goes on to the angel in the middle, completing itself in the vertical posture of the angel on the left. Thus, the composition of the icon naturally superposes three planes:¹ the biblical story about the three travellers visiting Abraham, combined with the plane of “divine economy”, where each detail of the image becomes a Christian symbol, and the final, intra-divine, transcendental and inaccessible plane.

Abolishing chronological order, the icon-maker organizes his composition in height rather than in depth, subordinating the plane surface and thus eliminating the void and the fear of it (*horror vacui*).² The characters, whose anatomy is only hinted at by the folds in their habits, transposed into the two-dimensional, seem not to move but to slide, as the juxtaposed colours and brushstrokes engender particular distances. The icon categorically rejects the vanishing point, the *claire-obscur* and the notion of volume. The perspective is often inverted, the lines do not flow away from the viewer but converge towards him, thus fully orienting the iconographical universe towards man,³ in order to have the image show what has taken place in time and become visible.⁴ Led by faith, dogma, tradition and iconographic models, the icon-maker “writes” according to a motif but the result belongs to another world, where the immobility of the bodies, without being static, concentrates its entire dynamism⁵ into the gaze that reveals the spirit. The divine is invisible, but reflected in the human visible. Reaching beyond the phenomenological veil, the icon opens itself to the revelatory vision through colour and the musical consonance of lines and forms. At the same time contemplation, silent recollection and an expression of divine mystery, the icon enables our participation in that which cannot be described, the unseen, the unheard and the unspoken.

In terms of technique, calligraphy also attempts to transfigure the world’s image (*imago mundi*) by means of a very simple material technique using black ink and rice paper. All colour pigments become shades of black and the interplay between the black line and the white space becomes the means of expressing the light-shade ratio. The black-white monochromy serves here the same purpose of revealing the sacred. Without figuration and without the perspective technique, the calligraphy work entails a system of connections in which the space of abstract representation obeys the law of the counterclockwise movement. This movement allows metamorphosis⁶ that is going from a material space with its own laws to an imaginary space that allows the re-creation of a world whose constrictions help show precisely what belongs to the subject.

¹ See Evdokimov, *Arta icoanei - o teologie a frumuseții*, 211.

² See Ibid., 192.

³ Cf. Ibid., 194.

⁴ Cf. Besançon, *Imaginea interzisă. Istoria intelectuală a iconoclasmului. De la Platon la Kandinsky*, 133.

⁵ Cf. Evdokimov, *Arta icoanei - o teologie a frumuseții*, 195.

⁶ Cf. Wunenburger, *Filozofia imaginilor*, 173.

The icon speaks to the illiterate through images. The sacred word becomes visible and may be contemplated in the icon, as the church not only *speaks* about the truth, but also *shows* it through images.¹ It is not enough for the truth to be uttered, it must also be shown, and the icon becomes thus the “contemplation”² of that which is not said and that which is shown. It is not rational categories or human morals that reign over the signification universe of the icon, but the divine spirit, which naturally shows how majestic the icon is in its simplicity. The icon as the “mould of ineffable reality”³ becomes the visible proof of the divine descent towards man as well as of man’s aspiration towards the divine.⁴ It points out the presence of divinity to man, without his being able to really see it. The icon is a visible figure inviting man to go beyond the visible, towards the unfigurable. Therefore, the icon cannot legitimate worship (*latreia*), only a recognition of sacrality through veneration (*proskunesis*).⁵ In its attempt to pictorially translate such an illumination, the icon replaces reading with seeing. It helps man participate in divine life, giving him the possibility of a spiritual rebirth, although it has always been said that this inner fulfilment, very close to absolute quiet,⁶ is impossible to express. As a religious experience, the icon proposes “seeing”⁷ God on the eighth day, proving the visual character of the word. That which cannot be seen reveals itself in that which can, and the image receives the same value as the word in search of the expression of divinity.



和 [Wa] Harmony, Japanese

¹ Cf. Uspensky, *Teologia icoanei în biserica ortodoxă*, 59.

² Ibid., 112.

³ Ibid., 139.

⁴ Cf. Ibid., 130.

⁵ See Wunenburger, *Filozofia imaginilor*, 207.

⁶ Cf. Uspensky, *Teologia icoanei în biserica ortodoxă*, 121.

⁷ Evdokimov, *Arta icoanei - o teologie a frumuseții*, 33.

However, unlike the icon, which attempts the integration of the Christian faithful into the universal unity of the church, calligraphy encourages the focus of the self upon itself in a mostly solitary meditation according to the path proposed by the Zen doctrine, leading to Self-Awakening.

Avoiding any theoretical attempts to define it, Zen means first and foremost a practice and teaching through which one may attain complete freedom and complete the journey from the realm of illusion (*samsara*) to that of Illumination (*nirvana*).¹ Through calligraphy, Zen religious philosophy brings the textual and pictorial image into the sphere of ordinary existence, of day-to-day life. Zen becomes a way of thinking through a graphic-scriptural image, trying by means of a visible form to come closer not to an invisible surreality but rather to a state of mind called “*mushin*” [*mu* ‘nothingness, emptiness, void’ + *shin* ‘heart, spirit’] (‘empty heart, nothing in the heart’/ no-mind), the state above all types of determination. Calligraphy can access a hidden meaning of the world, ontologically superior revelations, and this “nothingness” is proof of the emancipation and the optimistic or tragic liberation of the world. Being and nothingness, full and empty, presence and absence are all notions that can be re-known with the help of the black line in the calligraphy work, which thus becomes a vehicle of meaning.



無心 [Mushin] *Empty Heart*

¹ See John Stevens, *Zenga. Brushstrokes of Enlightenment*, Catalog Selections, Entries and Essay by John Stevens, Catalog Essay and Organization by Alice Rae Yelen (New Orleans Museum of Art, 1990), 132.

The calligraphy work, like any ordinary visual image, not only does not attempt to reproduce reality, being something different than reality, but it may even become the negation or absence of the represented reality. The logic of *mimesis* makes room for the revelation of eternity, where calligraphy becomes the interpreter of visible and invisible things. Presence turns into absence, while judgment and reason as intellectual operations are eliminated as there is no speculative or pragmatic goal to follow.

The image presented by a calligraphy work is a combination of several images, created through the projection of the calligrapher's view of the world, of reflecting a vision given by his own faith, but also of imitating and deviating from a model. The calligraphy work, two-dimensional in appearance, becomes three-dimensional through interpretation. It is, in fact, a cultural sign that never reveals its entire intuitive content. The calligrapher creates with his brush a product that never exists as an object, but he allows through its image the inauguration of a new view of the world. The image impregnated by the word is now the carrier of an imprint that is expression and meditation at the same time. The image oscillates between the fullness of being and the void of nothingness. Thus, the calligraphic image cannot be considered as a symbolic supra-reality with a particular consistence that allows man to live in reality, with it at his side. The revelation contained in the harmony of all elements that make up a calligraphy work cannot be justified, only contemplated. Just as art becomes "dephenomenalized", ¹ through calligraphy the world opens itself up to mystery.

Made up of a multitude of meanings, the significance of the image in calligraphy contains an immediate meaning as well as a hidden, indirect one asking to be revealed. However, in order to render the image comprehensible, it is also necessary to understand it indirectly, study it in depth and interpret it on different levels of meaning. By exploring various depth levels, interpretation becomes initiation. The meaning becomes spiritual and the journey to it can no longer follow a logical, reasonable path. Meaning enters thus a world of "truth and particular significance", ² openly opposing logical-conceptual rationality. The features of the real world may even become inverted and the calligrapher, in his attempt to visualize and express a sacred emotion, is no longer a proposer but a receptor of meaning, simultaneously receptive and active, fully aware of the fact that understanding is not immediately accessible but needs to be translated in a code different from the known ones. He is no longer the centre but an intermediate moment in the meaning being created, while meaning is approached through contemplative meditation as the creator-calligrapher attempts to give shape to the hidden dimensions of faith. The relationship between image and the unrepresentable is a peculiar one, where the image also resonates over the self, the emotion, the state of not-being. For the calligrapher, there is no other reality but that of the spirit or of the will wishing to take part in the gesture of creation through dot, line, plane, through their ability to combine. Most times, when completing a calligraphy work, the brush runs dry, ³ creating the so-called effect of "flying white". It is a dramatic journey from the first touch of the wet brush onto the paper to the "dry" finish that only takes the

¹ Evdokimov, *Arta icoanei - o teologie a frumuseții*, 26.

² Wunenburger, *Filozofia imaginilor*, 109.

³ See Christine Flint Sato, *Japanese Calligraphy. The art of Line & Space* (Osaka: Kaifusha, 1998), 9.

calligrapher's hand a moment to complete. The viewer is made conscious of the white background again, the shape of the sign and the white surface gain in significance and the painted signs are materialized, like objects as such.



雪月花 [Yuki. Tsuki. Hana.] *Snow. Moon. Flower*

Similarly, in the Byzantine icon a sensitive content is objectified on a material support, without any direct relationship to the visual experience offered by the surrounding reality. The eye as an organ and sight as a biological function of the human being become a privileged axis of constructing images.¹ For a true understanding of them, the movement of the line and the gesture of the brush help harmonize the elements of the icon's image into a whole. Japanese calligraphy, however, both a pictorial and a scriptural image, also requires sacralized contemplation. To know means, in both cases, to worship. Beyond a philosophy of the essence reigned over by the law of causality, beyond an existentialist way of thinking with transcendences lacking in ontological depth, calligraphy proposes the disappearance of forms and the dissolution of outlines, activating the principle of movement. As there are states beyond thinking and words, the ineffable in calligraphy tends to submerge into spiritual darkness, without ever reaching the last of the mysteries of the world it creates, originating in intuition and the subconscious.

¹ Cf. Wunenburger, *Filozofia imaginilor*, 13.

Developed within the Platonism of Eastern patristic thought and the philosophy of transcendence,¹ the icon is an “instrument of contemplation”² through which the soul tears itself from the sensitive world and enters the world of divine illumination. The icon is a means of accessing divinity, the “scriptures” attempting to establish a vision through a pictorial-scriptural image with singular features. It is a journey from the eye to the voice and back, and the optical and rhetorical bipolarity is proven by the fact that the correct syntagm is “to paint”, not “to write” an icon. Writing refers here not only to the signing of the artist’s name, but to the teachings of the icon³, in conformity with the teachings of the holy books. Once the name is uttered, it is manifest; it is present through having been named. However, in the case of a mystery, the revelation of meaning can only be made indirectly, mediated through an intermediary such as the icon, and symbolic knowledge, always indirect, uses contemplation⁴ in order to decipher the presence of the transcendental. The theological definition of the image goes now beyond the utilitarian and becomes a sacred art. The secret, irrational reality of the world is revealed indirectly through the two-dimensional surface within which the inspiration of the icon maker comes close to a miracle.

It has often been said that the icon does not possess its “own reality”,⁵ as it derives its theophanic value from participating in an epiphany. Hieratism, ascetiscim, the absence of volume in an icon exclude any form of materialization, and the emotion it generates transforms into a religious feeling leading to a mystical meaning (*mysterium tremendum*). As an icon does not copy nature, the real dimensions of reality are not reproduced in it, as matter itself seems to go into a meditative state. Torn from the immediate historical context, the icon is subject to the “transcendental rules of ecclesiastic vision”,⁶ as it neither proves nor demonstrates anything, only suggests “seeing the invisible”⁷ and the presence of divinity in the world. It also purifies and transfigures the viewer, leading him towards the mystery. It raises the spirit beyond itself and, helping it see the “open skies”, leads it into the divine mystery.

Giving up the representation of the visible, calligraphy also tries to become a way of presenting metaphysical contents, of revealing the absolute. Calligraphy may be read like a mandala whose morphological and aesthetical features offer a support for meditation through which the spirit may commune with the universe. The sensitive image is not its own purpose, but only a means to enter the state of supreme meditation, through which a hidden truth may be reached intuitively. The calligraphic image frees the spirit from the constraints of reality, allowing it to reach true illumination. The goal is not the ontological plenitude of divinity, but the state of being in the presence of supreme illumination. The infinite cannot be reduced to the finite, the invisible to the visible – they can only be hinted at. Through self-imposed asceticism, the calligraphy work requires poetics in which the role of visual and linguistic images is that of capturing the

¹ See Evdokimov, *Arta icoanei - o teologie a frumuseții*, 147.

² Besançon, *Imaginea interzisă. Istoria intelectuală a iconoclasmului. De la Platon la Kandinsky*, 146.

³ See Ibid., 146.

⁴ Cf. Evdokimov, *Arta icoanei - o teologie a frumuseții*, 148.

⁵ Ibid., 158.

⁶ Ibid., 160.

⁷ Ibid., 161.

inexpressible. As it is never exhausted in the immediate, of any kind, calligraphy becomes a space for reflection.



ENSŌ *The Zen circle*

Similar to the writing of a religious icon, the practice of calligraphy becomes an inner prayer both for the calligrapher and for viewer. The eye is expected not only to admire, but also to create meaning. The artist who has given birth to a world in ink is inseparable from the one contemplating it¹ and the act of creation and signification reveals to both the endless Path of Becoming:

*Je sais nourrir en moi
le Souffle intègre
dont l'Univers est habité.*²

¹ See François Cheng, *Et le souffle devient signe. Portrait d'une âme à l'encre de Chine* (Paris: L'Iconoclaste, 2010), 38.

² Mencius, apud Ibid., 104.