

RODICA FRENȚIU, *Caligrafia japoneză în memoria clipei* [Japanese Calligraphy in the Memories of the Moment] (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2021)

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The volume *Japanese Calligraphy in the Memories of the Moment* portrays the particularities of Japanese calligraphy known as *shodō*. A form of art appreciated for both its beauty of expression and its practical use, *shodō* is usually experienced through practice, rather than through the study of its theory. For this reason, a great number of books written on the study of *shodō* act as a guide to the practice of calligraphy (the use of brushes, ink and paper, proper body posture, how to trace basic character strokes etc.), rather than as treatises which illustrate and analyse the theory of *shodō* and how it has changed over the course of time. For this reason, Rodica Frențiu's book provides valuable insight into the details that shape the essence of Japanese calligraphy, offering readers a unique opportunity to learn more about this art through the author's experience and perspective.

Because *shodō* is a complex multifaceted form of art, a volume that discusses the major points of this practice in an easy-to-understand manner can prove to be challenging. In order to help the reader more easily navigate through the various issues discussed and to provide them with an overview of the main characteristics of *shodō*, the author divided the book into 5 chapters, each chapter dealing with a different aspect relating to *shodō*. The first chapter (*Japanese Calligraphy: From the Secret Medieval Teachings to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century's Avant-garde*) outlines the historical background which led to the development of *shodō*. The second chapter (*The Brush's Reverie: Writing by Painting and Painting by Writing*) deals with two very important aspects of calligraphy: the relationship between black and white and the concept of 'space' in *shodō*. The third chapter (*Japanese Calligraphy as an Artistic Act: the Visual, Dynamic and Calligraphic Dimensions*) proves the artistic qualities of *shodō* and showcases the characteristics which allowed calligraphy to maintain its importance over the course of time and successfully adapt to society's changes. The fourth chapter (*Contemplative Meditation and Transcendent Vision: the Calligraphic Work and the Byzantine Icon*) analyses the concept of 'image' and how it is perceived in the field of calligraphy, highlighting the strong connection between the visual and semantic elements of calligraphy from a spiritual perspective. The last chapter (*Memoirs of the Moment: Swift Milestones on Calligraphy's Path*) tells the personal story of the author's

journey in learning the art of *shodō* and how it changed her perspective on the Japanese language and arts.

The first chapter creates a historical framework that aids the reader in understanding the particularities of *shodō* and how the art of calligraphy came to be. The development of calligraphy is presented parallel to the development of writing in Japan, the author offering a diachronic perspective that explains *shodō* from the moment the practice was borrowed from China to the times when specific Japanese styles were created in order to differentiate *shodō* from the Chinese calligraphy model. The historical development of *shodō* culminates with the presentation of the Avant-garde period from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The chapter brings forth a very important issue that will continue to be discussed, either directly or indirectly, over the course of the following chapters: the status of *shodō* as an art. Following the era of modernization, in a time when calligraphy tried to get closer to the artistic trends of the world, *shodō* was seen by several scholars as not meeting the criteria which would make it an art. The first chapter sets the background on which the argument of calligraphy as an art presented in the third chapter is based, the author intending to argue, through the discourse of the whole volume, that *shodō*, through its highly expressive and innovative nature, has been and will continue to be an important form of art within Japanese culture.

The second chapter thoroughly analyses the relationship between black and white in the art of Japanese calligraphy. As far as colours are concerned, *shodō* makes use of only the white of the rice paper and the black of the *sumi* ink. Through her argument, the author proves that the monochrome character of a calligraphic work does not become an impediment in the creative act, on the contrary, it acts as an enhancement that allows the calligrapher to imbue the paper with their vision. As an important part of *shodō*, the five various types of calligraphy (*tensho*, *reisho*, *sōsho*, *kaisho* and *gyōsho*) are introduced in the second chapter and then later mentioned numerous times throughout the volume. The author further proceeds to explain vital aspects of calligraphy, such as ‘rhythm’ and the concept of ‘space’ and ‘pause’. Because of its apparent simplicity, *shodō* works make excellent use of each detail that goes into their creation. For this reason, the spaces between the written lines become just as important as the traces of black ink, the author providing an extensive explanation of *ma* (間, “space”) and how it is used within the inner world of a calligraphic work. For the reader, this clear and concise explanation serves as a guide that helps them get a good grasp of *shodō*’s interpretative process.

The third chapter illustrates the important role of calligraphy within Japanese society and thought. Having undergone a series of changes over the course of time, the public’s view of *shodō* has shifted, some researchers going so far as to wanting to remove calligraphy from the category of arts. Analysing *shodō*’s relationship with nature and the connection between the meaning of a

work and the receptor's interpretative process, the third chapter demonstrates that *shodō* is without a doubt a complex form of art. Moreover, calligraphy has remained an important part of everyday life, constantly finding new ways to reinvent itself in order to stay accurate to socio-cultural changes and the public's personal preferences. The author exemplifies this through the idiomatic expression 六十の手習い (*roku jū no tenarai*, "Calligraphy practice at the age of sixty," meaning "It is never too late to learn"), thus proving that the importance of calligraphy is reflected not only by the actions of people, but also by language itself. The third chapter becomes an important argument that showcases the role of *shodō* within Japanese society and helps the reader envision how and why the art of writing has become such a big part of everyday life.

The fourth chapter presents the readers one of the key elements that allowed calligraphy to be highly valued in Japan as opposed to the Occident: the close and dynamic relationship between the written word and the visual image. The author analyses the complex connection between word and image and how this relationship influences the perception of meaning. The framework on which these aspects are discussed is the spiritual dimension of calligraphy, the author making a comparison to the Byzantine icon, thus helping the reader better understand how *shodō* is perceived by the Japanese public. The chapter serves as a great introduction to Buddhism, particularly Zen Buddhism, which has had a great impact on *shodō* and its practice. Seen as a form of meditation, Japanese calligraphy has the ability to guide the practitioner to *satori* ("illumination") and help them reveal deep meanings of the outer world and their inner world. Although it is a difficult concept to explain in a brief manner, the author manages to provide a concise yet inclusive presentation of Zen Buddhism and its relationship to *shodō*. This unique comparative approach makes the argument easy to follow for both a casual reader who is interested in the Japanese language or culture, as well as for an informed reader, who is knowledgeable in the field.

The last chapter adds a distinctive note to the volume, as it has a strong subjective touch. The study of *shodō* is seen through the lens of the author's personal experience, showcasing her journey from the time she first held a brush to the numerous *shodō* expositions held both in Romania and in Japan. The chapter's tone makes it feel like a heart-to-heart dialogue with the reader, in which the author reveals profound details regarding her first interactions with the art of Japanese calligraphy and the immense impact it has had on her life. Paired with the analytical approach from the first four chapters, the final chapter ends the volume on a friendly, informal note, bringing the reader closer to the valuable experience that calligraphy can become.

Just like *shodō* fulfils both a pragmatic and an expressive function, the volume *Japanese Calligraphy in the Memories of the Moment* manages to immerse the reader into a vast field through both historical or scientific facts and

passionate writing that helps the reader experience strong emotions when observing the calligraphic works that accompany the text. The author's writing style aims to provide the readers with the best intellectual tools that will allow them to understand the art of Japanese calligraphy, while expressing at times a glimpse of the author's perspective on calligraphy through creative comparisons and analogies. In the second chapter, the author defines the logographic character as "a stylized image through which the eye, once moved by the impact with the world, wants to return this emotion to the visible," creating a powerful image that helps the reader visualise the notions discussed. This technique highlights the author's personal connection to the field and denotes a unique approach to the analysis and the volume's storytelling.

The written arguments are accompanied by calligraphic works created by the author herself, visually illustrating the content of the text. The images help the reader visualise the concepts and observe the balance between each individual component that goes into the creation of *shodō* works. The book offers the reader all the necessary tools to understand both *shodō* as an art form and individual calligraphic works, discussing the main characteristics of Japanese calligraphy in an effective, comprehensible manner.

The research is rigorous, the author citing state-of-the-art studies, which allows the readers to be up to date with the recent research trends in the field. Rodica Frențiu's proximity to calligraphy makes the volume extremely valuable, as the reader has the chance to learn about *shodō* through the eyes of both a researcher and a calligrapher. The volume presents a magnificent relationship between rigorous research and expressive writing, which reflects two of the most important characteristics of a calligrapher: discipline and creativity. The theory and personal experience support each other, illustrating theoretical facts through the author's own experience, allowing the reader to immerse themselves into the world of *shodō* and learn its characteristics directly from an accomplished calligrapher.

The volume *Japanese Calligraphy in the Memories of the Moment* is a compelling lecture for both Japanese language and culture specialists, as well as for casual readers who are interested in the field. The concepts discussed and the manner in which the subject is approached provide an extensive study that can be of use to a wide range of readers, offering valuable insight into the art of *shodō* and what makes it important within Japanese culture and society.

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