

Heard and Seen

SENGAI

Reading from right to left, a circle links with the base of a triangle, which in turn touches a rectangle. This is Sengai's universe, abstract and symbolic. 'The circle represents the infinite', writes Suzuki in the catalogue, 'and the infinite is the basis of all beings. But the infinite in itself is formless. We humans endowed with sense and intellect demand tangible forms. Hence a triangle. The triangle is the beginning of all forms. Out of it comes the square (the triangle doubled). This doubling process goes on infinitely and we have the multitudinosity of things which the Chinese philosopher calls "the ten thousand things" – that is, the universe.'

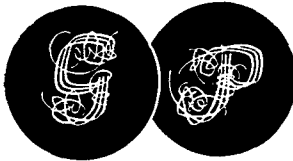
This exhibit, number 6, was the one reproduced on the posters, and the one judiciously placed to be the first seen as we entered the exhibition, still marveling that we had to pay only a shilling for the superbly presented catalogue that contains a reproduction of each one of the eighty exhibits, together with Suzuki's comments. Here indeed are ten thousand things, and each a world of its own. This was an exhibition quite unlike any other, needing to be pondered over, communicated with. One needed absolute silence, and it was best to be alone. The 'fleeting world', as Sengai paints and models it, is as significantly crystallised in the brush stroke and the moulding as it would appear to be in the flying calligraphy of the accompanying poems. A chummy old harlot offers him a gift of rather special pickles, and Tai-ki smashes his lute as an excuse for not playing at court to entertain a king. A crippled beggar is observed, and Hotei, the patron of children, gesticulates with a perpendicular arm after the manner of Edward Lear or awakes from a nightmare looking like someone from *Thurber*. A group of old men demonstrate how 'indispensable are a hood on the head, wrappers, a stick and spectacles . . . a hot water bottle, a heating stone, a chamber pot and a back scratcher'. Then there are the gods and devils, pantomime figures full of animation, and a bodhisattva full of reflection and enlightenment. An orchid, a spray of plum blossom, a cluster of bamboos driven by the wind. Two exquisite evocations of Fuji, sailing boats on a fan, and a meditating frog which is no more a caricature than any of the grotesque and humorous human figures. Sengai brings out the character of everything he sees and loves.

One could say that there is much more than art involved here, and yet, since the more important issues involved are a philosophy, a world-view, a way of life, and a vibrant personality, one is only saying that this is art at its utmost perfection, since it conveys all these effortlessly to us. Suzuki's notes and comments provide necessary background information regarding the haikus on which many of the paintings are based, but precisely in the way that Arthur Waley gives his unobtrusive explanations to the snatches of verse that are

always occurring in the Tale of Genji. The explanations are those of the self-effacing commentator absorbed in what he sees.

Sengai (1750-1837) was the hundred and twenty third abbot of Shofukuji temple, the first Zen institution established in Japan in the twelfth century. We are told that he was noted for his non-attachment, simple habits and humanitarian disposition. He retired from his abbacy at the age of sixty-two, and for the next twenty years devoted himself to people and painting. One is conscious of the sure touch of the Zen master, and with it his compassion towards all the living, whose purpose is seen to be an identification with the ultimate reality which can be called Emptiness or Fullness. Of the cicadas that sing *jiu, jiu, jiu* at the end of summer, as if they will live for ever, the Zen assertion is that they *will* live forever, 'regardless of the season, reverberating throughout the three thousand chiliocosms'.

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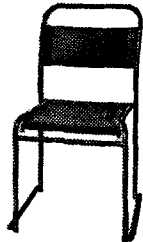
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