Hodo Tobase Roshi with a student

Creation in the Instant: An Interview with Painter Gordon Onslow-Ford

On May 13, 1991, Michael Wenger and Kaz Tanahashi met with Gordon Onslow-Ford. Discussion focused on the life and art of Hodo Tobase Roshi, who preceded Suzuki Roshi as abbot of Sokoji. Tobase Roshi invited Suzuki Roshi to come to San Francisco in the 1950s. Gordon, born in 1912, studied calligraphy with Tobase for several years. There will be an exhibit of Tobase Roshi's art in the Zen Center Art Lounge, November 1–December 15, 1991.

MW: We're in Gordon's studio in Inverness, the fire is going and we're talking about Gordon's work, about Hodo Tobase, and the relationship between them.

GOF: I was very fond of Hodo Tobase. Fond isn't a strong enough word. I had a bond with him. Tobase was the fourth or fifth son of a farmer. The monastery of Eiheiji asked his father to give them a child, so Tobase was given to Eiheiji when he was eight or nine years old. He was looked after with great affection for four years and then he was entered into monastic training. He was really a child of the monastery. He had the greatest affection for it. It was his home.

After World War II, he was sent here by the Japanese Government to give consolation to all the Japanese-American farmers whose land had been taken away during the War. He arrived to a very sad situation. He was oriented entirely towards the Japanese-American community rather than towards the general public. He didn't speak English, although I have a feeling that he understood much more than he let on. Tobase wasn't a scholar in any way, he was a monk who had great wisdom about the mind. He knew about human beings. He wasn't particularly interested in politics or modern art.

He was perhaps five-foot-three and very robust. As well as being a calligrapher, he was a cook. He spent twelve years as a cook in his monastery. When we went to a Chinese or Japanese restaurant, he used to walk straight into the kitchen and talk to the chef. We had such dinners as I've never had, before or since. He was also a wrestler, which stood him in good stead once or twice defending his groceries on Bush Street.

MW: How did your interest in calligraphy start?

GOF: I met Saburo Hasegawa, a well-known Japanese painter and calligrapher, through Alan Watts. I took him for a walk in Muir Woods. Hasegawa was a man of Tea. He was dressed in an immaculate brown kimono. We walked for two hours and he didn't say anything and I didn't say anything. Afterwards we went to my studio, which at that time was on board the ferry boat Vallejo moored in Sausalito. When we got on board, after looking around, he indicated that he would like to do some calligraphy. We cleared an area of paints and brushes and spread newspaper on the floor. Hasegawa took out of his sleeve a two hundred year old ink wrapped in a brocade, an ink stone, a roll of paper and a brush. He placed the paper flat with small stones at each corner, ground the ink rhythmically and gently, and then was still for some time. It seemed that it had taken him the best part of the afternoon to prepare to write.

He made the character for infinity that contains all the brush strokes employed in square writing *(Kaisho)*. And then he made a one-two-three which is a test of the calligrapher's skill. The six lines have to be placed correctly on the paper; each line is given a different weight and the spacing between each line is different.

After my first calligraphy lesson, I was convinced that I was a barbarian and that I had to pursue this. The next day I invited a few friends, among them Lucienne Bloch, the painter, to the ferry. In front of a blazing fire, Hasegawa gave us tea and made some calligraphy. When Hasegawa left after a week, he was in good shape and I was exhausted, but hooked on calligraphy. I sent him a haiku:

A sheet of paper/on the ferry deck/how white the mountain water.

Anyway, Lucienne Bloch was so impressed with Hasegawa that she went around Japantown looking for a calligraphy master who would teach. "No, no...there's no one here, but there's that old monk Tobase in the Zen Temple on Bush Street and he may know something about calligraphy." So she went to Sokoji to ask Tobase if he would teach calligraphy and he said "yes." I never heard Tobase say no; he always said yes. If someone asked him to do something: "Yes." Always yes. His affability was somewhat stern and people never dared to ask him to do something that was untoward.

Tobase's first few classes at the Asian Academy met in the subterranean kitchen/dining room on Monday nights after the students finished supper. Later he suggested that we meet at his temple, Sokoji, at 1881 Bush Street. This was in 1952. He had a wonderful kitchen. There was the big hall, the zendo, and behind that a spacious kitchen. We had the most friendly and enlightening meetings.

Tobase was a benevolent tyrant. He'd give us a tremendous amount of work. Just to study four characters a week, to be able to write them with a feeling of what they meant was enough, but there was always something else. I gave my best energies to calligraphy for five years and learned by leaps and bounds. It was just what I had been lacking. Because the surrealists in Paris with whom I had grown up had made intuitively many of the discoveries of Zen but they didn't have any metaphysics; they didn't know how to talk about it. They were poets and painters and revolutionaries and they didn't have the wisdom of Buddhism behind them. So my calligraphy studies complemented my life as a painter.

I know that this was an enormous adventure for Tobase, too. He had no expectation of meeting the general American public, he was there to comfort the Japanese-American community. This calligraphy class was an unexpected encounter for him.

MW: Why is calligraphy so important? What did your relationship with Tobase Roshi bring to your life and to your work?

GOF: I had discovered that the line, the circle and the dot were the three elements at the root of art before I met Tobase Sensei. But I was making line, circle, dot elements in a rather mechanical way that did not have the blood and bones of calligraphy. After studying *Kaisho* and *Sosho* (square writing and grass writing), I continued working faster until grass writing became illegible and changed into painting. As the line speeds up, it moves from one world to another. The fastest lines possible are the line, the circle and the dot. When a meandering line changes its kind of motion, it slows up, but a circle can go round at full speed, a line can dash up and down at full speed and a dot can hit the paper with maximum intensity. This confirmed my

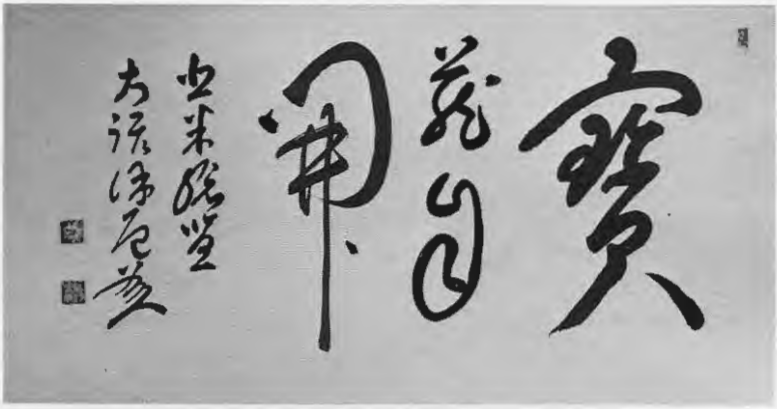
conviction that line-circle-dot elements make up the "seed" world, that is, as far as art is concerned, the ground of existence within and without.

Little by little I discovered through my meetings with Tobase Sensei that calligraphy—not writing about something but expressing yourself in line—was the way of talking about the spirit. That gave a fluency and assurance to what I was doing. Western calligraphy is different. It's done with a rigid nib with a strong technique. It is done with the fingers and the wrist while Chinese and Japanese calligraphy is done with the whole body/mind.

My painting is a form of meditation. For a day to have depth I need to paint. It was working with Sensei that clarified this feeling. I wrote a book called *Painting in the Instant* in which I tried to make a synthesis between the automatism of surrealism and the spirit of Zen in calligraphy. The book revolves about the Instant. You cannot think about the Instant any more than you can think about the Big Bang. They are beyond conception but they are present.

KT: How did Tobase teach—in what way?

GOF: He chose some saying—usually a Zen saying of four or five characters—and he wrote it. Then he made a small copy for everyone in the class. We had to study that in meaning and in brush stroke. We had to know it by the next time we came. We had to be able to do it in Kaisho and Sosho. He used to correct with a red ink brush on top of what we had done. If he liked it he put a red circle on the side; if he didn't, he indicated very boldly on top. This was so expressive, we could tell exactly the spirit of the character.



Tobase Sensei's calligraphy

KT: When you were training as a painter, maybe you copied Western paintings...

GOF: When I went to Paris in 1937 I did go to study with Andre L'Hote for six weeks and with Fernand Leger for four days, but I realized that my way was not to paint with a student mentality. Of course, I learned from Leger as he was a great painter. When I left his class he congratulated me and I went to see him from time to time in his studio. Right from the beginning I was involved in an adventure. I think it is true to say that I was original from the beginning; not very good, but I was on new territory.

The surrealists were interested in dreams and myths and making a synthesis between the dream world and daily living. We got into terrible trouble—there weren't any gurus—and there were disasters in all directions. Matta [the seminal surrealist artist] and I saw that the future of art lay in discovering the worlds beyond dreams. And we found a way to get in there.

KT: That was before World War II?

GOF: Yes. I started painting automatically. Automatic lines have their own reality and it soon became clear to me that I was in the inner world, beyond dreams. Once I discovered that, I had a direction which I have followed ever since.

MW: You had that in 1940?

GOF: In 1938. I started off as a good surrealist being interested in dreams. I had a notebook and I tried to write down my dreams. If you make a drawing of a dream, you can suggest some episode but the rest disappears. Remembering a dream and then painting it is an illustration of a past event that misses the dream reality. I wanted to find a way of expressing the functioning of the mind directly as it happens.

The spiritual in art, as I see it, is a message from the invisible, intangible inner worlds. While painting it appears directly from mind to canvas. It awakens awe. The spiritual in art is always growing from the edge of the collective unconscious.

KT: Often people kind of mix up spiritual with religious....

GOF: I do not wish to try and speak for traditional religions. When asked what my religion is, I say I'm a painter.

KT: When you were copying the same thing over and over again, it was different from your own discipline—wasn't it confusing?

GOF: Learning Chinese calligraphy for me is more than copying. It is acquiring a new kind of sensitivity that increases my potential as a painter. With a knowledge of Japanese and Chinese calligraphy, additional accents—whiskers, tails—become available. I was fascinated with the Chinese and Japanese characters; it was like imprinting something on my memory. Just like the early landscapes I did served to imprint beauty on my memory, to give me a bank of beautiful memories. The symmetry and the beauty of the Chinese characters is a whole facet of existence; it gives you a whole aesthetic attitude toward life.

KT: Your own painting with oil or watercolor...or using Chinese or Japanese brushes—How do you see the difference?

GOF: Studying Chinese calligraphy was something new for me. I never set out to become a Chinese calligrapher. I was always after my expression as a painter. My calligraphy studies led me to throwing paint in the air. Using the brush as a means to express a form or an object is using the brush with an ulterior motive. But in calligraphy, you are concentrating just on the line that you are making. When you have a character, you've got it in your soul: you've got the whole balance of it. That allows you to express how you feel about the character. Calligraphy, as I use it in painting, is a way of expression that happens as it is being made.

Tobase Sensei said to me that if he saw a character written by a Zen monk over the last three hundred years, he could tell who wrote it and how he was feeling.

KT: Did you feel that you could understand the quality of Tobase's calligraphy when you were just beginning?

GOF: I felt every brush stroke that Tobase Sensei made from the very first. When he was writing he captured my full attention. Critical considerations never entered my mind. The more I got to know Tobase's calligraphy, the more I appreciated it. Hasegawa and Tobase Sensei were very different.

Hasegawa's calligraphy was elegant, formal, and scholarly. Sensei's calligraphy was masterful, vigorous, lively.

MW: You studied some meditation with him. Did he suggest that as an adjunct to calligraphy or was calligraphy an adjunct to meditation or were they both their own thing?

GOF: We really only meditated occasionally and never when there was a full class. But sometimes when I was there with Tobase, he said, "Let's sit." He had wonderful advice about meditation, about how to breathe, how to bring the world in. I really have the impression that Tobase did his best to give me all that he could. I think he was a person who was genuinely loved by all his students. He was a ball of certainty—the kind of energy people could move around with a feeling of security.

KT: Would you tell a little about the exhibition of his calligraphy at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art? When did it take place?

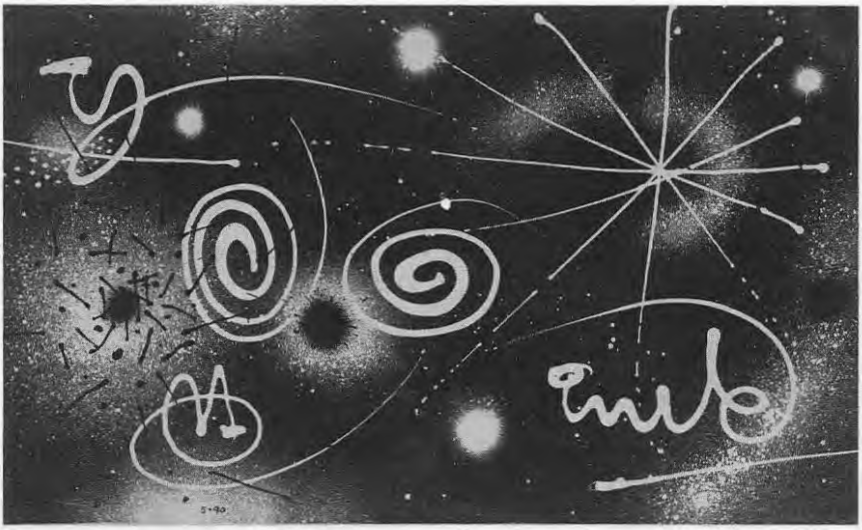
GOF: I was on good terms with the Director of the San Francisco Museum of Art (as it was called at that time), Dr. Grace McCann Morely. She had majored in Hindu Art at Berkeley and later became the first director of the National Museum of Indian Art in New Delhi. I said to her that there's a Zen master here who is a calligrapher, and she offered Tobase Sensei an exhibition. We were given a big gallery and the show was striking. It was a Zen manifesto for those who could read and for those who could not. Tobase Sensei's *Mystery Elegance* was a forward at the entrance and it remains an appropriate statement of priorities to this day.

KT: You see his pieces in an aesthetic way... in a spiritual way?

GOF In a sentimental way too.

MW: How would you describe how you took your study with him further?

GOF: I've taken calligraphy beyond Sosho, the grass writing. I work in the air. I don't work with a brush. I discovered that the speed with which you make a calligraphy determines the nature of the calligraphy. Basically, each inner world has a range of speeds within which it appears. The inner worlds appear faster than you can think. If you work spontaneously, you have a chance of catching them. You know it but you couldn't get it unless you could work faster than you could think. Once you've got it down, it's an inspiring and elating experience. You enter a kind of second childhood; you cast care aside. But you have to be able to cultivate the power of paying attention. That's really what great art is about: paying attention. Students often are distracted. A little part of their mind is wishing for or thinking of something else.



A painting by Gordon Onslow-Ford

KT: You know if you study Oriental art, maybe one tendency will be to make your art look Oriental. For you the influence seems to be not superficial at all. You don't work on that level—to get influence. It seems to be more in your heart.

GOF: On the one hand, art has the flavor of the place where the painter lives. Where would my art be today without the sunshine in the fog? On the other hand it is an expression of one's state of awareness. I would like my painting to be a bridge between Europe and America, between America and the Orient. East and West are meeting around the Pacific. The art of our age now coming into focus points towards a one-world art.

I have been on my own for the past forty-five years and I'm just beginning. Honestly, I'm just beginning. But I hope that other people will be able to take what I've done and be able to grow from it. Art comes from the inside out. Art doesn't come from trying to depict something out there. It's what the mind awakens.

If you pay full attention to what you are doing, to what is happening, you will find something new. It is only when you are tired or thinking about something else that you do what you already know. Creation happens in the instant. In the instant everything is present, everything is fresh. All that there is, is in the instant. It doesn't have anything to do with speed—you can paint slowly in the instant as well as you can paint fast. But you pay full attention. When it comes off, it's in the instant.