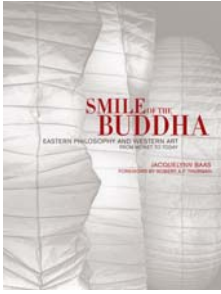


**Smile of the Buddha: Eastern Philosophy and Western Art from Monet to Today** / Jacquelynn Baas.--Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, September 2005.—312 p.: ill.--ISBN 0-520-24208-4 (cl., alk. paper): \$45.00.



In *Smile of the Buddha*, author Baas examines the possible influence of Buddhism in the work of selected American and European artists from the last quarter of the nineteenth century to the present. An intended outcome of such exploration, according to the author, is an enriched understanding of modern art from a perspective that is not well researched. Baas is frank about an overarching challenge with such investigation: “A Western form of artistic expression that has been influenced by Buddhism may not ‘look’ Buddhist, in terms of either its subject matter or style. The criteria will include whether the artist had the possibility of contact with Buddhism through texts, artistic expression, or other information and whether the content or effect of the work is in keeping with the psychological and philosophical perspectives of Buddha” (p. 9). Thus the author takes on the formidable challenge of making more approachable generally abstract, non-objective art by elucidating a relationship with a religion that is, for many Western readers, similarly abstract and distant.

The book’s skillful organization succeeds in accommodating diverse content in a readable and attractive presentation. Following an introduction that summarizes Buddhism’s history and core beliefs are five thematic sections that contain richly illustrated essays on twenty artists. For example, the section entitled “The Infinite Moment” focuses on how Buddhist texts and Asian art introduced to the West in the late nineteenth century inspired such artists as Vincent Van Gogh, Edouard Monet, Paul Gauguin, and Odilon Redon. “Other Dimensions,” explores the link of non-objective art with spirituality as manifested in the works of Wassily Kandinsky, Constantin Brancusi, Marcel Duchamp, and Georgia O’Keeffe. “The Space of Art” generally deals with the affinities between making art and the meditative practices of Zen Buddhism with artists Isamu Noguchi, Ad Reinhardt, Yves Klein, and Jasper Johns as examples. The fourth section, “The Sound of the Mind,” delves into concepts like chance, emancipation, and viewer participation as evident in the performance works of John Cage, Nam June Paik, Yoko Ono, and Laurie Anderson. Beginning each section is an essay that describes developments in Buddhism contemporaneous with the artists under review.

The relationship of Buddhism and modern art is a continuing research interest of author Baas, director emeritus of the University of California Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. In 1999, she collaborated with Mary Jane Jacob to create an arts consortium called *Awake: Art, Buddhism, and the Dimensions of Consciousness*. According to its Web site, <<http://www.artandbuddhism.org>>, *Awake* aims “to reveal to the American public the threads of Buddhist influence that run through the fabric of contemporary culture and the potential for satisfying aesthetic experience engendered by an open, aware state of mind.” *Smile of the Buddha* and a previous publication co-edited by Baas and Jacob, *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), are described as vehicles for disseminating the research of this collaboration.

The passion for this research evidenced in the *Awake* Web site also suffuses *Smile of the Buddha* and explains the author’s occasional imaginative leaps that attempt to connect some of the art discussed with Buddhist philosophy. Nevertheless, this book is a pioneering effort that overall achieves its goal of employing a new perspective to appreciate modern art. The substantial footnotes and lengthy bibliography provide ample support for continued research. Recommended for larger library collections with collecting interests in modern art and Asian religions.

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