



Sky Above, Great Wind: The Life and Poetry of Zen Master Ryokan

Ryokan

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Ryokan (1758–1831) is, along with Dogen and Hakuin, one of the three giants of Zen in Japan. But unlike his two renowned colleagues, Ryokan was a societal dropout, living mostly as a hermit and a beggar. He was never head of a monastery or temple. He liked playing with children. He had no dharma heir. Even so, people recognized the depth of his realization, and he was sought out by people of all walks of life for the teaching to be experienced in just being around him. His poetry and art were wildly popular even in his lifetime. He is now regarded as one of the greatest poets of the Edo Period, along with Basho, Buson, and Issa. He was also a master artist-calligrapher with a very distinctive style, due mostly to his unique and irrepressible spirit, but also because he was so poor he didn't usually have materials: his distinctive thin line was due to the fact that he often used twigs rather than the brushes he couldn't afford. He was said to practice his brushwork with his fingers in the air when he didn't have any paper. There are hilarious stories about how people tried to trick him into doing art for them, and about how he frustrated their attempts. As an old man, he fell in love with a young Zen nun who also became his student. His affection for her colors the mature poems of his late period. This collection contains more than 140 of Ryokan's poems, with selections of his art, and of the very funny anecdotes about him.

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