

SUZUKI ROSHI

By Narcissus Quagliata

In my life, Suzuki Roshi was the person who made me face a wall and get to know myself. He was the person who inspired me to still the noise of my mind and to finally turn an inquisitive ear to an amazing world.

Suzuki Roshi, a Zen master, came to California from Japan in the early 1960s after a lifelong study and practice of Zen meditation. My observation is that his love was the essence and the spirit of zazen (Japanese for meditation), a practice developed and refined for centuries in the Orient.

I was extremely lucky to meet him and to have a chance to practice with him. In my twenties, I had just come from Italy, restless and in terrible need of change—emotionally hungry for a new way to view the world. I was deeply inspired and affected by Suzuki Roshi, whose personal example helped me mature. His teaching was direct, not intellectual, a practice not a philosophy. He helped me learn the art of meditation and turn my attention inward.

In his sixties, Suzuki Roshi was full of humor, yet quite capable of instilling fear and expressing great anger. I studied with him from 1964 until his death in 1971.

Several years after Suzuki Roshi died, while suffering a personal crisis, I realized how I would have very much loved to see him. He had a way of almost chemically bringing me into another emotional space during my visits; he would show me the world from another viewpoint, a more interesting viewpoint. I missed that.

The melancholy feeling that he was gone then really hit me, so I decided to do a portrait of him in glass. And by doing this I felt I would bring him into my life again. From a photograph I carefully worked out a silhouette, and once I had the silhouette on the drawing it was like he was in my studio. I could feel his presence right there. So the whole piece was an invocation trying to get him to come out of the air so I could be with him. I didn't have anything to say to him, just his presence was important to me at that time.

Once I had the silhouette, I began thinking what to do inside it. There was a quality in him that I loved so much, which was very warm and very cold at the same time. I always equated it to the night sky when you're in the country and there are no city lights. You look at the stars and you are in awe of them. In a way, they are very comforting, in another way they are not comforting at all—they are very disquieting. You have a double feeling, and this double feeling was also in his person.

Facing Page: "Suzuki Roshi." 1979. Watercolor. Collection of the artist. 72 by 48 inches.



Photo by William Kane