

Whose Asia?

The Case of Brice Marden's Cold Mountain (1989 to 1991)

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I. The Question, and Why a Western Case

Over the years I have often received invitations of a particular kind. Would I write about this Chinese artist? Could I say something about the state of contemporary art in Asia? Surely I understand the Eastern philosophy behind this work better than they do. Those asking rarely mean any harm, and some are entirely sincere. But the invitations share a logic. They assume that my judgement has a natural sphere of application, and that this sphere coincides with where I come from. I am seldom asked to discuss a British painter, because by the same logic I am assumed to be unqualified to speak about how a British artist born and raised here handles his or her own cultural identity.

So when I read the criticism on Brice Marden, I recognised something familiar. Here was a white American painter who never systematically studied calligraphy and who had not been to China when he made the works in question, yet who is described again and again as having fused Eastern philosophy and Zen into his painting. The same logic, applied to him and applied to me, runs in opposite directions. It confines me to subjects that match my origins, while allowing him to speak about anything, and rewarding him with extra recognition when he speaks about the East.

That is why I am writing this essay. I do not intend to introduce Marden; enough introductions exist already, most of them better and deeper than anything I could offer. The question I want to raise concerns me directly: whose property is 'Asianness'? Does it come from the artist's origins, from the work itself once every other element has been stripped away, or from the viewer's point of view? To think this through, the least suitable subjects are precisely the artists I am usually assigned to write about. In artists of Asian background, identity and label are tangled together, and one cannot tell whether a critic is describing form or descent. Marden offers a chance to separate the two. He has no identity to borrow, so the source of the label has nowhere to hide.

I borrow him, as he borrowed Hanshan.

II. Heterogeneous Materials and an Inverted Chronology

Let us look at the historical events that produced what is called the 'Asian influence' in Marden's work.

In 1983 he travelled with his family to Thailand, Sri Lanka and India, and afterwards began to bring elements of certain Asian traditions into his work. In Thailand he collected and sketched shells on the beach; the Shell Drawings of 1985 to 1987 extended that experience.^[1]

See Brice Marden, *Shell Studies*, 1984, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.^[2]

From 4 October 1984 to 6 January 1985, Japan House Gallery and the Asia Society in New York jointly presented *Masters of Japanese Calligraphy, 8th to 19th Century*.^[3] The exhibition is often seen as the decisive trigger. What he saw there was brushwork that flowed and expressed, stressing rhythm and continuity rather than fixed character forms.

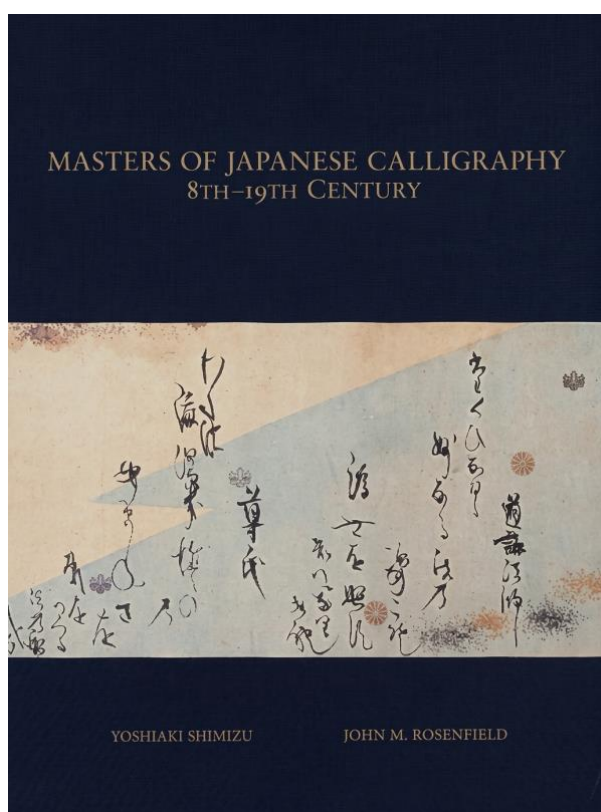


Figure 1. Cover of the exhibition catalogue *Masters of Japanese Calligraphy, 8th to 19th Century* (1984). Photograph by Min Zhang. For publication details see note 3.

In the late 1980s he came across Red Pine's translation of *Hanshan* by chance in a bookshop. The book printed the Chinese originals alongside the English. He later said it was precisely that form he seized on: four couplets, with five or ten characters to each.^[4]

Between 1989 and 1991 he completed *Cold Mountain*: six principal paintings, each roughly nine feet by twelve.

See Brice Marden, *Cold Mountain 6 (Bridge)*, 1989 to 1991, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.^[5]

In 1995 he travelled to Japan, China and Hong Kong. In Kyoto he was moved by the dry landscape gardens; only in Suzhou did he fully grasp the spiritual weight of the art, and it is said

that at the moment the Guanyun Peak came into view, he ‘got it’. That same year he bought his first scholar’s rock.^[6]

These historical events do not connect.

Shells on a Thai beach have nothing to do with the linked cursive of Japanese kana. The continuous flow of Japanese calligraphy and the grid of Chinese verse, five characters to the line, are within the traditions of writing two different things: one takes characters apart and dissolves them into breath, the other locks them into an invisible grid. Between the Taihu rocks of Suzhou and the four items before them there is still less of a formal passage. If I placed these five things side by side and said they constituted something called ‘Asianness’, anyone with training would ask what I was talking about.

Their only common feature is that, seen from Manhattan, they all lie in the same direction. The collective term holds not because the things it gathers resemble one another, but because whoever does the gathering stands at a similar distance from each of them.

The order is also a problem. The trip to Suzhou is often placed within accounts of the ‘Eastern origins’ of Cold Mountain, yet it took place four years after the series was finished. The rocks shaped what he made from the middle of the 1990s onwards. To use them to explain Cold Mountain is to backdate a later experience into an earlier work, and such backdating is not rare in writing about him, and is seldom flagged as backdating.

As for his initiation, it was Japanese calligraphy seen in New York; what led him to the layout of Chinese verse was an English translation found in an American bookshop. Both events took place within Western systems of display and publishing. The ‘Eastern’ origins were, from the outset, something already translated, already curated, already bound.

III. Where the Transfer Happens: Legibility and Irreversibility

Standing before Cold Mountain, a British viewer and I do not see the same painting.

This is not rhetoric; it is a consequence of literacy. Vertical columns, right to left, five to a column: the moment this layout enters the field of vision, reading is triggered automatically, a reflex no native reader of Chinese can switch off. Then it fails. Read again; fail again. The shapes have the weight of strokes, the poise of their openings and endings, the positions where strokes ought to be, yet they do not form a single character. It feels like someone speaking to me in my mother tongue: every sound correct, the whole meaningless.

The failure carries information. A viewer who cannot read Chinese sees ‘calligraphic brushwork’, a positive and complete aesthetic object; I see ‘characters that are not characters’, a

continuous process of meaning breaking down. The same image yields two utterly different experiences, and the English literature on these paintings has come mainly from the first.

Marden himself was unequivocal. 'It's not a form of writing. I'm not trying to make a language,' he told Pat Steir, adding that he understood Chinese calligraphy simply as he saw it, without knowing the language.^[7] These words are more accurate than anything later said on his behalf.

So the first thing that did not transfer is legibility. The strokes of a Chinese character carry two functions at once, form and meaning, and the two cannot be separated. Calligraphy is not abstract painting precisely because every deformation of a stroke must take place within the bounds of the recognisable; its tension comes from the line between reading and not reading. Take that line away and what remains is form, which all painting shares.

The second is irreversibility, and it matters more, because even I have to stand before the paintings to see it.

Calligraphy stakes everything on the irreversibility of time. Once a stroke falls it is there; there is no returning to the moment before the brush met the paper, and the work is the trace of a process that cannot be repeated. Looking at calligraphy is largely a matter of reading that process: the hesitation of the opening stroke, the speed of the line, the point where the ink turns from wet to dry. This is also why copying, in this tradition, is basic training rather than replication. What one learns is not a shape but another person's time in the moving brush.

Here a common misunderstanding must be avoided. Irreversible does not mean uncorrectable. The transmitted copies of the *Lanting Xu* show more than ten corrections; Yan Zhenqing's *Draft of a Eulogy for My Nephew* is covered in circled revisions and deletions, with some characters blotted out entirely; and these two works stand at the very summit of the tradition.^[8] Later viewers of the *Eulogy* read precisely those deletions, taking them as evidence of the writer's grief. The deletions are themselves proof of irreversibility: if one could undo, there would be no need to strike out.

What matters is not whether correction is allowed but the direction it takes. A deleted character stays on the paper; the act of circling becomes a readable stroke in its own right; added characters squeeze between the lines; the sequence is plain to see. Correction is absorbed into the record of time rather than erasing it. A character written badly and then corrected still stands, because the viewer can reconstruct how it went wrong and at what moment it was abandoned.

Marden goes the opposite way. He paints, then covers what he does not want with white, layer upon layer, revising again and again; the series occupied him from 1989 to 1991. He described the paintings as in a sense very realistic, because he could never truly take anything out: what had been painted out became images in their own right.^[9] The remark deserves a careful reading. He concedes that nothing can be removed, but he concedes it in the sense of covering. Standing before the

painting one can see old lines rising again beneath the white, the ghosts of rejected paths. Marden also said that, looking closely, one could probably distinguish each time the painting was worked on.^[10] That remark makes the point exactly. What can be distinguished are layers, each session a layer; what cannot be recovered is the time inside them, which stroke followed which, whether a minute or three weeks passed between two marks. The traces remain; the sequence has been compressed into strata. In the *Eulogy*, by contrast, every correction stays where it happened, and the sequence is the whole meaning of the work.

So the difference is not between correction and its absence, but whether correction leaves events or strata. Corrections in writing lie side by side on the page, each keeping its place in time; corrections in oil painting are pressed one on top of another, compressing time into a result that can no longer be divided.

To begin from outward form is an entirely legitimate procedure in the history of painting. Cold Mountain is outstanding painting, and its quality has nothing to do with what it borrowed. When we say these works ‘possess Asianness’, what we mean, stated precisely, is layout and the rhythm of the brush; and within the value system of Chinese calligraphy these belong to the outermost layer, the most portable and the least freighted with meaning. What a critical category that places ‘Asianness’ in this layer is actually describing seems to me worth asking.

There is also a methodological problem, one I realised only in the course of writing. Of the two absences above, the absence of legibility is visible in a picture of any size, while the absence of irreversibility is visible only in front of the original. The covering layers and resurfacing lines are measured in centimetres, the canvases in feet; reduced to a printed page or a screen, they are the first things to vanish. What remains is black vertical columns on a pale ground, which is to say the layer in which these paintings look most like calligraphy.

Reproduction systematically preserves the evidence that makes Cold Mountain look Eastern and filters out the evidence that makes it look otherwise. And a large part of the writing on these paintings has been done on the basis of reproductions. This is not carelessness on the critics’ part. The evidence in their hands has already passed through a sieve, and the sieve always faces the same way.

IV. Two Positions for Hanshan: The Chinese Canon and American Reception

The Hanshan Marden read and the Hanshan known to Chinese readers are not the same person.

Within Chinese literary history Hanshan is a marginal and eccentric presence. His poems are classed as vernacular and popular verse, long transmitted within Chan monasteries rather than the literati canon. Wang Anshi wrote twenty poems in imitation of him, and Zhu Xi took an interest in his collection, which shows that he was not unread; but no one would place him beside Du Fu or

Wang Wei. Hu Shi counted him among the representative vernacular poets of the early Tang, and the frame of that judgement is still ‘the vernacular’, an exception measured against the canon.^[11]

In America he is a founding saint. In 1954 Arthur Waley translated 27 of his poems in *Encounter*; in 1958 Gary Snyder translated 24; the same year Jack Kerouac dedicated his novel *The Dharma Bums* to Hanshan, and the Beats took him as a spiritual idol. In 1962 Burton Watson translated 100 poems, reissued eight years later by Columbia University Press, and Hanshan entered the university classroom.^[12]

This gap is not a curiosity; it is a direct illustration of the argument. The book Marden opened in a bookshop was already the product of Western canon formation. He believed he was connecting with the Chinese poetic tradition; in fact he was connecting with that tradition as reordered in America. And the logic of the reordering was that America after the war needed an East that stood apart from the establishment, reclusive and Zen, and so picked out from a vast poetic history the one figure who suited best.

One layer further down: Hanshan left no manuscripts in his own hand, and whether he existed at all is in doubt. The closest surviving witness to the archetype is a Southern Song printed edition in the line of the Guoqing Monastery edition of 1189, recut at Donggao Monastery, with a prefatory poem added by Wuwo Huishen. It is now held by the Imperial Household Agency in Japan and is the only surviving copy of the Guoqing line.^[13] In other words, the continuous thread imagined as running from the rock faces of the Tang to Manhattan is made, at every link, of woodblock printing, sinological translation and publishing. The layout Marden took was, strictly speaking, not Tang but woodblock.

This suits his way of working rather well: what he wanted was layout, not handwriting. The thing called ‘the East’ had been processed many times over before it reached his hands.

V. The Artist’s Three Refusals

At least three times in his life Marden refused the categories others gave him, and each refusal had the same structure.

In the 1960s he refused Minimalism. His monochrome panels, made with oil and wax, were quickly absorbed into the lineage of Minimalist painting, and to this day a standard reference work states that he helped to define it.^[14] Yet the frames of reference he offered always lay within the history of painting: light, feeling, mood, particular older pictures.

Around 1990 he refused the notion of calligraphy, as discussed above.

In the same period he refused spiritual painting. Asked whether the Zen search in Hanshan’s poems resonated in the paintings, he said he had responded very strongly to the poetry at the time

but would never say he was trying to put something spiritual into a painting; if he put anything in, it was his acceptance that such possibilities exist in painting.^[15] In conversation with Pat Steir he put it more fully: art certainly carries a spiritual thread, but you cannot set out to make spiritual painting.^[16]

Three refusals across thirty years, one structure: accept borrowing at the level of form, refuse belonging at the level of category. And the same outcome each time: the label stuck regardless.

One more detail. He told Steir that he had once wanted nothing to do with Oriental or Asian art, feeling that as a Westerner he simply could not understand a different philosophy, and that one of the benefits of reaching middle age was no longer feeling obliged to restrict himself in this way.^[17]

What he gave up was not the premise that East and West have incommensurable philosophies, but that premise's hold over him personally. He never argued that the two could communicate; he simply stopped treating their failure to communicate as a reason not to act. To define his work through a category that even he treated as a prejudice to overcome, rather than a fact to accept, is slippery indeed.

VI. How Labels Are Produced

If refusal fails, the impetus does not lie on the artist's side.

Open some dealers' descriptions of his work and you can read, on the same page, two contradictory statements: he is called a master of Minimalism, and a remark attributed to him says, in effect, that he uses painting as a sounding board for the spirit, a way into a place where thought stops.^[18] The remark appears in market texts without a source. Whether it is genuine hardly matters, because its function is independent of its truth. It exists to set a label for storytelling beside a label for pricing. The two labels serve different needs, and so need not agree.

The same mechanism handles his Eastern sources. The artist's account is narrow, specific and conditional: I used the layout, I used the brushwork, I do not know the language, I do not make spiritual painting. The descriptions produced from it are broad, abstract and unconditional: Eastern philosophy, Zen, meditative depth, the fusion of East and West. The latter is not a paraphrase of the former but a replacement. What gets replaced is every qualification, and qualifications are exactly what a person uses to protect their judgement.

None of this is new. In the 1930s Mark Tobey developed his white writing, whose all-over compositions are often compared with Pollock's in debates over priority; Franz Kline's black and white structures were repeatedly likened to calligraphy, and although he had corresponded with the Japanese experimental calligraphy group Bokujinkai, he later publicly denied the connection.^[19] Add Cage's Zen, Snyder's Hanshan and the Beats, and one has a whole line of thought that treated

‘the East’ as an internal resource of American art after the Second World War. The same structure ran once around 1950 and again around 1990, in almost the same form. Repetition is itself evidence that there is a mechanism. Marden was not its originator but a late inheritor, and when he walked into that exhibition in 1984, the ‘East’ he encountered had already been digested by an earlier generation of American artists and thoroughly Americanised. He said at the time that the only Western art he was investigating was Pollock, and that one of the greatest statements of the twentieth century was Pollock’s ‘I am Nature’.^[20] What he recognised in Hanshan, he recognised through Pollock’s eyes.

When a Chinese calligrapher absorbs the formal language of the modern West, it is usually called modern transformation or contemporaneity; when an American painter absorbs the formal language of East Asia, it is called Asianness or Eastern influence. Influence flowing from the centre is recorded as universal; influence flowing from the margins is recorded as regional. This asymmetry does not by itself prove the category wrong, but it is enough to show that the category has never been neutral.

VII. An Objection, and the Author’s Own Implication

If every influence across cultures is reduced to a history of reception, to who produces which discourse, then the formal migration that really took place is cancelled out. The visual kinship between Cold Mountain and Song calligraphy can be verified by the eye; it is not something talked into being. Layout and brushwork are portable techniques, and their effectiveness does not depend on whether the carrier knows the language. A painter who cannot read Latin can still learn from the letter spacing of Roman inscriptions, and we would not say the ‘Romanness’ of his work had been produced. More sharply: to demand that a form migrate together with its native value system is itself a kind of essentialism, and one that would fail every act of learning across cultures.

Form can indeed migrate independently, and the achievement of Cold Mountain is indeed real.

I do not claim that migration did not happen, nor that it only counts if complete. My claim is that migration happens at particular layers, and that the category of ‘Asianness’ operates precisely by not specifying the layer. If a review says ‘Marden borrowed the vertical layout of Chinese verse and the rhythm of calligraphic brushwork’, that is precise, verifiable and entirely sound, and I have no objection. But the common formula is different: ‘a fusion of Eastern philosophy and meditative depth’. The difference is not one of degree; the first describes the work, the second describes belonging. The analogy with Roman inscriptions fails precisely because no one would call a painter who studied their letter spacing an artist of Romanness, and no market needs such a term.

I write criticism, edit a journal, and curate exhibitions of Asian artists outside Asia. I know well that the position of ‘Chinese critic’ is here both a limit and a pass. Some commissions come to me

because an editor needs an Asian name to vouch for them; the real content of some invitations is to explain something I understand no better than they do. More awkward still, I produce these sentences myself. If a piece is to be accepted, spelling out the ‘cultural identity’ paragraph often works better than spelling out the formal analysis, and I know how to write that paragraph. I take the category apart while using it fluently. So this essay is not an outsider’s accusation but a confession. I criticise this discourse while admitting that I am one of its operators. I have even used Marden’s own move: I borrow his name to deal with my own problem, just as he borrowed Hanshan’s name to deal with his problems in painting. The only difference is that I have written the borrowing down.

VIII. Unequal Costs

Around 1990 this discourse acted on an American artist borrowing East Asian forms, inflating his narrow and specific account into a broad and abstract Easternness. Today it acts more often on artists of Asian background themselves, and it works in the same way: the artist’s specific statements about materials, craft, particular traditions and particular places are replaced by abstract statements about cultural identity, collective memory and Eastern philosophy. Press releases, art fair guides and collection labels still produce the same sentences.

For Marden, being labelled Eastern cost almost nothing. It added a tint to a reputation already secure, he had standing enough to refuse in public, and it did not matter when the refusal failed. For an Asian artist at the start of a career, the label is often the ticket into the system, and refusing it means losing exhibitions. The same category is ornament for the one and condition for the other. That is why this is not merely an academic question.

This journal states that it does not treat Asian identity as a fixed category to be illustrated, and that it is concerned with what these practices become once they enter longer artistic trajectories, and with what is carried into the global present and survives there. Cold Mountain offers a concrete answer. The vertical layout of Chinese verse was carried into New York and survived there, and what it lost on the way was irreversibility and legibility. What survived was the portable part.

If a critical category can recognise only the portable part, then the ‘Asia’ it produces can only be the portable one.

As for the characters I cannot read, I now think the failure was accurate. They were never characters in the first place.

Notes

1. On the 1983 journey to Thailand, Sri Lanka and India, and the turn towards Asian calligraphy that followed, see the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art artist page for Brice Marden, https://www.sfmoma.org/artist/brice_marden/, and the Crown Point Press artist page, <https://crownpoint.com/artist/brice-marden/>. Both accessed 22 September 2026.
2. Brice Marden, *Shell Studies*, 1984, ink on paper, 27.9 × 22.6 cm, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The Doris and Donald Fisher Collection, FC.486.A-G, <https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/FC.486.A-G/>, accessed 22 September 2026. This essay does not reproduce images of Marden's works.
3. Yoshiaki Shimizu and John M. Rosenfield, *Masters of Japanese Calligraphy, 8th to 19th Century* (New York: Frederic C. Beil, 1984), the catalogue of the exhibition of the same name, shown at both New York venues from 4 October 1984 to 6 January 1985 and afterwards at the Nelson Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, and the Seattle Art Museum. On the exhibition's effect on Marden, see the Crown Point Press page cited in note 1.
4. Pat Steir, 'Cold Mountain: An Interview with Brice Marden', first published in *Brice Marden: Recent Drawings and Etchings* (New York: Matthew Marks Gallery, 1991); adapted by Lynne Cooke for Dia Center for the Arts in connection with the Cold Mountain exhibition of 1991 to 1992. The translation referred to is Red Pine (Bill Porter), *The Collected Songs of Cold Mountain* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 1983); no complete translated poem is reproduced here.
5. Brice Marden, *Cold Mountain 6 (Bridge)*, 1989 to 1991, oil on linen, 274.3 × 365.8 cm, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, purchase through a gift of Phyllis C. Wattis, 99.367, <https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/99.367/>, accessed 22 September 2026. © Brice Marden / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
6. Brenda Richardson, in her essay for *Plane Image: A Brice Marden Retrospective*, ed. Gary Garrels (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2006); quoted in Danforth Art's introduction to its exhibition of Marden's prints, http://www.danforthmuseum.org/brice_marden.html, accessed 22 September 2026.
7. See note 4.
8. The original *Lanting Xu* does not survive; the reference is to its transmitted copies, represented by the Shenlong copy in the Palace Museum, Beijing, traditionally attributed to the Tang copyist Feng Chengsu, an attribution now doubted. A traditional tally of the original counts two characters struck out, six altered and four inserted. Yan Zhenqing's *Draft of a Eulogy for My Nephew* is in the National Palace Museum, Taipei.
9. See note 4.
10. See the audio guide on the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art collection page cited in note 5.
11. Wang Anshi's imitations are the *Ni Hanshan Shide ershi shou*. Hu Shi discusses Wang Fanzhi, Hanshan and Shide in the chapter on the vernacular poetry of the early Tang in *Baihua wenxue shi* (A History of Vernacular Literature) (Shanghai: Xinyue shudian, 1928). On the transmission and reception of Hanshan's poetry in China, see Xiang Chu, *Hanshan shi zhu (fu Shide shi zhu)* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2000).
12. Arthur Waley, '27 Poems by Han-shan', *Encounter* 3.3 (1954); Gary Snyder, 'Cold Mountain Poems', *Evergreen Review* 2.6 (1958); Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (New York: Viking Press, 1958); Burton Watson, *Cold Mountain: 100 Poems by the T'ang Poet Han-shan* (New York: Grove Press, 1962; reissued New York: Columbia University Press, 1970).
13. The Southern Song edition printed by the monk Zhinan at Guoqing Monastery in 1189, recut by the monk Wuyin at Donggao Monastery (c. 1229), with additions by Wuwo Huishen; now in the Archives and Mausolea Department of the Imperial Household Agency, Tokyo, and the only surviving copy of the Guoqing line. The standard annotated edition is that of Xiang Chu, cited in note 11, which takes as its base text the *Sibu congan* photographic reprint of a Song edition.
14. For example, the entry 'Brice Marden' in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.
15. Brice Marden in conversation with Gary Garrels, Museum of Modern Art audio guide, <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/207/2724>, accessed 22 September 2026.
16. See note 4.
17. See note 4.
18. For example, the 1stDibs sales page for Marden's print *Suzhou I*, which calls him a 'master of minimalism' and quotes the 'sounding board for the spirit' remark without a source: https://www.1stdibs.com/art/prints-works-on-paper/brice-marden-suzhou-i/id-a_3047343/, accessed 22 September 2026. The page is cited here as a specimen of reception, not as a record of Marden's own words.

19. On comparisons between Tobey and Pollock, see 'Oriental Calligraphy in Jackson Pollock', *Aesthetics* no. 21 (Japanese Society for Aesthetics), http://www.bigakukai.jp/aesthetics_online/aesthetics_21/text21/text21_kakeinanako.pdf. On Kline's correspondence with Bokujinkai and his denial in a 1958 interview with Katharine Kuh, see Tate, 'Contested Comparisons: Franz Kline and Japanese Calligraphy', *In Focus*, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/in-focus/meryon/japanese-calligraphy>. Both accessed 22 September 2026.
20. See note 4.