

Canadian Conference on Japanese Buddhist Icons

The Japanese Studies Program, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, hosted an international conference on the theme of “The Japanese Buddhist Icon in Its Monastic Context” from March 17 to 20, 1994. The conference was specifically designed to foster cross-disciplinary exchange between specialists in the fields of Japanese Buddhism and Japanese Buddhist art.

The idea for the conference emerged from an ongoing collaborative study of Chan and Zen portraiture by an art historian (Elizabeth Horton Sharf, McMaster University) and two Buddhologists (Robert H. Sharf of McMaster University, and T. Griffith Foulk of the University of Michigan). When we began our research some years ago scholarly consensus held that the portraits of Zen abbots known as *chinzō* were distributed sparingly by the depicted masters to their dharma successors as “certificates of Zen enlightenment”. Our research demonstrated, however, that in the medieval period

thousands of such portraits were produced and widely distributed for use in funerary and memorial rites, and in fund-raising. Our findings called into question long-standing assumptions concerning not only the nature of East Asian Buddhist portraiture, but also the significance of Buddhist funerary rites and the meaning of “Zen enlightenment”. Our collaborative effort also demonstrated the benefits to be realized when specialists in the fields of Asian art history and religious studies join forces.¹ While studies bridging the fields of Buddhist studies and art history are not unknown, substantial progress has been inhibited by the traditional segregation of disciplines. Thus art historians frequently examine a particular work of religious art with little heed to its ritual or institutional function, while Buddhologists are often unfamiliar with the range of art-historical materials available to them in their efforts to reconstruct the cultural life of medieval and early modern Japanese monasteries. Together with our colleagues Phyllis Granoff and Koichi Shinohara (both of McMaster University), we initiated plans for a conference that would maximize opportunities for cross-disciplinary exchange in an effort to rectify this situation. We envisioned an intimate gathering in which a small group of art historians and Buddhologists would gather together to discuss papers prepared and distributed in advance. The conference was ultimately made possible through the financial support of the Japan Foundation, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Yehan Numata Program in Buddhist Studies at the University of Toronto, and the Faculty of Social Sciences and Department of Religious Studies at McMaster University.

Twenty-three scholars from universities and museums in Japan, Germany, the United States and Canada descended on McMaster for a very full three days of discussion. The conference was inaugurated by two public lectures, one by Mimi Yiengpruksawan (Yale University) entitled “Chūsonji: Art and Mandate at a Medieval Japanese Temple”, and the other by Donald F. McCallum (University of California, Los Angeles) on “The Power of Replicated Icons in Japanese Buddhist Temples: The Seiryōji Shaka and Zenkōji Amida Triad Traditions”. Thirteen additional paper presentations, summarized below, served to focus discussion over the following days.

Robert H. Sharf presented a paper entitled, “Visualization and *Maṇḍala* in Shingon Buddhism”, in which he challenged the widely accepted notion that Shingon *maṇḍala* serve as “aids” to visualization practices. Sharf focussed on the discrepancies between the iconographic content of the main Shingon mandalas and the liturgical content of the rites with which they are associated—a situation that mitigates against their use as meditation aids. Drawing on historical sources, as well as on his own ethnographic research, Sharf went on to refute the notion that Shingon practices centre

¹ For a preliminary report, see T. Griffith Foulk and Robert H. Sharf, “On the Ritual Use of Ch’an Portraiture in Medieval China”, *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie* 7 (1993/94), pp. 149–219.

around the construction of an eidetic image of the deity in “the mind’s eye.”

Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis (Boston University) presented “Imperial Rule Over Nine Districts: Possible Sources for Japanese Taima and Two-World *Maṇḍalas* in Pre-Buddhist China”. Ten Grotenhuis suggested that early Chinese notions of geography may have influenced the development of Buddhist doctrines and the visual representations of those doctrines, in particular the Japanese Taima Mandara and Matrix and Diamond World *Maṇḍala* traditions. Ten Grotenhuis focussed on the ubiquity of the number nine in both Chinese notions of geography and in the composition of later Japanese Buddhist *maṇḍalas*.

James C. Dobbins (Oberlin College) presented “Religious Portraits in the Shin School of Pure Land Buddhism”, an exploration of the meaning and function of portraits of Shin Buddhist patriarchs with special reference to portraits of the founder Shinran (1173–1263). Dobbins argued that such portraits were embodiments of the sacred, commemorative substitutes of revered masters now deceased, and emblems of lineage. He further defined the role of the patriarchal portraits in the broad array of Shin Buddhist imagery as a whole, comparing them in terms of meaning and function to images of Amida, sacred inscriptions of the *nenbutsu*, and other objects of worship in early Shin Buddhism.

Nishigori Ryōsuke (Kitakyūshū University) presented “Zenshū Ōbakuha no shūzōga to sono gakatachi” [Ōbaku Zen portrait paintings and the artists who painted them], which consisted of an analysis of the stylistic development of portraits of Ōbaku Zen patriarchs in early modern Japan. Nishigori focussed on the “Japanization” of the style of the late Ming Chinese portraitist Zeng Jing, and went on to discuss the influence of European painting methods on Ōbaku portrait painting as a whole.

Bernard Faure (Stanford University) presented “The Buddhist Icon and the Western Gaze”, a critique of traditional art-historical approaches to the study of Buddhist imagery that feature the analysis of form and content (“the aestheticization of Asian art” in the West). Faure argued that traditional art historians have overlooked not only the function of Buddhist icons but also their capacity to evoke subliminal responses in the viewer.

T. Griffith Foulk presented “Icons in Medieval Zen Monasteries”, also a critique of traditional art-historical approaches to Asian art that turn Zen icons into objects appreciated primarily for their aesthetic, iconographic, and antique properties. Foulk insisted on the need to reconstruct the architectural, institutional, calendrical, and social contexts for which Zen icons were produced, thus highlighting their function in the world of Zen ritual and mythology.

Neil McMullin (University of Toronto) presented “Ox and Horse Symbolism in Early Japanese Disease-Related Rituals”, in which he discussed early Japanese disease-related rituals involving both Buddhist and Shintō priesthods. McMullin’s material challenged the tendency among many of the

conferees to use the term “icon” in a narrow and sometimes uncritical manner.

Donohashi Akio (Kōbe University) presented “Dōnai hekiga shōgon ni miru shudai to sono setsuwasei” [The adornment of monastic halls: Themes and stories in the decorative programs of interior wall paintings], an investigation of the motifs, subjects, themes, and narratives utilized in the decorative painting programmes for the interior walls of diverse Japanese Buddhist monastic halls. Donohashi’s analysis drew attention to the increase during the late Heian and Kamakura periods of the use of narrative pictorial elements in halls to which ordinary persons were denied access.

Martin Collcutt (Princeton University) presented “Icons in the Mind of Yoritomo: Iconography, Religious Life, and Political Power in the Early Kamakura Bakufu (1185–1221)”, in which he attempted to reconstruct the role played by specific icons of personal significance to Minamoto no Yoritomo. All of these icons have disappeared but are known from historical documents. Like McMullin’s paper, Collcutt’s paper enlarged the scope of the conference theme by presenting materials generally ignored in studies of Japanese Buddhist icons.

Karen L. Brock (Washington University, St. Louis) presented “Kasuga Daimyōjin and the Valorization of Myōe”, in which she underscored the role of Shintō deities in the religious life and career of Myōe Shōnin (1173–1232) and argued that Myōe used an icon of the Kasuga deity to garner patronage for Kōzanji. Brock’s paper offered a revisionist view of Myōe, a monk who is often approached uncritically, in terms of his Kegon Buddhist affiliations alone.

Paul Groner (University of Virginia) presented “The Role of Images in Eison’s Religious Activities”, in which he tied the doctrinal concerns of Eison (1201–90) as known from his writings, in particular his autobiography, to the central icons of his school. Groner featured the well-known portrait sculpture of Eison (the work was completed in 1280 and is preserved at Saidaiji, Nara), and argued that such images as these, many of which were enlivened by relics and documents placed inside them, were particularly significant to Eison, whose self-ordination left him with a powerful need to gain legitimation for the new Risshū (Vinaya) lineage he founded.

Donald F. McCallum (University of California, Los Angeles) presented “The Seiryōji Shaka as Portrait of the Historical Buddha”. McCallum focussed on two main issues: (1) the replication of the main icon of Śākyamuni (Shaka) enshrined in the Kyoto monastery Seiryōji as a religious and social phenomenon, and (2) the claim that this icon was an actual portrait of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni. McCallum’s paper, which described the success of the Seiryōji Shaka portrait tradition in Japan, emphasised once again the need to study Japanese Buddhist icons in the context of religious practice.

Mimi Yiengpruksawan (Yale University) presented “Gods in Pieces: The

Ontotheological Ramifications of the Joined-Wood Technique in Japanese Buddhist Statuary,” in which she interpreted the proliferation of sculptural images constructed in wood via the joined-wood (*yosegi*) technology in the Heian period as an expression of a fractured world pulled together by faith. Yiengpruksawan argued that not only did the new mass-production technique meet a desperate need among Heian aristocrats to pile up religious merit by constructing Buddhist complexes and filling them with statuary but also that the technique itself resonated with new religious meaning.

In addition to these thirteen presenters, the following scholars were invited to serve as respondents: Ian Astley (University of Marburg), Jan Fontein (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and Royal Ontario Museum), Phyllis Granoff, Ikeda Rosan (Komazawa University), Denise Patry Leidy (The Asia Society Galleries, New York), Elizabeth Horton Sharf, Koichi Shinohara, and Hugh Wylie (Royal Ontario Museum). A small group of scholars and graduate students from local institutions also attended and contributed to the discussions. The resulting conversation was invariably lively and often intense, especially when the focus turned (as it often did) to methodological and theoretical issues that have traditionally inhibited collaborative work between the disciplines of art history and Buddhist studies.

On the final day of the conference the Far Eastern Department of the Royal Ontario Museum gave participants a private viewing of works of Japanese Buddhist art in its collection. In the end there was unanimous agreement that the conference was a success, and plans were initiated for a follow-up conference and art exhibition. The conference papers are currently being edited for publication.

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Shintō and Japanese Culture
A One-Day International Symposium
Held at SOAS, London, Monday, 21st November 1994

This symposium was organized by The Japan Research Centre, SOAS, and the School of East Asian Studies, University of Sheffield, at the instigation of the Founding Committee of the newly formed International Shintō Foundation, a Japanese charity with the express aim of furthering research into Shintō studies, an area of Japanese religions which has received less attention in Western scholarship than, for example, Buddhism. Its proposed programme includes organizing symposia such as the present one, establishing academic research positions overseas, and exchange programmes which

will enable foreign researchers to conduct their studies in Japan. The event was held in Beveridge Hall, in the University of London^ Senate House.

Altogether six papers were held over two sessions, which dealt respectively with the topics, “A Rediscovery of the Sacred Dimension in Both Nature and Humanity” and “Shintō Encounters Other Religions”. The first session started with a contribution by Dr. Carmen Blacker (Cambridge), who spoke on “Shintō and the Sacred Dimension of Nature”. Dr. Blacker’s first concern was to point out that Shintō is an ancient complex of beliefs and practices, not to be identified with State Shintō, a development which the speaker clearly characterized as an aberration of Japanese religiosity. On the constructive side, Dr. Blacker indicated certain Shintō attitudes which might prove fruitful in our thinking about the environment. The following paper, by Professor Sonoda Minoru, “Shintō no seichi [Holy Places of Shintō]”, dealt primarily with the Grand Shrine of Ise as the paramount holy site of Japan and examined the significance of Ise’s natural situation. The final paper of the morning session was the undersigned’s “Holy Mountains in Shintō Religiosity”, in which the variety of beliefs and practices connected with Japanese mountains was briefly sketched. After questions from the audience, the well over 200 participants retired to the adjoining hall for a more than ample lunch.

The first paper of the afternoon session (dedicated to the second of the above mentioned themes) was a clear and enlightening account of the situation in Restoration Japan by Dr. John Breen (SOAS): “Shintō Encounters Christianity in Restoration Japan.” Basing his postulates on the writings of the late Tokugawa and early Restoration Shintō scholar, Ōkuni Takamasa, Dr. Breen presented information which challenges many prevalent notions on Japanese attitudes to Christianity during this crucial period, and made a plea for greater nuances in our approaches to this little researched area of Japan’s emergence into the modern world. The next paper, Professor Kamata Tōji’s (Musashigaoka Junior College) “Shintō to keruto no hikō-kenkyū [A Comparative Study of Shintō and Celtic Religion]”, pointed out three areas where the respective civilizations may be said to have something in common. The final paper, by Nicola Liscutin (SOAS), dealt with “Shintō and Popular Beliefs: Their Relationship at Mount Iwaki in Tsugaru” and offered the audience an outline of the speaker’s recently completed research on the interaction of Shintō and popular cults at her chosen site in Aomori Prefecture. Ms. Liscutin is to be complimented not only for her interesting paper, but also for the fact that she was prepared to stand in at short notice for Professor Herbert Passin (Columbia), who was incapacitated.

The symposium ended with a discussion of the afternoon’s topic, followed by closing remarks by Dr. Nakanishi Akira, the President of the International Shintō Foundation. Throughout, everything that was said, both the prepared, formal papers and the subsequent discussions, was translated by a small but dedicated and extremely competent team of interpreters and

broadcast over a bilingual system. Their contribution deserves the unreserved gratitude of all concerned. Plans are being formulated to publish the contributions to the symposium in due course. Furthermore, it is hoped that this will be the first of a series of such symposia, although I personally would like to see smaller workshops included in the future plans for the Foundation's academic gatherings.

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The Society for Tantric Studies: Seminars on Tantrism at the AAR

The Society for Tantric Studies has had its proposal for a five-year programme of seminars on Tantrism accepted by the American Academy of Religion. The proposal was submitted by Professors James Sanford and Charles Orzech (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill and Greensboro respectively) after extensive deliberations and consultations with the membership. Reports have it that at the last meeting of the AAR, the interest in the group was such that the room reserved for their meeting was far too small to handle the numbers who turned up, with the consequence that the corridors in the immediate vicinity became badly overcrowded.

The seminars of the AAR are designed to further well defined research projects by bringing together a small number of people (a maximum of twenty) for a limited period (five years), with the purpose of bringing research on the chosen topic to the point where one or more publications can be brought to completion. Work in progress is presented at Annual Meetings, where previously distributed papers are discussed. Members are expected to maintain the impetus of these meetings through correspondence, exchanging papers and essays, etc. The theme of the next meeting, this coming November, is "How do we study Tantric traditions?" and will offer a forum for the discussion of reflections on issues in the study of Tantric tradition and, as Profs. Sanford and Orzech's proposal has it, "more specifically on the relationship between indigenous terminology and Western scholarly categories". The organizers have called for essays based on specific Tantric traditions and the discussion at the meeting will be led by "discussants". Interested parties may write to the organizers (the address will be found in the advertisement for the Society at the back of this Journal); or, alternatively, to contact them by electronic mail:

orzech@turing.uncg.edu (Charles Orzech); *or*
jhsanford@email.unc.edu (James Sanford)

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