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In the past several years, scholars in the related fields of Buddhist Studies and Japanese Art History have contributed much to our understanding of Japan’s religious landscape during the Kamakura period (1192-1333). Buddhologists such as Bernard Faure and Richard Payne, as well as Japanese art historians Helmut Brinker and Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis, have highlighted the intimacy of idea and expression in their text-image analyses of doctrinal and visual systems. *Living Images* now investigates the function of the empowered image in the social, political, economic and ritual life of Japan’s medieval monastic establishment.

*Living Images* presents a wealth of new primary source material and ground-breaking methodological reassessments of the vital role that the empowered image played in the life of Japan’s monasteries. Robert Sharf’s introduction and final chapter on Shingon mandalas nicely frame three essays by James Dobbins, Karen Brock and Paul Groner on the power that images held for Shinran (1173-1263), Myoue (1173-1232) and Eison (1201-1290), respectively. Taken together, these provide a functional analysis of the powerful symbiosis between image and institution in medieval Japan. They reveal how consecrating strategies and monastic practices enlivened and empowered icons just as icons enlivened and empowered their hosts.

In his trans-historical and methodologically thought-provoking introduction, Robert Sharf charges that Western or Western-trained scholars traditionally have ignored, misconstrued or “Protestantized” pan-Asian image veneration. He blames this on the Western rhetoric of idolatry and the artificially separated academic disciplines of Religion and Art History. He remedies the rhetoric of idolatry by questioning the Cartesian separation of animate versus inanimate substances and by focusing on how Buddhist images were consecrated, venerated, or ritually constructed as sacred living presences. He remedies the academic divide by selecting four papers from the 1993 McMaster conference “in which buddhologists were asked to focus on images, rather than texts, and art historians were asked to attend to the ritual and institutional dimensions of their objects” (p. 7).

In Chapter One, James Dobbins insightfully outlines “the uncanny relationship between icons of Amida, nenbutsu inscriptions and Shin portraits, with special reference to the significance of portraits of Shinran in medieval Shin Buddhism” (p. 20). This three-way uncanny equivalency amongst figural statues, written invocations and master portraits (i.e. those with the mind of faith in Amida’s vow) strongly recalls the three secrets of body, speech and mind in esoteric Buddhism. Dobbins thus not only corroborates but also amplifies other studies of medieval reform movements that acknowledge the influence of earlier esoteric models, most notably Jacqueline Stone’s in-depth studies of Nichiren imagery. Furthermore, even though Shin icons, inscriptions and portraits are technically co-equivalent, Dobbins accurately highlights the elevated status of Shinran’s portrait double. He shows the extent to which, to paraphrase George Orwell, “some icons were more equal than others.” Shinran’s portrait sculptures were the unfortunate victims of repeated robberies, decapitations, recoveries, resculptings and reconsecrations with miraculously rediscovered relics, precisely because they were considered to be alive with Amida’s saving grace. Because Shinran’s posthumous portrait sculpture in particular fulfills Dobbins’ three-fold functional analysis of post-mortem activity, embodiment and lineage marking, it was especially capable of insuring the legitimacy and institutional survival of the
fledgling Shin church.

In Chapter Two, Karen Brock’s landmark study of Kasuga imagery offers a model investigation into the material and institutional context of image-production in early medieval Japan. She convincingly argues that Myoue commissioned fundraising visual aids as evidence of his numinous encounter with the Fujiwara clan’s tuteary deity. She argues that these visual aids helped to cement karmic-economic ties with the powerful patrons, alleviate pressing personal circumstances and perpetuate a miraculous foundation-tale for Kouzanji temple after Myoue’s death. In this regard, Brock reveals how Myoue’s successor, Kikai (1178-1250), strategically recast Myoue’s supernatural episode for fundraising effect. Whereas Myoue originally viewed the Kasuga deity in a maternal light, for example, Kikai may have rewritten him as Myoue’s spiritual father. The orphan Myoue had originally commented that the Kasuga deity’s instructions not to leave Japan “were given like a compassionate mother toward her beloved son” (p. 63). The distinctive blue eyes of Kasuga’s unprecedented painting, moreover, may well indicate the enlightened supervision of Buddha-Eye Buddha-Mother, Myoue’s other spiritual mother and protector figure. Kikai however, in typical honji-suijaku fashion, seems to have later recast the Kasuga deity as the local manifestation of Shakya- muni Buddha himself. Kikai’s textual-sexual revision of Myoue’s account may thereby have established Kasuga as Myoue’s father, not mother and equated Kasuga with his most enlightened figure in the Buddhist pantheon. Kikai’s economically and politically-motivated strategies for elevating the Fujiwara’s deity appear to have successfully flattered his patrons enough to insure their support of Kouzanji temple in perpetuity.

In Chapter Three, Paul Groner discusses the religious activities and images associated with Eison, the founder of the Shingon Ritsu sect. Eison revived old esoteric paradigms within his esoteric Shingon sect, and therefore inserted symbolic emblems of the old, traditional Three Jewels into his newly commissioned statues in order to enliven and empower them. In order to represent the Buddha, for example, Eison inserted new, miraculously-appearing relics or familial remains into the statues (technically, upon bodily death one becomes a hotoke or Buddha). In order to represent the Dharma teaching, Eison inserted apocryphal and canonical sutras and dharanis. In order to represent the Sangha monastic community, he installed contemporary donor rosters, practitioner’s vows or precept-taking accounts. These emblematic updates of the Three Jewels motif consecrated his new sacred images with a variety of vivifying agents so as to revive Buddhism’s time-honored yet ever-living ideals. Groner’s concise and well-written survey of consecration techniques in his “Relics and Dharani” section addresses the Buddha and Dharma aspects extremely well and should be considered in conjunction with evidence of Sangha membership and Eison’s revival of the precepts. Groner’s engaging descriptions of Eison’s private and public religious activities—particularly as the latter relate to welfare work for the hinin outcastes—are instructive and should be required reading for all scholars of medieval Japanese Buddhism.

Finally, Robert Sharf’s revolutionary essay radically questions all presupposition regarding “visualized meditation” (kansou) and the ritual functionality of Shingon’s Two World Mandalas. Shingon doctrine theoretically stresses the unification of body, speech and mind through mudra, mantra and mandala meditation, but Sharf reveals that no ritual manuals or oral commentaries ever prescribe active visualization of the Two World Mandalas per se. He demonstrates that prototypical Juuhachidou rites enumerate too many figures, outline too many morphing shapes and require too much time to do anything but rapidly and liturgically intone the discursive kansou passages. He concludes therefore, that mandalas are not prescriptive meditational aids designed for personal illumination. Rather, they are descriptive illustrations of their source sutras (especially in the Pure Land tradition) and they are ritual agents of spatial empowerment. He rightly calls for more scholarship on Indian and Chinese esotericism to account for the extra visual content of the Two World Mandalas that is not described in their source sutras. He strongly concludes that the mandala’s automatic ability to transform the ritual hall into a pure land (and hence anyone in its presence into a Buddha) means that the presence of the mandala “does not so much serve as an aid for visualizing the deity as it abrogates the need for visualization at all” (p. 192).

In conclusion, Living Images reveals how images and institutions functioned symbiotically to generate sacred power in Japan. It demonstrates how specific consecrating strategies and monastic rites transformed inanimate objects into living sacred presences with the power to heal, enlighten, protect the state, or insure fortunate rebirth. Conversely, it shows how empowered images gave life to the monastery by providing a focus for temple fundraising, government sanction, clan identity, welfare work, religious pedigree or the empowerment of ritual space. It is a must-read for any scholar of Japanese Buddhist art, doctrine and practice. Its contribution to
the wider scholarly community is also significant, however, for it addresses issues in medieval institutional history, ritual studies, text-image methodology, material culture, iconology, the economics of temple patronage, church-state relations and the textual construction and re-construction of miracles. Incidentally, it also speaks to spirit possession, hinin outcastes, faith, funerary practice, relics and religious syncretism in Asia. It is a richly illustrated volume with an extensive index and fifty pages of copious endnotes that serve as its bibliography. One only wishes that the snail’s pace of academic publishing had made this important scholarly contribution available to a wider readership earlier.

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