

Two Works of Japanese Art from the University of Virginia Art Museum

Dorothy C. Wong

The exhibition 'Treasures Rediscovered: Chinese Stone Sculpture from the Sackler Collections at Columbia University' is on view at the University of Virginia (UVa) Art Museum (15 January to 14 March 2010; see articles by Eileen Hsiang-ling Hsu and Leopold Swergold in *Oriental Art*, March 2008, pp. 113-124). It will offer a focus for a series of activities related to Asian arts and cultures that will engage the university community as well as the general public, and includes Chinese music concerts; the international, interdisciplinary conference 'Cultural Crossings: China and Beyond in the Medieval Period'; and a 'Digital Workshop on Asian Art and Humanities' (11-13 March; for details, see <http://www.virginia.edu/artmuseum>). Simultaneously, the UVa Art Museum will highlight selected works from its own collection, as well as loan works of Buddhist art from Japan and Tibet, in an exhibition entitled 'Expressions of the Buddhist Faith'.

One important work of Japanese art on display is the hanging scroll *Amida-sanzon Raigō*, or *Descent of the Amitabha Trinity* (Fig. 1). The scroll portrays Amida (Skt Amitabha; Buddha of the Western Pure Land) and his two attendant bodhisattvas (Kannon and



(Fig. 1) *Amida-sanzon Raigō* (*Descent of the Amitabha Trinity*)
Kamakura period, 14th century
Hanging scroll, ink, colours and cut-gold foil on indigo-dyed silk
Height 165.1 cm, width 53.5 cm
University of Virginia Art Museum (1975.10)
Anonymous gift

Seishi) in the act of descending to receive dying devotees whom they will guide toward rebirth in the Pure Land. Pure Land Buddhism had occupied a central position in Buddhist beliefs in East Asia since the 6th and 7th centuries. Iconic images of Amitabha and pictorial depictions of the Western Pure Land were frequently represented in Buddhist art. This type of *raigō* (lit. ‘welcoming approach’) painting flourished from the late 12th century in Japan, in part due to the teachings of Hōnen (1133-1212) and the growth of Pure Land Buddhism. Such paintings were often hung by the bedside of those about to die to encourage their faith in Amida’s arrival by helping them visualize it; sometimes the dying person was attached to the painting by a cord.

In the museum’s hanging scroll, Amida and the bodhisattvas are all shown in three-quarter profile. They stand on lotus pedestals that seem to glide on trailing clouds, accentuating their movement and speed of descent. Light rays extend beyond Amida’s halo to point in the direction of the unseen devotee toward whom the triad is heading. Kannon, in front, bends

far forward, offering a lotus throne on which the devotee will be born into the Pure Land. Amida’s hand gesture indicates that the devotee will be reborn into the uppermost sector of the lowest rank. As in many Buddhist paintings of the time, the figures are outlined in an even red line, while their flesh is painted in a pale yellow colour. The pedestals are painted dark green, and red is used in other details. But most eye-catching is the luxuriant use of *kirikane* (‘cut-gold’) for designs on the Buddha’s robe, the bodhisattvas’ garments, rays of light, and details on the pedestals. The *kirikane* technique involves the application of thin strips or minute geometric shapes of gold or silver foil on designs painted in with glue. Floral scrolls decorate the borders of the Buddha’s robe, enclosing a variety of intricate patterns (Fig. 1a). The cut-gold technique, also found on recently excavated Buddhist statues from Qingzhou in China that date to the 6th century (see Helmut Brinker, ‘Sublime Adornment: *Kirikane* in Chinese Buddhist Sculpture’, in *Orientalism*, December 2003, pp. 30-38), is thought to have been introduced to Japan during the Tang dynasty (618-907),

and flourished from about the 10th century onward. In excellent condition, the *kirikane* details on the museum’s scroll exemplify the delicacy and superb craftsmanship achieved by Japanese artists of the Kamakura period (1185-1333).

Also on view is an album of paintings by Kanō Tsunenobu (1636-1713), a model-book featuring copies of works of Chinese and Japanese artists whose styles were considered to form part of the artistic lineage of the Kanō school of professional painters. The Kanō atelier’s prominence in Japanese painting endured for several centuries, from the latter part of the 15th to the 19th century. Founded by Kanō Masanobu (1434-1530), the Kanō school artists were official painters for the Ashikaga shoguns, who patronized Zen (Ch. Chan) Buddhism, Zen art, and the arts of gardens and the tea ceremony during the Muromachi period (1392-1573).

Beginning in the 13th century, Chan Buddhism received a warm reception in Kamakura, with renewed contact between Japan and Song (960-1279) and Yuan (1271-1368) dynasty China. Chinese Chan masters who came to Japan attracted large followings, and many Japanese monks travelled to China. The Japanese monks also followed their Chinese counterparts in their artistic pursuits, creating similar Buddhist devotional pictures, monochrome landscapes, animals, and bird-and-flower compositions. The Ashikaga shoguns in Kyoto avidly collected Chinese paintings that were brought to Japan by pilgrim-



(Fig. 1a) Detail of the painting in Figure 1, showing *kirikane* design on Amida’s robe

monks returning from China and through trade. Their collecting activities and support of Zen temples created a milieu for the emergence of the Japanese genre of monochrome ink painting (*J. suiboku-ga*, 'water-ink painting') associated with Zen art of the period. Chinese paintings in the shogunal and temple collections became models for Japanese monk-artists. One of the great masters of Zen monochrome ink painting was the prolific monk-artist Sesshū (1420-1506), who had travelled to China in search of Song and Yuan paintings (though the style he actually encountered there was that of the Ming period [1368-1644]). He is known to have made miniature copies (*J. shukuzū*) of Chinese Song and Yuan masters' works, perhaps to show clients the availability of styles or to pass on the artistic heritage to disciples.

Although the Kanō painters were secular professional artists working for the elite, they nonetheless mastered the pictorial idiom associated with Zen art and thus the heritage of Chinese Song and Yuan dynasty paintings. They gained commissions to adorn Buddhist temples and the shoguns' residences, usually producing Chinese-style paintings of the four seasons, animals and flowers. With the transition to the Edo period (1615-1868), Kanō artists continued to receive painting commissions to decorate castles and residences from the new Tokugawa shoguns and *daimyō* (regional lords). They also developed a style that was bolder and incorporated characteristics of the native Japanese painting style called *yamato-e*,

which has a more decorative flavor and uses strong colours, and including that of their rivals, the Tosa school. Even though the Kanō workshop was prospering and had branches in both Kyoto and Edo (modern-day Tokyo), its artists faced growing competition from other ateliers and individual painters. Increasingly, the Kanō painters sought to define their own artistic lineage through a stylistic conservatism drawing heavily on the styles and techniques of the esteemed (and idealized) Chinese Song and Yuan masters and the renowned Japanese artists in that lineage.

Kanō Tan'yū (1602-74) was the most prestigious artist of the workshop in the 17th century. He also revived the practice of making miniature copies of famous works by Chinese Song and Yuan (and later Japanese) artists associated with the Ashikaga collection, even though by that time the collection was already being dispersed. Kanō Tsunenobu, who studied with his uncle Tan'yū, and others also made a number of *shukuzū* in the 17th century. Like Sesshū, the Kanō painters made these copies for connoisseurship purposes, for collectors, and to educate students. While for Sesshū, passing on artworks to students could constitute a transmission of knowledge in the Zen-Buddhist tradition, this was a strictly secular affair for the Kanō painters. At the same time, by tracing back their artistic heritage from Song and Yuan to later Chinese (Ming) and Japanese masters (including Sesshū), the Kanō artists attempted to use these models to establish an orthodoxy and thus ensure their position in the Edo painting scene.

The album on display at the University of Virginia Art Museum consists of 60 leaves, mounted on both sides as an accordion book. The first leaf copies a colour painting of a white eagle perched on a cliff amidst turbulent waves by the Northern

(Figs 2a-d) Leaves from an album of 60 leaves
By Kanō Tsunenobu (1636-1713), each dated 1695
Ink and colour on silk, mounted on paper
Each leaf: height 59 cm, width 59.4 cm
University of Virginia Art Museum (1975.11)
Anonymous gift



(Fig. 2a) 'Landscape in the Style of Muqi'
(1975.11.5)



(Fig. 2b) 'Splashed-Ink Landscape in the Style of Yujian'
(1975.11.5.7)

Song emperor Huizong (r. 1101-25). This is followed by copies of works of many Song and Yuan artists, including works by the monk-artists Muqi (fl. mid-13th century), Yujian (fl. late 13th-early 14th century), and Yintuoluo (active mid-14th century), who were considered iconic figures in the Zen painting tradition. Quite a few of Muqi's paintings have been collected in Japan, including the well-known triptych in the Daitoku-ji temple in Kyoto. Tsunenobu's rendition of Muqi's style displays soft, rounded hills and a mist-filled atmosphere that create an evocative landscape (Fig. 2a). Yujian's splashed-ink landscapes probably inspired the impressionistic and abbreviated-style landscapes of Sesshū, who had also made copies of Yujian's works. A copy by Tsunenobu, however, demonstrates stronger contrasts in tonality and spatial depth than does his reproduction of Sesshū's rendition (Yamato Bunkakan, pls 9 and 52) (Fig. 2b). Kanō Tan'yū had also made similar model paintings, and several leaves from this album closely resemble the ones executed by him (Kihara, Figs 3.24 and 3.26); thus it is possible that Tsunenobu worked from Tan'yū's copies.

In addition to those of Song and Yuan paintings, the album includes copies of flower-and-bird paintings by such Yuan and Ming artists as Lin Liang (c. 1416-80) and Lu Ji (15th century). The last half dozen or so leaves feature copies of works by Japanese artists: Mokuan Rei'en (d. 1345), Shūbun (fl. first half of the 15th century), Sesshū, Tosa Mitsunobu (1434-1525; founder of the Tosa school), Kanō Motonobu (1476-1559) and Sesson (c. 1504-83). To represent Sesshū's style, Tsunenobu chose to depict Shōki (Ch. Zhongkui) the demon slayer, a popular Chinese mythological figure who is rendered in a forceful brush style originating with the Chinese

artist Liang Kai (fl. late 12th-early 13th century) (Fig. 2c). The last leaf is a depiction of Mt Fuji, signed by Tsunenobu himself (Fig. 2d). In Tan'yū's album, his last painting of the mountain became a hallmark of the artist's identity. Tsunenobu's signature on the Mt Fuji model painting thus establishes him as the successor (after Tan'yū) to a specifically Japanese painting heritage. The album is an important testament to the cultural exchanges between China and Japan – and to the subsequent establishment of a pictorial narrative that delineates a heritage for the Kanō painters in which the painters themselves occupy a central role. It also speaks to the enduring impact of a painting tradition brought to Japan through Buddhist contacts.

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(Fig. 2c) 'Shōki the Demon Slayer in the Style of Sesshū' (1975.11.5.58)



(Fig. 2d) 'Mount Fuji' (1975.11.5.60)

ORIENTATIONS

The eyes of the world will be on Shanghai as it hosts the 2010 World Expo. In this issue we celebrate the opening of the exhibition 'Shanghai' at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco which, together with the 'Bay Area Shanghai Celebration', honours the longstanding special relationship that exists between the two cities. In our interview with Asian Art Museum director Jay Xu, he tells us about his vision for the exhibition and the museum. Michael Knight, Dany Chan and Lisa Claypool explore different aspects of Shanghai's visual culture from 1850 to the present day, through works selected from Shanghai museums and institutions. Nancy Berliner looks at the contributions made to the city's rich architectural heritage by its Jewish populations.

Dorothy Wong discusses two works of Japanese art from the collection of the University of Virginia Art Museum that will be highlighted in the exhibition 'Expressions of the Buddhist Faith', concurrently with the conference 'Cultural Crossings: China and Beyond in the Medieval Period'. This issue also features reviews of autumn auctions and fairs in New York, Hong Kong and London, and previews of fairs in Europe and the US; as well as an interview with Shanghai businessman and collector Liu Yiqian. In the commentary, André Alexander discusses conservation issues surrounding historic buildings and monuments in Tibet.

**Cover: Detail of *Shadow in the Water*
By Liu Jianhua (b.1962), 2002-08
Installation with porcelain and light
Dimensions variable
Collection of the artist**

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