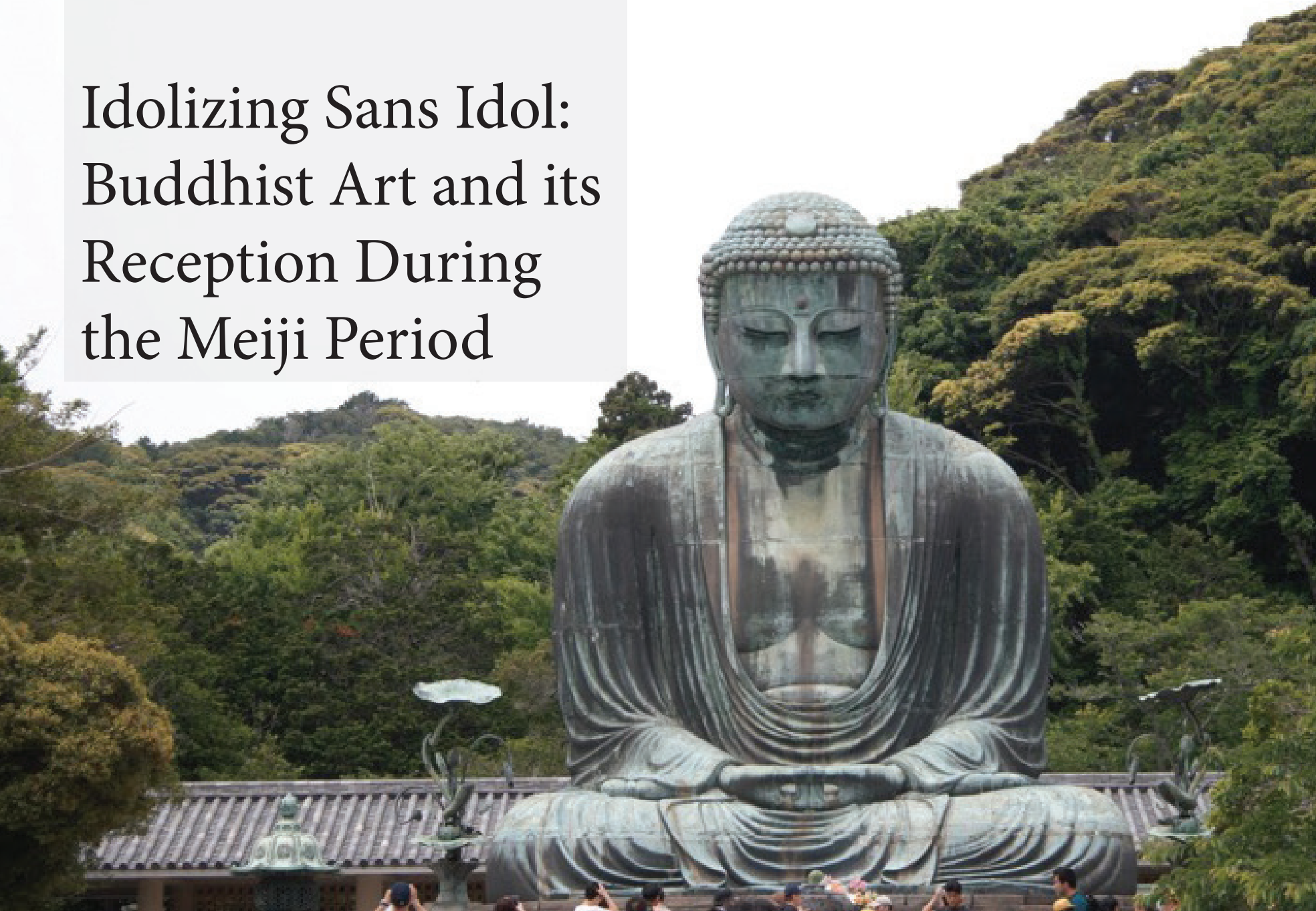


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Idolizing Sans Idol:  
Buddhist Art and its  
Reception During  
the Meiji Period



A churning crowd of shouting school children, darting selfie sticks, frenzied gesticulations between customers and salesmen, snatches of over a dozen different languages echoing off the verdant mountains of Kamakura, Japan. At the heart of this corybantic activity? An elegant, refined colossus. The *Kamakura Daibutsu* (Fig. 1), constructed in the eleventh century, is today the epitome of what the Japanese tourist industry has to offer, a monument to the heights reached by Buddhism and Buddhist art in Japan in the early and mid-centuries of the millennia. But how did the colossal Amitābha go from the embodiment of spiritual enlightenment and inspiration to a statue of impressive dimensions, the perfect backdrop for tourists' photos documenting their travels?

Enjoying vast popularity among the people and the government through the Edo period of Japanese history, Japanese Buddhism was shoved from its place of prominence during the Meiji Restoration of the 1860s, when the governing body of the Shogunate was replaced by the restoration of Emperor Meiji to the throne, and the country was opened to foreign influences for the first time in over two hundred years; events which rocked the geopolitical, social, and religious foundations of Japan and Japanese culture. Suddenly viewed by many as an invasive religion, Japanese Buddhism was quickly put on the defensive, as the enactment of *Shinbutsu bunri* led to the removal of Buddhist elements from Shintō shrines and the often-catastrophic destruction of hundreds of Buddhist temples and artifacts at the hands of Shintō authorities. Thrown from their pedestal, Buddhist thinkers and artists would spend the next several decades rebuilding and rebranding the religion for a country that more and more desired to modernize, Westernize, and secularize itself to fit more clearly into the Western world outlook.

This reconstruction of the perception of Buddhism

necessitated an evolution in two directions: all remaining artifacts and sacred sites would have to be reinterpreted in a way that made them relevant to a public that no longer valued the spiritual worth of the Buddha, while any new artwork with Buddhist subjects would have to be able to function dually as objects for religious purposes by those who remained faithful and as aesthetic objects for the newly secularized market. Through comparative analysis of pieces made before and during the restoration and by incorporating theories of post-colonialism, marginalization, and deconsecrated space, this study will examine the manner in which Buddhist art was reconfigured during the Meiji Restoration. The pieces examined in this study will bear witness to how the Restoration government's stance against Buddhism, the increased tourism within Japan, and the Japanese-born desire to conform to Western standards coupled with the West's desire for traditional Japanese styles combined to change the way in which Buddhist art, both old and new, was interpreted and made, by sterilizing older Buddhist art of its religious significance and creating new works which emulated Western traditions and styles.

### I. Reinterpretation

With the restoration of the Emperor to the throne in 1868 came the crumbling of Buddhism as a government backed religion. In the first months of the restoration, the government mobilized to enact *Shinbutsu bunri* (Fig. 2), a series of edicts through which the removal of all 'evil customs of the past' was achieved through the elimination of all Buddhist positions from Shinto shrines and in subsequent laws, forbade the use or presence of Buddhist statuary as images of the kami in the shrine compound. This edict was soon expanded to order the removal of all Buddhist imagery from all Shinto shrines.<sup>1</sup> In the months that followed, hundreds of Buddhist pieces were destroyed at the hands of Shinto authorities overzealously enacting the laws put forth by the Meiji government.

In a landscape still dotted with Buddhist temples despite this destruction, the reinterpretation of all remaining Buddhist sites became imperative in the government's attempts to separate and deemphasize Buddhist ideas from Shintō ones.<sup>2</sup> In one of many vicissitudes that would characterize the ensuing era, the years following the *Shinbutsu bunri* saw the Meiji government recognize its error in its compliance with these acts of destruction and move to identify and protect Buddhist sites it deemed to be of cultural, but not necessarily religious, significance. Fully operational by the 1880s, this program of restoration was carefully created to highlight and align the identity of these sites and relics with the cultural identity of Japan, effectively secularizing ancient sacred sites.

The government's first move was to deconsecrate Buddhist works by moving them out of the temples into a national museum, in order to give primacy to their historical significance over their religious importance. In placing the works in a museum, the government neutralized their power as religious objects by removing them from the context in which they were originally intended to be viewed.<sup>3</sup> As such, the government was taking the first step in changing the way viewers understood the objects by framing them as culturally significant and beautiful objects but not emphasizing their religious importance.<sup>4</sup> In preparation for government-funded programs of restoration, temples were also ordered to inventory important material goods and significant buildings on temple sites.<sup>5</sup> Soon after began an extensive program of temple restoration, spearheaded by the first generation of Japanese architects trained in Western techniques and styles at what is now Tokyo University.

As temples were restored, more and more objects were placed in museums, which were increasingly within the temple sites themselves. One such object was Hōryūji's *Kudara Kannon* (Fig. 3); a wood and polychrome statue dating to the second half of the seventh century. A willowy figure of exaggerated

height with a quixotic smile and peaceful air, the statue is today approached from a large exhibit hall filled with various temple relics before narrowing into a smaller chamber where the *Kudara Kannon* singularly commands the room. The statue itself is enshrined in protective glass; cast in a dim, fluorescent light. This viewing platform strips the object of its original intent, where it was meant to occupy the same space as the worshiper. Taking it out of the temple and constructing an artificial status as an aesthetic object fundamentally changes the way in which viewers interact with and understand the object, robbing it of its status as an icon and reducing it to a mere art piece. This juxtaposition of religious object in secular space has colored the comments of viewers of the *Kannon*, many of whom sense an incompleteness to the exhibit, as not fully religious, but not fully secular either.<sup>6</sup> Even if today's viewers understand that something is wrong about viewing the *Kannon* by itself in a dark room shrouded behind museum glass, they nonetheless walk away with the idea that the object is in a museum, not a temple, and therefore that the object is not so much religious in nature as cultural or aesthetic.

The desire of the Meiji government to begin creating museums for Buddhist works is indicative of yet another influence which helped to bring Buddhism from the heights of religious prominence to its secularized, cultural role in today's world. With the borders suddenly flung open to Western visitors, more and more Buddhist sites were becoming increasingly linked with the burgeoning tourist industry. This drastic change in policy is evincive of the dire necessity of suddenly defunded Buddhist temples to increase revenue for the upkeep of their properties. The tourist industry had perhaps the biggest influence on disarming Buddhism of its religious context and no site more effectively chronicles this change in view than the

*Kamakura Diabutsu* (Fig. 1).

As early as 1863, Western visitors to the site began to describe the *Diabutsu* with language which reflects an aesthetic understanding with little to no regard for the religious significance carried by the statue. Aimé Humbert, arriving as part of a Swiss mission to Japan, wrote of the *Diabutsu*, “There is an irresistible charm in the attitude of the Daiboudhs, as well as in the harmony of its proportions. The noble simplicity of its garments and the calm purity of its features are in perfect accord with the sentiment of serenity inspired by its presence.”<sup>7</sup> This analysis, one of the first made by a Westerner following the opening of the country, reflects a relatively dual reading of the statue, with words like ‘harmony,’ ‘charm,’ and ‘noble simplicity’ undoubtedly referring to the aesthetic value of the object, while words like ‘purity’ and ‘serenity’ indicate some understanding of the religious aspect of the work, but only vaguely and without specific reference to Buddhist concepts or practices.

Over time however, these secondary observations became lost in travelers’ accounts and the *Diabutsu* became merely a statue in the eyes of the beholders. In 1874, Théodore Duret related his impression of the statue and a similar work found in Nara:

“The Buddha of Kamakura, near Yokohama, which is known to us, is less high than that of Nara, but owing to its different pose and gesture it appears much less colossal. Yet one should not imagine this to be a statue with no other merit than its dimensions. On the contrary, we are in front of a true work of art...It is less agreeable in form than that of the Buddha of Kamakura, but one finds there a great character of simplicity, no less than the obligatory expression of calm and abstraction that the type of Buddha requires. This colossus produces

a great impression of when one discovers it for the first time, and this impression grows as one studies it and moves around it.”<sup>8</sup>

This later description of the statue categorizes both the Kamakura and Nara statues as art works, discussing their relative aesthetic merits and faults, with no regard in either case for the religious purpose, space, or understanding of the object which was crucial to their interpretation in their originally intended contexts. This interpretation is exactly what the Meiji government was hoping to establish; allowing Buddhism to continue to carry the cultural significance which would be necessary for an art style, but divorcing it from any religious significance which caused political difficulty and disunity.

## II. Creation

While the reinterpretation of ancient Buddhist sites was integral to the rebranding of Buddhist art that occurred during the Meiji Restoration, it was by no means the only venue in which Buddhist art was being discussed. With their only government funding allocated to the restoration of older artifacts, new works created during this time period were commissioned by individuals, either for use in private worship or as collection pieces, many of which were destined for Western consumption. This change in targeted markets would free up many artists working in the decades following the Meiji Restoration to a more open representation of Buddhist icons and themes, as is evident in the work of Hada Teruo (1887-1945), an artist who trained and worked during the height of the Meiji period following the restoration.<sup>9</sup>

Teruo’s 1937 work, *Bukka kai’en no Zu* (Fig. 4), displays many modernized, Western references, whilst still depicting Buddhist themes. The presented story is itself an old theme, often depicted well before the modern era. In Teruo’s version, a churning mob of religious hopefuls, including school children, businessmen and priests, many dressed in Westernized style

and carrying large banners, rush toward the pure land where the Buddha awaits, traversing what appears from a distance to be a sturdy bridge, but which ends abruptly at the water's edge, where figures are pushed into the churning waters by those at the back who do not yet know the peril which awaits them. Meanwhile, on the left side of the composition, a solitary woman in traditional kimono glides effortlessly over a rickety bridge, safely carried along by a pair of hands symbolic of the Buddha, assuring the viewer that she will reach the pure land. This work, while sharing some similarities with premodern versions of the tale, is notably different. The mob's signs profess a multitude of political systems and outlooks, including Socialism, Pessimism and Opportunism.<sup>10</sup> It is clear that the work is representative of the change occurring during the years following the Meiji restoration in which Buddhist works began to be able to function dually as objects for worship and objects of art, where subject and narrative could be provocative and critical, narrative, or allegorical instead of merely instructive or reflective. The ambiguity of intended meaning is itself reflective of the dual nature in which this work was expected to function; the left side is easily read as a religious work, while the right side complicates the reading, allowing viewers to discern a political or social commentary and warning.

In a similar vein to what was happening in paintings, architectural restorations or rebuilding of ancient sites also allowed architects opportunities to explore a more Western, Beaux-Arts understanding and depiction of structure. While most reconstruction efforts strove to maintain the original appearance of the temple site, not all temples were reconstructed in a traditional manner, particularly those that were near epicenters of international activity. One such project was the 1934 reconstruction of Tsukiji Honganji in Tokyo, designed by Ito Chuta (Fig. 5). The temple's location in the heart of Tokyo indicates why this building was rebuilt in a modernized style with modern materials, allowing it to be seen

by foreign travelers as a westernized structure and thus projecting the sense of modernity the Japanese desired to indicate to the rest of the world.

Looking at the temple, the departures Chuta took from the traditional wood frame structure are obvious. It is a synthesized conglomeration of Eastern and Western elements; masonry construction, stained glass windows, concrete, even a pipe organ.<sup>11</sup> With its sweeping, curved ceiling and ornamental carvings along the façade, the Japanese elements of this piece remain visible, but they take a back seat to the modernized, Westernized structure, which looks as though it would be at home in any of the great cities of Europe. The temple even goes so far as to include columns which are reminiscent of the Doric and Ionic orders, further hinting at a Westernized outlook and which are conspicuous in their absence from traditional temple architecture. Viewed as a whole, the temple is highly aesthetic, symmetrical and rhythmic in a way which is evocative of the traditional temples and pagodas, but which also evokes a stability and solidarity found more often in Western architecture.

Many of these changes invoked by artists following the restoration were founded on a nationally-rooted desire to modernize and Westernize in attempts to create a more favorable image of Japan in the eyes of the West, who in many ways were perceived as viewing Japan as a backwards country of secondary status in trade implications.<sup>12</sup> These artists did not employ a methodical, selective approach to their acquisition of Western elements, instead subsuming Western traditions with no regard to their distinguishing elements; creating a heterogenous conglomeration of various period styles and cultural influences.

In a desperate bid to be viewed as equal with the Western powers with whom Japan was now trading, Japan embarked on a rapid process of Westernization which took



on an almost post-colonialist quality. Japan desired so much to be the West's equal that they embraced every Western tradition which was brought to their attention, as can be seen in their sudden desire to adopt two-point perspective and other Western art techniques which previously the Japanese had shown no desire in developing. The Japanese fervently believed that if they could please the West by emulating the West, then they would be able to have a more active role in trade negotiations and exert more power in the Pacific and Far East.

In art, this attempt at Western emulation meant a drastic change in style. The Japanese government attempted to down play, if not suppress, the production of *ukiyo-e* prints, the most accessible form of Japanese art in the West. Japan believed these did not convey the intended message to the West of a Western style civilization in the Far East, and encouraged artists to pursue more Western style compositions and techniques, even setting up schools to teach this style of painting to the next generation of artists, fully anticipating that this style would be what would catch the West's eyes and give Japan greater influence in international affairs and a recognized position among the Western powers.

In an ironic turn of events, however, the Western art market preferred the traditional arts and techniques, most readily available in the form of *ukiyo-e*. The undying popularity and appreciation in the West for this style of art lead the government to quickly abandon their previous course of blatant Westernization and mobilize to define a Japanese aesthetic which incorporated elements seen in *ukiyo-e* and which would inform future artistic endeavors and be used to move Japanese Buddhist arts from the 'crafts' portion of world exhibitions to the 'Fine Arts' category, a category which had been traditionally denied to Asian countries. Both Teruo and Chuto exhibit this new aesthetic,

which clearly draws on and is linked to traditional Japanese arts and techniques, but which also includes Western motifs which indicate a sense of contemporariness and an attempt to bespeak a worldly outlook.

Japan's desire to modernize was fueled in part by a desire to be accorded the same honors as Western nations at world's fairs. Though Japan would begin exhibiting at world's fairs as early as 1873, it would take until the World's Colombian Exhibition in 1893 to have any works exhibited in the fine arts portion, as opposed to the handicrafts exhibit.<sup>13</sup> From their very first exhibition, Japan was highly aware of their perceived shortcomings, particularly in art, with one 1872 article stating that, "Our painting methods still lack detail and refinement, so that attempts at copying real scenery remain poor... In recent years oil painting methods have made tolerable progress, and there are some now which are quite worth looking at."<sup>14</sup> Japan was so certain of their need to modernize their art technique and assimilate it to Western standards that they couldn't fathom the notion that Western audiences actually preferred the more traditional style, with one anonymous writer even saying that "contrary to what one might expect, [the Western audiences] do not like the grand new Western-style patterns. Thus in our country we must not expel this distinctive art but instead further develop those techniques which differ from other countries, and knowing more and more that there are arts in Japan which cannot be imitated, it will be easy to increase the success of our industries."<sup>15</sup> Here the key phrases are 'contrary to what one might expect' and 'must not expel this distinctive art.' Japan was fully intent on ending the traditional art form for which it is best known, hence the sudden fervor for including Western style and technique in artistic endeavors. This desire was fueled by a conviction that the purpose of the World Fairs was to showcase the best trade goods a country could offer. In comparison with objects like steam engines and other feats of technology, the Japanese government saw its exhibitions at the

fair as small handicrafts which would not help to increase trade or prestige among the Western nations. When they came to realize that Westernized goods were not in fact the profitable desired option for increased Western consumption, the country immediately synthesized this new information into their creation of style, leading to figures like Chuto and Teruo, whose works include modernized Western ideas while also retaining a sense of timeless tradition which became the prescribed style for Buddhist artists working in the roughly half century following the Meiji Restoration.

The political, cultural, and social turmoil which racked Japan during the Meiji Restoration and ensuing decades profoundly changed the way Buddhist art was understood and created from that period forward. Demoted from religious relic to aesthetic object, existing Buddhist works were reinterpreted to appeal to modern, westernized audiences seeking traditional Japanese styles without the burdensome scriptures and stories originally associated with such relics. In the same vein, active artists attempted to ride the waves of cultural change as they developed a new style which combined the Western desire for old techniques with the Japanese desire for modernity and the governmental desire for a Buddhism neutered of its religious significance but still full of cultural prominence, a trend which continues to this day.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> James Edward Ketelaar, *Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan Buddhism and Its Persecution* (Princeton: Princeton Press, 1990), 9.

<sup>2</sup> To be clear, the edicts enacted by the government in 1868 which have come to be known as the Shinbutsu bunri called only for the separation of Buddhist and Shinto elements at shrines and temples. Though this was destructive in its own right, as it forced pieces to be moved from their original

settings, the resulting destruction of Buddhist sites and artifacts was the result of a long building tension between Buddhist and Shinto authorities. While this history will not be discussed in detail in this study, Ketelaar's study is a good starting point for understanding the changing relationship between Shinto and Buddhist thinkers in Japanese history.

<sup>3</sup> This technique of saving the artifact but destroying the original context is one which has been employed throughout the world, notably in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century, when religious art works were removed from churches and reinstalled in secular public spaces, such as guild halls, or sold into private collections.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on the development of Japanese museums in the Meiji Era, see: Alice Y. Tseng, *The Imperial Museums of Meiji Japan* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Jane Patricia Graham, *Faith and Power in Japanese Buddhist Art* (Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 193.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. While there is a large time gap between the date of the Kannon's reinterpretation by the government and the viewer comments discussed above, there can be little doubt that the reactions of today's largely secular audience reflect clearly the reactions that would have been made by viewers at the time of its reinstallation, who understood the statue as a religious object and were suddenly jarred into seeing it in a museum setting.

<sup>7</sup> Hiroyuki Suzuki, "The Buddha of Kamakura and the 'Modernization' of Buddhist Statuary in the Meiji Period" *Transcultural Studies*, 2, no. 1 (2011): 5

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>9</sup> For more information, see: John D. Szostak, "Two Paths to the Pure Land: The Niga-byakudo Theme and the

Modernist Buddhist Art of Hada Teruo,” *Archives of Asian Art* 57 (2007).

<sup>10</sup> John D. Szostak, “Two Paths to the Pure Land: The Nigayakudo Theme and the Modernist Buddhist Art of Hada Teruo,” *Archives of Asian Art* 57 (2007), 26.

<sup>11</sup> Graham, *Faith and Power*, 200.

<sup>12</sup> Ever since the enactment of the treaties which opened Japan’s borders, namely the Harris Treaty of 1858, Japan had chafed under the unequal terms to which she was subjected by the Western parties, such as fixed low import taxes on goods brought into the country, among other economic implications. Japan believed that if it could quickly adopt to the Western model it would be able to negotiate for itself a more equal treaty; a belief which continued to influence Japanese thought and culture though the second world war and even beyond. In every way possible, Japan began to encourage citizens to embrace Western models of society. For more information on the history of the opening of Japan to the West, see *Clash: U.S. – Japanese Relations Throughout History* by Walter LaFeber.

<sup>13</sup> Graham, *Faith and Power*.

<sup>14</sup> Chelsea Foxwell, “Japan as Museum? Encapsulating Change and Loss in Late-Nineteenth-Century Japan,” *Getty Research Journal*, 1 (2009), 4.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.





Fig. 1  
*Kamakura Daibutsu*, c. 1252



Fig. 2  
*Temple Bells Being Smelted for Bronze*, Tanaka Nagane, 1907



Fig. 3  
*Kudara Kannon*, 7th Century



Fig. 4  
*Bukka kai-en no Zu*, Hada Teruo, 1937



Fig. 5  
*Tsukiji Honganji*, Ito Chuta, 1934