

Unkei, Master Sculptor

By Nobuo Tsuji



Statue of Seshin, Unkei, national treasure, Kofukuji Temple, Nara



Statue of Muchaku, Unkei, national treasure, Kofukuji Temple, Nara

Japanese art tends to be described as gentle and lyrical. Even Buddhist sculpture, which is supposedly rendering the most hallowed and sublime image of Buddhist nature in three-dimensional form, often seems elegant and effeminate in the hands of the Japanese artist. But this is not always the case. There is Japanese Buddhist sculpture—particularly that by Unkei (ca. 1148–1223), a sculptor of the early Kamakura period—that is as dynamic and vigorous as anything done by the great Western masters.

Unkei's work stands out within Japan's long history of Buddhist art. He was only in his mid-20s when he completed the Dainichi-nyorai (*Mahavairocana*) at Enjoji Temple, Nara, in 1176. Modeled after *Mahavairocana*, the highest object of worship in esoteric Buddhism, Unkei's Dainichi-nyorai emanates youthful vigor and freshness. The figure's taut elasticity of muscle brings to mind the statue of

Bacchus (Museo del Bargello, Florence) carved by Michelangelo at around the same age.

The two gigantic guardian figures flanking the southern gate at Todaiji Temple in Nara were completed in just two months in 1203 by Unkei and his colleague Kaikei. The Todaiji and Kofukuji temples in Nara and most of their 8th-century artistic treasures had been burned in 1180 by the Taira. When Minamoto-no-Yoritomo defeated the Taira, he supported the imperial court in financing the restoration of the two temples. Unkei, his father Kokei and others of the Kei school of Buddhist sculpture were commissioned to create the necessary Buddhist images. The fierce expressions and sheer force of Unkei and Kaikei's guardian figures are telling proof that the age of a gentle but weak imperial nobility had given way to the age of the warrior.

Master works produced by Unkei and

others of the Kei school over several years beginning in 1208 are enshrined in the Hokuendo hall of Kofukuji. The most prominent is the seated figure of the bodhisattva Miroku (*Maitreya*) carefully crafted by Unkei to match the surrounding 8th-century figures of the Four Guardians that had survived the fire of 1180. Unkei's deep understanding and respect for the work of his predecessors is clear in the execution of the Miroku. Yet it is the two statues flanking the Miroku that show Unkei at his purest.

These are the standing figures of Muchaku (Asanga) and Seshin (Vasubandhu), two Indian brothers who were Buddhist philosophers sometime in the 4th to 5th centuries. Unkei's portrayals of these two historical figures are Japanese rather than Indian, and so realistic that one suspects he modeled them on specific individuals. The two figures are at once extremely human and yet monumental, massive and vivid renditions with their feet firmly planted on the earth.

Realism in Buddhist sculpture had as an example the early 11th-century figure of Roben (689–773), second patriarch in Japan of the Keron sect of Buddhism, at Todaiji. The statue of Roben, however, is something more than human but slightly less than a Buddha. In comparison, Unkei's Muchaku and Seshin are very real and human.

The seated figure of Chogen (1122–1206) at Todaiji is another sculpture believed to be the work of Unkei because of its masterful blend of the sacred and the human. Here Chogen is depicted as an old man with hollowed cheeks, a scraggly neck and stooped shoulders. Yet there is a powerful tension in the figure that speaks eloquently of his great faith and devotion to the Todaiji restoration.

Unkei's brand of realism did not outlive his death in 1223. If one accepts the Buddhist concept of metempsychosis, Unkei could well be the previous incarnation of Michelangelo, so powerful and dynamic is his work.

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