

A View of the Great Buddha In Search of Nirvana

By *Okabe Masayuki*

In 1886 Kamakura was little more than a remote village. With views of the Shichirigahama coastline to the south and flanked on the other three sides by arborous mountains, it was here, in this veritable stronghold of nature, that Minamoto no Yoritomo established Japan's first seat of military rule during the 12th century. The military rulers had a great respect for Buddhism and built many temples including the Kamakura Gozan. These five head temples, which include Kenchoji and Enkakuji, were joined by many others such as Tokeiji and Gokurakuji. A great deal of carving displaying a characteristically high degree of realism was done by some of the foremost carvers of Buddhist images such as Unkei and Kaikei, and Kamakura soon became the new focus of culture in Japan. With the fall of the Kamakura Shogunate in the 14th century, however, the area lost its political and strategic importance and was, for the next hundred years or so, just another regional city. By the Edo period, it had slipped back to being little more than an out of the way village some distance from the Tokaido, the main route between the seat of the Shogun in Edo and Kyoto where the Imperial court remained. After a military port was built in Yokosuka for the transportation of supplies, Kamakura came to life again through tourism, when a railway line to Yokosuka was opened in 1889 and a station at Kamakura was built. This was three years after two foreigners and their Japanese guide/interpreter visited Kamakura in 1886.

In those days, foreigners' visit to Kamakura was not unusual. During the final years of the Tokugawa Shogunate between 1853 and 1868, many foreigners had come to Japan and a number of them had taken up residence in an area set aside for them



*"Great Buddha in Kamakura" 1886, John La Farge
Watercolor on Paper, Metropolitan Museum, NYC*

in Yokohama after the port there was opened in 1859. Later, they began to settle in Tokyo during the Meiji period (1868-1912). For these two particular foreign travellers, however, Kamakura had a special appeal as an outlying tourist attraction. In the closing years of the Shogunate, Kamakura was the most westerly area which foreigners were allowed to visit. Even at the turn of the period a visit to such places as Nikko to the north of Tokyo was a major adventure, whereas Kamakura could be relatively easily reached on horseback from Yokohama.

By the late 1880s, trains were

running along the Tokaido route to Fujisawa, which was one of the towns along the old highway. Alighting at Fujisawa station, Kamakura could be reached by crossing the mountains along the coast from Enoshima. There were many things for these two travellers and the many other foreign tourists who went to Kamakura to see. First of all there was the beautiful island of Enoshima facing Sagami Bay. Then, from Inamuragasaki Head there were views of Mount Fuji to the west. The route to Kamakura then ran along the Shichirigahama coastline and on through Hase.

The two foreigners who went to

"Great Buddha in Kamakura"
1887, John La Farge, Watercolor on
Paper, Private



Kamakura in 1886 were from the United States. One was the painter John La Farge (1835-1911) and the other was the novelist Henry Adams (1838-1918). It was summer when they made their visit, with the din of cicadas all around them and the wind blowing in off the sea. Set in a basin facing the sea, Kamakura was a wonderful sight. Travelling from Tokyo, they were both overwhelmed by what lay before them. Although neither of them had visited Japan before, they were not completely ignorant about its culture and things like the kimono, as they had read some of the work of Ernest Fenollosa who, like them, was from Massachusetts. Nevertheless, there was so much they did not know about this country so far from home.

It was Henry Adams who had suggested making the trip. Both Adams and La Farge had studied at Harvard University but became close friends as a result of Adams' work as a critic

and it was he who asked La Farge to accompany him on his trip. They left the United States on June 3rd and arrived in Japan at the end of the month. Just before they left, Adams was asked by a journalist why they were going to Japan. "We are going in search of Nirvana" was the reply. They were, in other words, longing to know something of the meaning of death as it was preached in Buddhism.

The decision to visit Japan had been sudden. With completion dates fast approaching, La Farge had agreed to do some illustrations for a book and to complete a large mural for the Church of the Ascension in New York. Leaving this work unfinished, he set off with his friend on a trip which, at the time, had very little object. John La Farge was one of the United States' most representative late 19th century painters. He was also a close friend of the American artist, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, who worked

in both America and Europe. Whistler was an authority on Realism and Japanese art and greatly influenced the Impressionists. It seems that La Farge, too, greatly admired Japanese art and it is therefore easy to imagine why he would have wanted to visit Japan. But there was a much more immediate reason for making the trip.

Adams' wife, Clover, had just committed suicide. Her sister had thrown herself in front of a train and their father had died not long before. With so many bereavements in the family, it was hardly surprising that Adams was feeling so desperate and confused. He wanted to leave his troubles far behind as quickly as he could and visit somewhere that might prove to be a Utopia; and his friend La Farge would no doubt have been very understanding in the circumstances.

Having arrived in Japan "in search of Nirvana," they first visited a number of shrines and temples in Tokyo and Yokohama. They were both fascinated by their first encounter with the curious and mystic atmosphere of the Orient but they did not find what they were seeking. Constantly stimulated by everything around them in this strange land, they continued their wanderings. And then they made their way along a mountain path into Kamakura.

Emerging from dense woodland, a large object suddenly came into view. They saw an enormous shadowy form silhouetted by the strong light and found a large figure sitting amid the surrounding greenery. It was their first encounter with the Great Buddha. Constructed in 1252, the Kotokuin temple Great Buddha, a gilt-bronze image of Amida Buddha standing 10.6 meters high, had been enshrined in a Buddha Hall, which was later destroyed by fire. It was this image of Buddha that they had come upon so suddenly, and it was here that they found their Nirvana.

Adams and La Farge stayed in Japan for six months. During this time they met various people connected with the arts in Japan including Okakura



*"Great Buddha in Kamakura"
1880s, Kusakabe Kimbei
Hand Colored Albumen Print,
Übersee Museum, Bremen*

Tenshin and Kawanabe Kyosai. They also managed to visit Kyoto and a number of other places, too. On returning to the United States, La Farge wrote a chronicle of perceptive comments and impressions of his trip, and later had an exhibition of watercolors and oils of work inspired by the landscapes and people he had seen on his visit. La Farge also did some imaginative work based on things Kawanabe had told him and Okakura gave La Farge a copy of his book, *The Book of Tea* which he had written in English. This trip, which for La Farge's friend Adams had been a means of escaping from such terrible heartache, was therefore responsible for producing cultural exchange of a varied nature between the United States and Japan, and for a new interest in Japan that would bring the East and West together. A number of works based on the Great Buddha

remain among La Farge's work inspired by his trip to Japan. In all of them there is a strong sense of presence of the Buddha as a symbol both of the mysticism of the Orient and of a perception of life and death. La Farge, however, may well have based his paintings on some recently discovered hand-colored photographs. These photographs were taken and colored as souvenir postcards for the foreign visitors who went to Kamakura.

One of the eminent photographers who took such pictures was Kusakabe Kimbei. He had been a pupil of Félix Beato, a British photographer of Italian descent who had settled in Japan. Kusakabe made a name for himself in Yokohama selling glass lantern slides and photo albums. The techniques of photography were not the only thing that Kusakabe learned from Beato,

however. He also learned to recognize beauty from the standpoint of aestheticism. The kind of images he took of the Great Buddha seen from the side had no precedence in Japanese art. He was only interested in portraying the statue in the most appealing way possible. It was the same kind of aesthetic sense that reappeared in La Farge's work and it is intriguing that such paintings and photographs should provide some inclination of the kind of aesthetic awareness between the East and the West.

UJI

Okabe Masayuki is an associate professor of Art History at Teikyo University. He specializes in the study of artistic exchanges between the East and the West.