

# A Reexamination of Japanese Art

– Developments in the history of style in Japan preceded those in Western art

By Tanaka Hidemichi

Within the long history of Japanese culture, it is the field of art that has attracted the world's attention.

To date in the West, Japanese art has generally been perceived as the decorative portrayal of the beauties of nature (*Kacho Fugetsu*), typified by *ukiyo-e*. To be sure, that art form influenced the artists of French Impressionism and made the names of Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) and Kitagawa Utamaro (1753-1806) well known. Further, the *Korin* School (founded by Ogata Korin [1658-1716]) of the Edo period (1603-1867) influenced the flat ornamentation of Art Nouveau. Such terms as impressionistic, decorative and sentimentality came to be seen as the special characteristics of Japanese art.

But recently, it has been recognized that Japanese art possessed a much deeper history and a much richer human expressiveness. This has not at all been based on a form of nationalism, but can be said to be a recognition of the pluralism within the cultures of the world. It can also be a result of Japanese researchers studying Western art who have made comparisons with Japanese art.

This new awareness commenced with the reexamination of Japanese art beginning with the Buddhist art of the seventh century.

Until now, Japanese Buddhist art has been seen as no more than iconographic religious expression, but there is a new awareness of such works as works of art, just like Christian art in the West. This is related to the fact that the Kudara Kannon and the portrait statue of Ganjin were highly evaluated when they were exhibited in Paris. The field of Buddhist sculpture includes the Gandhara art of India and the Dunhuang art of China, and it has long been held that Japan's Buddhist sculptures are no more than imitations of these. However, the largest bronze

Buddhist sculpture ever created was in Nara, produced in Japan in the eighth century. While the works are in an archaic style, the Kudara Kannon and the Guze Kannon were produced in the seventh century. The Nikko and Gakko Bosatsu (bodhisattvas) and the figure of Asura in the classical style are now thought to have been completed in the eighth century. These works are clearly different in style from the art of India and China.

The various sculptures of Buddhas at Todaiji's Sangatsu-do (especially the Nikko and Gakko bodhisattvas), Kaidan-in's statues of the "Four Heavenly Kings," and the sculptures of the "Eight Classes of Beings" and the "Ten Great Disciples" and other Asuras at Kofukuji are simple standing figures, yet there is a nobility about them, and they have been recognized to have a tranquil grandeur. In terms of modeling, they are no less appealing than Greek statues of naked human forms. They are seen to exhibit the same complex human expression of 15th and 16th-century Italian sculpture. They share in common a transcendental quality which eliminates human egoism. While formerly considered the works of unknown artists and craftsmen, these works have come to be attributed to artists using the names Kuninaka-nomuraji Kimimaro and Shogun Manpuku.

Within Japanese art history, periodization has been designated as Asuka, Hakuho, Tempyo, Jogan, Fujiwara, Kamakura and Muromachi, as if artistic periodization merely followed the transitions of political authority. In consequence, it has not been possible to detect a concept of established "styles." Has it actually been the case that Japanese art has exhibited no stylistic development independent of political history? Is the very concept of "style" restricted to the West alone?



- K. Kimimaro, *Komoku-ten*, 8th century, Todaiji, Kaidan-in, Nara (left)
- K. Kimimaro, *Nikko-bosatsu*, 8th century, Todaiji, Sangatsu-do, Nara (right)

The broadly accepted styles of Western art history include "archaism," "classicism," "mannerism" and "baroque." This stylistic evolution has been applied to sixth century B.C. through third century A.D. Greece, as well as to 13th through 16th century Italian art. This formulation of "stylistic development" has supported the establishment of Western art history as an academic discipline, because the "history of style" has developed independently of the history of political authority. In his *Principles of Art History*, Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945) discusses five contrasting concepts within the transition from 16th-century "classicism" to 17th-century "baroque." Henri Focillon (1881-1943), in his *Vie des Formes (Life of Forms)*, states that an artistic work is one form, and that form develops according to an autonomous internal logic. These theories can also be applied to Japanese art. Let us now turn to developments within the history of art in Japan.

## Archaism (Seventh Century, Asuka Period Art)

First, the archaic style is characterized by simplicity, frontality, the archaic smile, immaturity and tactile values which are exhibited in a new artistic expression. There is a strong sense of frontality which resembles the archaic

sculpture of ancient Greece. The forms themselves are simple, but there is a new attempt at artistic expression. Representative works of Asuka sculpture include the Kudara Kannon in the Horyuji collection and the Four Heavenly Kings from the Horyuji Golden Hall. Many works of this period are attributed to immigrants from China and the Korean peninsula, but their originality of expression suggests that there is nothing immature about the works. As a good example, the Kudara Kannon has a subtle smile, a body of slim proportions which is seven heads in height, and refined waves of hair falling over its shoulders. While it falls within archaism, it is an excellent expression of a lifelike portrayal. The name "Kudara" was given to this image only after the Meiji period (1868-1912), and because it is carved from camphor wood, it is likely that it was actually carved in Japan. The Guze Kannon is also characterized by frontality, simplicity, the archaic smile and an immature figure with a tactile value. There are also images of bodhisattva seated in meditation, with one leg down and the other crossing it, which are in the same style as those of Korea, but those at Chuguji are different from those in having another sophistication. The fact that the name of the sculptor Shiba-no-Kuratsukuri-no-Obito Tori-busshi is inscribed on the nimbus of the Shaka Triad in the Horyuji Golden Hall is an indication that the sculptor was no unknown craftsman but was instead considered a highly esteemed artist. No actual works survive, so it is not possible to comment on the painting of the period, but the decorative depictions on the wooden base of the "Tamamushi Zushi" (Beetle-winged Shrine) of the Horyuji suggest the heights achieved in painting during that period.

### Classicism (Late Seventh and Eighth Century, Hakuho, Tempyo or Nara Period Art)

Johann J. Winklemann (1717-68), who was the first to approach art history from the perspective of "the history

of styles," characterized Greek classicism as having "noble simplicity and tranquil grandeur." His description certainly applies to the art of Japan in this period. The Buddha figures of the Sangatsu-do of Todaiji, especially those of Nikko and Gakko, are excellent examples of classical values. Others that might be included are the "Four Heavenly Kings" of the Kaidan-in at Todaiji, and the "Eight Classes of Beings" and "Ten Great Disciples" as well as other Asuras at Kofukuji. These simple standing figures exhibit a nobility and tranquil grandeur. Furthermore, the absolute clarity of their forms sets them off, and their modeling creates a sense of space around them. Greek sculpture emphasizes the beauty of proportion that focuses on the naked human form, and the sculpture of 15th and 16th-century Italy exhibits a more complex representation of man, but here is presented a transcendental quality that eliminates human egoism.

Works that may be termed classic in style date from the Hakuho period. The heroic images of the "Four Heavenly Kings" at Taima-dera and the group of clay figurines that frankly express joy, anger, sadness and happiness in the Five-storied Pagoda at Horyuji already fully exhibit these classical elements. Had the original Great Buddha at Todaiji survived, it would surely display by its sheer size the grandeur of the classic form. The solemnity is exhibited by the Fukukenjaku Kannon created by Kimimaro. In addition, the "Four Heavenly Kings" of the Kaidan-in and the related "Twelve Heavenly Generals" of Shinyakushiji basically share these characteristics in figure with the latter exhibiting movement. Among portraits, the nobility expressed in the sculptures of both Ganjin and Gyoshin sustain a similar severe human expressiveness. In them one senses a moderate idealism.

Unfortunately, only a few paintings from this period survive, but we do have the wall paintings of the Horyuji Golden Hall. Though these were destroyed in a fire in recent years, if they had survived, they would certainly



- K. Kimimaro, *Ganjin-wajo*, 8th century, Toshodaiji, Nara (left)
- Shogun Manpuku, *Asura*, 8th century, Kofukuji, Nara (right)

be considered world-class works of art. The three Buddhist deities of Shaka, Amida and Yakushi were painted with different touches. While the paintings were linear and painted on a plane, they had not lost three-dimensionality. The faces of the Ten Disciples of Shaka expressed particularly well the individual intelligence and sincerity of these figures. While these paintings were all executed with techniques imported from Tang China, the figures are given a new sense of life that differed from Chinese precedents, evidence that they are an expression of Japanese art.

### Mannerism (Ninth through 11th Century, Jogan, Fujiwara or Heian Period Art)

The second half of the eighth century saw not only natural disasters, epidemics and famines, but the collapse of the *Ritsuryo* political system (criminal laws and administrative regulations) as well. In 760 the construction of Todaiji was completed and in 789 the Bureau for the Construction of Todaiji was disbanded. The spiritual integration between Buddhism and making Buddhist images had declined. The capital was moved to Heian (present-day Kyoto) and at the beginning of the ninth century, the new Buddhism of Tendai and Shingon, brought back from China by Saicho and Kukai, gave rise to a new esoteric Buddhist art. The new iconography made expression complex and presented a certain coolness and voluptuousness, such that the natural sense of vitality was lost.

Let us consider the group of Buddhist images at Toji. The images were created under the direction of Kukai, and we can sense in them an intellectual doctrine. On the central altar are five Buddhas, on the east side are five



• Unknown Sculptor, Taishakuten, 9th century, Toji, Kyoto (left)  
 • Unkei, Muchaku, 13th century, Kofukuji, Nara (right)

Bodhisattvas, on the west side are five Great Myoo, and on the four corners are placed the four Heavenly Kings, Bonten and Taishakuten. The arrangement represents the fundamental doctrine of Shingon Esoteric Buddhism. The sculptures have undergone repeated repairs, but the form of Bonten, barring one shoulder, for example, has a kind of fullness not previously seen and Taishakuten has a certain intellectual face, and both have an undeniable coolness. These characteristics are a kind of excessive expressiveness and unnaturalness, which must be termed manneristic.

The Four Great Myoo images surrounding the central Fudo Myoo on the west side reveal a seemingly inner-directed anger. This is an expression not seen in Tempyo classicism. With the movement of the eight arms holding various weapons, they present a strangely grotesque impression.

Buddhist painting of the late Heian period is represented by numerous excellent works such as "Nirvana of the Buddha" (Kongobuji) and the "Shaka Arising from the Golden Casket" (Kyoto National Museum). Both are superb works with numerous figures and complex spatial organization. In the latter work, the forms of bodhisattvas and lohans rendered ecstatic by the light emanating from Shaka are quite different from those seen in the wall paintings in the Horyuji Golden Hall. These figures lack a sense of individual modeling and reveal an unnaturalness that is typical of mannerism. Furthermore, this period of the flourishing of the Fujiwara clan was a time when the sophisticated Jocho style dominated in Buddhist images, against the background of elegance at court.

Representations of stories of love among the courtiers, typified by the Genji Monogatari Emaki, gave rise to the formalized artistic style of "hikime kagihana" (eyes that appear to be a simple line and a simple hook shape for a nose) and "fukinuki yatai" ("blown-off roof" technique).

The Jocho style, as the refined style, became dominant, because it became familiar as a kind of manneristic style. Representative of this style is the statue of Amida Nyorai in the Byodoin at Uji, and the free forms of the fifty-two bodhisattvas playing heavenly music and presenting offerings in the clouds that adorn the walls of the same Hoo-do (Phoenix Hall) may be considered masterpieces of the manneristic style. Sophisticated expression always holds the danger of being formalistic, and that would seem to be a common fault of courtly culture.

### Baroque Art (Mid-12th through Mid-14th Century, Late Heian - Kamakura Period Art)

Next comes the style known as baroque in 12th century Japanese art. "Baroque" is a Portuguese term that derives from the term for an irregular-shaped pearl. The art that this term is applied to is generally characterized by movement, curved lines, decorative-ness, strong contrast, a sense of rhythm and emotional expressiveness. It is a painting art that makes a strong appeal to the senses. At the same time, it is a spatial art which anticipates movement in the surrounding space.

Representative of this style are the Shingisan Engi painted scroll and the Dainagon Ekotoba scrolls with their painterly depictions of dynamic movement, and the realism and spatial representation of the sculpture of the Unkei school which was commissioned to participate in the reconstruction of Todaiji and Kofukuji after they were destroyed by fire in 1180. The blooming of this new style was clearly the ascendancy of the *bushi* (military) class. In the political struggles among the aristocracy, the warriors of the Minamoto and Taira clans participated



• Tankei, Mawarajo, 13th century, Sanjusangendo, Kyoto (left)  
 • Jokei, Kongo Rikishi, 13th century, Kofukuji, Nara (right)

and eventually took over control. At the same time, the common people also came into their own. This is depicted particularly masterfully in the *Heiji Monogatari Ekotoba* scroll. Its superb composition and the picturesque depiction of the head of Shinzei (Fujiwarano-Michinori [1106-1159]) attached to a long sword rank the painting among the world's masterpieces. From the outset, the depiction of the horses and carts of aristocrats and couriers racing madly about in The Burning of the Sanjo Palace display typical baroque-like characteristics.

In sculpture Unkei gave expression to the movement of the physical body. Unkei's Fudo Myoo Triad and Bishamonten sculptures (Ganjoju-in) give clear expression to anger in human form, and their directness is linked to Realism. In particular, the figures of Fudo Myoo's two young male attendants are masterful, and the attitude of Seitaka who is facing to one side seems clearly based on careful observation of children's behavior. Another masterpiece is the group of "Eight Boy Attendants" in Kongobuji on Mount Koya. The actual physiques of these figures are generalized, but their weight is skillfully expressed and the anger in their innocent child-like faces is discernable. Eiko Doshi and Kongara Doshi are characterized by their full cheeks, chubby necks and thick lips. One can almost sense their willfulness along with the natural movement of their youthful forms.

Notable among Unkei's portraits are the sculptures of Muchaku (Ananga) and Sesshin (Vasubandhu). Muchaku was of course the fifth-century Gandharan monk who founded the Hosso School. He held that consciousness is the basis of all phenomena, the

theory that is known in Japanese as *Yushikiron*. This theory differed from the dependence on the “other power” of the Amida Pure Land faith espoused by the aristocrats of Kyoto at that time. It was rather an espousal of the “self power” with which believers confront suffering by themselves. The realism and spatial quality that we see in this image derives from his belief in this idea.

Jokei’s pair of “Kongo Rikishi” images (Kofukuji) are also representative sculptures of Japanese baroque style. We notice first of all the powerful naked forms and the movement that creates space around them. Until this time the masculine figure had been represented by helmet and armor, and this is the first time that the physical body itself was used. Japanese sculptors of this period possessed an adequate knowledge of anatomy, though the way they expressed it differed from both the idealism of the naked human figure of Ancient Greece and the portrayal of suffering in 15th and 16th-century Italian art. Here we sense a naturalism that attempts to show a natural strength. The Twelve Heavenly Generals of Kofukuji, by the same sculptor, are characterized by their many expressions and their particular large movements, and each sculpture has individual countenances and moves. They give us a sense of the range of Jokei’s abilities.

The superb images of the Twenty-eight Classes of Beings in the Rengeoin (Sanjusangen-do) in Kyoto add realism and fantasy to this movement. The figures of the old man and woman Basu Sennin and Mawarajo recall through their realism the figures of Caravaggio and Rembrandt in the 17th century. It is difficult to discover just why these figures take the forms they do. It would appear that Tankei, to whom these works are attributed, modeled them on actual monks and nuns of the time. It is of great interest that King Karura appears in the incarnation of a bird and King Magora appears as the incarnation of a snake. If we consider them in Christian terms, such animals would more likely be seen as incarna-

tions of the devil, but here they are presented in dignified forms.

Kosho’s Kuya Shonin (Rokuharamitsuji) stands only 117.6 cm high, but the figure certainly captures the feeling of the sage’s roaming and continuing forward movement.

### Modern Art (14th through 19th Century, Muromachi - Edo Period Art)

Buddhist art is often said to have come to an end in the 14th century. It is true that after this period we do have Zen painting, but landscapes (*sansui*) and paintings of natural beauty become the main type, and we no longer encounter superior Buddhist works of art. In the background, we notice that Buddhist temples themselves become more worldly, and with the development of a money economy, we detect a leveling trend within society. The landscape paintings of the Muromachi period Zen monks signify an element of escapism within the intellectual class, and at the same time, point to a focus on the individual within Buddhism. The landscape paintings of Sesshu (1420-1506) may be seen in a sense as a romanticization of China by the intellectuals, and religious motivation would seem to be minimal.

The *Bakufu* (military government) and the ruling class of the day commissioned artists of the Kano school in the decoration of large castles and temple halls, establishing an “academism” based on their “Chinese-style” flower and bird paintings (Kacho Fugetsu). With the appearance of secular painting, however, subject matter became freer and *yamato-e* techniques were also introduced.

The painting of Tawaraya Sotatsu (dates unknown) and Ogata Korin (1658-1716) served as nothing more than an excuse for purely decorative treatment of traditional *monogatari* themes. Literati painters of the Edo period, while looking back to Chinese style landscape painting (*nanga*),



- Uragami Gyokudo, *Rainy Mountains*, 18th century, National Museum, Tokyo (left)
- Hokusai, *Kanagawa-oki Namiura*, 36 Views of Mt. Fuji, 1831 (right)

developed their own approaches to painting landscapes following the seclusion of the country. *Ukiyo-e* painting and prints within the *Japonisme* movement had considerable influence on Western painters, particularly the French impressionists, but here can be seen the freer choice of painting themes and expressions that preceded that of the modern West.

The last breath of Buddhist painting in the 14th century resembles the development of modern art after the decline of Christian art in the mid-17th century. Upon escaping from the bounds of religion and myth and finding it possible to select subject matter freely, painting underwent a purification, and dynamic composition and bold coloring became possible. *Ukiyo-e* not only contributed to the colorings of *cloisonnisme* and the forms of Cubism, but the decorativeness of the Rimpa school influenced Art Nouveau because there already existed in painting in the East and the West a tendency toward decorativeness. The background of Manet’s “Portrait of Zola,” for example, includes an *ukiyo-e* print, a Velazquez painting as well as a Japanese screen with colorful birds and flowers painted on a gold background. All this suggests that in a psychological sense, Japan had already begun to modernize. One can understand the works of Sotatsu and Korin, the paintings of the literati and the *ukiyo-e* in the form of “*Japonisme*” as preceding that of modern painting in the West. One can only conclude that developments in the history of Japanese art preceded corresponding developments within Western art. **UJI**

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