

Book Reviews

Sherry D. Fowler

Murō-ji: Rearranging Art and History at a Japanese Buddhist Temple.

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005, 293 pp.

There is a welcome trend in recent articles and books on Japanese art published in English by art historians. From dating examples of art and architecture by detailing their stylistic elements, focus has shifted to emphasis on relating them to their politico-social, historical, and environmental milieu. The subtitle of Sherry Fowler's study of Murō-ji, "Rearranging Art and History at a Japanese Buddhist Temple" indicates it as an in-depth study of the historical and religious elements that have had major impact on the temple and on its rituals, art, and architecture since its establishment in the 700s by monks of the Kōfuku-ji, a major Nara temple of the Hossō school established as the clan temple of the influential Fujiwara family, in addition to its being a study of Murō-ji's statuary, ritual objects and architecture.

Today Murō-ji is a temple of the Buzan branch of the Shingon sect of Buddhism, but it has had a long, eclectic history associated with mountain deity worship, Buddhist practices of the Hossō, Tendai and Shingon schools, syncretic *honji-suijaku* kami veneration, as well as the veneration of Maitreya, the Buddha to come. This can be seen in the architecture and arrangement of the votive images enshrined in its halls.

The author has done extensive research on primary resources related to the locality's and the temple's history, as well as on mainline historical sources of Japanese culture and history. She begins (Ch. 1) with the involvement with Mt. Muro and its indigenous dragon deity to whom, even before the establishment of Murō-ji, prayers had been made for rain, and subsequently petitions added for the protection of the nation. In Chapter 2, she addresses the Murō-ji's various religious affiliations; Hossō, Tendai, Shingon, and the "contested histories" of sectarian affiliation seen as "an early modern construct that has often been projected back onto the early history of temples." In particular, she discusses the vying claims of the Kōfuku-ji and Shingon sect which spanned the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries and involved political intervention by the imperial and *bakufu* governments.

The author next (Ch. 3) deals with the four main structures of the complex; the pagoda, the Maitreya Hall, the Main Hall, and the "Founder's" Portrait Hall in the Okuno-in. In discussing their architecture, she also deals with Japanese preservation practices, dating of repairs and changes, and the images enshrined. She relates the restoration of Murō-ji's national treasure pagoda which was badly damaged by falling trees in a 1998 typhoon. During restoration, evidence of its being constructed circa 800 was found. She also details the public showing of the pagoda's

secret (*hibutsu*) Five Wisdom Buddhas, and compares the 1999 national campaign to restore the pagoda to historical fund-raising campaigns (*kanjin*) held to repair well known Buddhist temple buildings. The thirteenth century Miroku Hall is seen as the best place for traces of Murō-ji's original status as a special subtemple of the Kōfuku-ji. Veneration of Miroku (Maitreya) was advanced in the Kamakura period as an alternative to Amidism, and records remain of popular yearly ceremonial practices. The fourteenth century Main Hall is seen as best reflecting the early influence of Shingon. Originally used for conferring various levels of secret esoteric teachings (*kanjō*), a Nyorin Kannon, widely associated with Shingon temples, is the main image. The Okuno-in and the Founder's Portrait Hall with its statue of Kūkai, who established the Shingon Sect, is seen as clear examples of the fourteenth century shift to Shingon ritual and practices.

Chapters 4 and 5 investigate the Golden Hall and changes in its use and images over time. Analyses show that datings of the five images now aligned in this hall range from the 9th through the 10th centuries. The author's well-researched argument is that the original grouping venerated was a triad of Yakushi, the Healing Buddha, flanked by the bodhisattvas Kannon and Jizō, evidence of early Tendai influence. Later the grouping was modified and enlarged to reflect the temple's then association with the Kasuga Shrine-Kōfuku-ji complex and its *bonji-suijaku* images. An interesting sidelight is that the Jizō image currently in the Golden Hall does not fit in size nor style its backing mandorla; whereas, the Jizō enshrined in a concrete hall in the village of Sanbonmatsu a few kilometers away does. Moreover, sculpturally and stylistically the Sanbonmatsu Jizō is closely related to the national treasure main figure that is now registered as Shaka, not Yakushi. Just how this Jizō came to be removed from the configuration in the Golden Hall remains a mystery as there are no known local or temple records related to its move.

The concluding chapter, "Conclusions, Manifestations of Multiplicity," recapitulates and ties together the author's central thesis of there being "plurality of practice" at Murō-ji, which included mountain deity worship, Buddhist and syncretic Buddhist-Shinto practices, eventually overlaid by Shingon beliefs and practices on earlier Hossō and Tendai ones.

Scholars in various disciplines of Japanese studies will find much of interest both in the wide-ranging contents of this book, and in the author's organization and method of research on the Murō-ji. In addition, the book is richly and thematically illustrated in color and in black and white. The volume ends with an Appendix that gives Fowler's translation of the *Ben'ichizan nenbun dosha sōjō* (Mt. Benichi's Petition for a Yearly Ordinand), 43 pages of notes, a 7-page Glossary of Japanese and Chinese Characters, 17 pages of primary sources, English and European language sources, and Japanese, Chinese and Korean ones, followed by a detailed Index. Historically and artistically, the author has given us an impressive in-depth study of Murō-ji, its historical relationship to other temples and shrines, as well as to Japanese society.

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