

With a Single Glance: Buddhist Icon and Early Mikkyō Vision.* Cynthea J. Bogel. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009. 496 pp.

Reviewed by Heather Blair

There is simply no other book like *With a Single Glance* in (or out) of print. This volume makes a significant contribution to our knowledge of the complex field of esoteric Buddhist visual culture. Cynthea J. Bogel's focus is the establishment in ninth century Japan of a systematized complex of representational, ritual, and doctrinal practices that she refers to as Esotericism or Mikkyō, as distinct from un-systematized (and lower-case) esoteric elements current in the Nara period. Her stated mission is to "challenge the authoritative status of the text" (p. 58) in mainstream Buddhist studies and to exhort us to consider "Buddhism as a visual and material tradition" (p. 56). Appropriately, the subtitle of the book is a fair indication of Bogel's project: she eschews aesthetic assessments or use of the term "art" in favor of an analysis that highlights the "visual efficacy" of Esoteric icons—that is, their abilities to instantiate as well as to represent, to enlighten and to "look back" at the practitioner. She achieves this goal through the presentation of an impressive array of information over the course of 300-odd pages. Significantly, her arguments are supported by more than 100 high-quality, mostly color illustrations.

Given the historical focus of the volume, it can come as no surprise that Kūkai (774-835, a.k.a. Kōbō Daishi) and his Shingon teachings play a starring role here, but Bogel also incorporates welcome discussions of nascent Tendai Esotericism and its imagery into her discussion. In fact, one of the major strengths of the project is its thoroughgoing attention to context. To chart out the religious and visual culture with which Esotericism interacted upon its arrival in Japan, Bogel analyzes a considerable body of non-Esoteric material from the Nara and early Heian periods. Similarly, in order to assess the relationship between Mikkyō's continental inspirations and its development in Japan, she provides a very useful treatment of the scant but striking material evidence for Tang Esotericism.

The book is divided into five more or less equal parts, and the argument is more lateral than linear. As a result, the five-fold structure is reminiscent of a mandala, and given the subject matter, it seems unlikely that this is coincidental. Definitions of major terms, the state of the field, and assessments of Buddhist "visualities" and iconicity occupy the first several chapters. Thus the first part of the book introduces Bogel's fundamental argument on the importance of visuality to Buddhist culture in general and Mikkyō in particular. Part Two considers Kūkai's mediation of continental and Japanese Esotericism. First Bogel examines evidence for Tang Esotericism, including little known and little published icons excavated at the Anguosi site and material imported to Japan by Saichō; then she takes up Kūkai's itemization of major objects that he brought back from China (the *Shōrai mokuroku*). This is a rare survey and analysis of all items listed in this famous document, and it comes complete with plentiful illustrations. The result is a fascinating glimpse into the multi-faceted materiality of Kūkai's transmission of the Dharma. Part Three is devoted to establishing the Japanese context for the arrival of imagery and

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ideas discussed in the previous chapters. It works to document the roles of “vision” in Japanese religious culture—both in terms of the physically visible (e.g., icons) and invisible (e.g., visualized images)—prior to and during the early diffusion of Mikkyō. Part Four focuses primarily on the mutual integration of Esoteric images and ritual practice. This portion of the book includes one chapter on contemplations (C: *guan*; J: *kan*) and one on the use of imagery in Esoteric ritual. Interestingly, this is the least-illustrated portion of the book, and there is little by way of thick description: the discussion remains fairly general and theoretical. Part Five considers the physical and ritual spaces of Esoteric visual culture, and begins with a survey of the architectonic contexts inhabited and the ritual work done by mandalas, paintings and sculptures. The last chapter provides an in-depth case study of the complex ninth century sculptural mandala installed in the lecture hall at Tōji in Kyōto. Here Bogel provides an interesting analysis of the mandala as related to but not derivative of texts (i.e., sutras or ritual commentaries). This is where the book ends—there is no separate conclusion.

Each of the parts just outlined stands more or less on its own and could be read independently by an audience with basic knowledge in Buddhist studies, Asian art history, or Japanese cultural history. Those with little familiarity with the topic at hand are advised to begin by reading the first chapter prior to the introduction in order to avail themselves of definitions and introductions to major terms. Overall, the multi-centered quality of the discussion undermines argumentative incisiveness on a macro-level, and in this respect it is significant that the book ends without a formal conclusion. On the other hand, the interlocking structure contributes to a subtle kind of provocation: Bogel’s work is so informationally dense that it invites active and ongoing reflection.

As invaluable as *With a Single Glance* is, there are also several issues that make reading and reference more difficult than need be. Perhaps the most obvious is the incidence of spelling and orthographic errors—e.g., *Śuśruta samhitā* for *Suśruta saṃhitā*, *Buddhālocana* for *Buddhalocanā*, or Huayen for Huayan (Pinyin transliteration is used for Chinese terms). For the most part, such errors are minor, and readers familiar with Sanskrit, Chinese, and/or Japanese will be readily able to infer the correct terms. Then again, misspellings may cause difficulty in tracking follow-up references. This is a shame because this book will be quite useful to graduate students and members of the art history and museological community who do not have specialized language training. There are also cases of inconsistency and situations in which cross-references or more careful editing would have increased readability, particularly for non-specialists. The author works with numerous texts (sutras, ritual commentaries, historical records, etc.). While this is part of the appeal of the book, it may also provide ground for confusion. In many cases, including the index, sources’ titles are given in English translation. At other points, however, titles appear solely in transliteration. For instance, the *Nihon ryōiki* is cited numerous times—and to good effect—beginning on page 24. The first reference is to its Japanese title, but on page 30, the title is given in English translation with a note that it will appear henceforth as *Miraculous Stories*. Then, on page 57, it crops up again as *Nihon Ryōiki*, and the best background information on its content is provided only on page 148.

Unfortunately, there is also no comprehensive list of illustrations—and given the number of figures, a table of contents would be of considerable help in (re)locating particular images. With respect to back matter, there is no glossary, an addition that, once again, would have made the book more accessible to non-specialists. The index, however, is functional, if not as detailed one

might wish (for instance, “logic of similarity,” one of Bogel’s major analytical concepts, is not included).

Many issues of interest to different constituencies surface at various points in the book. These range, for example, from treatments of obscure and little-discussed sculptures, to discussion of debates about just what Kūkai imported from China and what he invented, to well-turned comments on textiles. In short, this is a rich volume indeed: *With a Single Glance* will be useful to researchers, graduate students, collectors, and museum professionals, both as a monograph and as a support for ongoing reference.

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