

Amamonzeki jiin no sekai: miko-tachi no shinkō to gosho bunka [Amamonzeki – A Hidden Heritage: Treasures of the Japanese Imperial Convents]. The University Art Museum, Tokyo University of the Arts. April 13, 2009-June 14, 2009.*

Reviewed by Claire Cuccio

With the explosion in art and cultural websites, easy global access to images of cultural artifacts has challenged the traditional role of museum exhibitions, but the exhibition held between April 13 and June 14, 2009 at the University Art Museum of Tokyo University of the Arts (Tokyo Geidai Bijutsukan) of nearly two-hundred treasures from the Japanese Imperial Buddhist Convents (*amamonzeki*) lures us back into the museum space. The exhibition renews the possibility of sensing awe when encountering a material object for the first time, a human experience that remote, virtual access to the material object interrupts. By highlighting objects that are known to have been made or used by nuns who founded or restored the convents and that have been rarefied through generations of careful handing, the exhibition personalizes the nun's devotional and daily-life objects, stirring an urgency to see them in the material.

The unique assemblage of these object-artifacts represents the vision of a team of scholars associated with the Institute for Medieval Japanese Studies and the Tokyo University of the Arts, as well as Sankei Shimbun's foresight in recognizing the far-reaching implications of the project by offering to sponsor it. Japanese and foreign specialists collaborated closely with the abbesses of the 13 imperial convents in Kyoto and Nara that remain in operation, some of which have a history of over a thousand years. Their combined efforts take viewers on a pilgrimage through the exclusive subculture of the individual convents, mapping out a socio-cultural matrix of the lives of imperial, aristocratic, and shogunal daughters-turned-nuns.

The cultural breadth of the convents can be seen in various objects made from wood, clay, cloth, metal, paper, and pigments, and some even attest to religious fervor by incorporating the hair and blood of the nuns who created them. They range from calligraphy, lacquerware, altar cloths, votive figures, hand and hanging scrolls, accessories for religious rites, handcrafted games and other entertainments, to woven and embroidered garments for dolls and adults. This creative production captures the astonishing skill, erudition, and industry of these tonsured women.

Objects on display also convey their culturally specific functions, ordinary to ceremonial. The animal-hair fly swatter (*hossu*), used ritually to strike out illusions, can be seen illustrated in many of the portraits of abbesses where it is held as a symbol of spiritual authority, but an actual 17th century example owned by Abbess Daitō Bunchi (1619-97) of Nara's Enshōji, displays the beauty and intricate design of the functional object itself. Likewise, the 18th century lacquer tonsure table from Kyoto's Reikanji infuses the oft-encountered phrase "took the tonsure" in Buddhist texts with pointed ritualistic significance as the actual spot where a young princess sacrificed her locks of hair to assume her official role as nun. The visual brilliance of these objects convinces us that the imperial convents are extraordinary cultural repositories.

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The dynamic interplay of objects within the exhibition advocates for the inextricable link between court and convent. Portraits of convent abbesses, for instance, serve to document the history of the individual convents through their founders; to display the refined painting tradition of the convents; and to establish the distinct iconography of representations of imperial Buddhist abbesses. The subtle offering of flowers placed before each portrait simultaneously reminds us of their role as devotional objects. Portraits painted by the imperial nun Tokugon Rihô (1672-1745) moreover begin to create a stunning portrait of the artist herself. From these pieces, one might assume “convent painting” was her exclusive occupation. But her biography is enhanced by viewing her calligraphy and paintings owned by different convents and temples, a *kesa* (clerical garment) and *inkajô* (certificate of dharma transmission) presented to her by the Ôbaku Zen priest Daizui Dôki (1652-1717) as testament to her religious training, a doll that she elaborately clothed and cared for as child princess to adult nunhood, and a self-portrait that she painted when abbess at Kyoto’s Hôkyôji. The portrait of Abbess Rihô and her influential role in history accrues through the various objects encountered at various spots in the exhibition, each object revealing something more about her, and creating layers of meaning that produce a multi-dimensional profile of her.

The convincing reproduction in the exhibition space of the *shoin*-style reception suite in Reikanji should be highlighted for its intriguing applications of new digital technologies. More broadly, it represents a supreme example of the convergence of convent and courtly life. But perhaps most significantly it functions as a conceptual staging device by providing an architectural space in which to imagine the myriad furnishings, tableware, and pastimes that comprised convent life, and are exhibited in nearby spaces.

While so many of the objects stimulate the feeling of awe one experiences when seeing something for the first time, the general public’s unfamiliarity with the subject matter necessitates that the exhibition works hard to orient viewers. Indeed, the exhibition encourages its viewers to take in every label and consult the catalogue at each turn in order to process the complexity of imperial convent culture. The catalogue goes beyond being a companion piece and simple documentation of the exhibition and serves as a critical primary source that delivers what quite possibly will become a canonical compendium. The fully bilingual, professionally translated Japanese-English tome compiles in-depth articles by a range of specialists covering every topic and medium of the exhibition with valuable appendices and images grouped in provocative ways.¹

An exhibition premised on a closed society also invariably calls for a feat of design in the exhibition space. The curators’ careful conceptualization of imperial convent culture opens up a multi-dimensional, multi-sensory experience. Reconstructed altars create sensitive venues for religious rites and ease the presentation of the many related objects. Displayed in such a way as to allow for perambulation, textiles are vaulted and often complemented with photographs elucidating their more outstanding elements. Music and video clips that document convent rituals and traditions animate, authenticate, and weave together otherwise seemingly disparate objects on display. This exhibition realizes in a museum space new epistemologies that delimit a zone of inquiry and explore it through cross-cutting issues being, in this case, Japanese Buddhism, the imperial court, gender, education, architecture, ritual and ceremony, play, and patronage. The

result has moved many who have viewed the exhibition to exclaim, effectively, “This has never been done before.”

Note

1. The companion catalogue, *Amamonzeki jiin no sekai: miko-tachi no shinkō to gosho bunka = Amamonzeki – A Hidden Heritage: Treasures of the Japanese Imperial Convents* (Institute for Medieval Japanese Studies, et al., eds. 2009), written in both Japanese and English is available through the Geidai site

http://www.geidai.ac.jp/museum/exhibit/2009/amamonzeki/amamonzeki_en.htm,

accessed February 22, 2010. For inquiries in English see, <http://www.chusei-nihon.net/>, accessed February 22, 2010.

Reference Cited

Institute for Medieval Japanese Studies, Patricia Fister, and Monica Bethe, eds.

2009 *Amamonzeki jiin no sekai: miko-tachi no shinkō to gosho bunka = Amamonzeki: A Hidden Heritage: Treasures of the Japanese Imperial Convents*. Tokyo: Sankei Shinbunsha.

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