A JAPANESE FOLK ART SCULPTURE AND A TRADITIONAL AMIDA BUDDHA FROM THE SEATTLE ART MUSEUM

Thesis for the Degree of M. A.

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ABSTRACT

A JAPANESE FOLK ART SCULPTURE AND A TRADITIONAL AMIDA BUDDHA FROM THE SEATTLE ART MUSEUM

by Ann Silvernale Bowden

Two examples of Japanese sculpture from the Seattle Art Museum were chosen for study in this paper. No comparison is made between the two until the end of the paper, at which time an evaluation is made of the effectiveness of the two works as religious statements. The first piece is a folk art sculpture believed to be 300 years old and of Christian origin. I have attempted to explore what happened in Japan when Christianity came; to find out what Japanese Christian sculpture was like, and what happened to the icons when Christianity was eradicated. In considering the possibility that the piece is not Christian, I compared it with native Japanese works: haniwa and Buddhist folk carvings. I have offered some suggestions concerning the possible identity of the sculpture within the Buddhist pantheon.

The second sculpture is an eighteenth century Amida Buddha considered to be typical of such works by professional carvers in the Edo period. It is elegant, marvelously refined, but curiously sterile. I have indicated the relationship of this image to the Amida Nyorai carved by Jōchō in the eleventh century. Conditions that

prevailed at the time of the carving of the Seattle Amida are also considered. To determine how this icon evolved from traditional sculpture that came before, I have studied the works of the great periods of Japanese sculpture. An attempt has been made to trace the reasons for the decline in vitality in temple sculpture which occurred after the fourteenth century.

To do this research, I used the resources available at the Seattle Art Museum, the University of Washington, and Michigan State University. In addition, correspondence was sent to museums, temples and private collectors in Japan. (At the time of this writing, all data from this source has not yet been received.) I have had several consultations with Dr. Sadayoshi Omoto of Michigan State University, Dr. Glenn T. Webb of the University of Washington, and have corresponded with Professor Hugo Munsterberg.

After comparison of the folk-carving with images of the Virgin Mary done by Japanese and Europeans of the time, and by further comparison of it with sculptures in the native Japanese tradition, I have suggested that the provincial work is not Christian. The evidence suggests it is a Buddhist sculpture done in the manner of the best-known provincial priest-carvers, Enku and Mokujiki.

It would appear that the Amida Buddha became trapped in the cultural restrictions of its day, and because of

this, reached the "end of the line" as a document of the religious life of the Japanese people.

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PREFACE

This paper tries to determine the inspiration for and historical climate surrounding two Japanese sculptures in the Seattle Art Museum. One work reflects the small but vigorous provincial current in the broad stream of Japanese sculpture, and the other typifies the main current--the traditional art of court and temple. Religion and political history play a large part in this account because the sculptors were caught up in their times as well as influenced and restricted by ecclesiastic tradition.

In order to do this study, many hours were spent in the Seattle Art Museum. The staff was extremely helpful, and I would like to especially thank the Registrar, Pauline Adams, for leading me to resources that greatly assisted my work. At the University of Washington, Dr. Glenn T. Webb was an inspiring teacher of Japanese Art. He saw the beginnings of this paper, and I am grateful for his help. Through all of my graduate work, Dr. Sadayoshi Omoto of Michigan State University, was a patient, encouraging guide. I deeply appreciate all he has done for me.

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PART I

THE FOLK ART SCULPTURE

Description and Classification

There is something uniquely fresh and appealing in the simplicity, the directness and the roughness of a piece of folk art. Such a piece is the recently acquired (1966) Japanese sculpture reputedly from the Sendai district in Northern Honshu, in the Seattle Art Museum.

It is 28 inches tall, made from a single piece of wood, flat backed as if intended to be an icon. The head is slightly bent forward. The face is more sophisticated than the rest of the figure, being smoother and more finished looking. The eyes and mouth are tiny incisions and the nose is a flattened wedge. The ears are extremely large, and the high peaked "cap" sits oddly on the head. A bulky collar comes right under the chin. The shoulders slope down to too-long arms which are bent in an attitude of prayer. The truncated lower body ends in stubby feet emerging from under the garment. The Japanese term for provincial work such as this, is mingei, from the word min, meaning people or folk, and gei, meaning skills or arts.

Folk art is the unselfconscious and anonymous work of unpolished country people, "taking its strength from the land and requiring neither sophistication nor even a high degree of expertness in technique."[1] The golden age of

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[1]Hugo Munsterberg, Mingei: Folk Arts of Old Japan (New York: The Asia Society, 1965), p. 6.

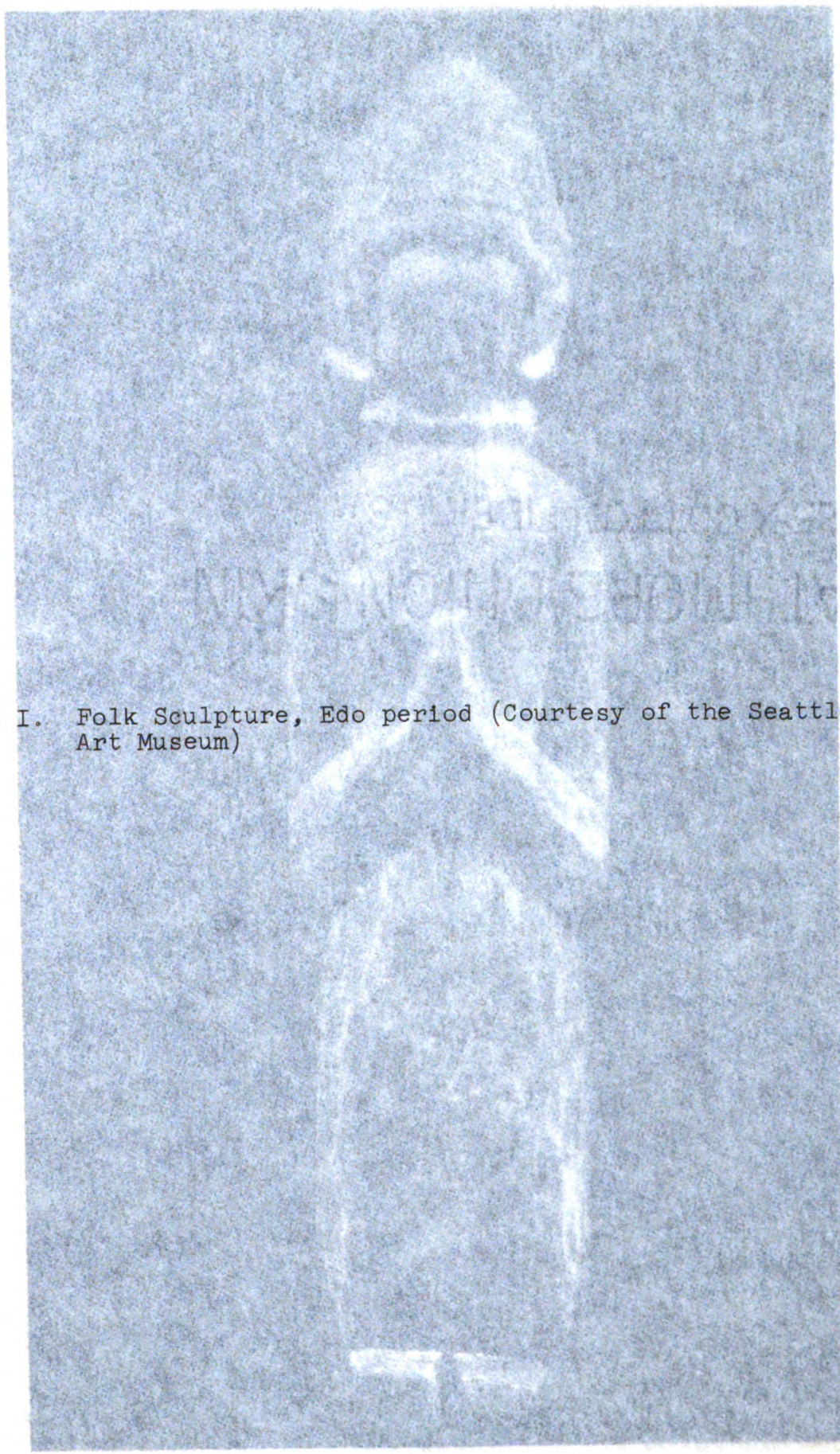

PLATE I. Folk Sculpture, Edo period (Courtesy of the Seattle Art Museum)

PLATE I. Four Seasons, Two-panel Tapestry of the Boston Art Museum)

Japanese folk art arrived in the Edo period (1615 to 1868), when peace and prosperity was established by the Tokugawa Shogunate, and common people had some leisure for the first time to devote to the making of articles of utility as well as beauty. They may have drawn upon memories of works of court and temple masters, but in addition endowed their works with a fresh vigor and engaging naiveté that set it apart from the arts of the courts, and perhaps even transcended a mere imitation of such artists. Such mingei may tell us more about a culture and a people than the works of accomplished masters.

In the 1930's, two great scholars, Langdon Warner and Soetsu Yanagi, began writing about the fresh, rough beauty and true artistic genius to be found in the folk arts of Japan. Museums and collectors began to discover this beauty, and entire exhibitions, such as the one at the International Folk Art Museum in Santa Fe (1958), and the travelling exhibit of the Asia Society (1965), have been devoted to this art.[2]

In 1960, the Seattle Art Museum exhibited its outstanding Japanese art collection in commemoration of the centennial of American-Japanese diplomatic relations. It was the first time folk paintings, sculpture and crafts

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[2]The Seattle Art Museum has been a leader among American institutions in the collection of Japanese mingei (Munsterberg, "Japanese Folk Art in the Seattle Art Museum", Oriental Art, VIII Summer, 1962 , 69).

were included along with the highly sophisticated works of professional masters.[3]

Six years later, a dealer in Japan sold the mingei, the subject of this study, to the museum. The dealer stated that the piece was unique, that it was Christian and probably three hundred years old.[4]

The sculpture was featured in the 1967 Museum engagement book, which stated: "This highly simplified interpretation of the Virgin Mary is the product of a folk craftsman in Japan in the early 17th Century. It is 'Mingei' or folk art and 'Namban' meaning foreign or barbarian in its inspiration. It dates from close to 1600, for within a very few decades thereafter the widespread Christianity of the Jesuits was forbidden and the relics ordered destroyed. Few of the figures called 'Maria' survive." If this piece is Christian, we should try to find its place in the years that Japan was exposed to the missionary activities of Portugal and later, Spain.

Christianity in Japan

Three Portuguese castaways were the first Westerners to reach Japan. Their visit, in 1542, was brief, but their enthusiastic account of the Japanese adventure brought merchant ships into Kyushu harbors a year or two later.

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[3]Richard Fuller, Japanese Art in the Seattle Art Museum (Seattle, 1960).

[4]Mrs. Pauline Adams, registrar, Seattle Art Museum, private interview, April, 1968.

"From the point of view of the great Kyushu barons the appearance was opportune, for in addition to being intensely curious about the Portuguese and their wares, they saw foreign trade as a source of the wealth they needed to maintain their military strength. The foreign merchants thus arrived in Japan at the right place and at the right time."[5]

When the Japanese saw that the Portuguese traders treated missionaries with great respect, they accorded favorable treatment to them as well. The Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier landed at Kagoshima in 1549 and was well received by the lord of Satsuma. His was the first organized mission to Japan, and Xavier and his few colleagues achieved some success in winning converts. He hoped to see the "King of Japan" in Miyako (now Kyoto) but found the shogun absent from the city and the emperor in retirement. He did seek out influential people and established good relations with a number of them. "It was the policy of the Jesuits to seek the support of the ruling classes wherever they went. They knew that in the long run they must depend upon the good will of the temporal power."[6]

When he returned to Goa, which was headquarters for the Portuguese government of the Indies, Xavier reported

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[5]George Sansom, A History of Japan, Vol. II: 1334-1615 (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1961), p. 264.

[6]Ibid., p. 291.

that mission work in Japan should go well and spoke very favorably of the Japanese people. He urged that missionaries be sent immediately, and good men were sent. Ten years later there were twenty Jesuit fathers in Japan.

Father Gaspar Vilela was received by the Ashikaga Shogun on whom he must have made a favorable impression, for orders were issued that the missionaries be well treated and allowed to preach freely and build churches in the capital. Violence soon broke out in the city forcing Vilela to move to Sakai for two years. Meanwhile, jealous Buddhist monks clamored for the expulsion of all missionaries from the country, but the protection of the Shogun prevailed.[7]

Luis Frois joined Vilela in 1564. He was active in Kyoto when Nobunaga and Hideyoshi were in power, and was very successful in his conversions and relationships with influential people. His letters provide highly reliable evidence on events of the time.

Frois had a very favorable interview with Nobunaga in 1569, and soon thereafter received a license to preach in Japan. Nobunaga's favors to Christian missionaries continued for the remaining thirteen years of his life.[8] The growth of Christianity was remarkable under Nobunaga's protection. No doubt he wished to ensure a continuous foreign trade, but there was also more to his decision,

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[7] Ibid., p. 292.

[8] Ibid., p. 294.

for he was a man of foresight who carefully balanced advantages and objections before making up his mind to treat the Jesuits well. He was surely influenced by the character of the missionaries who were men of strong faith, good breeding and great scholarship. But he also used Catholicism to counteract the political strength of the powerful Buddhist institutions.

The success the Jesuits had was remarkable, considering that there were but a handful in all of Japan. By 1582, it was estimated that there were 150,000 converts in Japan, most of them in the western provinces. "Some of these were devout, some had converted on orders from their daimyo, others were fascinated by the new and bizarre, and still others thought it wise to adopt the religion of the Portuguese merchants who could make them rich."[9]

Large numbers of converted warriors were genuinely inspired by strong faith and the need to believe in a guardian deity. A few famous generals rode in the Korean invasion some years later under Christian flags. Peasants were attracted by the solace of "the Christian doctrine, material help in the form of charitable gifts, medical care in the Jesuit infirmaries, and a new status and feeling of well-being in the little Christian schools and the

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[9]Seiroku Noma, The Arts of Japan, Vol. II: Late Medieval to Modern, edited by Glenn T. Webb (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1967), p. 173.

churches where they attended Mass. That the faith of these simple people was very deep-rooted is proved by their steadfast behavior under persecution in a later period."[10]

Hideyoshi reacted to the Christians somewhat differently. He was not interested in religion personally, but was friendly with the Jesuits, and enjoyed conversations with them from time to time. He was most affable and encouraging with the Vice-Provincial Gaspar Coelho, and suggested that Coelho might soon purchase for him two well-armed Portuguese ships to aid him in his invasion of Korea.

Suddenly, in 1587, Hideyoshi did an abrupt about-face, banned Christianity and ordered the Fathers to leave the country in twenty days time. The reasons for this are as uncertain as they are varied. Some Jesuits left the country, the rest went into hiding but with continued evangelistic activity.[11] In time it became apparent that Hideyoshi was too busy with governmental problems and his plans of foreign invasion to think much about the Christians. He seems to have been aware of their continued activity, and to have tolerated individual freedom of belief, objecting only to wholesale conversions at the insistence of a daimyo.[12]

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[10]Sansom, History of Japan, II, p. 298.

[11]Ibid., p. 347.

[12]See p. 18 for an account of the enforced expulsion edicts.

Christian Icons in Japan

Religious relics that were brought into the country by the missionaries to aid them in their work probably originated in Portugal and Antwerp where regular workshops made paintings for export. At first, the European paintings were concerned almost entirely with the Virgin and Child, and the Virgin as Our Lady of Grace. The only exception was a picture of the Resurrection of Christ mentioned in a report to Rome in 1565. There was at least one illuminated Bible, and a decorated Glossa Ordinaria in Japan as early as 1551.[13]

Luis Frois mentions the first attempts of the Japanese to make devotional objects for Christian use. When he was stationed at Sakai in 1560, he had a Japanese Christian goldsmith make two retablos, one of the Nativity, and the other of the Resurrection of Christ for a new chapel he was building.[14]

It became readily apparent that along with the language difficulties and problems in ideology, there was some confusion of the Virgin with the Bodhisattva Kwannon, often portrayed as the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy. To avoid this confusion, the first professional European artist to work in Japan, Giovanni Niccolo, specialized in oil paint-

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[13] J. E. McCall, "Early Jesuit Art in the Far East", Artibus Asiae, X, (1947), p. 124.

[14] Ibid., p. 124.

ings of Jesus as Savior. With a picture of the Savior, the missionary could explain Christian doctrine clearly, and later introduce the Virgin and Child and other subjects of Christian iconography. Niccolo established the Academy of St. Luke in Arima in 1594, in order to teach young Japanese artist-converts painting, engraving and possibly sculpture.[15]

Pupils of Niccolo decorated the newly built Catholic churches until activity was forced to stop. The Annual Letters of various years mention specific paintings that caught the visiting Bishop's eye. It was noted that Jesuits could not tell which works were of European origin and which were done by the Japanese. It was a curious fact that the Japanese did not use the European technique in creating original pictures, but confined their work almost entirely to copying European paintings.

A European printing press arrived in Japan in 1590 and Niccolo was able to begin teaching the art of engraving.[16] In 1596 Bishop Martinez visited the seminary and described the visit: "From the printing office [we] went into the studio of the engravers. The work room of the painters stirred up especial admiration. These were of various age levels, and were very numerous. With palette in hand they stood before the canvases and painted pictures in oils. Over the entrance to their house hung a picture

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[15] Ibid., p. 130.

[16] Ibid., p. 131.

of the Virgin Mary after St. Luke which a young nineteen year old Japanese had made in perfect form. [We] departed highly satisfied with the artistic creativity of the young Japanese of this place."[17]

Very few examples of Christian sculpture have survived. What does exist falls into three categories: imported European pieces, disguised Christian examples carved by Japanese, and fumi-e, or foot-treading reliefs used to extract confessions during the persecutions.

The few imported pieces are crucifixes, medals and shrines, such as a relief of the Virgin and St. John in a triple arched shrine case of sixteenth century Flemish make.[18] The camouflaged sculptures were usually Buddhist in style with a hidden Christian symbol somewhere on or inside the piece. A unique collection of such works is owned by Mrs. Renzo Sawada in Oiso, near Kamakura.[19] The foot-treading reliefs were initially confiscated medals and plaques of Japanese or imported origin, fitted into wooden frames, and later were metal reliefs made especially for the purpose. The subject matter of the reliefs was often the Pieta or Virgin and Child. The practice was to force every person, in areas where Christians were suspected of

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[17] Ibid., p. 133.

[18] Ibid., pp. 298-299.

[19] A. Eisenstaedt, "Hidden Crosses", Life, XX (March 25, 1946), pp. 93-96.

hiding, to step on the Holy Image. To refuse to do so meant torture and death. There was a Prayer of Contrition given to the faithful by the Jesuits, to be said after stepping on the reliefs, in order to save them from death.[20] Most of the existing fumi-e show much sign of wear.

In the realm of secular art, a few Namban screens were painted around the turn of the seventeenth century. Namban means "southern barbarian" to the Japanese, since the foreigners came in from southern waters into southern ports. The subject of these screens was generally a Portuguese ship coming into port, being greeted by Portuguese traders and Jesuits. Sometimes the screens showed Jesuits and Portuguese walking in the busy, panoramic city scenes which were popular at the time. The foreigners were a great curiosity, and some Japanese began to wear Portuguese clothing, carried rosaries and learned to say a word or two in Portuguese.[21]

Embassies to Rome

Two embassies were sent to Rome, one in 1582 and the other in 1615. These were the first diplomatic visits by representatives of Japan with European countries. The first envoy was sponsored by three important Christian

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[20]Tei Nishimura, Namban Art (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1958), English summary, p. 7.

[21]Basil Gray, "Western Influence in Japan", Oriental Art, II, No. 4 (winter, 1956), p. 129.

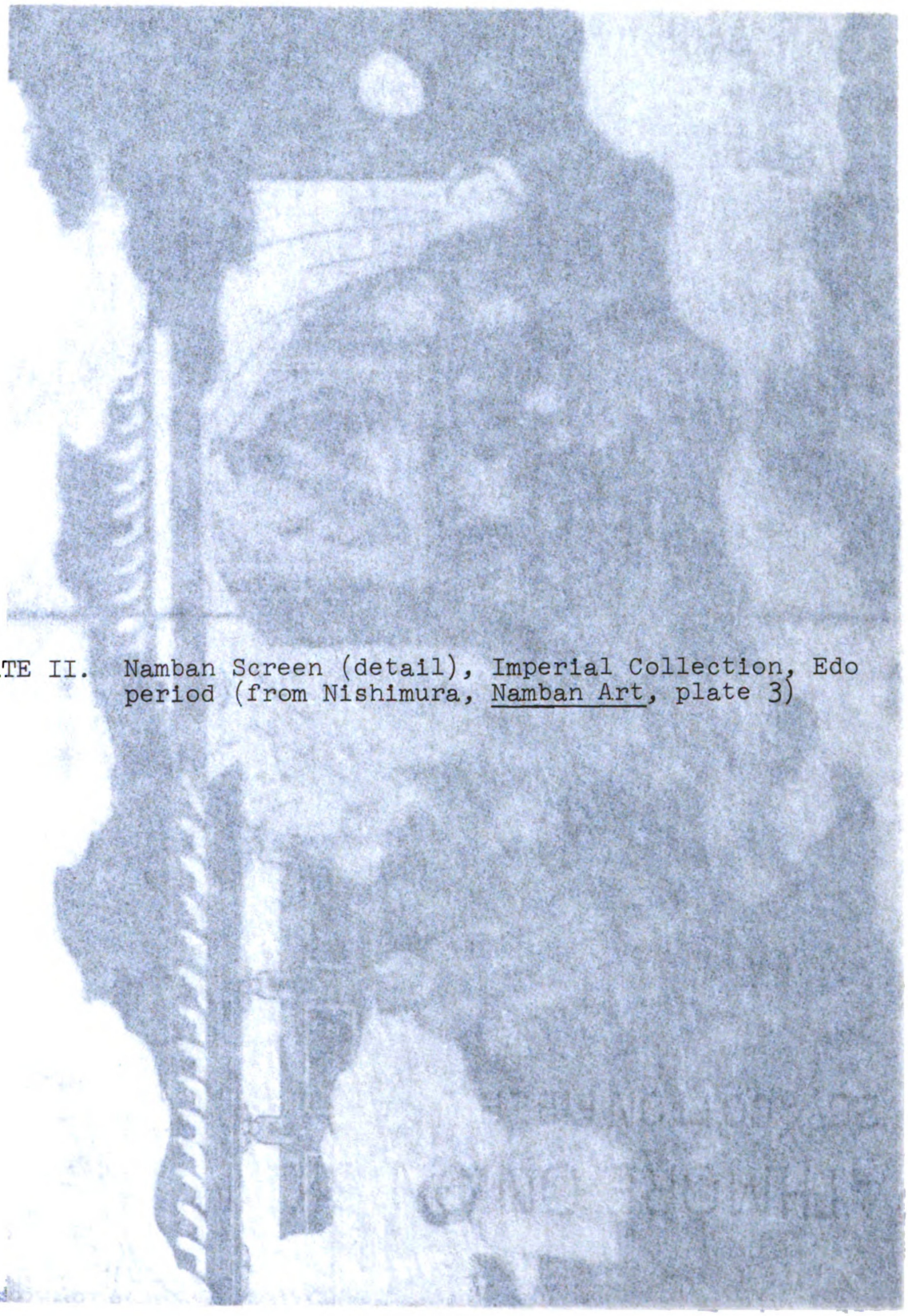

PLATE II. Namban Screen (detail), Imperial Collection, Edo period (from Nishimura, Namban Art, plate 3)

PLATE II. Number Screen (metal), Imperial Collection, Edo period (from Meshimura, Number Art, plate 3)

lords of Kyushu Island and comprised four well-born Japanese youths who had brilliant success in Lisbon and Rome. Eight years later they came back to Japan with gifts of illustrated books, Gobelin tapestries and other art objects from Phillip II, ruler of Spain and Portugal, and Pope Gregory XIII. The accompanying Jesuits "were also honored by the Pope, who granted them a monopoly on evangelism in Japan, as well as a handsome stipend."[22]

The sponsor of the second expedition was Date Masamune, a powerful daimyo of the Sendai district. It is curious that he would send the embassy as late as 1615, when the persecutions had begun in earnest. "There is no proof that Date Masamune actually renounced the Buddhist faith. His religious belief was no deeper than that of the mass of his educated contemporaries . . . hence he was doubtless unconscious of the inconsistency of expressing sympathy with a foreign creed while doing his utmost to promote the interests of the faith of his ancestors."[23] He sent flowery letters to the Pope expressing his interest in Christianity. He, too, may have had an eye to building trade relations. At the same time he was rebuilding at great expense a Buddhist temple, the Zuigan-ji at Matsu-

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[22]Noma, Arts of Japan, p. 173.

[23]G. Meriweather, "A Sketch of the Life of Date Masamune and an Account of his Embassy to Rome," TASJ, XXI (1893), p. 30.

shima. The collection of Christian artifacts still housed in this temple, was brought back from Rome by his ambassador, Hasekura Rokuemon.[24]

Earlier, Masamune was one of the last lords in the north to hold out against Nobunaga. He capitulated after a stern warning, and there was a measure of respect between the two men. He remained one of the few independent and uncommitted daimyos during Hideyoshi's tenure, and was one of the defenders of Ieyasu at battles leading up to Sekigahara in 1600. Perhaps for the reason of his power and loyalty, the Christian artifacts in his great temple were not disturbed during the anti-Christian purges.

Several things bothered Hideyoshi about the Christians. They were charged with "encouraging daimyos to force their people to give up their old religion; with selling Japanese as slaves to China, Korea, and other parts of Asia; with killing animals (horses and oxen) for food; and with destroying Buddhist and Shinto buildings."[25] It is true that Portuguese traders did buy slaves, and the Jesuits and their converts did occasionally smash Buddhist images and Buddhist shrines. But

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[24]Christian activity in the Sendai district is important to this study, as it is the reputed provenance of the Seattle mingei.

[25]Sansom, History of Japan, II, p. 347.

Hideyoshi still admired the Jesuits as individuals and was not too disposed to ruthlessly root them out. As a result the number of Jesuits in Japan did not diminish but increased after 1592. The report of the Society for the years 1595-96 shows that there were more than one hundred forty Fathers in Japan. "This was a remarkable situation for Hideyoshi had licensed only ten priests in Nagasaki for the spiritual needs of the Portuguese."[26]

The Pope had granted a monopoly of maritime trade east of the Red Sea and as far as seventeen degrees east of the Moluccas to the Portuguese. This meant that a monopoly on trade carried with it a monopoly in Christian missionary endeavor, since only missionaries approved by the Portuguese could find passage on their ships. As a result, for fifty years after the discovery of Japan by the Portuguese, only Portuguese ships traded in Japanese ports and only Jesuits preached in Japan.

This monopoly on Jesuit missionary work was bitterly resented by members of other orders especially the Franciscans who were preaching in the Philippines. Spanish traders in the Philippines also resented the Portuguese hold on trade with Japan. At first by accident, and then by design, Spanish sea captains began a tentative trade in the port of Hirado. Hideyoshi sent a rash letter to the Governor-General in Manila demanding tribute. In re-

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[26] Ibid., p. 350.

turn the Spanish Governor sent two placating missions each headed by Franciscans who offered to stay on in Japan as "hostages" and preach. This they were allowed to do and soon more Franciscans came. There was a flurry of activity, convents and churches were built even in Kyoto, the capital. Naturally the Jesuits, ostensibly confined to Nagasaki, were furious.[27] The quarrels between the two orders did not improve their position in Japan.

The Persecution

A crisis came late in 1596 when a Spanish ship broke up on the coast of Tosa. The valuable cargo was confiscated, and the irate and intemperate pilot reputedly said something to the effect that priests and traders were forerunners of conquering expeditions. Hideyoshi suddenly issued an order for the execution of seven Franciscans and nineteen Japanese followers who were all in Kyoto. They were first mutilated, then "led in a pitiful cavalcade to city after city, to be shown as a warning to the people. They reached Nagasaki [a month later] and there were crucified upside down as common criminals."[28] The icy winds of persecution had begun to blow.

From 1596 on, foreigners and converts were persecuted. The purges were sporadic until "the rule of the

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[27] Ibid., p. 373.

[28] Ibid., p. 374.

second Tokugawa shogun when there was a concentrated effort to drive out all members of the foreign faith, now entirely associated with imagined plots to make Japan a colony of a Western nation."[29] Religious relics were destroyed, except those that were hidden away.

In the years from 1618 to 1621 a large number of Japanese Christians were put to death. Fifty were executed in 1619 alone, but European Christians were not killed until 1622, the year referred to as the Great Martyrdom in the mission reports. At that time, nine foreign priests were killed along with forty-six Japanese Christians. By 1626 seven hundred fifty had met their death by execution. Thousands more must have died from imprisonment or exile.[30]

Boxer says, "a careful scrutiny of the primary sources indicates that the vast majority of native Christians eventually apostatized, either under torture or the threat thereof, in the course of the persecution."[31] And yet it is estimated that up to five thousand martyrs died for the Faith between 1614 and 1643 and less than seventy of these were Europeans.[32]

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[29]Noma, Arts of Japan, II, p. 173.

[30]Sansom, History of Japan, III: 1615-1867, p. 41.

[31]C. R. Boxer, The Christian Century in Japan 1549-1650 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 360.

[32]Ibid., p. 358.

Disguised Icons

Christianity in Japan was either eradicated or went underground. Believers hid their Catholic artifacts, or created new ones disguised as Buddhist icons. For two and a half centuries these people lived with fear. When the ban on Christianity was lifted and freedom of worship restored in 1873, nearly half of the hidden Japanese Christians returned to the Catholic Church, but the other half adhered to their old secret way of worship, as if the prohibition was still in force.

To this day in Japan, there are about 30,000 "separated" believers scattered on some twenty islands off the northwestern coast of Kyushu and also on the Nishisonoki Peninsula on the Kyushu mainland, who refuse to be assimilated into the contemporary Catholic Church. The prayers and rituals they perform are so distorted by time and deprivation from priestly guidance that they cannot recognize themselves as part of the present-day Church. They worship quaint disguised pictures and statues in secret such as a painting of Christ in feudal Japanese costume wearing a topknot, but with a cross and a dove in the background. They worship a sculpture of the Virgin carved to look like Kwannon, the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy, wearing a veil and with a tiny cross incised in the wooden back.[33]

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[33]"Persecuted Christians Still Worship in Secret", Nippon Times, Sept. 1, 1955.

Mrs. Sawada's notable collection of disguised Christian works has already been cited. On each of the works there is some symbol, sometimes hidden inside a hollow carving, to indicate its Christian intent.

The only category of Japanese Christian sculpture the Seattle Art Museum mingei falls into is that of disguised Christian work. It obviously does not look like a western Virgin Mary. The odd cap, or headdress seems too strange. The medieval Japanese were extremely adept at imitating European works. Admittedly the carver was not workshop trained, but even a folk artist such as the mingei carver should have been able to carve a veil or some other obvious characteristic of the Virgin. Stylistically the mingei does not come close to any depiction of the Virgin researched.[34] In every painting and carving of the Virgin, the Western viewer can see some characteristic iconography. Thorough inspection of the Seattle statue, however, fails to reveal any Christian marking or symbol, and would thus eliminate the likelihood of its being a disguised work.

Professor Hugo Munsterberg in commenting about the Seattle example, has written in reply to a letter enclosing a photograph of the mingei, "most of the material (Christian sculpture) survived in Kyushu and was made

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[34]Nishimura, Namban Art; Eisenstaedt, "Hidden Crosses"; McCall, "Early Jesuit Art."

either in imitation of a Western style or in the prevailing Buddhist mode with sacred Christian symbols. I would therefore very seriously doubt that this is a Virgin Mary. If it is genuine, I believe it to be a praying Buddhist figure in the añjali mudra. However, in not personally seeing it, I would be hesitant to accept it altogether as an ancient work, and think it is further likely that it is 19th Century."[35]

Iconography of Mingei

Let us consider the possibility that the Seattle mingei might not be Christian after all. The hands are pressed together in an attitude of prayer. The Buddhist añjali mudra is done this way. The smooth body could be any type of robe. It is when we get to the collar that we hesitate. Is this part finished? Could it be an attempt at a necklace? An early Nara sculpture of Bon Ten (Brahma) has a robe that rises around the neckline. Each figure, in an extremely early (ca. 650) group of the Four Deva Kings in the Kondo of the Horyu-ji has a smooth ruff-type collar coming up around the chin.[36] None of these figures has hands pressed together, but all four are wearing crowns. Perhaps the "cap" of the Seattle mingei is really a band or crown around the head, and the hair, then, shows above as well as below.

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[35]Letter to writer, May 20, 1968.

[36]Tokyo National Museum, Pageant of Japanese Art, Vol. 3, ed. by Yutaka Tazawa (Tokyo: Tōto Bunka Co., Ltd., 1952), plate 9.

PLATE III. Folk Sculpture (details), Seattle Art Museum (photos by C. E. Bowden)

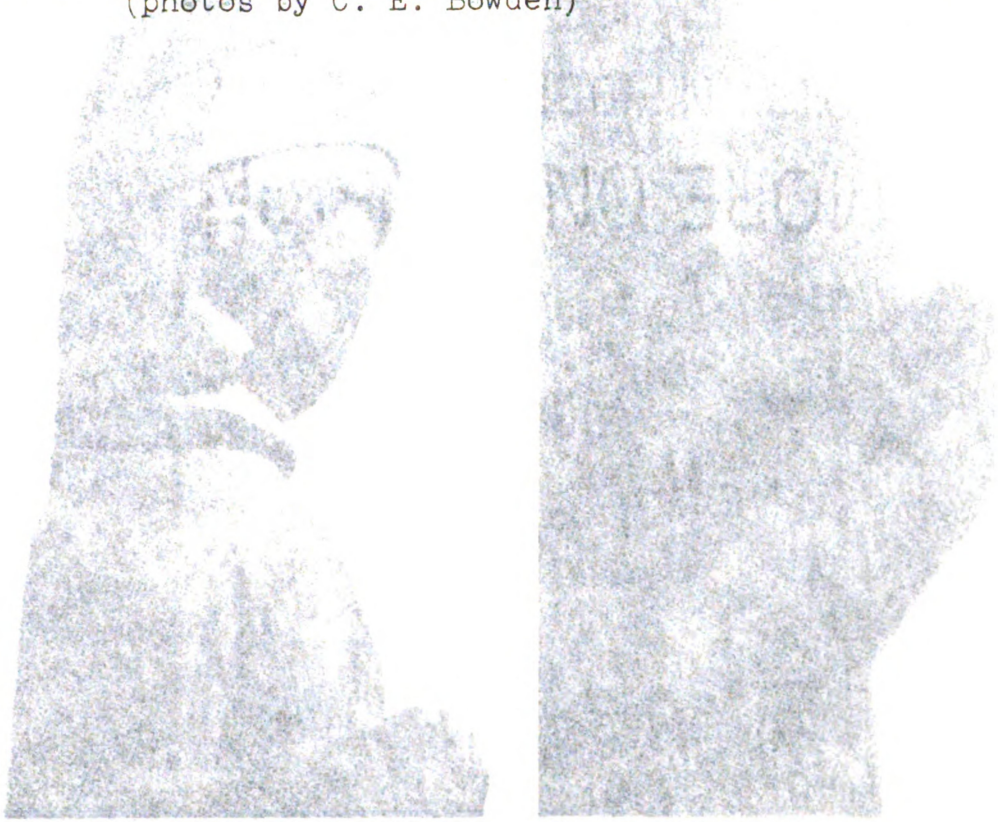


PLATE III. Rock Sculpture (detail), Seattle Art Museum
(photos by C. E. Fowler)

The ears are extremely large like the traditional Buddha, whose earlobes were distorted in his youth by the weight of gold earrings, which indicated his royal origin. Bodhisattvas also have elongated ears because they are said to derive from the figure of Gautama (the historical Buddha). They have attained enlightenment and are helping enlighten others. They are usually graceful figures, serving as attendants to Buddhas or objects of worship, themselves.

Two strong impressions are made when the Seattle work is viewed from a distance: the sculpture is tree-like in its simplicity and columnar verticality; and it possesses an unmistakable aura of spirituality. The piece looks old, not only because of the cracks and lines in the wood, but because it has an ancient quality, a timelessness that makes us want to look deeper into the past for some clue to its origin or meaning. It may well have been carved in the nineteenth century as Munsterberg suggests, but there is a mysterious quality of agelessness about it as if it has always had something to say to humanity--and is still saying it.

Comparison with Haniwa

Maybe it seems old because it reminds us strongly of something old, the haniwa figures of the second to sixth centuries, A. D. These are sculptures made of clay cylinders about half an inch thick, and usually twenty five

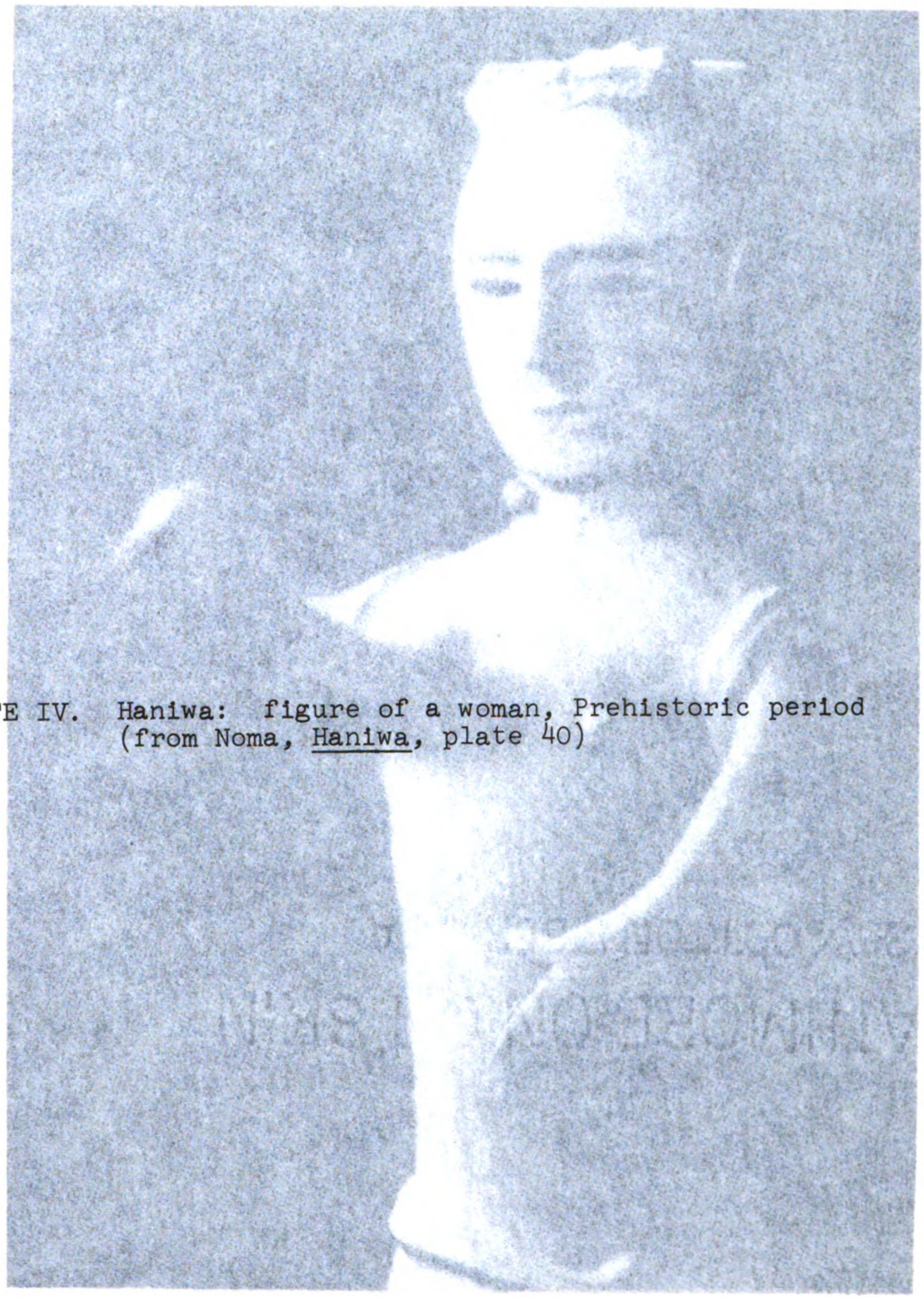
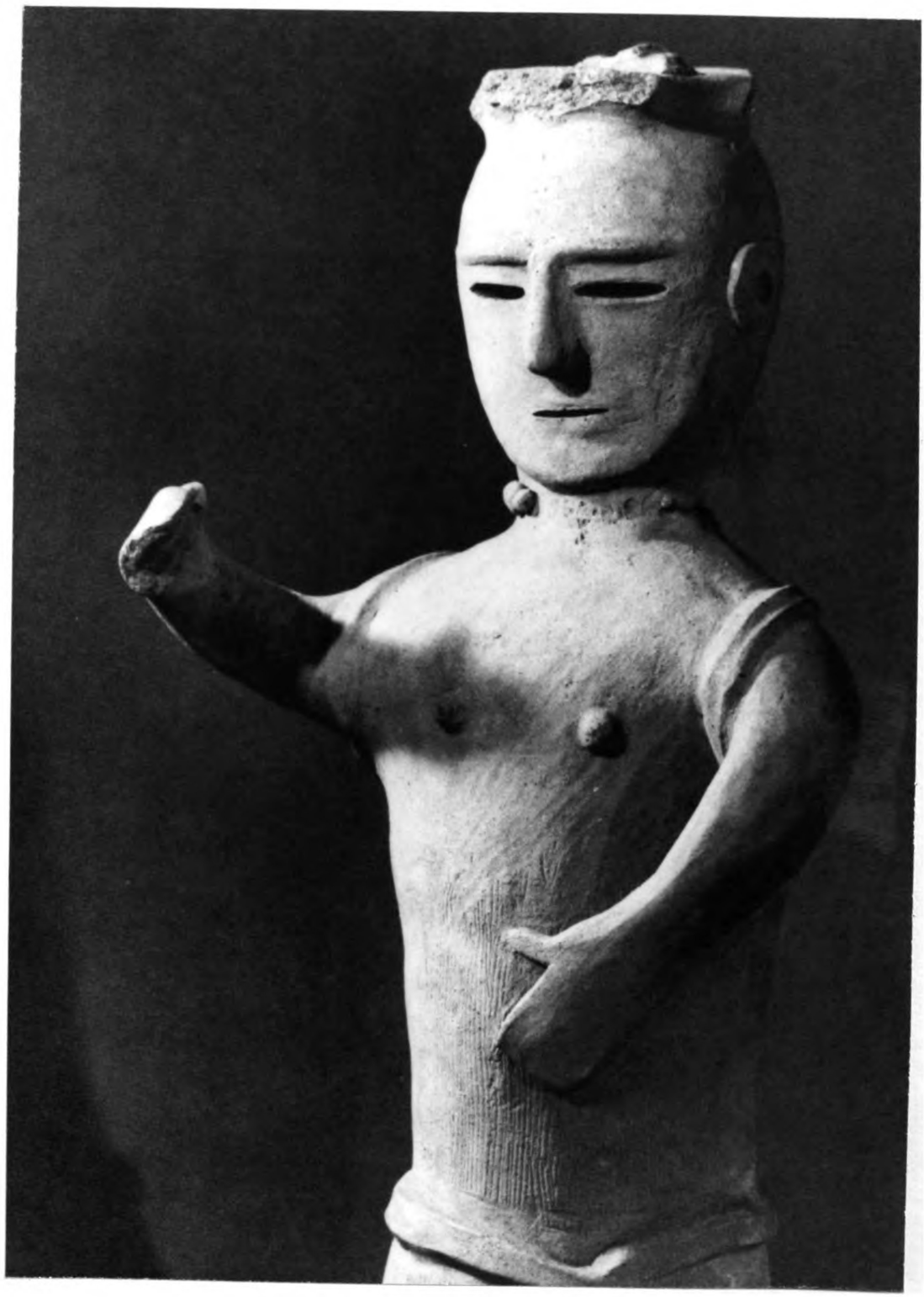


PLATE IV. Haniwa: figure of a woman, Prehistoric period (from Noma, Haniwa, plate 40)

PLATE IV. Hanlwa: figure of a woman, Prehistoric period
(from Noma, Hanlwa, plate 40)



let the heat escape during firing, but the noses in both works are triangular wedges, and there is an exquisite simplicity about the total effect of the faces that links the two types of work together in a very fundamental way. The hands are schematic slabs of wood in the one, of clay in the other.

The facial expression of the folk carving is one of quiet containment and pensive, inward reflection. Together with the bend of the head and the praying hands, the expression gives it a strong religious feeling. One can easily imagine a rustic setting and simple people communing with this statue. It touches the chords of humanity.

Recording the human condition in another way are the haniwa figures. Many have extremely sprightly expressions. They smile, or frown with anger, or seem ready to shout or speak. Others are consumed by grief, or simply haughty or hollow-eyed with mournful mystery. They are religious works in the sense that they surrounded a religious precinct, but are not icons. What are they?

Several theories are advanced about their origin. Legend has it that they were used as substitutes for human sacrifice. Instead of hundreds of attendants going to their deaths at the time of a royal burial, the clay figurines were substituted. Another theory suggests that the haniwa were intended to reproduce funeral processions in a lasting form. The interesting variety of clothing, armor and other details supports this idea. There is also

speculation that they may be influenced by Chinese tomb sculptures, but the Japanese method of manufacture is different and the effect is different in that it retains its sense of the clay. The haniwa were arranged on burial mounds, not placed on or in front of tombs as in China.[39]

The only other type of anthropomorphic sculpture made in Japan before the time of the haniwa figures was the "dogu", meaning "clay images", which were produced around 3000 B. C. These probably had religious meaning, for many resemble the earth goddesses of other primitive cultures. These two sculptured types, then, are the only truly native Japanese forms, for when Buddhism came on the scene in the sixth century, it completely overwhelmed the native tradition. Seiroku Noma said, "the race that had made the images, however, did not disappear, and the same instinctive sense of form that haniwa reveal appears again and again under different guises throughout the later history of Japanese art."[40] Perhaps the Seattle mingei is just such a reappearance of this native tradition. If so, it is not a revival of old forms of the past, but a continuation, a quietly flowing, but separate, current in the broad stream that is Japanese sculpture.

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[39]Noma, "Haniwa, Protohistoric Sculpture", p. 5.

[40]Noma, Haniwa, p. 9.

Relationship with Shinto

An important element in this particular current of art is its relationship with the religion that existed in Japan before the onslaught of Buddhism. It was a religion so nebulous and vague there was no name for it for hundreds of years. It was a nature worship "of which the mainspring is appreciation rather than fear . . . and much that is kindly and gracious in the life of the Japanese today can be traced to those sentiments which caused their remote ancestors to ascribe divinity not only to the powerful and awe-inspiring, such as the sun and the moon and the tempest, or to the useful, such as the well and the cooking pot, but also to the lovely and pleasant, such as the rocks and streams, the trees and flowers."[41]

The work of the haniwa maker seems related to Shinto, the "Way of the Gods," by the very nature of its vitality and its feel for the clay. The folk artist, in the same way, seems to sense the beauty of the object, be it stone or wood, clay or cloth, and does not try to transform it into something that it is not.

Buddhist Folk Sculptures

A folk carving from Sado Island, a small Jizo Bosatsu illustrates this. It has the same columnar form as the haniwa and the Seattle mingei. It looks like the stone

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[41]Sansom, Japan, a Short Cultural History (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1943), p. 47.

from which it was carved. The body is reduced to a simple cylinder, with hands, feet and robe barely more than indentations in the rough surface. The Jizo Bosatsu is traditionally one of thirteen Buddhas of the Shingon Sect whose special task is to safeguard the soul after death. On Sado Island he is regarded as a patron saint of children, and figures, such as this one, were made to be thrown into the sea by women who wished to have children.

Even closer to our problem piece, the mingei, is the work of two Buddhist priests, living a century apart. Mokujiki became a priest in 1573 after having been a soldier half his life. Apparently he "gave vent to a dissatisfaction with the religion and art of [his] day by traveling from place to place, carving statues incessantly (and in unusual ways) as [he] went."[42] He carved rather squat figures draped in convoluted garments and with delightfully pugnacious faces. There is nothing quiet about his work. It throbs with a healthy muscular roughness and vigorous personality. Many of Mokujiki's works are now in the Yakushi-dō at Tōchikubō.

The figure of "Shotoku-Taishi" from Kōtai-ji shows a much more robust and assertive person than the mingei. But the wood is in a single block, and the hands are in the same prayerful attitude. Mokujiki's work seems naive,

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[42]Noma, The Arts of Japan, II, p. 216.

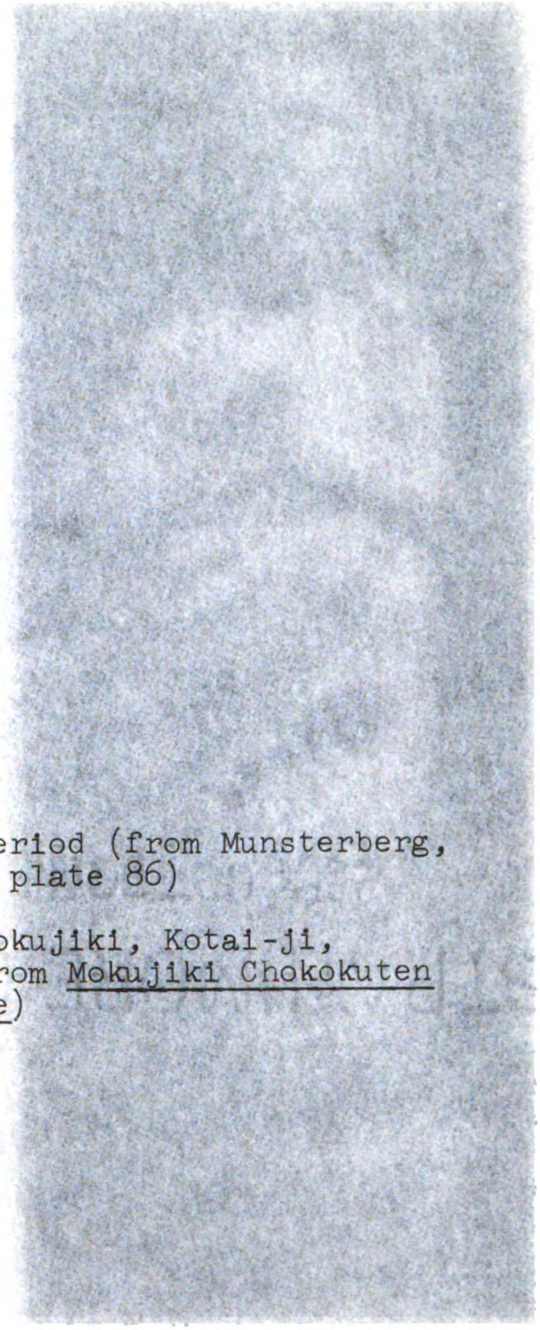

PLATE V. a. Jizo Bosatsu, Edo period (from Munsterberg, Folk Arts of Japan, plate 86)

b. Shōtoku Taishi by Mokujiki, Kotai-ji, Muromachi period (from Mokujiki Chokokuten Exhibition Catalogue)

PLATE V. a. Dio Bonatsu, Edo period (from Munsterberg, Folk Arts of Japan, plate 86)

b. Shōtoku Taishi by Mokujiki, Kotai-ji, Muromachi period (from Mokujiki Exhibition Catalogue)

but highly individualistic and unselfconscious. There is more sophistication, more mystery, timidity and conventionality in the Seattle work.

The other provincial priest-carver was Enku (1628-95) whose convictions led him to travel all over the country for almost forty years. He even went to Ezo in Hokkaido, which at that time was an extremely hazardous journey, and the destination primitive. He visited shrines and sacred places everywhere he went, leaving behind distinctive wooden images of "gods." He is said to have carved over twelve thousand pieces, and "all those still in existence possess a sense of power and mystery that conventional works of the time lack, and might be considered the antithesis of the rococo forms at Nikko."[43] He was known primarily as the carver of Buddha images, but also carved many Bodhisattvas. A collection of his works is in the temple Yakuo-in in Saitama.

Enku's manner of working was to use a hatchet and cut the wood, usually hinoki (cypress) into a wedge shape with one corner of the wedge forming the front of the figure. If a knot or knob was revealed in the wood, he would employ it in the total design. He did not force the wood to conform to a preconceived idea, but was sensitive to the possibilities within the wood itself, and the beauty in the grain of the wood.

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[43] Ibid., p. 87.

Many of his works look extremely unfinished. Some are hardly more than rows of stakes with Buddha heads, shoved in the ground, but he intended them to stand as they are. He extracted the essence of the idea, and then moved on. The overwhelming effect of much of his work is that of powerful rough slashing strokes. Often the sides of the garment are undercut to lift it in successively cascading folds. In this technique there is striking similarity with the traditional Yumedano Kwannon in the Hōryu-ji. There is a head, said to be a self portrait, that is carved with many little horizontal ridges in the manner of early Heian works. Another work, slender and sinuous, curiously sophisticated for all its schematic crudeness, can be compared with the Kudara Kwannon in the Hōryu-ji. Both have the same elongated, graceful body and calm, inward-directed expression. Enku apparently admired traditional icons and was emulating them in his own way.[44]

The smile on the faces of his sculptures is said to reflect the happiness inherent in Buddhism. Enku was a Buddhist priest, but probably prayed to Shinto deities as well. This practice is common in Japan. His subject matter is Buddhist, but there is something more to his work. There is a strong native sensitivity to the qualities of the medium, perhaps even a reverence for the wood.

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[44]See plates, p.

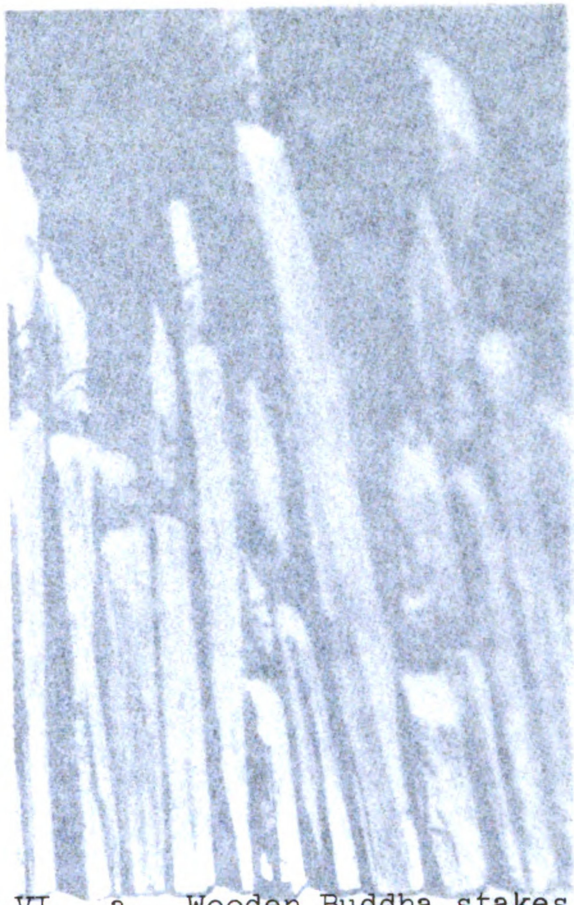

PLATE VI. a. Wooden Buddha stakes by Enku, Edo period

b. Self-portrait by Enku

c. Kwannon by Enku

d. Kudara Kwannon, Horyū-ji, Asuka period (from Kokka, No. 836)

PLATE VI. a. Wooden Buddha sraiks by Enku, Edo period

b. Self-portrait by Enku

c. Kwannon by Enku

d. Kichiza Kwannon, Horyu-ji, Asuka period (from Kokka, No. 93c)

The Enku figure of "Kwannon" in the Asia Society catalog shows some kinship with the Seattle folk carving. The hands of both works are the same chopped off, fingerless slab. Both figures are simple columnar shapes. The Enku is much more slashed, powerful and vigorous. Its cut-into robe and elaborate headdress is very different from the calm, static figure of the mingei. Both carvings possess an unmistakeable spiritual aura. For all the Enku's raw vitality, the faces of the two figures have the same expression of inward withdrawal and self-containment.

Sansom said, "the power and prestige of a foreign culture seem as if they would overwhelm and transform Japan, but always there is a hard, non-absorbent core of individual character, which resists and in its turn works upon the invading influence."[45] In this instance the powerful foreign culture was Buddhism, which transformed Japanese art. We may have at hand here a core of resistors to that influence, in Mokujiki, and Enku, and the carver of the Seattle mingei. The most resistant and the one who "worked upon the invading influence" the most is certainly the individualistic Mokujiki. Enku is seen to have admired Buddhist works but only sometimes adhered to traditional iconography, usually going his own way with half-realized versions of traditional icons. The carver

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[45]Sansom, Short Cultural History, p. 15.

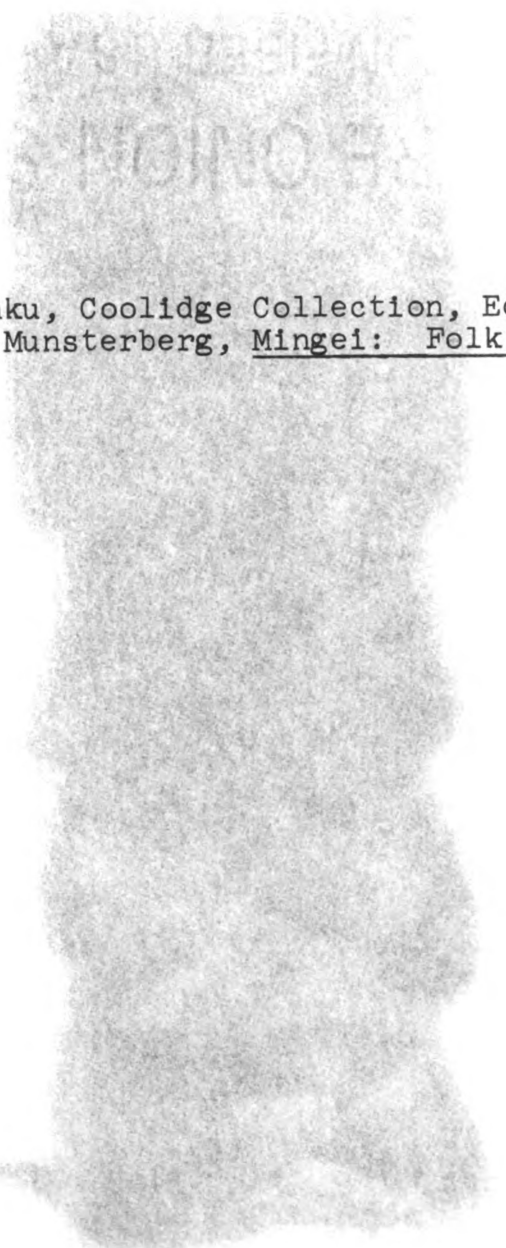

PLATE VII. Kwannon by Enku, Coolidge Collection, Edo period (from Munsterberg, Mingei: Folk Arts, plate 55

PLATE VII. Kwanyin by Enku, Coolidge Collection, Ede
printed (from Munsterberg, Masked: Folk Arts,
plate 55

of the Seattle piece is the least resistant and closer to the fine-art tradition than the others. But the carving still retains a quality of simplicity, and freshness, and sense of wood that court and temple art denies.

Considerations of Attribution

Since, as we have seen, the Seattle mingei is a step closer to the traditional Buddhist style, we should make an attempt to place it in the Buddhist pantheon. It cannot be identified for certain. The iconographical evidence is ambiguous and slight. We have a praying figure with elongated ears, bent head and hands together, wearing a bulky collar and a headdress that is very problematic for all its simplicity. Being flat-backed, it is obviously meant to be viewed from the front.

The fingers are not carved in the sculpture. The hands are merely a solid slab. The symbolic hand gesture that it approximates is the añjali mudrā which is called kongō gasshō in Japan, and is formed by "joining the hands, which are held vertically at the level of the breast, palm against palm, fingers against fingers, interlocked at the tips, the right thumb covering the left."[46] There are several slight variations on the composition of this gesture, but all have the same significance so can be considered the same. They are mudrā of adoration.

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[46]E. Dale Saunders, Mudrā: A Study of Symbolic Gestures in Japanese Buddhist Sculpture (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960), p. 76.

"The kongō-gasshō may derive from Hindu etiquette, in which it is a gesture of offering, of adoration, and of salutation . . . In Buddhism this gesture serves to give homage to divinities accompanying offerings or prayers, and reveals thereby the influence of the old Hindu usage . . . The hands are joined under the mouth in order to give homage to the Words emitted by it; hence the gesture honors the Buddha and the Law."[47] The right hand symbolizes the world of the Buddha, the left, the world of Beings. The hands are two, but are joined to form one unit, parallel to that which exists between the Buddha and Beings.

The kongō-gasshō can never be represented on a statue of the Buddha, because it is a gesture of adoration, of giving honor to a superior state. "It is a gesture which belongs rather to Bodhisattvas and to lesser personages (Guardian Kings, holy men, etc.), who give homage either to the Buddha or to the Doctrine."[48] It is to be found on the multiple-armed Kwannon, but in Japan (as in India) the two-armed Kwannon does not form the kongō-gasshō.

Kwannon[49] is the greatest and most famous of all Bodhisattvas. His name denotes "the lord who looks down

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[47] Ibid., p. 77.

[48] Ibid., p. 79.

[49] Avalokiteshvara in Sanskrit, and Kuan-yin in Chinese.

mercifully upon the suffering of the world."[50] His basic form throughout Asia is that of a young prince wearing costly clothing and jewels. In addition, he takes on many other guises in his readiness to help others. Theologically, Kwannon is male throughout Asia. In India he was portrayed without overt male attributes, but with a lithe softness and an angelic quality that easily led to his later appearance (after A. D. 700) as a female divinity in China and Japan. It was often a madonna-like quality, even to his carrying a child in his arms, that led to the confusion of Kwannon with the Virgin Mary. Since Kwannon does not pose in an attitude of adoration, and that is our dominant clue, we will have to eliminate him as a possibility.

Amida Buddha often appears as the center of a triad, flanked by Kwannon and Seishi. Seishi assumes several different mudrās, the principal one being that of adoration, palms pressed together. He is one of the Thirteen Buddhas of the Shingon Sect and as such safeguards the soul for one year after death. A statue in the Detroit Institute of Arts reputedly of Seishi, tenth century (late Heian Period) shows the Bodhisattva seated, which is unusual as he is generally shown standing. The figure's hands are palm to palm. There is a crown-like

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[50]Dietrich Seckel, The Art of Buddhism (New York: Crown, 1963), p. 224.

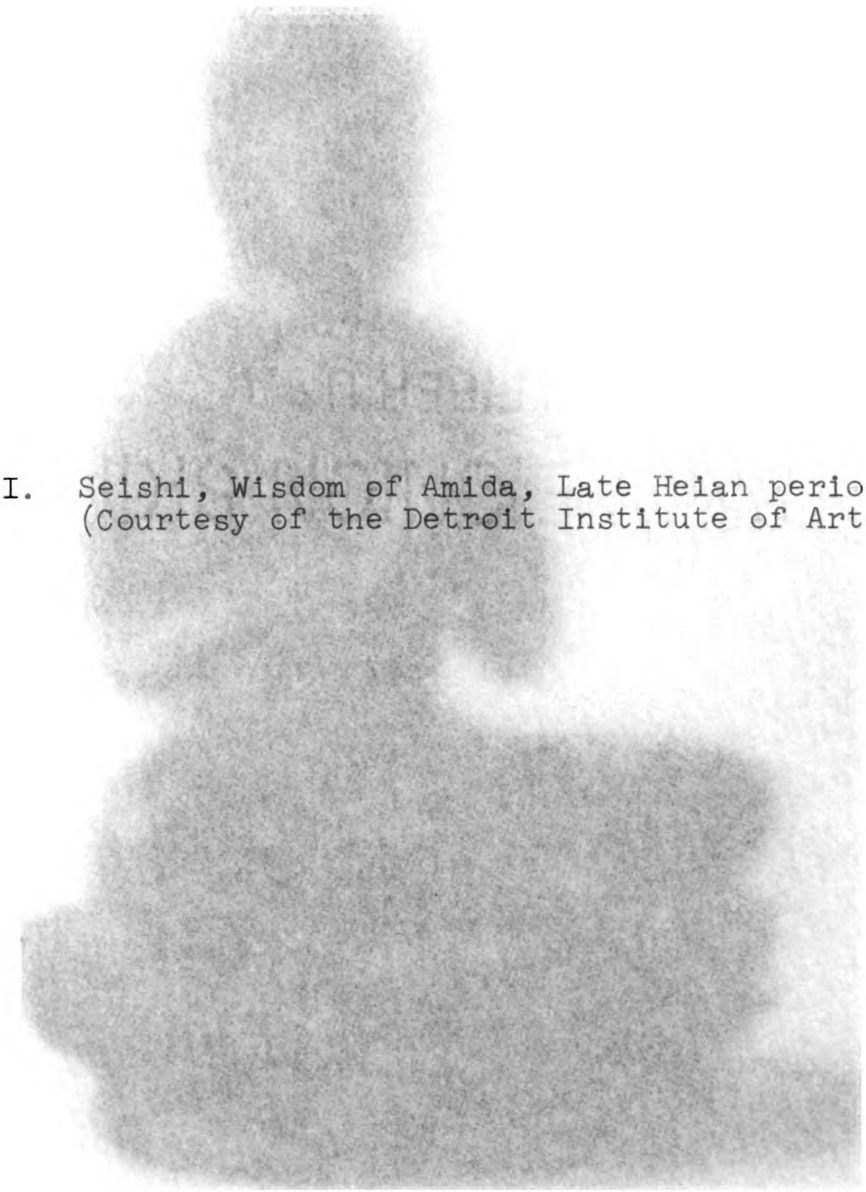

PLATE VIII. Seishi, Wisdom of Amida, Late Heian period
(Courtesy of the Detroit Institute of Arts)

PLATE VIII. Seleh, Wisdom of Amida, Late Heian Period
(Courtesy of the Detroit Institute of Arts)

band around the head surmounted by a hōkei or topknot of hair. Could the band across the head of the Seattle sculpture also be a crown? And could the high peak on the mingei be an approximation or beginning of a topknot? The ears of both works are pendulous. The Seishi bears the three classic neck rings, the sando, which are Buddha attributes carried over to Bodhisattva figures. Perhaps the provincial carver considered the neck rings, but for some reason was unable to carve them.

Two of the Ten Great Disciples of Buddha, Anaritsu and Ananda are usually represented standing with head shaven and a circular halo. Could the band be a provincial carver's solution to a halo? The hands of the two disciples are in the kongō-gasshō mudrā, as is the mingei.

Two sculptures, Gakkō Butsu and Nikkō Butsu, in the Hokke-dō of Tōdai-ji, Nara, are iconographically like Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten and are regarded as masterpieces of the late Nara period. They wear monk's robes and are praying with hands together. Their hair is mounded up by bands across the hair. Perhaps the carver of the Seattle work was familiar with these figures.

In A. D. 532, the King of the Korean kingdom of Paekche presented the Japanese emperor with a number of Buddhist ritual objects including a statue of Shakyamuni. There had been some cultural contact with the continent before that, but this marked the beginning of real aware-

ness on the part of the Japanese of the great philosophical religion emanating from China through Korea. There was violent opposition to the new faith for a while due to political reasons. Less than fifty years later Buddhism was established more firmly in Japan than in China.

Prince Shōtoku Taishi (Sage-Virtue) 574-622, is regarded as the real founder of Buddhism in Japan. He acted as regent for his widowed mother, and encouraged the spread of the faith by official edict. "The chief concern of Shōtoku Taishi was to propagate the moral and intellectual benefits of Buddhism, but he did not neglect the outward aspects, the temples, pagodas, vestments and ceremonies, which must constitute its first appeal to the unenlightened."[51] He wished not only to be worthy of Buddha, but also to rule his country as a Bodhisattva.[52] There are many statues of Prince Shōtoku, many portraying the kongō-gasshō mudrā. In several, he is wearing a high collared robe, such as the statue by Enkai in the E-den of Hōryu-ji, Nara.[53] There are countless other attendant figures to be studied as possible solutions to the identity of the Seattle mingei.

The evidence seems to suggest that the Seattle mingei is not Christian, that it is a provincial Buddhist

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[51]Sansom, Short Cultural History, p. 71.

[52]Masaharu Anesaki, History of Japanese Religion (Rutland, Vt. and Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1963), p. 59.

[53]Pageant of Japanese Art, plate 38.

work done in the manner of Mokujiki and Enku, and, like them, the carver was probably a priest or monk.

PART II

THE AMIDA BUDDHA

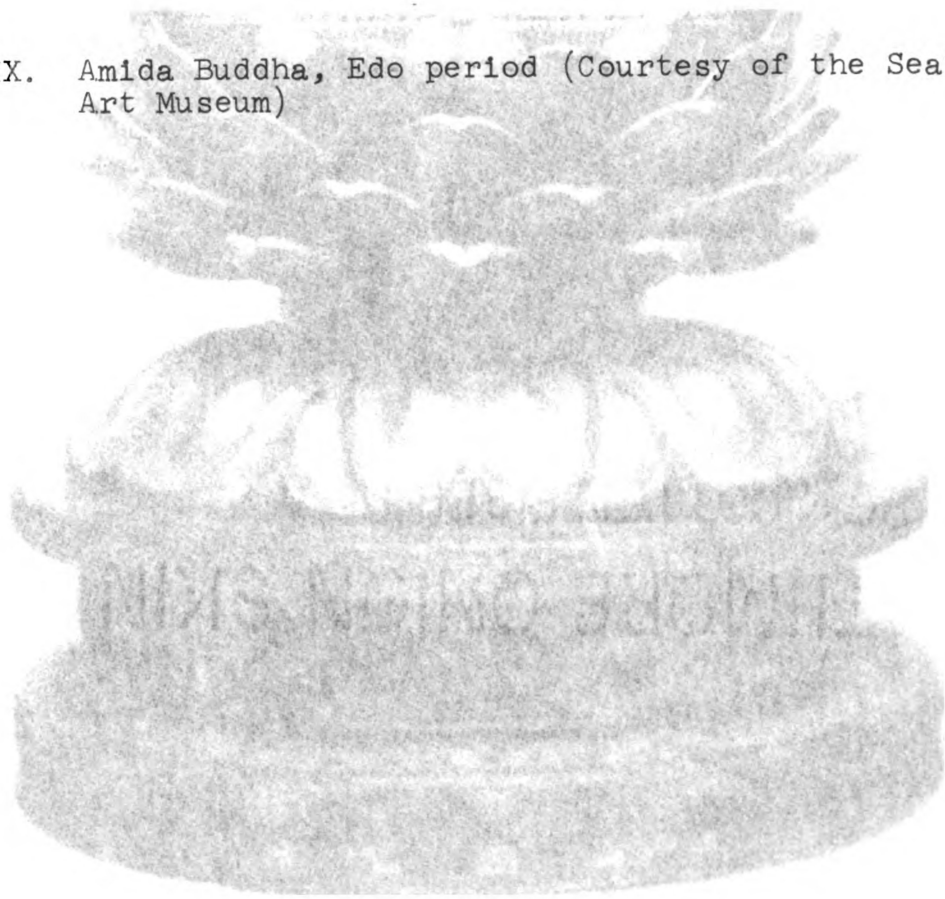

PLATE IX. Amida Buddha, Edo period (Courtesy of the Seattle Art Museum)

PLATE IX. Amida Buddha, Edo period (Courtesy of the Seattle Art Museum)

abstruse speculations of the Shingon and Tendai sects. The attractive dogma of salvation by the mere repetition of the formula "namu Amida Butsu" could not be combatted by the older sects.[2] As a result they sometimes incorporated the new approach into their own teachings. It was thus a non-intellectual form of Buddhism, which involved an attitude of complete and enthusiastic devotion.

Buddhist temples began to reflect these new ideas in their architecture and decoration, striving for as much elegance and lightness as possible, to recreate the Pure Land into which believers would be born. Anesaki describes it: "Born in the Land of Purity, the pious man is like a blind man who suddenly recovers his sight and finds himself surrounded by radiant beams and brilliant jewels of untold price . . . . Amida Buddha sits on a lotus seat like a golden mountain in the midst of all glories, surrounded by his saints."[3] As well as repeating the name of Amida, "the idea of repetitive images, the virtue of which lay in their mere multiplicity, was one of the formal religious practices of the time."[4]

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[2]Peter C. Swann, An Introduction to the Arts of Japan (New York: Praeger, 1958), p. 68.

[3]Anesaki, Japanese Religion, p. 152.

[4]Robert T. Paine and Alexander Soper, The Art and Architecture of Japan (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1955), p. 44.

Many such sculptures, Buddhas sitting on a lotus, had been carved for centuries in Japan. Is this particular sculpture, which is supposed to be typical of the age, a fresh look at the subject? This question has to be asked, even within the framework of the rigid requirements set down for the Buddhist icon-maker. The Buddha image must perpetuate the posture of the historical Buddha in "yoga". The posture, being immovable, symbolizes the unassailability of Truth.

Comparison with Work of Jōchō

The Seattle Amida Buddha is lovely. It is elaborately decorative. It is like a gilded doll. To analyze it stylistically, we have to compare it with the Amida Nyorai in the Phoenix Hall of the Byōdō-in, Kyoto. This sculpture is the late work of Jōchō (d. 1057), and the hall in which it is placed is an excellent example of a temple embellished with the best of fine and decorative arts to reproduce the Amida Paradise on earth.

Jōchō came from a temple studio in Nara and continued to work a great deal in that city, even though his workshop was in Kyoto. He was thus exposed to the early Nara masterpieces. There was such a demand for temple sculpture that a new technique was developed to facilitate production. Instead of being carved from a single block of wood, the statues now were made from a number of separate pieces of carefully selected wood which were roughly

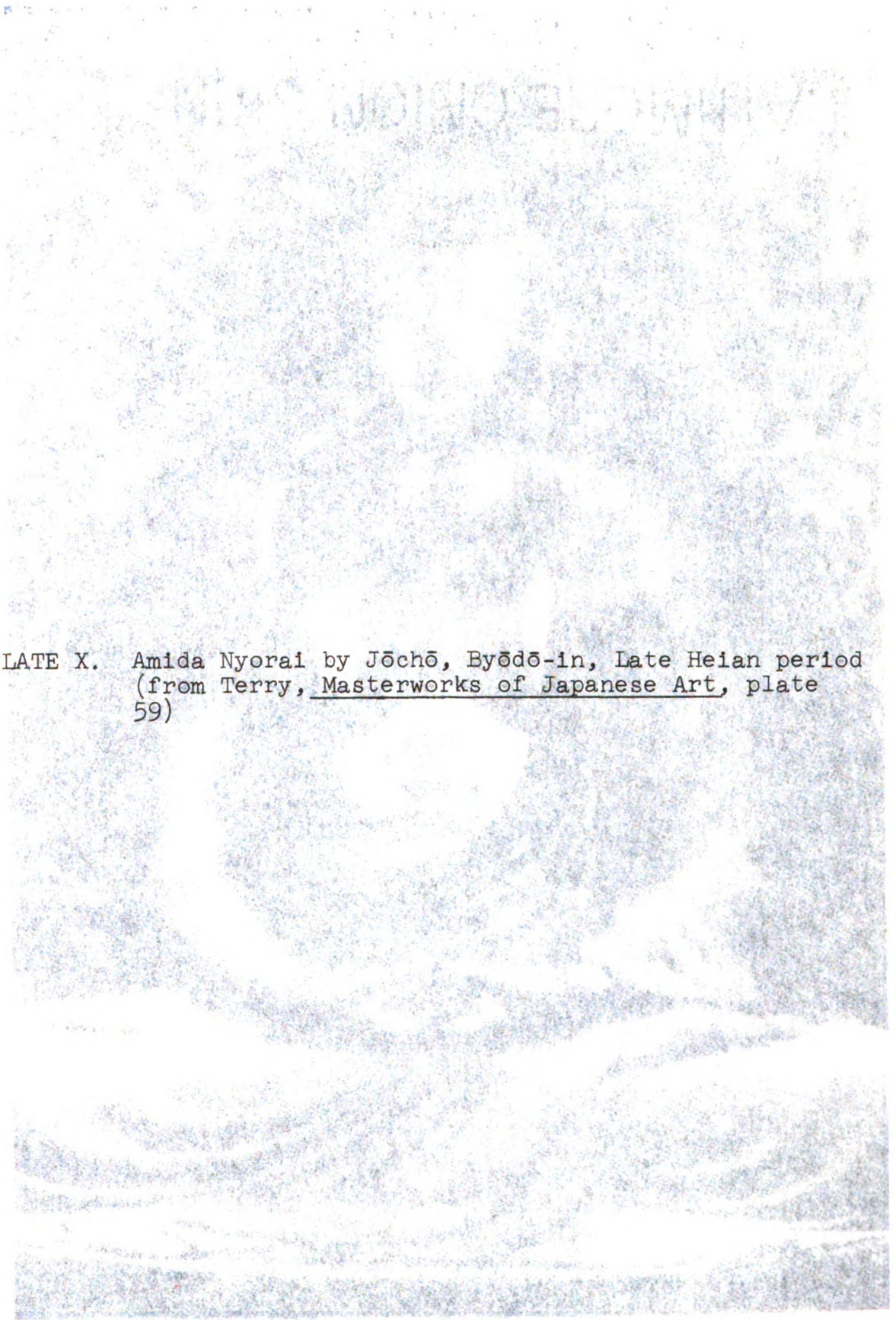

PLATE X. Amida Nyorai by Jōchō, Byōdō-in, Late Heian period (from Terry, Masterworks of Japanese Art, plate 59)

PLATE X. Amida Nyorai by Jōchō, Byōdō-in, late Heian period
(from Terry, Masterworks of Japanese Art, plate
52)

carved and assembled by pupils, and finished by the master.[5] To do the fine carving of the face or hands for example, the master could hold the piece in his hands, turning it around, delicately shaping all the while. It was a method that was conducive to sensitive carving. The Amida Nyorai was made by this technique. It shows modification from earlier types which were more massive and heavy, with stiff draperies. Here we see a figure that is more human in scale, of elegant proportions. The face is benevolent, the drapery flows in soft graceful curves. There is a sense of calm stability about the figure. It is substantial and impressive.

The eighteenth century Seattle Amida clearly follows the type set down by Jōchō. The fundamental difference between the two works (apart from size) is in the attitude and resultant effect of the statue. In both, the hands perform the mudrā of meditation, the jō-in. The drapery is practically identical, except in the Seattle piece it is decorated in gold-leaf patterns of flowers and leaves while the Jōchō work is plain. The face of the eleventh century Amida Nyorai is broader with fuller cheeks and lips. The eyes of the Seattle work are almost closed. There is no contact with the viewer. The more slender face with its slim nose and tiny mouth, seems shut away from the world. The Jōchō work seems strong and full of

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[5]Swann, Introduction, p. 68.

PLATE XI. Amida Buddha (details), Seattle Art Museum
(photos by C. E. Bowden)

PLATE XI. Amida Buddha (details), Seattle Art Museum
(photos by G. E. Bowden)

purpose. It makes a confrontation. The Seattle icon seems soft and devoid of purpose. It withdraws. The lavish halo, called "hiten-ko", surrounding the double circles forming the body and head of the one, and the equally ornate pedestal of the other, serve as foils to set off the basic simplicity and sense of calm of both seated Buddhas.

What came to be regarded for centuries as the ideal of Buddhist sculpture, was the Buddhist figure on a lotus throne carved by Jōchō. "The style of Jōchō . . . though characterized by elegance of form, had a certain realism and strength derived from the orthodox sculptural style perfected in the Nara Period. His followers, however, could not rival him. They simply copied the Jōchō style. Their art was a search for grace and delicacy more than anything else, and as a result, it became conventionalized, weak, and spiritless."[6] How the marvelously refined and elegant Amida in Seattle reached such a spiritless state seven centuries after Jōchō, can be answered by looking at the conditions then prevailing in Japan.

Social and Economic Conditions in Edo Period

In 1615 Tokugawa Ieyasu succeeded in establishing complete control of the country. He laid such a firm foundation of feudal dictatorship, that his family maintained supreme control for the next two hundred and fifty

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[6]Tazawa, Pageant of Japanese Art, III, p. 41.

years. The emperor was reduced to landless impotence. The capital was moved from Kyoto to Edo (now Tokyo), a village situated in a swamp. Soon Edo became the economic and cultural center of the country, as well as headquarters for the government and military.

What was probably an agrarian uprising, but was joined by disaffected Samurai who had fought under Christian generals, brought about the most serious development in the Edo period. In 1637 thirty thousand peasants seized the castle at Shimabara and, waving Christian banners, held it for some time against overwhelming government forces. All but one hundred and five of the rebels are said to have been slaughtered. To prevent further uprisings and possible foreign aggression, which Christianity seemed to represent, Japan cut herself off from all contact with the West. "The underlying reason was the determination of the Tokugawa to secure internal peace and prosperity, and to avoid any foreign entanglement likely to jeopardize those aims."[7]

Japan was sealed off. No sea-going ships could be built. No Japanese could travel abroad, and if already abroad could not return under penalty of death. A handful of Chinese and Dutch were allowed to remain in a restricted area in Nagasaki, but no strong cultural influences came from them. A minimum of trade went on from the

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[7]Sansom, History of Japan, III, p. 44.

harbor at Nagasaki only. The Dutch, Portuguese and English ships entering did not carry Western goods, only articles from other ports of Asia. The country was turned in upon itself.

Not only did Japan miss out on all the benefits from the political and scientific achievements of the rest of the world, but she also stopped her own economic expansion. "Her problem now was not how to obtain and utilize wealth and wisdom from abroad, but how to conserve and increase her own resources."[8]

The growth of the city of Edo led to the proliferation of new kinds of townsmen, people who produced goods and services for the ruling and military class. Everybody put the squeeze on the farmer who produced rice for everyone but himself. As Sansom put it, "the peasants were heavily oppressed by members of the knightly order, who soon in their turn were exploited by the rising class of merchants. Then, as the daimyo and the samurai attempted to transfer their burden of debt to the already overladen shoulders of the farmers, the agricultural economy broke down, and was replaced by a mercantile economy which Japan [eventually] was unable to support without calling upon the outside world."[9] Money soon replaced rice in business transactions. Abuses led to wild speculation. No one knew how to manage the new phenomenon. The merchants, on the whole, thrived.

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[8]Sansom, A Short Cultural History, p. 455.

[9]Ibid., p. 466.

Merchants who flaunted their new wealth too ostentatiously sometimes had it confiscated by the Shogun. Strict rules of behavior in every facet of life laid down by the Shogunate resulted in intellectual stagnation, but led to a burst of hedonistic activity by the bored populace. The Ukiyo or "Floating World" came into being, with its many amusements for the townsman. The peasants continued to live a very hard life, while the life of the townspeople was extremely dissolute.

The sterner Samurai preserved their dignity and followed their traditional pursuits. It was they who preserved the conservative temple art when Edo was blossoming out with the new colored prints. It can be seen that creative energy was expended in the realm of the Floating World, while religious art was stagnating. Sansom said, "As for Buddhism, it seems to vanish from the historical scene in the Edo period, and there is no sign of any activity in religious literature, or indeed of any cultural contribution from the Church. Nobunaga and Hideyoshi having broken its power, Ieyasu, by his legislation, had ensured its impotence, and from his day we hear of no distinguished prelate and no great religious reformer . . . . Although certain Buddhist conceptions had by now entered deeply into the national consciousness and certain Buddhist observances had become part of every-day life, the Buddhist

Church as an institution seems to have been unsuited to the temper of the times."[10]

It is with this in mind that we look back upon the Amida Buddha. It surely reflects the superficiality of the age, and the concern for lavish decoration. It also looks a little tired. It sags a little. We have traced some of the environmental influences that probably affected its production. What was Japanese sculpture like when the impulses from Buddhism were fresh?

Earlier Japanese Buddhist Sculpture

In describing these beginnings, Langdon Warner said: "The powerful and gentle flood of Buddhism bore Japan irresistibly along toward its full Far Eastern heritage to join China and India where, for all the differences, Asia was One. The beneficient New Idea carried a simple people from their primitive animist beliefs and practices to broader deeps and amplitudes to find room for whatever spirit and intellect man's nature might develop."[11]

In the Nara period, eighth century, Buddhist sculptures were testaments to the terrifying or benign power of the deities. The anonymous sculptors were able to infuse a profoundly superhuman spirituality in their works, which at this time were still carved from the single

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[10] Ibid., p. 477.

[11] Japanese Sculpture of the Tempyo Period, edited by James Marshall Plumer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 36.

trunk, with only a few protuberances added on. There is a solidity and power in the statues which is not found in later periods. Sentimentality plays no part in these works, rather, we see a great idealism and sincerity.

Strict canons of ecclesiastic tradition from the very beginning of Buddhism in Japan set limits upon what the sculptor could do with an icon, so the subtleties of bulk, or lack of it, facial expression, and the decoration of the accoutrements of the figure was what produced the impact upon the viewer. James Marshall Plumer, in his introduction to Warner's last book wrote: "The essential forms and proportions of the sculptures, like the hierarchies themselves, stemming originally from India, have a tendency to be maintained for gods of higher order, and to be progressively relaxed on descending to the lower. Along with natural change in style, the Buddhas tend to reflect Chinese parallels, and the demons to spring from the earth of Japan."[12] We would add to this that the demons, too, were Japanese versions of those of China.

Japan closed her doors to the outside world for the first time in 894, and for the first time since the exposure to the overwhelming culture of China, was able to find her feet and stand alone.

In the first half of the ninth century, the centralized bureaucratic system of government was functioning

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[12] Ibid., p. 8.

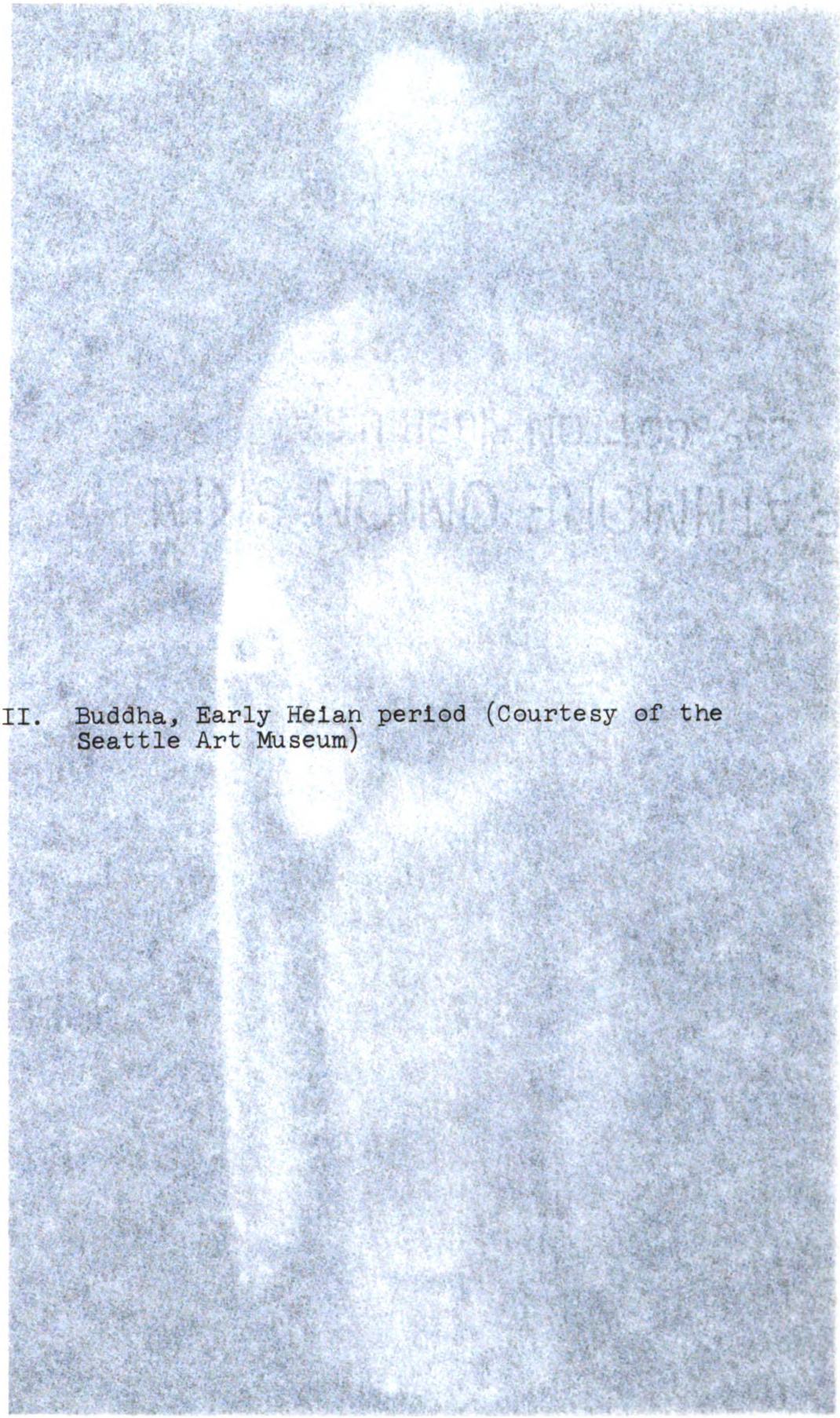

PLATE XII. Buddha, Early Heian period (Courtesy of the Seattle Art Museum)

PLATE XII. Buddha, Early Nara period (Courtesy of the Seattle Art Museum)

very effectively. Japan was internally on an even keel. The important Shingon sect of Buddhism rose to ascendency. It was proud of the synthesis it had made of all previous creeds. In its temple workshops artists set the tone for Heian sculpture which had gradually changed from the idealism of Nara days. "Sculptured objects became more than just superior human beings, ennobled by deep belief or softened by contemplation. Their effect on the spectator was not intended to be overwhelming and awe-inspiring, forms became heavy with symbolic meaning and divorced from reality . . . [The intent was] to fascinate and subdue the viewer."[13]

A standing ninth century Buddha in the Seattle Art Museum epitomizes the sculptured characteristics of the time. Here we see the use of the single block of wood. The joined-on pieces are missing. The drapery falls in heavy graceful loops from the shoulders of the figure. The treatment of the fat, sensuous face and body is almost gross, yet the sense that this is a meaningful icon is preserved by its mysterious remoteness. It is like a tangible vision. Warner said, "these Oriental gods are not like our merely superhuman classical ones . . . . they are less definable, more abstract still, non-human rather than superhuman."[14]

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[13]Swann, The Art of Japan (New York: Praeger, 1966), p. 57.

[14]The Craft of the Japanese Sculptor (New York: McFarlane, Warde, McFarlane, 1936), p. 5.

By the tenth and eleventh centuries, the late Heian period, the centralized government began to decline and the ruling power passed into the hands of the Fujiwara family. It was a time of frivolity, escapism and sentimentality. The statues for the temples began to reflect softer, more feminine ideals and were more human in scale, more elegant in proportions.[15] There was a greater demand for statuary. Sculpture was now hollow, and made of many fitted pieces. It was the time in which Jōchō carved his Amida Nyorai.

An eleventh century carving in the Seattle Art Museum, one of a pair of Apsaras, the other being in the Honolulu Academy of Arts, is an excellent example of the delicacy and lightness achieved by carvers following Jōchō. Apsaras were Celestial Beings, nymphs of the sky living in Amida's Paradise which was for those who had escaped from the cycle of constant rebirth. These females are shown floating on air with garments streaming around them and the celestial scarf billowing over their heads.[16] The Seattle sculpture came from the lower left margin of a flame-like nimbus of a great Buddha now in the Rhode Island School of Design, and the nymph's hands probably carried a musical instrument such as a lute. Now we see

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[15]Swann, Art of Japan, p. 69.

[16]Will H. Edmunds, Pointers and Clues to the Subjects of Chinese and Japanese Art (London: Sampson Low, Marston and Co., 1934), p. 224.

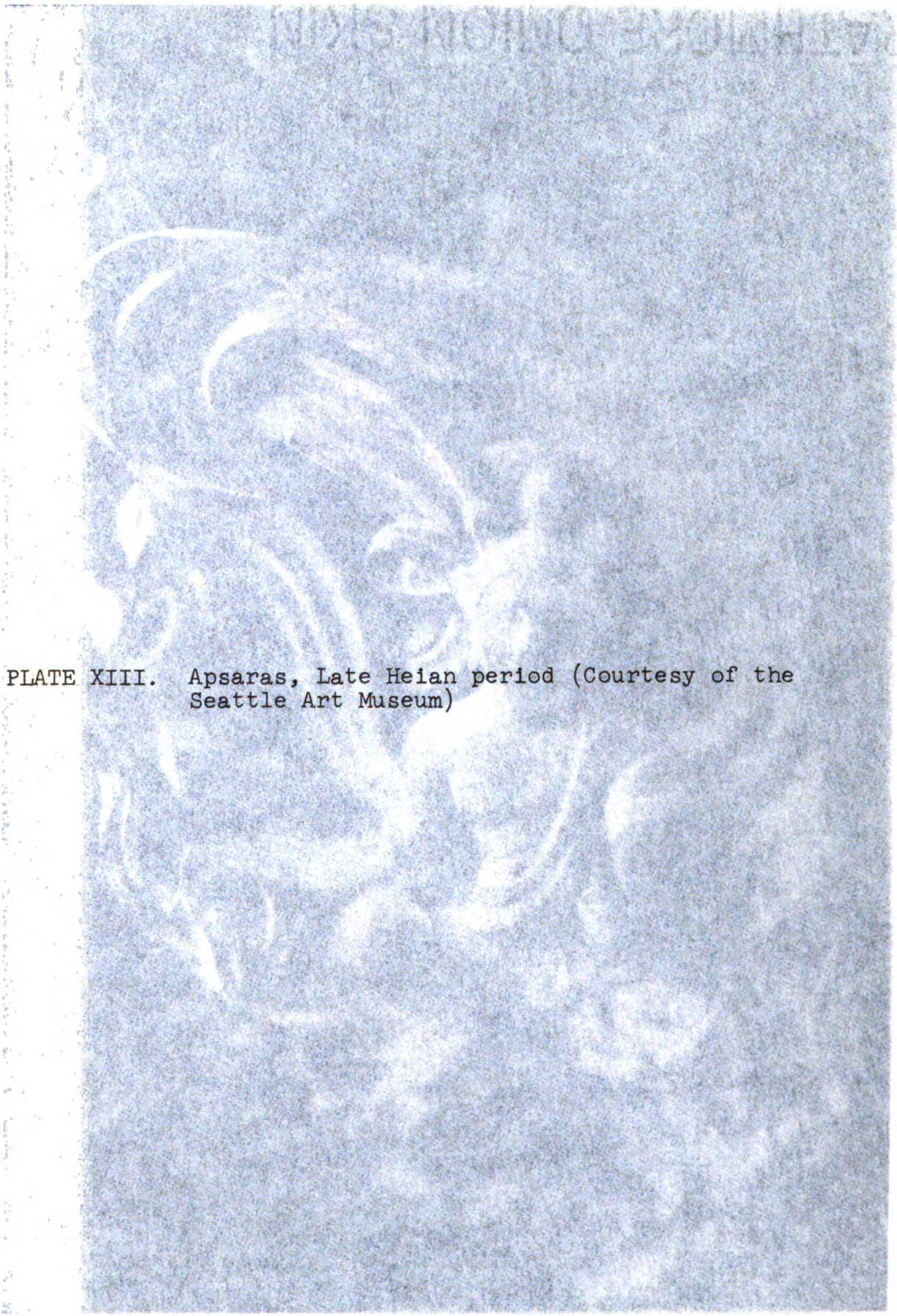

PLATE XIII. Apsaras, Late Heian period (Courtesy of the Seattle Art Museum)

PLATE XIII. Apsaras, Late Helan period (Courtesy of the Seattle Art Museum)

more naturalism and movement in the figure. It's quite human. Only the face is still that of a heavenly being. There's a remoteness and delicacy in its expression that further enhances the sculpture's transitory aspect. The whole carving truly seems lighter than the air Apsaras are supposed to inhabit. The billowing scarves create an extremely decorative pattern. This type of sculpture fit in perfectly with the requirements of the Court-motivated aristocratic culture of the time.

Great civil wars swept Japan in the twelfth century. Military dictators now ruled the country, and the capital was moved from the courtly Kyoto to Kamakura. "Buddhism was no longer under state patronage, as it had been in the Nara period, nor was it dominated by the interests of the nobility, as in the Heian age. The extension of Buddhism to the masses has left its permanent impression on the national character of the people."[17] The wars had destroyed many temples. In the rebuilding, the need for new religious icons was great. By extreme good fortune Jōchō's family produced sculptors of genius, the best of whom was Unkei. Since many statues had to be provided quickly, the artists worked cooperatively. They achieved a new strength and realism in their work that had not been seen before. Kamakura artists were looking backward to Nara times, but infused their carvings with a mundane directness that had popular appeal.

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[17]Paine and Soper, p. 53.

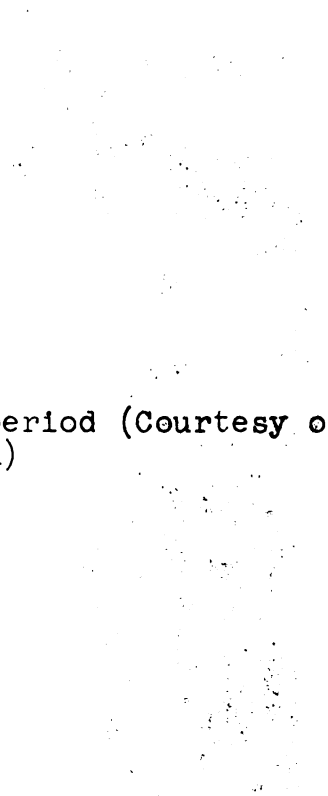

PLATE XIV. Seishi, Kamakura period (Courtesy of the Seattle Art Museum)

PLATE XIV. Seiseki, Kamakura period (Courtesy of the Seattle Art Museum)

A figure of Seishi performing the mudrā of adoration, dating from the fourteenth century, is in the Seattle Art Museum. It is very similar to a Shō Kwannon by Jōkei[18] (1226). Here we see an animated attentive figure with a slender body and very human, responsive face. Its sweet expression places it in the fourteenth century, rather than earlier. The garments look quite natural in the way they ripple and fall. The Bodhisattva seems about to move. This is typical of the Kamakura ideal.

The Decline of Vitality in Sculpture

In describing the Kamakura Buddha type, Robert Paine said; "Vast and imperturbable, yet downward looking and compassionate, the Buddha sums up the qualities which the age expected to find . . . . The conventionality of the pose and the regularity of the handling of the robes may reflect a formalizing tendency which was beginning to affect the arts."[19]

Common people flocked to Buddhism at this time. Until peace was brought about and the country unified in 1615, constant wars and deprivations swept the country. Amida Buddha especially appealed with his easy path to salvation. The repetition of the conventions of the sect, both by believers and sculptors, led to mere formalities

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[18] Ibid., plate 48 A.

[19] Ibid., p. 56.

being observed. A Tokugawa edict required that every household have a Buddha image. Humanity crept out of the face and form of the Buddha and out of the act of worship. The period of vitality was over.

Just as one can imagine a peasant worshipper devoutly kneeling before the mingei piece, we can also see the Amida Buddha in a temple setting. Its gilded wood has been darkened by incense smoke. It's difficult to imagine it overwhelming or involving the worshipper. It is certainly a marvelously refined image, displaying the highest technical skill. Yet in the manner of most commissioned religious sculpture the world over, when production demands are large, and iconography fairly rigid, the work becomes routine and stereotyped.

Comparison with Mingei as Religious Work

Perhaps, after all, if we look for a statement of true Japanese religious life of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we might have to decide in favor of the simple mingei piece. Where the Buddha seems sterile and stereotyped as an expression of religious carving and feeling, the provincial sculpture breathes of the Japanese countryside and a devout faith. With its feel for the medium, the piece of wood, and in its appeal to simple religious response, the mingei work appears to belong to a stream of native Japanese sculpture that remains small, but vigorously alive. Langdon Warner said, "folk art is

indispensable if we would know the genius of a people. For it is certain that neither precious materials nor embellishment add much to our knowledge of the craftsman's accomplishment. Frequently these serve actually to obliterate evidence of his more direct instinctive impulse and of his traditional methods."[20]

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[20] Tempyo Period, p. 5.

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