

BOOK REVIEW

Covaci, I. (Ed.). (2016). *Kamakura: Realism and Spirituality in the Sculpture of Japan*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 192pp. ISBN 9780300215779.

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The catalogue trades on the well-rehearsed claim that sculptural works produced during the Kamakura period (1185 – 1333) in Japan achieved what was described as a ‘renaissance’ in Buddhist art. In turn, this is viewed principally through the cultural patrimony of the nation, Japan. This surely cannot be the only lens to frame the show. Intricacies of diplomatic ritual dance of cross-institutional loaning of artworks aside, none of the works really came from Japan. It is therefore a missed opportunity to unsettle some of these assumptions about Japan’s insularity and particularity by offering a more fleshed out histories of global flows and coordinates that have shaped so much of Buddhist aesthetics and culture in the past.

However, what the publication achieves in doing is to make a different kind of claim. In that one could principally speak of the process through which sculptural works as ‘enlivened’, through the adornment of the unseen interior by means of inscriptions and deposits. This in turn contributes to the central function of these images in ritual and devotional worship. Because of this, the exhibition curator Ive Covaci makes a case that this could be considered as a form of ‘realism’.

Does it help that the term ‘realism’ is not then unpacked in the subsequent catalogue? The publication is strong in contexts. Assembled here is a cast of scholars that demonstrated rigour in topics that helped flesh out both the aesthetic dimensions and the socio-political contexts that convincingly make a case for why sculpture during the Kamakura period continues to be an area of great interest. Exhibition curator Ive Covaci herself contributed an essay that grounds Buddhist sculpture of the Kamakura Period historically, Samuel C. Morse ventured a short history of the Kei School, Hank Glassman provided a fascinating account of the relationship between native Shinto deities and Buddhist Gods, while Nedachi Kensuke explored the role that replicas played in statues that were deemed to be miraculous. These were rounded up with a thoroughly researched catalogue of objects shown in the exhibition written by Ive Covaci and D. Max Moerman.

Nevertheless, it fails in large part to take the exhibition subtitle seriously. This in turn might reflect an undeclared gap in knowledge and a rift in expectation that is not addressed between the kinds of institutional marketing demands that Asia Society might make in order to sell the show’s legibility to an American audience with some familiarity with the debates around ‘realism’ and a curatorial class who is more interested in focusing on a deep scholarship at the expense of translation. The result of

which, 'realism' as a subtitle and a concept turns out to be facetious, if not, almost irrelevant to the premise of the book.

At times, how realism is used to convey a sense of the life-like nature of the sculptures, almost akin to naturalism. If this term in which realism is defined in relation to Buddhist sculptures during the Kamakura period, then such use of the term bears comparison with idea of realism developed in the history of Western art around the early modern period, particularly from the Renaissance period. If realism in both contexts speaks of verisimilitude as a technology of representation, what is suggested in both contexts is the move away from the modular forms of image representation towards image-making as a form that may convey pathos. The emotive bonds between the beholder and the icon is what I think is at stake here.

In the instance of Kamakura art, these are achieved through the practice of enlivenment, described at length in the book as the deposition of relics and inscription within the interior of the statuary, while allowing for certain iconometric vocabulary to distinguish one deity from the other and to impose some kind of 'divine grammar' on statuary. In the instance of Renaissance Art, the classical grammar though recognised by Johann Joachim Winckelmann as 'noble simplicity and quiet grandeur' (edle Einfalt und stille Größe), is also counter posed with Aby Warburg's 'animated accessories' or pictorial incidents that convey movement (bewegtes Beiwerk).

The tension between stillness and movement therefore animates the realism of early modern art in Europe, as opposed to the process of 'enlivenment', which I understand to mean bringing to miraculous life-like-ness that constitutes the early modern sculptures of Japan as defined by the book. It is this kind of comparison that might provide added dimension to the otherwise enclosed book, that while accomplished in fleshing out the complex life worlds that make up a period of extraordinary socio-political changes in Japan, was ultimately burdened by its history. In doing so, it continues to play into the Japanese claim to exceptionalism and incomparability, even as the title of the exhibition suggests otherwise.

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