

Introduction

This book explores works of Japanese Buddhist art bearing the name of Tankai (1629–1716), the Shingon prelate who expanded a temple on the slopes of Mount Ikoma near the cities of Nara, Osaka, and Kyoto. Under his direction, the sanctuary, which was soon to be renamed Hōzanji, became a rich and bustling center of popular Buddhism, and it continues so to the present day. Placed in the Founder’s Hall is a portrait statue of Tankai that depicts him as a vigorous man in his sixties, holding prayer beads in his left hand and a bronze single-pronged *vajra*, the Buddhist symbol of transcendent energy, in his right (FIG. 1). Tankai was firmly committed to the spiritual disciplines of mountain Buddhism — seclusion, severe asceticism, meditation, and ritual — but he was also innately gifted as both an artist and an administrator, and the conflict between his spiritual and social propensities often troubled him.

Not until Tankai was in his fifties did his name begin to appear on major works of Buddhist art. Prior to that time, he had concentrated on mastering the arcane concepts and rituals of Esoteric Buddhism. In the 1680s, after his appointment as head of the dilapidated little sanctuary on Mount Ikoma, he embarked on an ambitious campaign of constructing temple halls and commissioning icons. After years of ascetic self-discipline, the worldly side of his character suddenly came to the fore, and by the time of his death some thirty-five years later, his name had been placed on at least 150 sculptures, paintings, and ritual implements.

Tankai was credited, for example, with carving the primary object of devotion at Hōzanji: a wooden statue of Fudō Myōō, the Resolute King of Mystic Wisdom (FIG. 2). Tankai’s name was also placed on brass images of the elephant-headed Kankiten (the Japanese version of the popular Indian deity Gaṇeśa) and also appears on the image of the

Detail of fig. 2

Introduction



1 | *Portrait of Tankai*, ca. 1680–86. Hollow woodblock construction; polychrome lacquer, inlaid crystal eyes. H. 76.6 cm. Founder's Hall, Hōzanji

god's female consort.¹ In 1700, rich laymen gave Tankai a pair of elegant new paintings of the mandalas that are central to Shingon symbolism and ritual (FIG. 3). Other examples include a portable shrine that contains tiny wood carvings of wrathful Esoteric Buddhist deities bearing an inscription from 1701 stating that Tankai had made it (FIG. 4). When he was seventy-seven years old, his disciples honored him by commissioning an elaborate reliquary-pagoda made of gilded silver and copper plates.² In 1709, he was credited with making three elaborate statues commissioned by Higashiyama Tennō, Japan's semidivine sovereign (FIG. 5). Three years after Tankai's death, his disciples commissioned in his memory a painting of the death of Śākyamuni nearly two and one-half meters square (FIG. 6).

These works of art belong to a tradition of symbolism that had begun in India centuries earlier, were transmitted widely throughout Asia, and focused on the worship of transcendent deities. Most of the works are tranquil and meditative, some fierce and even terrifying, but all mystic and highly imaginative. In aesthetic character, this tradition of Buddhist art differs markedly from the much-admired secular arts of Japan, as embodied in decorative screens, ink landscapes, narrative scroll paintings, and illustrated poems. In those, the Japanese employed idioms to express their rapport with the natural world and their gift for abstract design, and they conveyed deeply personal emotions (love, loneliness, nostalgia, remorse, or chagrin) through "suggestion, irregularity, simplicity, and perishability."³ These native Japanese aesthetic idioms are far different from the supernatural vision of devout Buddhists embodied in the Tankai oeuvre.

The familiar Esoteric Buddhist god Acala (J: Fudō Myōō) is depicted some fifty times in the Tankai oeuvre, by far the most numerous of all such deities, but readers will also encounter unfamiliar and recondite Buddhist figures such as Avalokiteśvara (Juntei Kannon) (FIG. 7), Mahāpratisāra (Daizuigu bodhisattva), and the local folk god Kōjin Nyorai. Readers unfamiliar with Mahāyāna traditions may be baffled by this profusion of deities, but Shingon Buddhists recognized more than fifteen hundred gods and goddesses (most of them of Indian origin) and represented them in the grand mandalas that Tankai minutely studied for decades. Some of the gods are abstruse symbols of Buddhist cosmology; others are more readily approachable folk deities of Indian or Japanese origin.

Ideologically, behind this vast diversity is the unifying figure of Dai-nichi (Skt: Mahāvairocana), the cause of all causes and the supernatural force from which all deities derive their identities and spiritual missions. The classic demonstration of this underlying order may be seen in the two great Esoteric Buddhist mandalas that have been displayed

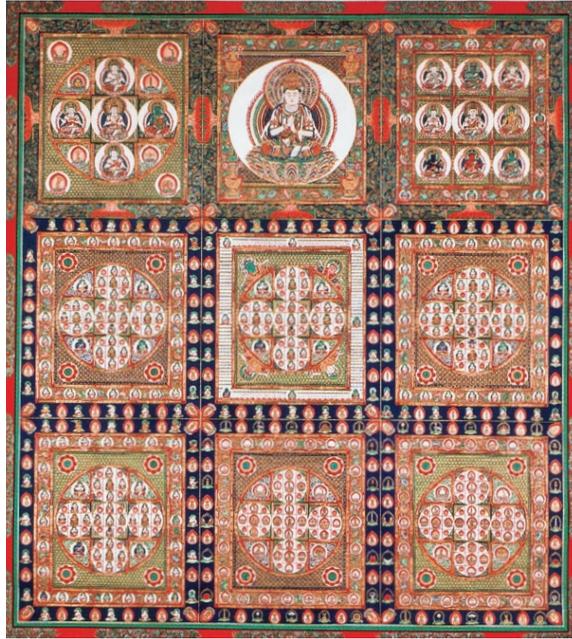


2 | Seated *Fudō* and Attendants, ca. 1680. *Fudō* halo inscribed “carved by Tankai.” Hollow woodblock construction; polychrome lacquer, inlaid crystal eyes, metal fittings. H. of *Fudō*, 84.8 cm. Hōzanji. All five statues registered as (National) Important Art Objects

in virtually every Shingon sanctuary. Ordinary believers may not have understood this complex iconography, but awareness of its very complexity awakened profound feelings in their hearts and caused them to rely on the priests who had mastered its secrets.

CRITICAL JUDGMENT

Tankai is often listed as a sculptor in standard art reference books, and his name is placed alongside such professional artist-craftsmen of the day as Kanō Tan'yū, Ogata Kōrin, and Hishikawa Moronobu.⁴ Tankai, however, is the only high-ranking priest among such famous figures, and the scores of artworks that bear his name were made in a comparatively brief period, beginning in the mid-1680s and ending in the 1710s. Not only had he devoted more than forty years of his earlier life primarily to priestly concerns, but his labors in the visual arts were an integral part of his wider vocation as a clergyman. Even in his later years, he would delve into intricate doctrinal texts, fast for days, and perform marathon fire rituals in which he burned tens of thousands of inscribed wooden slabs.

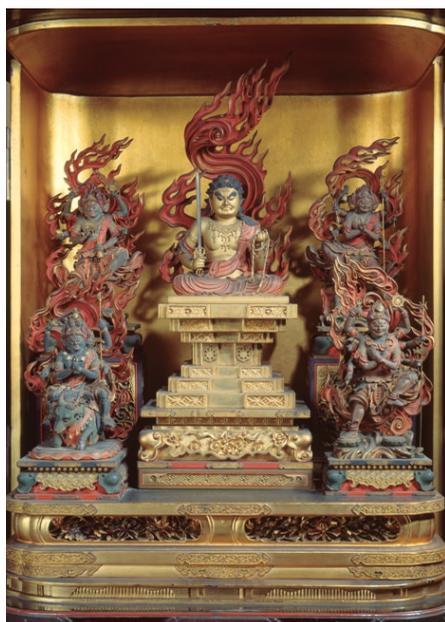


3 | *Kongōkai mandara*, 1700. Hanging scroll; ink, colors, cut gold leaf on silk. H. 186.1 cm. Hōzanji

We must also acknowledge that Tankai's reputation as an artist is clouded. In 1899, for example, the learned director of the Tokyo Imperial Museum, Kuki Ryūichi, singled him out for special notice:

Tankai, a noted wood carver of the period, made several images of Buddha, which, in point of artistic finish and touch, are quite above the ordinary, but when they are subjected to a critical investigation, there is in the mien of the Buddha something vulgar and sensual.⁵

Kuki, a strong advocate of Western learning, traveled widely in Europe and the United States and attained great influence over the Japanese government's cultural policies. He wrote that Buddhist sculpture and painting had once represented the pinnacle of the nation's artistic achievement but by the Edo period had declined so far in aesthetic quality as to be undeserving of serious study: "not one sacred image worthy of veneration had been produced during the previous five hundred years."⁶ Kuki found modern works of art, however elaborate and skillful in workmanship, to be spiritless.



- 4 | Attributed to Tankai (1629–1716). *Miniature Shrine of the Five Wisdom Kings*, 1701. Lacquered red chinaberry wood, metal fittings. H. of box, 80.7 cm; h. of Fudō, 12.6 cm. (National) Important Cultural Property
- 5 | *Shō Kannon*, 1709. Signed “Tankai jisaku.” Hollow woodblock construction; polychrome lacquer, metal fittings. H. of figure, 59.4 cm. Hōzanji

Kuki’s dismissive opinions were not solely based on aesthetic judgments but stemmed from considerations — theological, sociological, and political — that are beyond the scope of this essay. We should, however, take note of the belief, widespread in Japan, that age itself confers superiority, which is embodied in the pervasive doctrine of the End of the Dharma (J: *mappō*). Buddhists had long asserted that after the death of Śākyamuni, his teachings became by stages increasingly corrupt and laymen’s belief increasingly tepid.⁷ They calculated that the final phase, the age of “the Last Dharma” (*mappō*), began about the year 1050, would prevail for ten thousand years or so, and will end in warfare and chaos. At that point, Maitreya will descend from the Tuṣita Paradise, attain enlightenment, preach the True Dharma, and begin the cycle of creation anew. This is a variant of Hindu concepts that hold that the universe came into being in an age of virtue and divine justice, passed through stages of gradual decline, will end in utter decadence and destruction, and then will begin again, repeating the cosmic cycle. By the 1890s, credence given by the Japanese to such ancient myths was being eroded by the empirical sciences, but the notion of inevitable decay had been deeply embedded in the nation’s historical consciousness.



6 | Takeuchi Eiryū (active second quarter of 18th century). *Death of Śākyamuni*, dated 1718. Commissioned on third anniversary of Tankai's death. Hanging scroll; ink, colors, gold paint on silk. H. 241 cm. Hōzanji



7 | *Juntei Kannon*, 1691. Signed “Tankai.” Hanging scroll; ink, colors, gold paint on silk; gold leaf on back. H. 146.6 cm. Hōzanji

For decades, antagonism to later Buddhist art was a guiding principle for scholars in Japan and abroad. In the 1930s, for example, George Sansom wrote in his influential *Short Cultural History* that religious sculpture had fallen on evil days in the Edo period, and apart from a few second-rate images, carved with incredible dexterity, it was dull and repetitious.⁸ In 1955, Robert Paine of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, wrote in the canonical Pelican History of Art series that Buddhist sculpture and painting after the Kamakura period had suffered from a popularization of ancient cultural standards.⁹ Paine lamented the exaggeration of facial expressions, melodramatic postures, theatrical realism,

hardness, and obviousness, and he deplored the want of creativity and vitality. In the same volume, Alexander Soper claimed that later Japanese religious architecture had so declined that it demanded no prolonged critical attention. According to the 1981 *Biographical Dictionary of Japanese Art*, “sculpture in the true sense of the word ceased to exist in Japan” during the Muromachi and succeeding periods, except for the wooden figures carved by Enkū and Mokujiki Myōman, which have a “peculiar charm and power that is lacking in professionally made Buddhist images.”¹⁰ Spread through academic and museum circles in Japan and abroad, this attitude is still widely held, but in 2007 Patricia Graham of the University of Kansas published a thoughtful book asserting “the need to reassess the canon of Japanese art history to allow for the inclusion of . . . later Japanese Buddhist material.”¹¹

When by purest happenstance I visited Hōzanji in 1980, I was deeply impressed by the grandeur of the natural setting and the sculptures attributed to Tankai. Therefore, I decided to accept Graham’s challenge to “reassess the canon” by giving Tankai the kind of close study that has been accorded to prominent Buddhist artists of earlier times. Selecting a sample of Tankai works for analysis in this book, I join Graham in suggesting that college teachers consider adding such material to their survey courses, that curators exhibit it in their galleries, that collectors acquire it, and that art dealers reassess market values. The last point, market values, will be a red flag to colleagues who oppose the injection of money into discussions of art historical value, but we must recognize that throughout history, works of art (Tankai’s included) have been treated as commodities — their monetary values affected by considerations of rarity, attribution, provenance, condition, historical association, and, of course, visual appeal.

COLLABORATION

As Chapter 5 makes clear, there is little question that Tankai was a talented draftsman, but many of the works of art credited to him bear evidence that professional artists and craftsmen contributed in important — if often unacknowledged — ways to the making. The exact role taken by Tankai in regard to objects associated with him is usually a matter of conjecture, for important works of Buddhist art have often been created by teams of craftsmen directed by prestigious persons who were credited with the creation. For Tankai, questions of artistic identity and authenticity can be resolved only by prolonged firsthand examination of the works themselves — a task that I could not perform, given my advanced age and primary residence outside Japan.



8 | Kanō Yoshinobu (1552–1640). *Buddhist Sculpture Workshop*, first half of 17th century. Detail of one of twenty-four hanging scrolls mounted on folding screens; ink and colors on paper. H. 58 cm. Kitain, Saitama. (National) Important Cultural Property

Perforce, my study is a preliminary exploration of this material, and I propose a scenario — based on occasional inscriptions, scraps of documentary information, and features of the artworks themselves — that may have prevailed for many of the objects credited to Tankai. First, he would have been prompted by religious tenets to create a new icon. Then he would secure financing from pious patrons, make preliminary drawings, enlist artists and craftsmen to make the object, closely monitor its progress, conduct rituals to “enliven” it, and preside at the dedication ceremonies. Akin to a trademark, his name or signature would indicate that the object had emerged from his spiritual milieu, its potency enhanced by his exalted reputation.

The relationship between priest and craftsmen is clearly illustrated in the picture of a seventeenth-century sculptor’s studio, one of twenty-four celebrated paintings of Japanese craft workshops attributed to Kanō Yoshinobu (FIG. 8).¹² It shows five men carving a big wooden guardian statue in a Buddhist sculpture workshop set up in a temporary shed. The bald old man seated on a scaffold could well be a Master Buddhist sculptor (*busshi*); two of the sculptors wearing ordinary citizens’ hats (*eboshi*) are laymen; a fully robed Buddhist priest is giving instructions to the artisan carving the statue’s topknot. In other words, an icon is being made in a quasi-commercial workshop with the guidance and active participation of a priest.

Tankai collaborated with many different craftsmen: sculptors, painters, print artists, carpenters, metalworkers, lacquerers, tile makers, and so on. Most of the ateliers have not yet been clearly identified, and only for his relations with professional sculptors has sufficient evidence emerged to begin to form a coherent account. Some statues have been inscribed with names and dates, and some information can be found in documents in the Hōzanji archive, but the record is by no means complete.

DISCORD

Writing on a computer about a reclusive monk-artist who lived on a distant mountain four hundred years ago, I do not pretend to fully comprehend the realities of Tankai’s life. I have tried to base my account on published historical documents, but there are strange gaps and anomalies in the evidence. For example, in prominent monasteries where Tankai had studied, turmoil was caused by a bitter schism between partisans of the Old and New Shingon doctrines that is not mentioned in the Hōzanji archive.

The Kogi (Old Doctrine) faction adhered to the practices and beliefs conveyed to Tang China by missionaries from India, and from China



9 | Shōtendō (dedicated to Kankiten, left). Remodeled in 1805 and 1875–77. Hōzanji

to Japan by the great monk Kūkai (see Appendix A). Tankai was formally enlisted in the Kogi tradition while a young student in Edo, and most of the densely packed pages of the Hōzanji archive clearly belong to the Kogi school. During much of Tankai's adult life, however, the Shingi (New Doctrine) school was in ascendance. Its leader was the eloquent Ryūkō, who received lavish patronage from the family of Shogun Tokugawa Tsunayoshi and his circle. Tsunayoshi died in 1709 and was succeeded as shogun by Ienobu, who turned for spiritual guidance to monks of the Kogi school (Jōgon and Tankai among them). For the next three years Tankai, ensconced on his wooded mountainside near Nara, responded to insistent requests for supernatural aid from Edo Castle (discussed in Chapter 6).

Tankai had also been distracted by his dreams. Indeed, Buddhists held that dreams and visions were important links to metaphysical realms.¹³ In his sleep, Tankai would converse with Buddhist deities and patriarchs, and the main objects of his devotions, Fudō and Kankiten, appeared vividly to him. When Tankai finally decided that Fudō represented the higher spiritual power and made its statue the chief object of devotion (*honzon*) at Hōzanji, he built for Fudō a much larger and grander hall than that for Kankiten. Whereupon, the elephant-headed god haunted Tankai's dreams, complaining bitterly of second-class status, demanding more attention, and causing him great personal distress.¹⁴ Without digressing into Freudian dream analysis, we should note

that Tankai continued to envisage and worship Kankiten. The public at large was attracted to this exotic and secretive deity who was a celebrated remover of all obstacles; long after Tankai's death, successive head priests built a large structure dedicated to Kankiten, crowded into a narrow space alongside the Main Hall at the heart of Hōzanji (FIG. 9).

MODERNITY

Much of Tankai's artistic activity occurred during the Genroku period (1688–1703), the so-called golden age of Early Modern Japan — a time of great economic prosperity, cultural innovation, and social change.¹⁵ The ruling Tokugawa military regime had promoted the ethical doctrines of Confucianism as a central force in determining national policy. It had brought Buddhist temples under strict government control by awarding them annual stipends, requiring them to register local citizens, regulating the designation of branch temples, limiting their fund-raising, and placing them under the supervision of both a national commissioner of temples and shrines (*jisha bugyō*) and a local official, such as the Nara regional administrator (*nantō bugyō*).

Empirical sciences had begun to erode the credibility of ancient creation myths and miracle tales, weakening the mythic authority of the royal court in Kyoto and the military regime in Edo. Regional lords and rich townsmen supported poets, writers, and painters who boldly expressed their individuality. Professional artisans — lacquer makers, potters, and weavers — found ready markets for their wares. The bunraku and kabuki theaters flourished in the large cities; restaurants and brothels prospered, their clienteles exuberant and at times boisterous. Japanese culture was increasingly fragmented into separate political, regional, and artistic idioms, as the incipient stages of modernity became ever more apparent.

Tankai appears to have sealed himself off from cultural influences from the changing world beyond Ikoma. He continued to revere the nation's sacred sovereign and social order, to willingly serve the Tokugawa military regime, to believe in Buddhist cosmology, and to worship the gods of Indian Buddhism and Japanese Shinto. Observing ancient rules of asceticism, he dressed in plain rough robes, ate sparingly, remained celibate and reclusive, studied an enormous number of texts, and performed marathon mystical ceremonies with utmost gravity and conviction. After a long life of selfless dedication, he became a cult figure, and his temple became a magnet for the populace at large.

Hōzanji priests have scheduled grand public ceremonies: for fifteen days at the beginning of the new year; a spectacular six-day *Goma* ritual

in the fourth month; special ceremonies celebrating the changes of seasons; twice-weekly worship of the elephant-headed Kankiten; the birthday of Śākyamuni in the fifth month; and so on throughout the year. Such was the temple's enduring reputation as a place of miracles that pilgrims of all kinds came to Hōzanji, "swarming like ants": shopkeepers, moneylenders, sake brewers, carpenters, thespians from Osaka, aristocrats from Kyoto, farmers from the fertile rice fields of Osaka and Kawachi provinces, rich warriors from the castle town of Yamato-Kōriyama. To reach the sanctuary, they climbed rocky, weed-clogged trails that wound through forests. Greeted by temple priests, they inscribed their wishes on slabs of wood in the belief that ritual fire, incense, smoke, and prayer — coupled with the occult skills of learned priests and the mystic powers of mighty gods — would bring good health, prosperity, offspring, safety, and, above all, salvation. If they did not comprehend the intricacies of Shingon cosmology, they trusted the priests who did. Consoled by Shingon's doctrines of death and salvation, they accepted its lofty accounts of creation, believed in the power and purity of its gods and saints, and found community with the other believers.

A BEDROCK OF UNDERSTANDING

Patricia Graham correctly emphasized that scholars have given far less attention to Buddhist art of the Edo period than to that of earlier times. Fortunately, however, Kobayashi Takeshi, former head of the Nara National Cultural Properties Research Institute, published in 1964 a massive two-volume compilation of documents and images associated with Tankai.¹⁶ A remarkable art historian, Kobayashi wrote that in 1960 the head priests of Saidaiji and Hōzanji asked him to compile a biography of Tankai to mark the impending 250th anniversary of the monk's death. (Note that the 300th anniversary is approaching.) Kobayashi said he was reluctant to take on the task because he was not a scholar of Buddhism, but he had long admired statues attributed to Tankai and thought he could explain the monk's role in the history of Japanese culture.

At Hōzanji, Kobayashi discovered a huge archive of books and manuscripts as well as buildings and works of art attributed to Tankai. Under his direction, teams of scholars and priests transcribed more than 450 documents, which they numbered, arranged chronologically, transcribed, punctuated, photographed, and summarized — a heroic achievement. Kobayashi noted that some of the places where Tankai is known to have studied had disappeared, and all traces of his presence were lost. Certain persons whose names appear prominently in the archive were difficult to identify or bring to life — a problem that has bedeviled me

as well (see Appendix B). Kobayashi stated that much more remained to be done, but he faced a deadline. On 1 October 1964, he turned the manuscript and pictures over to a printer in Nara. The bound volumes appeared a mere forty-six days later!

I was very familiar with Kobayashi's scholarship, for in 1965 he had published a collection of documents related to Shunjōbō Chōgen (1121–1206), the monk who supervised the repair of the great bronze statue of Vairocana at Tōdaiji after it was damaged in civil conflict.¹⁷

My own study of Chōgen¹⁸ had been based mainly on Kobayashi's efforts, and I greatly admired his erudition, lucidity, and method of compiling detailed documentary bases for art historical topics. In one respect, however, my study of Tankai has differed from Kobayashi's. In his Tankai compendium, he included only those works of art that were inscribed or were credibly documented, and he excluded those that came to Hōzanji after Tankai's death. I discuss such works if they are consistent with Tankai's religious vision and help clarify Hōzanji's sacred character.

Kobayashi died before he could compose an interpretative synthesis of the Tankai data as he had done for Chōgen. Since his death, more evidence has come to light, and Hōzanji is preparing a new and expanded chronology of Tankai's life. Kobayashi's effort nonetheless remains an inspiring monument of positivist scholarship, and even if my book is a superficial review of his massive achievement, I respectfully dedicate it to his memory.