Faith in Museums: On the Confluence of Museums and Religious Sites in Asia

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(Article begins on next page)
OVER THE PAST DECADE THE CRITICAL STUDY OF MUSEUMS HAS MA-
TURED, AS THE NUMBER OF BOOKS, JOURNALS, AND CONFERENCES DE-
voted to all facets of museum studies has dramatically increased. 
While many approaches to the topic are possible, I would like to ex-
amine how museums in Asia function in religious ways and how 
religious sites, such as temples, have come to function as museums. 
Pursuing this tack might seem puzzling, or even controversial, to 
those familiar with Theodor W. Adorno’s now well-known essay in-
veighing against the immurement of objects in museums, in which 
he emphasizes the unpleasant overtones of the German word museal 
(“museum-like”), used to describe “objects to which the observer no 
longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying. 
. . . Museums are like the family sepulchers of works of art” (175). 
Adorno’s essay articulates a sentiment about museums that was born 
in the past and has persisted down to the present. We hear echoes of 
Adorno’s disdain and feelings of dehumanization, for example, in 
James Boon’s recent essay “Why Museums Make Me Sad,” which 
expresses his own melancholic reaction to museums. If museums 
are merely mausoleums where dead objects are housed, how could 
they possibly function as religious sites? How could their contents 
ever provide religious inspiration?

A number of prominent intellectuals have recently argued for a 
more positive perspective on museums. In opposition to the earlier 
laments, the new voices laud museums for the ways they showcase the 
artistic and cultural heights reached in different parts of the world, 
displaying objects that constitute our shared ancient heritage. Muse-
ums, according to these critics, demonstrate the possibility that cer-
tain objects can transcend cultural context. They posit that museums 
allow the world to share in the knowledge and uplifting feeling that 
art inspires. Kwame Anthony Appiah and James Cuno, for example, 
have argued against the nationalistic laws regarding the retention and 
repatriation of art and cultural patrimony (ostensibly aimed at restor-
ing the art to its original context). They also question a state’s ability to

FAITH IN MUSEUMS:
ON THE CONFLUENCE OF MUSEUMS AND RELIGIOUS SITES IN ASIA

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tion of religious statuary from Hunan.
represent and showcase its “national culture” by displaying objects produced long before the formation of the modern nation-state.

The annals of museum studies are filled with different iterations of these opposing views about museums, and no clear resolution is in sight. Some time ago Miguel Tamen sensed this impasse and pointed out that

\[
\text{the complexity of the relation between preservation and destruction has come to define different kinds of institutions and institutes, from the monumentalized preservation of destroyed or fragile objects as sites, to the collecting of otherwise destructible objects in museums. In either of these cases, the distinction between caring for an endangered thing and avoiding what are perceived to be negative uses of such a thing is as a rule extremely thin. (57)}
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I do not intend to come down on either side of this debate or try to walk the razor-thin line between these opposing views. In the limited space available to me here, I attempt to shift the discourse and explore the profound sense of disconnect that I have perceived between the literature on museums that has developed and proliferated in Euro-American academic circles and the development of museum practices in Asia. There is a particularly acute disconnect in the ways the two cultures treat the relation between museums and religion.

The topic of museums and religion has not been entirely scamped in the literature on museums, but writing on the subject has tended to focus on issues involving the problematic display of religious and ritual objects (sometimes objects of great secrecy) and on calls for their repatriation. Emblematic is Nancy Jay’s account of her experience at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University, where she found herself gazing at an object beside which a faded card read, “A Churinga, the most sacred object of an Australian tribe. The worst disaster that could befall the tribe was to lose its Churinga. It must never, under any cir-
cumstances, be seen by a woman" (12). For Jay, this incongruous moment underscored how the displayed sacred object, stripped of its context, was both anything and nothing. In the face of similar experiences involving the inappropriate exhibition of religious objects in other museums, an entire discourse has developed that questions their display in public settings and usually includes calls for their repatriation. Yet beyond the now familiar issues of retention or repatriation, other questions about the relation of religion to museums have received scant attention.

In moving away from the problems posed by religious objects in museums to interrogate how museums act as religious sites, I am not exploring entirely uncharted territory. The art historian Carol Duncan laid the foundation for this line of inquiry and went the furthest in detailing the intimate connections (in terms of the physical structure, practices, and narrative descriptions of experiences) between religious sites and museums (7). Drawing on anthropological literature, Duncan argues that museums have functioned as shrines where civil religious rituals are enacted. Her great insight was to challenge the integrity of the stark post-Enlightenment division between the secular (museum) and the religious (monastery or temple) and to show how museums are structured and act like ritual spaces. Nonetheless, ample room exists to further unpack the religious dimensions of museums, since we are now even more aware of the limitations of past modernization-secularization theories. Interpretations that view museums as part of the modernist project of creating secular nation-state institutions may have been useful for unmasking nationalist intentions, but these readings have largely led to the occlusion of the religious aspects of museums. In other words, modern attempts to fashion museums as secular institutions reach toward an ideal more than a reality.

Developments in contemporary museum practices in South and East Asia underscore
the limitations of maintaining an overly distinct division between the religious and secular functions of museums. To initiate a discussion of these developments, we need not travel to India, China, or Japan, since a brief sojourn in the San Francisco Asian Art Museum will suffice to get the issues on the table and the dialogue started. The recently renovated Asian Art Museum greets visitors with a narrow escalator that takes them directly to the third floor, where a statue of Ganesha, the elephant-headed destroyer of obstacles, welcomes them. At the base of the image is a box with a small sign that says, “Donations to Ganesha may be placed in the slot.” Museum officials installed this worship box at the doorway so that worshippers would not place coins all over the image’s body and around the base in the hope of attaining the deity’s blessing, as they had done in the museum’s previous home. For many visitors, these images and icons are considered living beings, not merely the dead matter discussed by Adorno.

The type of religious devotion directed at the Ganesha image in the museum in San Francisco is not unprecedented. When ostensibly secular museums were introduced to India in the early nineteenth century, British colonial officials were disconcerted to see visitors caress and make offerings to the images on display. As Saloni Mathur and Kavita Singh have noted, those practices in Indian museums “suggest that the opposition between the realm of the sacred and the presumably secular, national space of the museum, a prevailing distinction in art history’s understanding of museum formation in Europe, is a conceptual structure that no longer meets the theoretical challenges of museums today” (150). Similar behavior could be reported from China, Japan, and other parts of the world. Instead of merely piling on further examples of explicit forms of religious devotion brought into the museum, which some (even today) might dismiss out of hand as a modern vestige of the idolatrous behavior of the benighted masses, I
would like to examine a different facet of the curious relationship between religion and the formation and function of museums in East Asia. First, I will consider museums in Japan that are thought to be able to inculcate religious experiences, and then I will examine the ways that museums have surreptitiously provided a space for religious devotion in China even in the face of radical critiques of religion.

An auction by Christie’s in New York City in early spring 2008 shocked the art world when a wooden statue of Dainichi Nyorai, the supreme Buddha in the esoteric tradition, sold for 14.38 million dollars, though preauction estimates predicted that it would go for a mere 2 million. The selling price for this statue, claimed to be from the hands of Unkei, an important sculptor of the Kamakura period (1192–1333), set a new high mark for a Japanese or Buddhist artwork at auction. As the news of this sale spread, questions were naturally raised about the buyer, who was officially listed as Mitsukoshi Ltd., a major department-store operator in Japan. Yet it became clear that Mitsukoshi was acting on behalf of an anonymous customer in Japan. While the object (and claims to its authenticity) attracted great attention from museums and collectors, by late March it was evident that this Buddhist statue had been purchased neither by a museum nor by a private art collector but by the Shinnyo-en, a Buddhist-inspired “Japanese New Religion” that has achieved great popularity and financial success in Japan and abroad. A priest for the Shinnyo-en eventually came forward and remarked that the Dainichi statue was considered not a piece of art but a living Buddha.

While the Japanese and foreign press tended to emphasize the price and the nationalistic elements of the sale, especially the sacrifice paid by the buyer to keep this exquisite piece of Japanese patrimony in Japan, what caught my eye was the fact that it was purchased by a Japanese New Religion. Japanese New Religions developed in relation to the longstanding tra-
ditional forms of Japanese religion (including Shinto and Buddhism), but they have tended to be hybrid movements that mix in elements derived from the revelations of their founders (often women). At different junctures in the past thirty or so years, art buyers acting on behalf of Japanese New Religions have dominated the world’s art market, buying up the most exquisite pieces available. The motivating force behind their purchases was the need not to provide their temples with ritual objects but rather to fill up the new museums that they were erecting throughout Japan. During the 1980s and 1990s Japanese New Religions, especially those descending from Ōmoto-kyō, founded in 1892 by Deguchi Onisaburō (1871–1948), established and constructed a selection of high-quality contemporary museums, some of them architectural masterpieces (Stalker). Those museums include the Mokichi Okada Association Museum of Art in Atami—which opened in 1982 and is approached through a striking 200-meter underground escalator bathed in mystical lighting—and the Miho Museum near Kyoto, designed by I. M. Pei, built in 1997 for 215 million dollars and filled with 300 million dollars’ worth of unsurpassed art from around the world. One of the fundamental premises of these new religious movements is that exceptional works of art can have religiously transformative effects on those who view them. Interestingly, the original religious context, which was so important to Jay in her views on the Churinga in the Peabody Museum and which for other interpreters determines whether objects are alive or dead, is here irrelevant. The devotees of the Japanese New Religions believe that the objects stand alone in all their glory and reveal their wonders to the viewer. Although the objects on display have been extracted from their original religious contexts, the new site of the exhibition takes on religious dimensions. A visit to the museum is elevated to something like a religious pilgrimage, as is explicitly the case with the Miho Museum.
In designing the Miho Museum, Pei purposely envisaged a visit to the site, which is located in the middle of a nature preserve some distance from the nearest urban center, as being like a visit to the magical site described by the Chinese poet Tao Yuanming (Tao Qian) in his “Peach Blossom Spring.” That story concerns a fisherman who traveled up a mountain stream until he suddenly came upon a grove of peach trees in full bloom. Exploring further, he traced the origin of the stream to a spring near a cave that was emitting a ray of light. He entered the cave and found himself in an idyllic land. The fields were abundant and society utopian. When the villagers noticed him, they asked where he was from and invited him into their homes for feasts. As he took his leave from this fabulous place, he was warned not to mention anything about it to the outside world. Yet when he returned to his village, he told a local official about his experiences. They retraced his route, but he was never able to find the utopian land again.

When Pei first visited the proposed site of the Miho, he exclaimed that it was “Shangrila,” an idyllic paradise on earth, just like the peach blossom spring. A visit to the Miho Museum involves a long journey by train, bus, and foot. During the last leg of the journey, one meanders along a path lined with cherry trees, passes through a cave-like tunnel, and crosses a suspension bridge before arriving at the museum. According to the Shinji Shūmeikai (the New Religion behind the Miho Museum), the journey to the museum and the carefully chosen art inside it can positively influence the spiritual development of a visitor. The visitor should, in theory, return a changed person.

We should be careful, however, not to try to explain away these connections between religion and museums in Japan as the product of the “mystical East,” to set Japanese museums in opposition to secular or scientific Western museums. Rather, such connections should challenge us to further understand the
religious underpinnings of art in the Western context. Indeed, it looks as if the founders of the Japanese New Religions had taken a page directly out of Hegel’s philosophical meditations on art and aesthetics. In his well-known theory, art is depicted as the unfolding of spirit, whose trace is, or should be, accessible in art objects (at least until the last stage of the “end of art,” where spirit no longer requires images). This spirit is not jeopardized when the object is immured in a museum. Writing around the same time as Hegel, Goethe explicitly compared the viewing of art in museums to a religious experience. Reflecting on a visit he made to the Dresden Gallery in 1768, he wrote that

the impatiently awaited hour of opening arrived and my admiration exceeded all my expectations. That salon turning itself in on itself, magnificent and so well-kept, the freshly gilded frames, the well-waxed parquetry, the profound silence that reigned, created a solemn and unique impression, akin to the emotion experienced upon entering a House of God, and it deepend as one looked at the ornaments on exhibition which, as much as the temple that housed them, were objects of adoration in the place consecrated to the holy ends of art. (qtd. in Duncan 14–15)

In drawing an explicit correlation between a museum and a church or temple, Goethe asserts that objects in museums should be approached with the same reverence afforded to icons in churches. Similar sentiments are found in the nineteenth century. For example, Ernest Fenollosa, the first curator of the Oriental collection at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1890, describes the spiritual force of the museum’s Maitreya statue: “The impression of this figure, as one views it for the first time, is of intense holiness. No serious, broad-minded Christian could quite free himself from the impulse to bow down before its sweet powerful smile. With all its primitive coarseness of detail... it dominates the
whole room like an actual presence” (xxiv).\(^3\)

Something must have been in the water of the Charles River around this time, since an entire circle of critics connected with the Boston Museum of Fine Arts shared views consistent with Fenollosa’s commentary on the statue. In a book published by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1918, one member of that group, Benjamin Ives Gilman, compared the viewing of images in a museum to a form of religious communion: “Art is the Gracious Message pure and simple,” he wrote, “integral to the perfect life,” its contemplation “one of the ends of existence” (qtd. in Duncan 17).

While the Miho Museum played an explicitly religious role in modern Japan, that kind of institution would have been impossible in China because of its recent political history and its sensitivity to any form of religious expression. Plenty of examples of explicit iconoclasm aimed at eradicating superstitious practices of the masses could be cited, but we should also be attentive to what Stanley Idzerda has called “iconoclasm without destruction.” In coining this phrase, Idzerda was interested in expressing the way certain objects in French museums were stripped of their revolutionary identity by being classified as “art”: “A scepter from one of the desecrated royal tombs of Saint Denis that deserves to be preserved in a museum, as the Commission des Monuments put it in 1793, is not a scepter but [an] example of fourteenth-century goldsmith work” (qtd. in Tamen 62–63). In China, this kind of recasting of ritual objects as “art” or, more commonly, as “cultural relics” has been most notable in the changing identity of ancestral-shrine halls and in the ways that some museums or cultural centers, which function like small-scale museums, have used the veil of “culture” to clandestinely include local deities, or divinized ancestors, in their exhibits and to operate in religious ways. Mayfair Yang has described how in 1998 the governing body of a rural village in Zhejiang approved the construction of a “cultural pal-
ace” to preserve its cultural memory. Local villagers willingly agreed to help finance the construction. Yet a local elder confessed to Yang that, despite appearances to the contrary, “as far as the villagers were concerned, they were helping to rebuild the temple to Chen Shisi Niangniang, the goddess Chen Jinggu, whose temple had originally stood on this site.” The goddess’s temple had been torn down in 1950 by the Communist government, and in the 1980s, Yang relates,

when it was possible to worship her openly again, people constructed a makeshift shrine next to the school and burned incense to her image. Local elders concluded that the only way that the government would agree to erect a new building on the spot was if it thought the building was a cultural palace, and that is how the building was presented when it was completed in 2000. It just so happened that its traditional architectural style, with its shiny green-tiled roofs curved upward, fantastic mythological wall paintings, and opera stage bore all the hallmarks of a deity temple.

The local villagers had even commissioned new images of the deity and were ready to install them in the museum-like cultural palace when a government-sponsored temple-destruction campaign swept through the village in 2001 and forced them to sequester the images until the climate for installing them—above the images of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and Deng—was right (720).

Strategies of surreptitiously reviving religious practices under the guise of culture were also widely used in recasting traditional ancestral halls as cultural centers. When the villagers in Dachuan, a rural village in northern China, decided to rebuild one of their temples, they recognized the difficulties such an undertaking presented:

[T]hey had to find ways to convince the government and Party authorities that the reconstruction of the temple did not represent the restoration of an illicit, superstitious cult. . . .
They emphasized the cultural legacy of Confucius to assure officials in charge of the county’s public security and religious affairs that the temple was a center of historical education. (Jing 63–64)

The destroyed temple was rebuilt, but only after the villagers convinced the “government officials that the temple was a public site for cultural education rather than exclusively an ancestor hall” (67). While museums were taking on religious functions, however explicit (Japan) or clandestine (China), these cases also point to the ways that temples came to function like museums.

Throughout history, temples, monasteries, and churches, such as Saint Peter’s Basilica in Italy or the Shōsōin in Japan, have maintained substantial collections of art and religious objects. The Shōsōin, for example, was just one of many storehouses inside the large Todaiji temple complex in Nara, established in the eighth century, which housed a variety of Buddhist ritual implements but was also filled with objects that had arrived in Japan after a long journey on the Silk Route. Those precious objects included Persian glass, exotic fabrics, and Indian and Chinese musical instruments. During the nineteenth century, however, this monastic collection was taken over by the Meiji government, and following World War II the objects became “national property” under the jurisdiction of the Imperial Household Agency’s Archives and Mausolea Department. Objects from that enormous collection are now regularly exhibited at the Nara National Museum on a rotating basis. At other sites in Japan, the main objects of worship have been displaced from the main sanctuary to an onsite museum (often referred to as a “treasure palace”), leaving the altar empty. The resident Buddhist priests are expected to perform the same rituals in front of the icons in the museum they had performed when the icons were enshrined on the monastery altar (Rambelli and Reinders 27).
Contemporary temples and monasteries in China that are open to outside visitors tend to be more akin to museums than to living religious sites. Even active temples and monasteries with resident monks and a daily flow of devout Buddhists often have a space reserved for an exhibition hall to showcase the monastery’s historical objects or to hold special events. Many of the Chinese Buddhist temples that have survived into the twentieth century have become tourist attractions, museums preserving a quickly disappearing culture. At least in urban environments, the center of religious life has shifted out of temples and into other domains (Goossaeart 204–05). Visitors to monasteries, no longer hoping to have an explicitly religious experience, now pay entrance fees to come into contact with the “aura” of certain historical objects. The Zhihua Monastery in Beijing, for instance, is “a repository of Chinese Buddhist culture, though now a museum rather than a living religious institution. As such, it is like many Chinese monasteries today. . . . Many have become protected cultural properties either restored or awaiting restoration for use as museums and public parks” (Weidner 9).

Another fascinating example of a religious site and a museum trading roles is the proposed Maitreya Buddha statue to be constructed in Kushinagar, India, as part of the ambitious Maitreya Project. The plans for this enormous statue of the future Buddha include a seventeen-story building that constitutes the Buddha’s throne and part of his body. Inside that structure will be small shrines, meditation spaces, galleries, and a museum (Maitreya Project). Mathur and Singh have observed how this colossal project “reverses the traditional relationship between the Buddha figure and the museum: here it is not the figure of the Buddha that is placed inside the museum, but rather it is the museum that is incorporated, swallowed whole, as it were, into the gigantic body of the Buddha” (153). Indeed, as they note, the objects inside the museum spaces
reverse the usual flow of objects from shrines and temples to museums, since the relics that are to be housed inside were supplied by museums. While this museum will be built inside a religious structure, it is equally common to find reconstructions of an Asian temple’s inner sanctum or altar inside a museum.

The interrelation of museums and monasteries is particularly pronounced in contemporary Thailand. Louis Gabaudé has noted the curious confluence of terminology normally related to sites designated for commemorating the Buddha with terminology related to sites referred to as museums—usually located in or near a monastery—that are used to display the wondrous life of a new saint. These museums tend to contain crystallized relic fragments, contact relics, and, most important, a wax or resin lifelike representation of the saint (116). Saints’ museums are not trivial add-ons to monasteries; one museum was recently constructed at a cost of eighty million dollars. Such a museum is a key facet in the success or failure of the sanctification of the saint. Gabaudé concludes:

[W]hile hagioconstruction no doubt occurred throughout the history of Buddhism and all over Asia, in Thailand’s museums for saints, the traditional concern for preserving the relics of special monks is given a contemporary gloss. The articles kept in the museum are taken as providing a kind of scientific proof of sainthood appropriate to this “scientific age.”

(118)

The contemporary situation in Thailand presents a striking challenge to the earlier post-Enlightenment calls for a division between sacred monasteries and secular museums.

Museums have served the interests of modern nation-states; they have become consumerist tourist sites, and, yes, some are indeed like the melancholic family sepulchres alluded to by Adorno. By detailing the explicit ways in which museums function as
religious sites and vice versa in Asia, I have urged us to think more carefully about how religion has conditioned the formation and function of museums and their collections everywhere, including in the West. Modern museums do not function in exclusively religious ways, and religious sites have not all become like museums, but each kind of institution has been able to adopt the other’s role with little alteration in infrastructure or content. We are insufficiently attuned to the religious facets of museums not because too few examples exist but perhaps because of the specious modernization-secularization theories that have for too long drawn a clear line demarcating the secular (museums) from the religious (temples and monasteries) and because of a reluctance to account for the persistence of religion in the modern world.

NOTES

1. On the debates surrounding these issues in the United States, see Brown; Clifford. Fiskešů discusses the way these debates have played out in China.
2. “Japanese New Religions” generally refers to the new religious movements in Japan that formed in the late nineteenth century and blossomed in the postwar years.
3. On the reception of Buddhist art in Western museums more generally, see Faure; Abe.

WORKS CITED


