

**Hibutsu (Hidden Buddha)**  
**Living Images in Japan and the Orthodox Icons**

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Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems'  
(Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 2, 76)

**(1) Icon, Matter, Visibility, Representation, Senses, Incarnation**

The idea concerning icons in eighth century Byzantium can be stated as: Because God has become matter, God has become visible and able to be represented by matter. But it also entails that God-Christ can be sensed by other senses. As Saint John says in his first letter, “we have heard it; we have seen it with our own eyes; we looked upon it, and felt it with our own hands” (1:1-2). But after Christ’s Ascension, Christ the God can be represented only by his material portraits (icons)<sup>1</sup>. In this case, the important point is that God is not immanent in matter (as was refuted by the iconoclastic Old Testament); God can only be represented in matter (as was supported by the iconodule of the New Testament). As is asserted by the Chalcedonian dogma, in Christ, the nature of God and the nature of matter were united “without confusion, without change, without division, without separation”. And we encounter this paradox in material icons. Further we can say, with icons, a whole material culture was founded on the dogma of incarnation.

But this idea of the visibility of God in matter is a peculiar idea, as it is founded upon the paradoxical idea of incarnation which is beyond our reasoning (1 Cor. 2:9). By this idea, which accomplished the Old Testament prohibition of thinking of matter as living, the instinctive notion of the living (inspired) matter was repressed in the West until Sigmund

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<sup>1</sup> The recent publication by Bissera Pentcheva refers to this idea that God in Christ can be perceived by all senses. Bissera V. Pentcheva, The Sensual Icon: Space, Ritual, and the Senses in Byzantium, Pennsylvania, 2010. The reason why God’s visibility has been the main topic of discussion is that until recently there has been no way of representation for other senses than visibility. And God’ visibility in Christ has affirmed the positive meaning of material life. This is why visibility has been thought superior among all senses from the beginning of Greek culture. As Friedrich Nietzsche remarked, the figurative art (visibility) is of Apollonian as contrasted to the nonfigurative art of music of Dionysian (Die Geburt der Tragödie, Band I, Hanser, München, 1954, S. 21). Visibility is the sense which makes the world material, rational and understandable without chaotic agnosticism. So it could be said that we need it in order to live in a positive way in this material world. To think about the sacred space which concerns all senses and even beyond senses is to return to the foundation of Western material culture based on the superiority of the visibility in Greek Antiquity and revived by the idea of window by Leon Battista Alberti who interprets the picture as an open window (*una finestra aperta onde si possa vedere l’historia*). Leon Battista Alberti, La Pittura, traduzione di Lodovico Domenichi(Venezia, 1547), p. 15

Freud rediscovered it. But outside the West, there are still a lot of examples of living matter which were lost in the West.

A Hidden Buddha (the sacred sculpture or painting of Buddhist deities which is kept hidden) is one of them and the most prominent example for the idea of sacredness in general. Hidden Buddhas are invisible as they are kept in seclusion and in darkness, and they do not only “seem” to be living, but are living in the literal sense for the people who think they are living.

For this study, recent Western researches on Hidden Buddhas will be consulted, but it is fruitful to see Hidden Buddhas in comparison with the explicitly visible Western material culture since Byzantium and definitely since the Renaissance Age. Also it is to be noted that the reason why the sacred is invisible has relation with the spirit and the consciousness, which denies to be treated in the objective way of science.

## **(2) Invisible Hibutsu**

The Hibutsu (Hidden Buddha) is an instructive topic, which presents an alternative approach to Western thinking upon sacred space. In Japan, even now in the modern era, there are a lot of “Hidden Buddhas” called “Hibutsu” in Japanese (statues or paintings), which have not yet become subjects of historical art research. They are kept in temples, but are not to be displayed, or displayed only once within a certain period, i.e. once in three years or ten years or sixty years or never.

In recent years, there are often occasions to exhibit Hidden Buddhas in museums and temples, especially because of the 1300 years’ centenary of Nara city in 2010. But even in these cases, they sometimes do not show their photos. The information leaflet of the exhibition of the Mii-dera treasures in 2008 showed on the reverse side an explanation of details of the exhibition, but there was no photo of the Hidden Buddha which was the main piece of the exhibition (**Fig.1**). Why were they reluctant to show it? The interpretation that to keep it hidden is to stimulate the curiosity of people is too vulgar and also ignorant of the cultural background. Not to show these Buddhas has a deeper religious meaning.

Among Hidden Buddhas, some are never to be shown and they are called “Absolutely Hidden Buddhas (Zettai Hibutsu)”. Among them there are three famous Zettai Hibutsu. One in Zenko-Ji Temple in Nagano, the second in Nigatsu-Do Temple in Nara, and the third in Senso-Ji Temple in Tokyo. They are never to be viewed. Even the priest of the highest hierarchy does not dare to see their own Hidden Buddha. The Buddha statue in Zenko-Ji Temple is said to be the first statue of Buddha which was

brought from Paekche (Baekje, 18 BCE – 660 CE) in 552(or 538) as a gift of King Song of Paekche, when Buddhism was introduced into Japan. Note that it is almost contemporary with the rediscovery of Mandylion in 544. This statue was brought to Nagano in the present place in 642. Since 654, by edict of Emperor Kotoku, it has been an Absolutely Hidden Buddha. The record of its last opening for veneration was in 1702. From the 13<sup>th</sup> century, even its copy (A copy of a Hidden Buddha is generally called Omaedachi, which means, “Standing in Front of the Hidden Buddha”) became a Hidden Buddha and could be seen only once in six years when it is open for viewing for two months. The year 2009 was the year to open the shrine and from 5. May until the end of June, and six million 730 thousand people visited it.

In addition, the 88 Buddhas along the pilgrimage route in Shikoku Island are in general all Hidden Buddhas. There was a big album published in 2002 which was dedicated to these Buddhas, among which 47 of the 88 Hidden Buddhas were photographed, and 28 Hidden Buddhas appeared as Omaedachi, the substitute. So even now in the age of images, we cannot obtain any image of these thirteen Buddhas.

In Zenko-Ji, its Buddhist image, hidden and invisible, is connected with specific rites in sacred space. The “Tainai Meguri” rite may be regarded as one of them and can be found in many other temples, but the Zenko-Ji Temple presents a characteristic example. Under the main altar which contains the Absolutely Hidden Buddha, there is a subterranean passage going around the miraculous image above, where the pilgrims must move in complete darkness and at the end touch the key of the shrine precisely under the altar (presumably to receive good fortune) and then return back to the light outside. The movement through darkness to light is to be understood symbolically as a new spiritual birth. Therefore it is called “Tainai Meguri (Going around in the womb)”. Zenkoji has an “Eternal Fire” (a lantern) which is said to have burned since its construction in 644, two years after Honda Yoshimitsu (Zenko) brought the Buddha figures from Naniwa (Osaka), where they had been abandoned by the anti-Buddhist family Mononobe. This fire is, of course, not to light up the space, but to intensify the darkness.

Invisibility and darkness are the characteristics of sacredness and sacred space in Japan. In Enryaku-Ji on Hiei-zan mountain near Kyoto, which is the center of Tendai Esoteric Buddhism, the central shrine is half under the ground and very dark in its sanctuary. Here also a pair of lanterns (called Eternal Fire) has been burning from the year 788 in its center on both sides of the small shrine, which also contains an Absolutely Hidden

Buddha. This Buddha statue is said to have been hewn by the founder of the Tendai sect Saicho (766-864) himself from sacred wood in the same year. A very rare photo was taken on the 1200 years' anniversary of the foundation of the Tendai sect in 2005 (Fig. 2). And of course it is still inaccessible to art historians.

Why are Hibutsu hidden and invisible? There are a number of studies of Hibutsu (Hidden Buddhas), especially by Motohiro Yoritomi(1945- ) and Fabio Rambelli(1963- ).<sup>2</sup> But recently art historian Shiro Ito(1945- ) points out that Hibutsu is only a phenomenon in Japan and does not exist in other Buddhist cultures and he deplores it not having been researched and explained yet<sup>3</sup>. Takako Fujisawa researches the phenomenon of Hibutsu historically and notes that the term Hibutsu can only be found in documents from the Edo period, and also notes that this phenomenon can be traced back to late 9<sup>th</sup> century. She tries to interpret Hibutsu and notes several characteristics. She writes that Hidden Buddhas are mainly Kannon-Bodhisattvas (especially Juichi-Men Kannon, which means Kannon crowned with 11 heads) and they have magical power for worldly benefit (health, money, love, peace and so on). Kannon has an actual relation with people and speak to them as if they are living. Hibutsu are, according to her, inspirited and their power has no relation to which form they have, because it is not important to see them, but to hear them talk<sup>4</sup>. But she does not give any clear explanation as to the reason for their invisibility, although some hints already exist in her description of the Hidden Buddhas that they talk.

### (3) Living images with consciousness

It is art historians in the West who point to the character of Buddhist images theoretically and explicitly as living images and not as works of art<sup>5</sup>. Bernard Faure writes "Buddhist icons are, in a manner alive,

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<sup>2</sup> The essay in Buddhist study by Motohiro Yoritomi should be mentioned first. Fabio Rambelli researches the Hibutsu from the point of view of semiology. Motohiro Yoritomi, *The World of Hibutsu*, in *Hibutsu*, Mainichi Shinbunsha, 1991, pp. 74-120. Fabio Rambelli, *Secret Buddhas: The Limits of Buddhist Representation*, *Monumenta Nipponica*, vol. 57, No. 3(Autumn, 2002), pp. 271-307

<sup>3</sup> Shiro Ito, in the text for the magazine *Ichikoiinn* with the special topic for the Buddhist statues in Kyoto, November, 2009, p. 39

<sup>4</sup> Takako Fujisawa, What is Secret Buddha ?, in *Nihon no Hibutsu(Secret Buddhas in Japan)*, Heibonsha, 2002, pp. 114-119

<sup>5</sup> Recently it is more frequently remarked than before in Japan that Buddhist images are not works of art. I can cite here one example written by Akira Masaki(1953-) who is one of the most important researchers of Esoteric Buddhism. He writes in his book concerning recently very popular exhibitions of the Buddhist statues in museums, "We should stop to see Buddha statues as Aesthetic enjoyment, or bluntly to say, to stop to see it as an object.

and not simply dead representations”<sup>6</sup>. And he also writes they are “something quite different from a simple representation”<sup>7</sup>. Here the term “icon” is meant to designate the painting or sculpture for religious usage in general and has nothing to do with the historical definition of icon in Byzantine theology as will be shown later in this paper. Also he writes concerning the portraits of the Zen priests that they are not merely “realistic”, but real<sup>8</sup>. Hiroo Sato(1953- ) writes in connection with the idea of Honji-Suijaku that, according to this idea, Buddhist priests and Buddhist statues have both become visible expressions of the invisible Buddha and they are ontologically the same<sup>9</sup>. So Buddhist statues can be said to be living in the same way as the Buddhist priests are living. Or it is better to say that there is no distinction between living and not-living. But the first Japanese art historian who interpreted Buddhist statues for the first time not as representations of Buddhist deities in the Western sense, but as a living matter which is sacred in itself was Tadashi Inoue (1929-). He named this phenomenon as Reiboku-Kegen-Butsu (霊木化現仏; appearing Buddha in inspired wood)<sup>10</sup>. And Yoko Yamanoto(1955-) has recently added a new interpretation following Tadashi Inoue’s contribution. She writes that the sacred woods were transformed from animistic deities to Buddhist

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To see them is from the outset wrong. They are not works of art. They are to pray to.” Akira Masaki, *The Mysteries of Buddha Images* (仏像ミステリー), Kodansha, Tokyo, 2010, p. 259. This tendency might be because of the post-modern tendency to return to the traditional animistic attitude toward matter. The most important critique for this kind of anti-Western remarks about Buddhist art, which denies the Western concept of art to be applied to the Buddhist images was Katsuichiro Kamei (1907-66). In the early post-war years, he often wrote that the Buddha images are Buddha themselves and they are not to be viewed, but rather to be prayed to. He wrote in his most popular book as follows: To see Buddha statues as works of art from a stylistic point of view is a mistaken idea. Buddha statues are not sculptures. They are just Buddha. To talk about Buddha statues is to talk about Buddha itself, and it is a difficult task to talk. In it, not only the spirit of Buddha, but also the spirits of the ancient people is present. In order to understand the spirit who made, consecrated and prayed to them, the only thing we can do is to bow and pray in front of them as our ancestors did. Katsuichiro Kamei, *Nature and Seasons of the Ancient Temples in Yamato* (大和古寺風物誌), Shincho-Bunko, 1953, pp. 182

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Faure, *The Buddhist Icon and the Modern Gaze*, in *Critical Inquiry* 24, spring 1998, p. 768-9

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Faure, *Visions of Power: Imagining Medieval Japanese Buddhism*, Princeton, 1996, p. 237

<sup>8</sup> Bernard Faure, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism*, Princeton, 1991, p. 170

<sup>9</sup> Hiroo Sato, *Kishomon no seishinshi*, Kodansha, 2006. Also for the idea of Honji Suijaku and its interpretation in Western perspective, see. Mark Teeuwen/Fabio Rambelli(ed.), *Buddhas and Kami in Japan: Honji Suijaku as a combinatory paradigm*, Routledge, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Tadashi Inoue, Shinbutu-Shugo no Seishin to Zokei, in *Zusetsu Nihon no Bukkyo*, vol. 6, Shinchosha, 1991, pp. 50-120

deities by having been sculpted in the form of Buddhist deities<sup>11</sup> So all Buddhist statues are sacred in themselves and can be said to be living, and there are Buddhist statues especially named as living bodies (Shojin). These Shojin Buddhas have become Hibutsu (secret Buddhas)<sup>12</sup>.

Therefore Hibutsu are Buddhist images par excellence or the most spectacular example of Buddhist images. They are not “sculptures” in the Western sense. They are living. This is not in a rhetorical sense, but literally and actually living.

Alternatively it might be better to say that they are thought to have consciousness<sup>13</sup>. Conscious beings are not to be seen or exhibited. Fabio Rambelli cites the text compiled by Saisho(濟承) in 1499 and interprets its content as saying that Buddhas (icons) have a spirit, and should not be soiled (by easy contact) and he explains this invisibility as necessary in order to avoid pollution<sup>14</sup>. But we need further explanation as to why visibility entails pollution. We can exhibit animals, but we cannot exhibit human beings as it is a violation. It is because to gaze at them means to make them objects and possess them. This notion appears to be universal. Roland Barthes wrote that photography transformed subject into object<sup>15</sup> and Susan Sontag also writes of photography as a way of possession<sup>16</sup>. But it is better to cite here a much older Coptic text about visibility in general from the fifth or sixth century which warned women not to show off when going to church and told its flock, with a word “What the eye sees it appropriates”<sup>17</sup>. Living (conscious) beings are not to be possessed. Just one glimpse is enough to get to know that they exist.

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<sup>11</sup> Yoko Yamamoto, On the Legends of the Woods of Buddhist Statues (崇る御衣木と造仏事業), Cursing Materials and the Making of Buddhist Sculptures from Them, Bulletin of Meisei University. Department of Japanese and Comparative Literature, College of Japanese Culture (明星大学研究紀要) 15, 2007, pp. 73-83. Takeo Oku, Controlling Miraculous Efficacy, in Bijutsu Forum 21 (美術フォーラム 21), Vol. 22, 2010, pp. 37-40.

<sup>12</sup> Takeo Oku, Shojin Butsuzo ron, in Studies in the history of Japanese Art (講座 日本美術史), vol. 4, Tokyo Daigaku Shuppan Kai, 2005, pp. 293-322

<sup>13</sup> Robert H. Sharf, The Rhetoric of Idolatry, in Living Images: Japanese Buddhist Icons in Context, ed. by Robert H. Sharf/Elizabeth Horton Sharf, Stanford, 2001, pp. 10-11. Robert H. Sharf would be the first person to go further to mention the consciousness in Buddhist images.

<sup>14</sup> Fabio Rambelli, op.cit(2), p. 277

<sup>15</sup> “La Photographie transformait le sujet en objet” in Roland Barthes, La chambre claire: Notes sur la photographie, 1980, p. 29 (Japanese edition, Misuzu Shobo, Tokyo, 1985, p. 22)

<sup>16</sup> Susan Sontag, On Photography, New York, 1977, pp. 155-6. Also, Margaret Olin, Gaze, in Critical Terms for Art History, ed. by Robert S. Nelson/Richard Schiff, Chicago, 1996, p. 216

<sup>17</sup> Georgia Frank, The Pilgrim’s Gaze in the Age before Icons, in Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance, ed. by Robert S. Nelson, Cambridge, 2000, p. 107. This text was traditionally attributed to the Coptic Saint Shenoute (348-465/6). Pseudo-Shenoute, On Christian Behaviour, XL, 5, transl. by K. H. Kuhn, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum

Jizo Bodhisattvas are the most popular Buddhist images in Japan (**fig.3**). We find them quite often standing along the road. They are all individual Buddhas. Certainly nobody in Japan thinks they are representations of one original prototype Jizo Bodhisattva. Perhaps this notion is reinforced by the fact that Buddhist deities are not historical beings, but even the historical Buddha himself is interpreted as a universal deity in Mahayana Buddhism. They are not representations, but all living (inspired) by themselves and people feel these deities refuse to be photographed. They are not representations of deities, but deities themselves. To put it in another way, they are not representations, but doubles (simulacra).

These images of Buddha are living (inspired and conscious). There is no distinction between Buddha and its image. So sometimes it happens that in the temples or shrines from where deities and portraits are loaned for exhibitions, people perform a ritual to draw their spirit out of the material before they are to be exhibited in a museum. Then it becomes possible to exhibit them as works of art. This practice is often performed before an exhibition, although museum curators are already sufficiently Western-minded to feel suspicious about the efficiency of such a pre-modern ritual<sup>18</sup>.

Portrait sculptures or paintings are also considered as living. These years the repairs of the whole construction of the tremendous building in the Higashi-Hongan-ji Temple in Kyoto are under way, and scheduled to be finished (2003-2010). The function of this building is to house the portrait (in this case, a sitting wooden sculpture) of the founder of the Buddhist sect (Jodo-shinshu), the priest Sinran (1173-1263). The portrait is called a “Venerable Shadow (Go-ei or Mi-ei)” (**fig.4**) and the shrine is called a “House of Venerable Shadow (Goei-do or Miei-do)”. Before the beginning of the repairs, this Go-ei was transferred to the neighboring building in a solemn ceremony, as if a living person, while many passionate believers were moved to tears by their very rare meeting with the Go-ei (**fig.5**).

I cite here one more (supposedly actually living) example among many from Zentsu-ji in Shikoku Island, where Kobo-daishi (Kukai 774-835) was born. Kobo-Daishi Kukai was the founder of another sect of esoteric Buddhism (Shingon Esoteric Buddhism). In this temple there is also a Miei-do (a House of the Venerable Shadow) where the portrait painting of Kobo-Daishi is kept. This is said to be a self-portrait of Kobo-

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*Orientalium, Scriptorum Coptici*, Tomus 30, Louvain, 1960, p.55

<sup>18</sup> Fabio Rambelli describes this custom in detail. Fabio Rambelli, *op.cit*(2), p. 285

Daishi. Before he left for China, he climbed into the branches of a pine tree above a pond where, looking at his face mirrored in the pond, he made a portrait of himself which he left for his mother as a memory. This pine tree has already withered, but its trunk is kept near the pond. Later this portrait was named by Emperor Tsuchimikado as a blinking portrait as it was said to have blinked when the emperor viewed it in 1209. This portrait is also a Hidden Buddha and is to be viewed only once in fifty years. The next time will be in 2035. Of course, there is no photo, but we have a photo of the copy from the Muromachi-period (15<sup>th</sup> century) (**fig.6**).

The idea that Buddhist images are living is taken for granted among people in Japan where not only Buddhist statues, but also every material can be living (conscious). One prominent example is the doll cult in Japan. The doll cult has been popular in Japan, and in this post-modern world, this cult is becoming even stronger. We Japanese cannot get rid of dolls as just matter. As a result, dolls are given funerals. The most famous place for a doll funeral is the Awashima Shrine in Kada (near Wakayama city). This shrine is a legendary old temple of the indigenous Shinto religion founded by Empress Jingu (170-269) and Emperor Nintoku (257-399) from the early third century. Dolls are waiting to be cremated (**fig.7**). People bring dolls which they cannot throw out, and pay a donation to the temple (a cremation fee is charged). On a sign, it is written not to leave dolls without permission. However it is not written not to take them. For we Japanese, it is unthinkable to take these dolls and sell them to an antique shop. We are scared and dare not even touch them, because we feel they are living. The cremation kiln also seems to us comparable to a crematorium for human beings. I needed courage to take photos of these dolls. To take photos seems to be blasphemy. Doll funerals can be seen in many places. In Tokyo, the Meiji Jingu Shrine is a very new institution which was constructed after modernization. It is the biggest Shinto Shrine in Tokyo, located in the center of Tokyo near Shinjuku. They call this funeral at the Meiji Shrine the “Farewell to Dolls Festival”.

At any rate Japanese people cannot simply get rid of things. This is true not only for dolls, but for many other things as well – such as needles for sewing which housewives have used for a certain period. There are also funerals for photos and cameras<sup>19</sup>. From the pre-modern era, there is an expression that things acquire a spirit (become inspirited) when they become one hundred years old. These possessing spirits are called

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<sup>19</sup> Upon this memorial service for inanimate objects, see the chapter titled “Objects rituals, tradition: Memorial services (Kuyo) for inanimate objects” in Fabio Rambelli, Buddhist Materiality: A Cultural History of Objects in Japanese Buddhism, Stanford, 2007, pp. 211-258



Tsukumo-Gami (**fig.8**). Japanese people do not like old things. They like fresh and new things, as they are scared of old things inhabited by spirits. The idea of the protection of historical heritage is far from our indigenous idea.

#### **(4)Refusal of life or consciousness in matter by Judeo-Christianity**

Animated or, perhaps more precisely, inspirited matter is what Judeo-Christianity refuted from the beginning of legendary Moses. Egypt was a land where matter was inhabited by spirits. Living material, material viewed as living (conscious) should be one of the definitions of an idol, and I suppose it is the most important one. Plutarch deplored that even among Greeks there are some who have not learned nor habituated themselves to speak of the bronze, the painted, and the stone effigies as statues of the gods, but rather call them (just) gods. And he adds that the great majority of Egyptians made offering to the animals themselves and treated them as gods<sup>20</sup>. An idol does not represent something behind it, it means rather that it has no prototype and is living by itself and has consciousness. It is not only animated but also inspirited<sup>21</sup>. Moses and the Old Testament prophets vehemently attacked this notion of thinking of manufactured figures as living by themselves. Suffice it to cite from Psalm 115:4-7 which says “their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, nostrils, but cannot smell; with their hands they cannot feel, with their feet they cannot walk, and no sound comes from their throats”.

The reason for the second Commandment and the prohibition of graven images is that people tended to think of these images as living (conscious) and pray to them. So it was desirable not to make them from the outset. The expression that idols are just dead matter is repeatedly found in many places in the Old Testament. On this presupposition, the icon theory of the 8<sup>th</sup> century stated that these dead materials have become vehicles to represent God, because God has become man (matter), so he has become visible and can be represented by a portrait (icon). So the idea that the materials (icons) themselves are not living and are just dead materials is a prerequisite for icon theory. St. John of Damascus also writes that, “it (the image of the human being) does not live, nor does it think, or

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<sup>20</sup> Plutarch's *Moralia*, Loeb, vol. 5, p. 165

<sup>21</sup> Anthony Eastmond, *Between Icon and Idol: The uncertainty of imperial images*, in *Icon and Word: the Power of Images in Byzantium*, ed. by Eastmond/James, Ashgate, 2003, pp.76. Bissera V. Pentcheva, *Icon and Power: The Mother of God in Byzantium*, Pennsylvania, 2006, p.149

give utterance, or feel, or move its members”<sup>22</sup>. And St. Theodore the Studite repeats the same expression “For it is perhaps wood, or paint, or gold, or silver, or some one of the various materials which are mentioned”<sup>23</sup>.

The important distinction between “latreia” and “proskynesis” by John of Damascus and incorporated into the act of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Nicaean Council is also to make distinction between God and matter. John of Damascus wrote, “I do not venerate matter (ὕλη), I venerate the fashioner of matter, who become matter for my sake.”<sup>24</sup> So the icon is dead matter and not living (conscious). Therefore it is possible to see and exhibit it, and it can be a museum piece in the future in our age theoretically. According to the Old Testament, there is no possibility to think that the object returns the gaze at all<sup>25</sup>. This instinctive sensibility is simply repressed by Mosaic laws.

In the study of Hibutsu in Zenko-Ji Temple, Donald McCallum writes of its character as living image, and says that “the desire to worship a living icon” is “very deeply rooted in human psychology”<sup>26</sup>. But as Bernard Faure writes, the notion of animated Buddhist icons has been repressed as a result of the modern and Western values of aestheticization, desacralization, and secularization<sup>27</sup>.

How then do we distinguish dead icons from living idols? As Robert H. Sharf puts it concerning Buddhist images, “The charge of idolatry presupposes a clarity concerning the nature of sentience,

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<sup>22</sup> Bonifatius Kotter(Hrsg.), Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos, III, 16, Berlin, 1975, S. 125. Louth(tr.), Three Treatises on the Divine Images, New York, 2003, p. 95

<sup>23</sup> Antirrheticus S. Theodori Studitae, I, 11, PG, 99, 341c, Roth(tr.), On the Holy Icons, New York, 1981, p. 32

<sup>24</sup> Kotter(Hrsg.), op.cit(22)., II, 14, S. 105; Louth(tr.), op.cit(22)., p.70. Recently Marie-Jose Mondzain writes that it is a fundamental error to confuse the incarnation with materialization and that “became flesh” is not equivalent to “became matter”. But this attempt to rationalize the paradox leads to the monophysite heresy which said that Christ is not a complete man. Marie-José Mondzain, Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary, Stanford, 2005, p. 94.

<sup>25</sup> In Hindu India, people go for “Darsan” at the deities and the visibility seems to be important to their relation with material Buddhas, but Darsan means that the deity sees the worshipper as well, as in the Hindu understanding the deity is present in the image. Diana L. Eck, Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India, New York, 1981(1998), pp. 6-7. This “Darsan” can be interpreted as “gaze” in accord with Jacques Lacan’s theory. Gaze in Lacan’s usage denotes the surrealistic visibility which makes matter as if alive. Jacques Lacan, Of the Gaze as Object Petit a, in The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, New York, 1978, p. (Japanese edition, Iwanami Shoten, 2000) Michael Hatt/Charlotte Klonk, Art History/A Critical Introduction to its methods, Manchester, 2006, p. 189

<sup>26</sup> Donald F. McCallum, Zenkoji and Its Icon: A Study in Medieval Japanese Religious Art, Princeton, 1994, p.182

<sup>27</sup> Bernard Faure, op. cit(6)., 1998, p. 769

consciousness, and embodiment. Yet such clarity continues to elude us”. Sharf concludes that the phenomenon of idolatry is always, and necessarily, in the eye of the beholder<sup>28</sup>. It means it is our attitude which decides whether it is an idol and living (conscious) or an icon and matter. All images can be idols and living (conscious) according to the attitude of the people who are in front of them. Therefore the phenomenon of idolatry is within us and cannot be a subject of positivist research.

There are some texts which show this situation. One is a text by Chinese Esho (慧沼 648-714) written as an annotation to the text translated by Genjo (玄奘 620-664) which says: “the wood has no spirit. But why does it utter voice ?” Then it gives the answer that sincerity of prayer and strength of wish make miracles work<sup>29</sup>. Another text is by Myoe (明恵 1173-1232) the famous Buddhist priest of the 12<sup>th</sup> century Japan, which Bernard Faure cites and which says: “When you think about an object carved from wood or drawn in a picture as if it were a living being, then it is a living being.”<sup>30</sup> Both texts assert that people make the dead matter alive. Myoe knows for sure that the object is just wood or picture, but he says, if people see it as living, then it is living. There is no repression to refute here life or consciousness in matter. One more Japanese priest after Myoe, who is one of the most important Zen priests, Muso-Soseki (夢窓疎石 1275-1351) , writes in his dialogue that nature (mountains and rivers) is neither good nor bad, it is human mind which can be good or bad<sup>31</sup>. So we decide

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<sup>28</sup> Robert H. Sharf/Elizabeth Horton Sharf (ed.), Living Images: Japanese Buddhist Icons in Context, Stanford, 2001, pp. 11-12. Fabio Rambelli also notes upon the Buddhist internal ambivalence toward objects. Fabio Rambelli, op.cit(19)., p.3

<sup>29</sup> 「問木は無心。何故動而出聲耶。答此有三義故動而出聲也。一者行人心誠。二願強盛故。三菩薩願重故也」(木はこれ心無し。何の故にか声を出だすや。・・・行人の心の誠なること、・・・行人の誓願の強盛なること、・・・菩薩の誓願の重いこと)。「十一面神呪心経義疏」(『大正新脩大藏経』Vol. 39, p. 1010)。Ryusaku Nagaoka (1960-) cites this famous and important text among art historians, but he interprets this text as that wood itself will not become living, Buddha behind the statue makes it living, and he treats Buddhist statues just as matter. This interpretation follows the example of the idea of Byzantine icon and the Western idea of representation. It is as if there was such reasoning in Japan at that time. Ryusaku Nagaoka, Nihon no Butsuzo, Chuoko Shinsho, 2009, p. 259. Also another prominent researcher about the meaning of Buddhist statues, Takeo Oku(1964-) interprets the making of the Buddhist statues as a rationalizing activity to make magical and living character void in the material. This interpretation is also an attempt to make the Buddhist case as a parallel with Western idea of icons. Takeo Oku, Controlling Miraculous Efficacy, in Bijutsu Forum 21 (美術フォーラム 21), Vol. 22, 2010, pp. 37-40. But clearly there has been no such persistent ideology in Buddhism as there exists in the case of Christianity, codified in Church Council in Nicaea in 787 following the reasoning of Old Testaments and other foregoing Church Councils.

<sup>30</sup> Bernard Faure, Visions of Power: Imagining Medieval Japanese Buddhism, Princeton, 1996, p. 259. Myoe-Shonin Shu (明恵上人集), Iwanami Bunko, 1981, p. 211

<sup>31</sup> Muchu Mondo (夢中問答), Iwanami-Bunko, 1983, p. 134

whether this or that is an icon or an idol. Nothing is decided in advance. It can be living or just a dead matter according to us. This agnosticism or the sole consciousness doctrine(唯識論) which was established in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century would have been in Buddha's mind when he attained Enlightenment.

And this ambiguous idea could be the only way to ground the idea of Buddhist statues as objects of art and let these statues be exhibited in museums, but also at the same time, it could give the reason for thinking of them as living and letting them be kept invisible. So at last we find the reason by which we are qualified to treat them as matter.

By contrast, the text by Saint Paul could be cited from the Letter to the Romans (14:14): "Nothing is impure in itself; only, if anyone considers something impure, then for him it is impure." Saint Paul also admits the possibility of seeing life or consciousness in matter, but he denies this other possibility as impure. This denial has no foundation, but is by God's commandment. He just follows the Old Testament laws from which not a letter, not a dot, will disappear (Matthew 5:18).

In the West, this idea of the transcendental prohibition can be found also in the story of the mechanical doll by E.T.A. Hoffmann "The Sandman" (1815/6). In this Clara tells her fiancé Nathanael, who becomes enamoured of a girl which is actually a mechanical doll, as follows: "it seems to me that all that was fearsome and terrible of which you speak, existed only in your own self, and that the real true outer world had but little to do with it."<sup>32</sup> Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) uses this novel as an explanation of the uncanny. According to Freud's text "Uncanny" (1919), "the uncanny (*unheimlich*) is something which is secretly familiar (*heimlich-heimisch*), which has undergone repression and then returned from it."<sup>33</sup> And he adds "Nowadays we no longer believe in them, we have *surmounted* these modes of thought; but we do not feel quite sure of our new beliefs, and the old ones still exist within us ready to seize upon any confirmation."<sup>34</sup> It can be interpreted here that the idea of a living matter or simply animism is the secretly familiar feeling. It was repressed by the Old Testament and we no longer believe in animism as we have surmounted it, but we are not sure of our new beliefs regarding dead matter. Old beliefs of animism still exist within us and when they return, we feel the uncanny.

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<sup>32</sup> E.T.A. Hoffmann, *Der Sandmann*, Werke, Zweiter Band, Insel, Frankfurt am Main, 1967, S. 15

<sup>33</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Das Unheimliche*, Gesammelte Werke, XII, Fischer, Frankfurt am Main, 1999, S. 259

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, S. 262

This primitive sensibility of the uncanny is also noticed by Wilhelm Worringer (1881-1965) in his representative work “Abstraction and Empathy (Abstraktion und Einfühlung)” in 1908. He writes that the instinct of human beings is not world-piety, but horror (Der Instinkt des Menschen aber ist nicht Weltfrömmigkeit, sondern Furcht) <sup>35</sup>.

### (5) God works, not matter

There is one spectacular example which embarrasses us and needs to be elucidated. There was in Japan the exhibition of paintings by Makishima Nyokyu (牧島如鳩 1892-1975) in 2008 through 2009. He was baptized as an Orthodox Christian and painted Orthodox icons, but at the same time he painted Buddhist images. This practice can be compared with the works by Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947). A strange phenomenon is apparent concerning the Buddhist images made by Makishima Nyokyu. Among his works, two pictures are said to make a cracking noise when they wish to (**fig.9**) (**fig.10**). They are not only, presumably, animated but also have consciousness. They are not “as if” living, but “actually” living. Are they idols? But if we see Makishima’s Buddhist living images just as matter without consciousness and see their life of making cracking noise as coming from God, then they can be interpreted as miraculous icons. Miraculous icons in general should be interpreted like this. Miracles can only be worked by God, and through matter, not by matter itself as the famous dictum of Saint Basil repeated in the act of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Nicaean Council reversely indicates: the prayer toward icons goes to the prototype (η γαρ της εικονος τιμη επι το πρωτοτυπον διαβαινει) .

Studies upon the idol, i.e. living images, are now proliferating. It seems people in the West are reaffirming that the idea of icon (i.e. representation) is a result of Jewish-Christian reasoning in the 8<sup>th</sup> century on the presupposition of Mosaic Law regarding the prohibition of the idea of living images. To see the Living God through dead matter, which itself is not God, is the idea of representation grounded in God’s incarnation as dead matter. Søren Kierkegaard wrote in “Either/Or” that the idea of representation was introduced into the world by Christianity<sup>36</sup>. It is also significant that the idea of absolute and relative worship in Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* has the same reasoning as John Damascene’s idea of *latreia* and *proskynesis*<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*, München, 1948, S. 140

<sup>36</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, part I, ed. by Hong, Princeton, 1987, p. 64

<sup>37</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, vol. I, ed. by Hong, Princeton, 1992, p. 407. Recently Clemena Antonova cites Kierkegaard for the

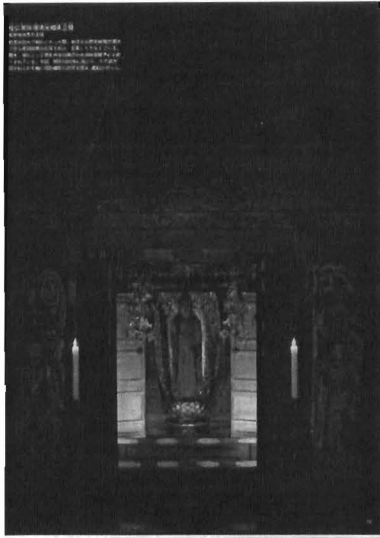
In Japan, where God stays invisible without icon theory, there is a common expression: it is too beautiful to make it into a picture (e nimo kakenai utsukushisa). Actually some scenic places are related to this dictum. One small rock island beside the seashore is where one legendary painter from 9<sup>th</sup> century Kose-no-Kanaoka (巨勢金岡) threw down his painting brush as he gave up trying to paint the beautiful scenery (fig.11). In contrast, in the West, following the icon theory, there are expressions such as, “Zum Malen schön (it is so beautiful that we would like to make picture of it)” as in Mozart and Schikaneder’s “Zauberflöte” or in Serbian expression, “lep kao slika (beautiful like painting)”. In the West, beauty and God are visible. Therefore the very popular expression by Saint-Exupery(1900-44) in “Le Petit Prince” (1946), “Ce qui est important, ça ne se voit pas”, is not a Western idea at all.

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first time concerning the paradoxical unity of the transcendental and the immanent in icons. Clemena Antonova, Space, Time, and Presence in the Icon: Seeing the World with the Eyes of God, Ashgate, 2010, p. 65. But Kierkegaard is worth citing not for this specific idea, but for the idea of relative worship for this material world.



(Fig.1) “Hidden Buddha among Hidden Buddhas of which even the illustration is restricted” Information leaflet of Exhibition of Miidera-Treasures 2008-2009 Osaka City Museum of Fine Art



(Fig. 2)  
Hidden Buddha legendarily hewn by  
Saicho(766-864) himself  
from the sacred wood in 788

The Central Shrine  
Enryaku-ji Hiei-zan  
(Shiga)

From Hieiizan ,  
Taiyo Special Issue (別冊 太陽)  
Heibonsha  
2006, p. 12



(Fig.3)  
Statues of Jizo Bosatsu (Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva) in Hara (Okayama)





(Figs. 4,5)

Transfer of the Go-ei(Venerable Shadow) of the priest Sinran (1173-1263)  
from Go-ei-do(House of Venerable Shadow)

17 June 1999

Nishi-Hongan-ji(Kyoto)



(Fig. 6)

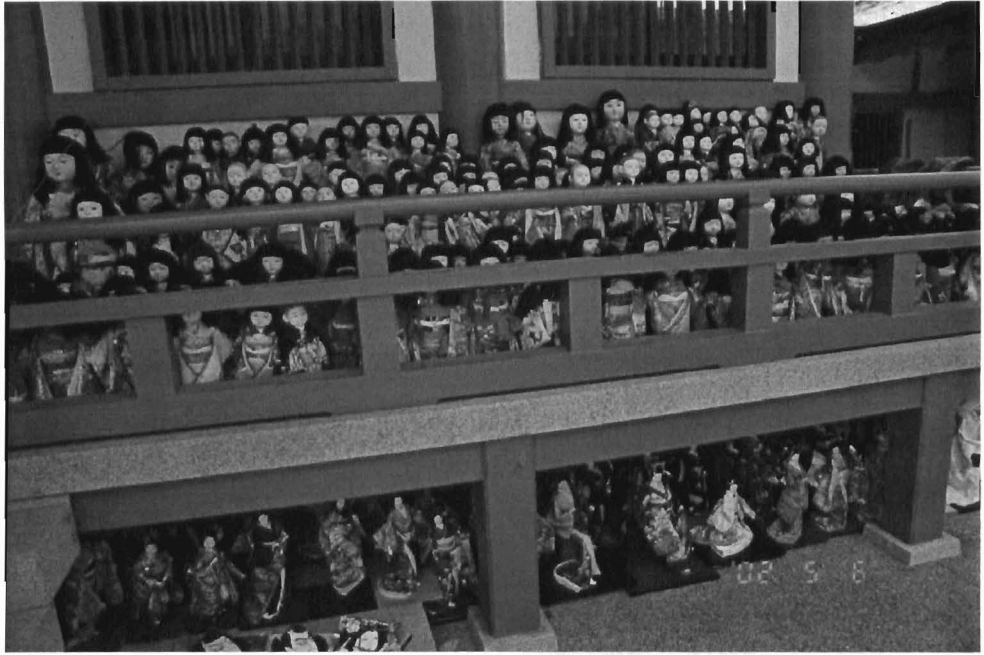
Copy of Mehiki-Taishi  
(Blinking Great Priest)

114.4x73.4cm

Muromachi-period

Zentsu-ji

(Kagawa)



(Fig.7)  
Awashima Shrine in Kada (Wakayama)



(Fig.8)  
Jakuchu Ito (1716-1800)  
Tsukumo-Gami  
(Possessing Spirits)  
129.2x27.9cm  
Fukuoka Art Museum



(Fig. 9) Makishima Nyokyu (1892-1975) Ryugasawa-Daibenzaiten  
Oil on canvas, 97.0x132.5cm, 1951, Ashikaga Museum of Art (deposited)



(Fig.10)  
MakishimaNyokyu(1892-  
1975)  
Daojizai-senju-kannon bosatsu  
1964  
Oil on canvas  
193.0x129.8cm  
Gangyo-Ji Temple  
Hongo(Tokyo)



(Fig.11)  
Island of Throwing the Paintbrush  
Izumo(Shimane)