Amamonzeki: The Artistic Practices of Aristocratic Buddhist Nuns in Pre-Modern Japan

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Amamonzeki:
The Artistic Practices of Aristocratic Buddhist Nuns in Pre-Modern Japan

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Requirements for Departmental Honors in Art History

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Abstract

This study explores the lives and artistic works of aristocratic Zen nuns in Early Modern (1600-1868) Japan. Influenced by the Lotus Sutra, whose teachings and allegories permeated their lives, Buddhist nuns saw the creation of art as a pious, meritorious act. Art was an intimate part of their lives and worship, and together within their convents aristocratic Buddhist nuns played an important role in Japanese cultural history. Their artistic contributions were prayers for amassing karmic merit in the afterlife or were intended to assist temples in furthering the spread of Buddhism. The quality, quantity and variety of their visual expressions of faith eloquently testify to Buddhism’s ability to inspire artistic creativity among the devout. Art was not only a form of piety for Buddhist nuns, but sometimes involved sacrifice through ascetic practices. Traditions of self-mutilation carried out by religious women in pre-modern Japan were performed predominantly by those seeking to overcome their physical attachments and render themselves genderless when male priests hindered their pursuit of spiritual studies. The cultural breadth of the convents can be seen in various objects made from wood, clay, cloth, metal, paper, and pigments, and some even attest to religious fervor by incorporating the hair, skin and blood of the nuns who created them. The visual brilliance of these objects convinces us that the imperial convents are extraordinary cultural repositories that deserve further scholarship. This study underlines the importance of studying visual culture within broader socio-cultural contexts of ritual, gender relations and the negotiation of social status.
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Introduction

I. Historical Notes on Women and the Japanization of Buddhism

Throughout its history, Buddhism has absorbed a mix of various ethnic religious elements as it evolved from its origins in India to its first introduction to Japan in the sixth century and again as it spread to other parts of South East and Central Asia, China, and Korea. The Buddhist conception of women evolved not only in relation to the cultural view in each area, but in relation to native beliefs,1 politics and social attitudes towards gender. After the importation of Buddhism to Japan, these attitudes grew further in combination with the changes that took place in Japanese society over the centuries. Buddhism has attracted criticism for its discriminatory treatment of women, its ontological beliefs surrounding the nature of the female form and soul, and for relegating them to a secondary social status. Some attack the Buddhist teachings as misogynist and out of date. Others desperately search for quotations and actions of the Buddha, as well as eminent monks and priests that could offer examples and events of positive attitudes towards women and their salvation.2 But it is difficult to avoid fervent Buddhist teachings that explicitly state that women cannot easily be redeemed from sin because they are naturally more sinful than men, or that the sinful nature of women prevents men from practicing asceticism sincerely, or that because the nature of women is inherently evil they cannot achieve salvation without first being transformed into or reborn as a man.

This study investigates the spiritual and artistic efforts of the aristocratic Buddhist women within pre-modern Japan who through their artistic works sought to accrue positive karmic merit in order to achieve enlightenment and heavenly salvation. Affluent and educated, the nuns of the

1 Japan’s indigenous religion, Shinto is a polytheistic religion that revolves around Kami “gods” or "spirits” supernatural entities believed to inhabit all things.
Amamonzeki were exposed to a multitude of resources with which to create. Influenced by the Lotus Sutra, whose teachings and allegories permeated their lives, Buddhist nuns saw the creation of art as a pious, meritorious act. Art was an intimate part of their lives and worship, and together within their convents aristocratic Buddhist nuns played an important role in Japanese cultural history.

Their artistic contributions were prayers for amassing karmic merit in the afterlife, or were intended to assist temples in furthering the spread of Buddhism. The quality, quantity and variety of their visual expressions of faith eloquently testify to Buddhism’s ability to inspire artistic creativity among the devout. Art was not only a form of piety for Buddhist nuns, but sometimes involved sacrifice through ascetic practices. The tradition of self-mutilations carried out by religious women in pre-modern Japan was performed predominantly by women seeking to overcome their physical attachments and render themselves genderless when male priests hindered their pursuit of spiritual studies. The cultural breadth of the convents can be seen in various objects made from wood, clay, cloth, metal, paper, and pigments; some even attest to religious fervor by incorporating the hair, skin and blood of the nuns who created them. The visual brilliance of these objects convinces us that the imperial convents are extraordinary cultural repositories. Portraits of convent abbesses, for instance, serve to document the history of the individual convents through their founders; to display the refined painting tradition of the convents; and to establish the distinct iconography of representations of imperial Buddhist abbesses.

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3 *The Lotus Sutra* is one of the most popular and influential sutras (canonical scriptures) of Mahayana Buddhism. It contains the final teachings of the Buddha addressing the salvation of sentient beings.
II. Women in Early Japanese Buddhism

When Buddhism was introduced to Japan through Korea in the sixth century, the Japanese were exposed for the first time to the advanced culture of the Chinese continent. The power and multiple influences of Buddhist temples and Japanese society varied over the centuries depending on the wealth of the founding patrons, the doctrinal emphasis of the founding priests, and the religious organizations that grew up around them. The study of individual religious groups tended to be overly absorbed in questions of politics, intergroup rivalries behind the emergence of male leaders, and relations with civil authorities. The doctrinal approach has had a similar preoccupation with powerful politics and rival schools of thought. In both religious and political society, the doctrines that approach the roles of women never appear on centerstage. The fact that the role of women in the history of Buddhism has not been taken up as a serious research subject is a natural outcome of such traditional scholarly stances. An entire world of influence has been neglected from its introduction, and subsequently the contributions of Buddhist women were not considered worthy of serious study. When we move outside the parameters of imported Buddhism itself and look more broadly at the question of spirituality and religious beliefs in Japan, it is undeniable that women have played roles of great importance. Among the most important and effective means of dealing with these issues and delving deeper into the real nature of the Japanese Buddhist faith and practice is the opening up of a whole new field. This study builds upon the contributions of scholars who have begun to remedy the historical neglect of women’s contributions to Buddhist thought and practice.

5 Ibid. See also the work of Rita Gross, Liz Wilson and others for cogent discussions of the lack of critical scholarly attention to women’s historical contributions to Buddhism.
Despite the negativity of some Buddhist doctrines, it is difficult to determine any special tendency in women’s acceptance of Buddhism separate from trends in Japanese aristocratic society as a whole. Religious rights pertinent to women included prayers for parturition, with emphasis on transforming a female fetus into a male by means of prayer. Devotees were not exclusively evoking an easy and safe pregnancy, but directed their efforts towards prayerful supplication, protecting the infant during pregnancy from the condemnation of being born female.\(^6\) Eight lectures on *The Lotus Sutra* (妙法蓮華経 Myōhō Renge Kyō) included an eight-part volume of prayers, that especially attracted the attention of women, in part because the sutra was considered to be reflective of women’s potential for salvation. Another especially important sutra for women is *The Three Jewels* (三宝 Sanbō), the first Buddhist instruction book written by the Japanese and the first testament to the Japanization of Buddhism.\(^7\) It is especially significant in that it was created at the request of a woman and therefore indicates the general level of understanding among Heian (794-1185) aristocratic women.

A passage in the *Nirvana Sutra* (大般涅槃経 Daihatsunehan-gyō) claims that the sinful obstacles of one woman equal the sum of harmful attachments to all men in the world.\(^8\) The commentary on the theory of mind only contains a passage stating that women are messengers of hell who will never achieve Buddhahood and that, though their appearance may resemble that of a bodhisattva, internally they are more like female demons.\(^9\) The five obstacles in the Lotus Sutra

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\(^7\) In all schools of Buddhism, Buddhists take refuge in the *Three Jewels*, i.e. the Buddha (the Enlightened One), the Dharma (the teachings of the Buddha), and the Sangha (the monastic order of monks, nuns and - later - lay believers).

\(^8\) This sutra is heavily contested within Buddhism, especially in its translation and transmission to certain Buddhist-practicing areas of Asia. The two versions differ in their teachings on Buddha nature: one version teaches that all sentient beings have the potential to attain Buddhahood, whereas the other indicates that some will never attain Buddhahood.

\(^9\) In Buddhism, a bodhisattva refers to anyone who has generated a spontaneous wish and compassionate mind to attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings.
state that the five higher levels of rebirth are blocked for women and are therefore an obstacle to the achievement of male rebirth or Buddhahood. This idea together with a woman’s three obligations under Confucian gender ideologies to obey her father, her husband, and her son were called *The Five Obstacles and Three Obediences* (五障三従 goshō-sanjū or goshō-sanshō). These injunctions were frequently used together to explain the inferiority of women.10

Mahayana Buddhism along with its established monastic orders was introduced to Japan in the middle of the sixth century. Although the Buddha was a foreign deity and Buddhism a foreign religion, it represented to the Japanese an expression of the most intellectually and technologically advanced and superior aspects of known cultures. Japanese rulers instituted many administrative systems for the support and management of Buddhism, including clearly established demarcations between the clergy and secular population. The state-sponsored monasteries strictly regulated contact between monks and nuns; this segregation became an orthodox precept for monks as Confucian values infiltrated Japanese thought. Women in their acceptance of this faith had little choice but to acquiesce to their discriminatory spiritual subordination. Women relied heavily on the Lotus Sutra as their primary source of hope to achieve Buddhahood, as it promised that women could overcome their physical limitations and achieve Buddhahood.

After Buddhism’s first introduction in the sixth century, Japanese Buddhism was sustained by priests from the Korean Peninsula, but eventually native Japanese would take the tonsure and become Japan’s native clergy. The first of Japan’s Buddhist clergy were women. The first to take the tonsure and serve the Buddha was Shima, the daughter of the 6th-century Chinese émigré sculptor Shiba Tattō. Shima was eleven when she took the tonsure and assumed the

religious name of Zenshin-Ni. Soon after, two young women became her disciples and were
given their names Zenzō-ni and Enzen-ni (552-587). Soga no Umako (551-626), a powerful
leader and Buddhist revered the three young nuns and began the construction of Buddhist
temples. Due to the political opposition that Buddhism endured from proponents of indigenous
Shintō belief and courtly rituals, one year after the three nuns took their vows an attack by Shiba
Tattō’s enemy, Mononobe no Moriya led to the destruction of temple buildings and Buddhist
statues. Mononobe no Moriya then had the nuns publicly beaten and defrocked. In 588 during
the reign of Emperor Sushun (r. 587-592) and after the killing of Mononobe by the pro-Buddhist
Soga clan, the three nuns resumed their Buddhist practice and requested permission to travel to
the Korean Kingdom of Paekche in order to pursue further studies of Buddhism.

As Buddhism became more interdependent with other social institutions, the
responsibilities of the temples increased, male clerks took over the administration and
management of temple complexes and the study of religious precepts was assigned primarily to
male monks. To study doctrines that had originated in India, they had the difficult task to
depend on scriptures translated from classical Indian languages into Chinese. Most monks
entered temples as children to require such basic education and knowledge. Only after decades of
study and training were they able to deepen their understanding and interpretations of the higher
points of Buddhism. Women clerics in Japan consequently began to lose position, authority, and
influence. During the seventh century, Chinese legal and political systems in which male
primogeniture dominated were adopted in Japan, significantly curtailing the power of women
within the social system. The shunning of women by men as a practice in Chinese Buddhist
temples was not accepted without modification in Japan. For example, in the year 741 emperor

11 Deal, A Cultural History, 67.
12 Ibid.
Shōmu (r. 724-749 CE) ordered the building of state-supported monasteries and convents in each province. The male temples were called *Temples of the Golden Light in the Four Heavenly Kings of the Nation*, and each had twenty assigned resident priests for training in prayer. Comparable convents were also established, indicated by their official designation as *Temples of the Lotus of Atonement for Sin*. Convents were designed as protected institutions of the nation where nuns were to pray for the expunging of female sin.

In order to prevent contact between monks and nuns, these official monasteries and convents were built on opposite sides of the provincial government headquarters. Even though the nuns’ task within the state was ostensibly to pray for the expiation of their sins, their function does not adequately explain their true protective role vis-a-vis the state. The government’s policy to build convents specifically for women throughout the country ran counter to the apparent disparaging attitudes of the male Buddhist establishment towards women, and modulated monastic precepts that urged shunning. The Taiho Code of 701, established the *Sōniryō-Regulations For Monks and Nuns*- which detailed the behavior for monastics and their relationship to the state. This meant that Buddhist monks and nuns were to restrict their Buddhist activities to those sanctioned by the state and their rituals for the benefit and protection of the state. Control of the monastic community was very strongly connected with the ruling class. Through this hierarchy three main offices of monastic administration were instituted within the Prelate’s Office (*sōgō*): primary prelate (*sōjō*), secondary prelate (*sōzu*), and chief of the Dharma (*hōzu*). The monks and nuns that were regulated by the *soniryō* and overseen by the *sōgō* were considered “official monastics” because they had received permission to become

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13 Ibid.
14 Ibid, 60.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
ordained and were expected to follow the sōniryō under threat of punishment.17 These formal governing bodies illuminate the close relationship between state and religion in the early centuries of Buddhism in Japan, as well as the ways in which the subordinate role of women was reinforced through both prevailing cultural norms and institutional structures. We will turn next to an examination of Buddhism in the two pre-modern eras in which women artists flourished, the Heian (794-1185) and Edo (1600-1868) periods.

III. Woman Painters at the Heian Court

During the Heian period (794-1185CE), the Fujiwara regents sought to control imperial succession through female consorts. Placing a daughter at court was a fiercely contested point of political prestige, and tremendous resources were lavished on those daughters to enhance their charms. The importance of women’s contributions to Heian literature is well known.18 In an age when the educated male was expected to write both public documents and private memoirs in Chinese, women took the lead in developing prose writing in Japanese. Women’s impact on the visual arts of the Heian period was equally important, although more difficult to define and document. The elegant curvilinear kana calligraphy used for transcribing Japanese poetry or prose was called onna-de (women’s hand); to this day the Heian kana is considered unsurpassed in beauty. An analogous term in painting is onna-e (women’s painting), which refers to the ostensibly amateur style of secular painting developed by court women to illustrate tales, in contrast to otoke-e (men’s painting), the professional style of secular painting that demanded training in skilled brushwork that was more accessible to aristocratic men than it was to women.

17 Ibid.
In the Heian period, both the appreciation of painting and the ability to paint were considered requisite skills for the cultivated aristocratic woman or lady-in-waiting at court.\textsuperscript{19} In the tenth century, women became especially important as artistic connoisseurs and patrons with the rise of new pictorial genres to complement literature in the vernacular, namely the \textit{uta-e} (poem picture) related to \textit{waka} (poems in native Japanese meter) verse and the \textit{monogatari-e} (tale picture) meant to accompany prose tales. Both were small-scale genres intended for private, informal viewing by a principally female audience. In the “Hotaru” chapter of \textit{The Tale of Genji}, the early 11\textsuperscript{th}-century novel by the courtly lady-in-waiting Murasaki Shikibu, there is a description of the ladies of Prince Genji’s household enjoying themselves by reading illustrated tales and making personal copies of favorite illustrated manuscripts.\textsuperscript{20} Repeated discussions of painting in \textit{The Tale of Genji} reveal Murasaki Shikibu’s abiding interest in the arts. Still more concrete evidence for women’s painting is seen in \textit{Eiga Monogatari} (A Tale of Flowering Fortunes), a chronicle of the redoubtable Fujiwara family centering on the career of Fujiwara Michinaga (966-1028 CE). Michinaga’s granddaughter was so skilled at painting, even in the professional-style \textit{otoko-e}, that she put the professionals to shame.\textsuperscript{21} These passages refer to cultivated, high-born women for whom painting was but one of many courtly accomplishments.

The literary and pictorial arts were the two primary aspects of court culture, yet they differed considerably in their modes and circumstances of production. Since the mid-ninth century, painting, especially secular painting, had been the chief occupation of professionals (\textit{eshi}) in the court painting bureau (\textit{edokoro}).\textsuperscript{22} Because they did not have access to service in

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
this office, women did not have the opportunity to play as seminal a role in the development of secular painting styles as they did in literature. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to conclude that Heian women were no more than a passive, albeit highly engaged audience for painting. Like Murasaki Shikibu and Sei Shonagon of an earlier day, Lady Tosa no Tsubone (the Lady of the Tosa Chamber) was a member of a special elite known as the nyōbō, women who occupied private quarters in the imperial palace or high aristocratic households. Nyōbō were chosen for their accomplishments in such crucial social skills as calligraphy, poetry, and witty conversation.\(^\text{[23]}\) Lady Tosa had the extraordinary honor of executing shōji (panel paintings) for an imperially commissioned temple, the Hōkongōin of Empress Taikenmon’in (1101-1145), an important imperial vow temple which was built in the 1130s. The subject of her work was meisho-e (pictures of famous places), a standard theme in Heian-period yamato-e painting.\(^\text{[24]}\) Lady Tosa, already known within the court as a talented painter, was pressed to join the professionals, and to accommodate her, a workshop-the nyōbō - was set up within Toba palace. Demonstrating that women’s painting could be considered appropriate for a formal commission, Lady Tosa contributed paintings to the aforementioned Hōkongōin. Her nephew, Bishop Gyōhen (1181-1264) proudly recorded Lady Tosa’s accomplishments as a family honor.

Literary findings suggest that women artists were accepted as semiprofessional painters at court by the Insei period (1086-1192).\(^\text{[25]}\) Lady Tosa was given the prestigious public commission of panel paintings for the residential quarters of an imperial vow temple, the

\(^{23}\) Ibid.  
\(^{24}\) Yamato-e (“Japanese painting”) is a style of painting that was developed in the Heian period (794-1185). In contrast to earlier Japanese modes of Japanese painting inspired by Chinese Tang-dynasty (618-906 CE) brushwork and composition, these indigenous modes of Japanese focused upon depictions of nature and Japanese literary sources. Yamato-e is generally divided into the two stylistic categories of onna-e (“women’s painting”) and otoko-e (“men’s painting”).  
\(^{25}\) Weidner, Flowering in the Shadows, 161. The Heian period is commonly sub-divided into the Early Heian (794-951), Middle or Fujiwara (951-1086), and the Late Heian or Insei (1086-1185) periods. See Penelope Mason, History of Japanese Art, 2nd ed. (New York: Pearson, 2005), 100.
Hōkongōin of Empress Taikenmon’in (1101-1145). Recent scholarship and the rich artistic legacy of aristocratic women shows the high degree of autonomy and aesthetic achievement that they produced during the Heian period.

IV. The World of Women in Pre-modern Japan, 1600-1868

Between 1600 and 1900, a dramatic flowering of women artists occurred in Japan. These women lived in a society that theoretically limited their every move. During the Edo period (1600-1868), so named because the capital city was located in Edo (present-day Tokyo), Japan was ruled by a series of Shoguns from the Tokugawa family who provided more than 250 years of peace and security after the country had been devastated by civil wars for almost a century. As the founder of the regime, Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616) enforced the division of the populace into four major social classes: samurai, farmers, artisans, and merchants. Members of the imperial family, the aristocracy as well as the clergy were excluded from these four classes. Education and cultural values became very important; since the country was no longer at war people had more time and energy for creative expression. Without external stimulation, the Japanese began to look internally, leading to new developments in art and literature. The renaissance in the arts included a significant increase in the number of women artists, a remarkable feat considering the tight restrictions placed upon their lives. As this study argues, under certain conditions, women did break away from the socially approved roles of wife and mother.

The position of women in Japan was a lowly one under the patriarchal system which became entrenched after 1600 when Japan was unified under this feudalistic government. Prior

to the 9th century, the descriptions of female deities in myths, and the numerous women rulers indicate that the status of women was similar to that of men. The feminine image suffered drastic changes as a result of the influence of Buddhism, Confucianism, and the growth of feudalism. Many Buddhists texts taught that woman's nature was inherently evil, associating them with attachments to the sensual world as opposed to the spiritual realm. Some texts went as far as to declare that women had no hope for salvation other than through their rebirth as men. Consequently, once Buddhism began to permeate the fabric of Japanese society, the status of women began to deteriorate. The position of women declined even further in Japan after the Tokugawa rulers’ adoption of the Chinese philosophy of Neo-Confucianism. From the 17th century on, the Tokugawa government fervently promoted Neo-Confucian thought, which generally regarded women as inferior to men, reinforcing the misogynistic doctrines of Buddhism. The lowliness of women was a fundamental principle of Confucianism, which had originated in the strict Chinese patriarchal society. Since women were considered inferior, society urged them to comport themselves with humility and to accept the guidance of their wiser male relatives. Economically, a woman was dependent first on her father, then on her husband, and eventually on her son.

Within the feudal structure a woman's purpose in life was to marry and produce heirs to safeguard the family succession. Depending on social class, most women were married between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five. During the Momoyama (1573-1600) and Edo periods, political marriages were employed especially by feudal lords, who when arranging peace treaties with hostile parties often contracted marriages between members of their respective families as

27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
guarantees of good faith. Under the guise of marriage, women were used as hostages, and in numerous cases, they were divorced from one husband and married off again according to their family’s wishes in order to expedite another relationship. A husband's power over his wife was almost absolute. Limitations were placed upon her physical activity, and she was discriminated against with regard to property and divorce. A woman's only recourse within an intolerable marriage was escape. Adulterous women were dealt with severely and put to death along with the other man involved. Women were encouraged to remain within the home, even to the extent of foregoing religious ceremonies at temples and shrines. In line with this shift in public view, women did not attain equal rights in the Edo period due to the feudalistic ideas that had so thoroughly permeated Japanese society that it was not until the overthrow of the Tokugawa government in the succeeding Meiji period that Japanese women saw a change in status.

The cultural accomplishments of cultivated Heian aristocratic women, who enjoyed an unusual degree of autonomy, were discussed previously, but it was during the Edo period (1600-1868) that the greatest increase in number of women artists occurred. The growing eminence of female artists in the Edo period occurred despite the fact that women’s position in society was lower than before, following the misogynistic gender ideologies inherent in the Neo-Confucian philosophy promoted by the Tokugawa shogunate. Japan was enjoying an age of peace and prosperity, and as affluence spread to the lower classes, new patrons as well as new schools of art developed, encouraging the creative achievements and participation of women in both art and literature.

29 Deal, A Cultural History, 137.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
Despite these repressive realities, women artists flourished in the Edo period. Among the many noblewomen who distinguished themselves in the arts were Ryōnen Gensō (1646-1711) and Genyō (also known as Rinkuji Miya, d. 1726). The daughter of one of the attendants of the Empress Consort Tōfukumon’in (1607-1678), Ryōnen Gensō served at the imperial court and became celebrated for her achievements in poetry, calligraphy, and painting. She made the momentous decision to leave her family and become a nun around the age of twenty-six. When a Zen abbot refused her request to enter his temple because she was too beautiful, and would thus be a distraction to the monks, she burned her face with a hot iron to make herself acceptable.\footnote{Weidner, \textit{Flowering in the Shadows}, 221.}

In the poem written by Ryōnen Gensō, the nun contrasts her former life at court with the new path her life has taken as a disciple of the Ōbaku Zen priest, Hakuō (d. 1682):

\begin{quote}
Formerly to amuse myself at court I would burn orchid incense;
Now to enter the Zen life I burn my own face.
The four seasons pass by like this,
But who am I amidst the change?
\end{quote}

The frivolity of court amusements, like incense, is set against the seriousness of the religious life ahead of her, the difference intensified by the violent act of self-disfigurement with which she proves her intent to further her religious studies.

Genyō, the seventh daughter of Emperor Gomizuno-o (r. 1611-1629), also became a nun; she achieved a high degree of skill in painting Buddhist figures. Becoming a nun was a socially acceptable means for women to abandon their roles as mothers, daughters, and wives and to live more independently. With their newly gained freedom, these women had the time and energy to develop and refine their artistic and literary skills. Taking the tonsure did not necessarily imply a
life devoted to only religious duties; many women immersed themselves more in artistic than ecclesiastical activities.\textsuperscript{33}
Chapter I: Japan’s Imperial Buddhist Convents

I. The Religious Life of Imperial Nuns

The imperial convents, known as *amamonzeki*, carry traditions going back several centuries, some of the oldest more than 1,200 years. These convents have the special distinction of having been headed by high-born abbesses who were the daughters of emperors, aristocrats, and shoguns. Although they flourished as intellectual and artistic centers for aristocratic women during the Edo period, the social status and circumstances of the convents changed dramatically in 1870, when the Meiji (1868-1912) government prohibited royal women from entering Buddhist convents. The treasures of generations of abbesses and the piety and daily rituals they established are faithfully handed down today at thirteen extant imperial convents in Kyoto and Nara that embody a precious legacy in the history of Japanese culture. Most of these convents are closed to the public, making their existence virtually unknown, even to ordinary people in Japan. This thesis, while highlighting the founding and restoration by the abbesses of the thirteen convents, is intended to introduce the faith, hardship and art practices that were cultivated in the imperial convents and give a glimpse of the lifestyle they passed down, which was based on time-honored traditions of court culture.

From the thirteenth century until the overthrow of the Tokugawa Shogunate in 1868, daughters of emperors and shoguns became powerful leaders of an elite network of high-culture convents that eventually came to be called Imperial Convents. While being centers of learning, spiritual discipline, and worship, these convents were likewise small aristocratic courts where the

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34 Deal, A Cultural History, 218.
35 The Edo period (1600-1868) brought 250 years of stability to Japan. The political system evolved into what historians call the *bakuhan* system, consisting of the *shōgun*, a warlord with national authority, and the *daimyō*, who were warlords with regional authority. This feudal structure featured an increasingly large hierarchy, comprised at its peak of over two hundred daimyo (feudal lords) ruling over individual fiefs (*han*).
customs and language of imperial circles were maintained. It was here where Japanese women preserved the highest cultural, literary, and art traditions of the imperial court, even as the Imperial Palace repeatedly suffered the fires of war and the court life itself fell on hard times. After the wars of the sixteenth century, imperial convents experienced a renaissance in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

This system of imperial convents within which Japan’s high-born and most highly educated women created and maintained spiritual and cultural communities was one of the true cultural treasures of Japan, a legacy that was almost destroyed by the anti-Buddhist policies of the nineteenth-century Meiji government. In 1870 the new Meiji government established a policy of separation between the indigenous Shinto and supposedly foreign Buddhist faiths and banished Buddhism from the court. Royal women were forbidden to become Buddhist nuns, and those who were already nuns received orders to revert to their secular life. This loss of intellectual and financial support from the court was devastating. Despite this governmental stance, the empress Dowager Shōken (1850-1914) and others in her circle sent messages and extended unfailing personal support to the former imperial nuns trapped in these circumstances.

II. Japan’s Imperial Buddhist Convents

The thirteen surviving imperial convents located in Kyoto and Nara are just a fragment, for initially there were more than thirty, with the majority founded in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In the earlier centuries, elite tonsured women and the temples in which they resided

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36 Deal, A Cultural History, 209.
37 Ruch, Engendering Faith, 354.
38 Ibid.
were commonly referred to as *bikuni gosho* (nuns’ palaces); however, *amamonzeki* or *monzeki amadera* have been the terms in general use since the Edo period.39

Since Emperor Uda (867-931; r. 887-897) took the tonsure and residence as a Buddhist monk in Ninnaji in Kyoto, the term *monzeki* has been used to designate temples where the resident abbots or abbesses were members of the imperial house and court aristocracy.40 Imperial Buddhist convents differ from other nunneries (*amadera*) in that historically, the majority of abbesses came from imperial, aristocratic, and shogunal families.41 Within the long history of women in Buddhism in Japan, the emergence and flowering of court-related convents represents a unique cultural phenomenon that produced significantly more historical and cultural manuscripts and treasures that document the long history of the important role women played in the history of Japanese Buddhism. Imperial convents were places where elite women devoted themselves not only to Buddhist practice and rituals, but also to literary pursuits, as well as the production and patronage of art. Since the compounds often consisted of palace residences (*gosho*) that have been partially converted into temples, they were elaborately decorated and outfitted so that the resident tonsured women were able to enjoy the refinements concomitant with aristocratic life.42 Although this might appear to be incongruous, imperial convents are in fact characterized by a harmonious blending of secular and religious space and activities. Examinations of historical documents, convent records, and objects preserved in the convents reveal that the abbesses divided their time nearly equally between devotional activities and artistic pursuits. Religious and secular were not separate worlds, but intricately intertwined.

39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
The earliest surviving convents trace their history back to the seventh century, approximately one hundred years after Buddhism was introduced to Japan. Women were in fact the leaders in entering the clergy of this new religion. According to the *Nihon shoki* (Chronicles of Japan, comp. 720), the daughter of the Buddhist sculptor Shiba Tattō took vows in the mid-sixth century, adopting the religious name Zenshin. She, along with two female disciples Zenzo and Ezen, went to the Korean peninsula for religious practice in order to be properly ordained. After returning in 590, Zenshin dedicated herself to the training of nuns. More and more women joined their ranks, and by the mid-seventh century, the *Nihon shoki* records that there were 569 Buddhist nuns in Japan. Nunneries were constructed, often paired with temples of male clergy, *sōji*.

Buddhist clergy came to be highly respected in Japanese society, for in order to read and fully comprehend Buddhist texts they had to master the difficult Chinese language. Many nuns were quite learned and were appointed to court positions. The articles of the *Sōniryō* (Regulations for Monks and Nuns) imply that nuns and monks had equal status. As part of the government’s enthusiastic propagation of Buddhism, in 741 Emperor Shōmu (701-756; r. 724-749) decreed that monasteries (*kokubunji*) and convents (*kokubunniji*) were to be constructed in all the provinces. The purpose of these provincial temples was to perform rituals and prayers for the protection of the state and emperor. Empress Kōmyō (701-760), his consort, is believed to have been a driving force behind this project as well. Raised in a devout Buddhist aristocratic household and perhaps inspired by the great patroness of Buddhism in Tang China, Empress Wu Zetian (624-705; r. 690-705), Empress Kōmyō became deeply involved in promoting Buddhism,
sponsoring major sutra copying projects and charity houses to care for sick and the indigent. 46

The second oldest of the remaining convents, Hokkeji, founded in Nara around 745 within the property of Empress Kōmyō’s own residence containing her private chapel, became the head nunnery for all of the kokubunniji.

III. Shifting Attitudes toward Female Clergy

Nunneries flourished in the seventh and early eighth century, with women continuing to be prominently engaged in Buddhist practice and promulgation. By the mid-eighth century, Buddhist thought began to be infiltrated by Confucian values, which held that men were superior to women, causing a gradual shift towards patriarchal family practices.47 Nuns were eventually barred from sitting with equally ranked priests at formal gatherings and were no longer allowed to participate in national religious ceremonies.48 The gender divide deepened, and by the beginning of the ninth century, women were no longer able to be officially ordained. As a result of the sharp curtailment of women entering the Buddhist order, many convents were abandoned or were transformed into male monasteries.49 Hokkeji declined after the deaths of Empress Kōmyō and her emperor-daughter Kōken (r. as Empress Kōken 749-758; 764-770 as Empress Shōtoku), who had been its principal patroness. Related to the widely disseminated Confucian ideology in which women were inferior to men, exemplified by the expression sanjū (the three obediences, namely to father, to husband, and then to son), was the idea that the female body was impure.50 In Buddhist literature the concept of itsutsu no sawari (“five obstacles” or “five

46 Ibid.
47 Deal, A Cultural History, 78.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
obstructions” referring to the five ranks in the Buddhist universe said to be unattainable by women) became widespread, suggesting that women were unfit to follow the Buddhist path and should strive to be reborn as men (tenjō jōbutsu).\textsuperscript{51} However, not all women acquiesced to this androcentric ideology. Their activities and writings suggest they believed that physical transformation was not necessarily a prerequisite for becoming a bodhisattva and that the female state could be overcome through firm commitment to practice. Their conviction was based in large part upon one of the basic tenets of Mahayana Buddhism, the belief that every person possesses the buddha nature, which is beyond duality.\textsuperscript{52}

When the capital was moved in 794 to Heiankyō (present-day Kyoto), few new nunneries were established. Rather than disappearing from the Buddhist scene altogether, women continued to be active privately as lay practitioners and patrons, reinterpreting what it meant to be a nun and creating their own style of tonsure.\textsuperscript{53} Aristocratic Heian women established court-centered Buddhist traditions of their own that allowed them to practice Buddhism in a way that was recognized as formal and legitimate within court circles. It was not unordinary for married noblewomen to renounce secular life by taking the tonsure, referred to as nyūdō (entering the Buddhist path) or shukke (leaving domestic life), often prompted by the illness or death of family members.\textsuperscript{54} Some women took Buddhist vows purely out of religious commitment. It was a means of securing a livelihood, as in the case of ladies-in-waiting who followed the path taken by their tonsured mistresses. Most women did not become formally ordained or enter convents, largely because those paths were no longer open. Instead of performing rituals on behalf of the state as their predecessors in state-supported convents had, the devotional activities of Heian-

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{52} Gross, \textit{Buddhism after Patriarchy}, 48.
\textsuperscript{53} Ruch, \textit{Engendering Faith}, 90.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
period female practitioners tended to focus more on prayers and services for family and personal salvation. This trend is thought to be related to social changes taking place as families and clans gained independent economic and political power. Patronage was also an important way of showing religious devotion, and aristocratic Heian women followed in the footsteps of Empress Kōmyō by sponsoring the construction of chapels and temples.

IV. The Flowering of Convents: Restoration of Ordination Rites for Women

By the thirteenth century, there was a revived interest among women in becoming officially affiliated with Buddhist institutions, a shift that may have been related to a decline in women’s financial and political power. Aristocratic women became actively involved in reestablishing Hokkeji and other convents.55 Hokkeji had been controlled by Kōfukuji priests during the Heian period, and by the late twelfth century the buildings had fallen into ruin, inhabited only by aristocratic lay nuns. By the mid-thirteenth century, there was only one building left standing: the lecture hall or kōdō. Led by Shokeibo Jizen (b. 1187), a high-ranking lady-in-waiting, a group of nuns living there sought to restore the convent by aligning themselves with the Saidaiji priest Eison (1201-1290).56 Eison was one of the leaders of an ambitious campaign to rebuild temples and restore formal ordination following the devastating civil war at the end of the Heian period. Ordination was perceived as the only way to “legitimize” their Buddhist practice, thus the lay nuns at Hokkeji employed Eison as instructor and ordainer. An ordination platform was established at Hokkeji where women could take their vows in ordinance with the vinaya precepts.57 The convent was gradually restored and Jizen was

55 Ibid, 102.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid. The vinaya refers to the division of the Buddhist canon containing the rules on governing the Buddhist monastic community.
appointed as first-generation abbess (chōrō) of the newly revived Hokkeji. By 1280, it was functioning as a major Ritsu-sect training center for women from diverse classes and backgrounds.\(^5\) Despite the fact that it was officially a branch temple (matsuji) of Saidaiji, Hokkeji retained relative autonomy under Jizen’s astute leadership.\(^5\)

In addition to witnessing revivals among established sects such as Ritsu and Kegon, the Kamakura period (1185-1333) was also an age when new Buddhist movements flourished. Pure Land sects preached that women who put their faith in Amida Buddha would be reborn in male bodies.\(^6\) However, the form of Buddhism that was to have the greatest impact on the history of imperial convents was the Rinzai Zen school of Buddhism, whose teachings promote that anyone can become enlightened through a regimen of sitting meditation and training directly with a Zen master.\(^6\) The direct approach of Zen with emphasis on self-discipline, as well as the sophisticated Chinese culture imported along with it, appealed to members of the court and warrior elite - including women - who became avid students and patrons.\(^6\) By the second half of the fourteenth century, Zen institutions were playing increasingly significant roles in social, political, and economic arenas in Japan.\(^6\)

Old nunneries were revived, and new ones constructed. By the end of Kamakura period, nearly five hundred convents were constructed, the majority affiliated with the newly imported Zen sect, with the Ritsu sect second and Jōdo third. This increase was not only a matter of

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\(^5\) The Ritsu (regulation, Sanskrit: vinaya) school of Buddhism, established in the 8\textsuperscript{th} century, is one of the Six Schools of Nara Buddhism in Japan. It is known for its use of the Vinaya, the division of the Buddhist canon containing the rules on governing the Buddhist monastic community.

\(^5\) Fister, *Ama Monzeki*, 41.

\(^6\) Ruch, *Engendering Faith*, 123.


\(^6\) Zen-shū (Zen School): A Buddhist school that teaches that enlightenment is to be gained not through strict doctrinal studies, but within one’s mind through the practice of meditation guided by a spiritual teacher. Known in China as the Chan school, its founder is regarded as Bodhidharma (Japanese: Daruma), an Indian monk who introduced the teachings to China in the sixth century.

\(^6\) Deal, *A Cultural History*, 90.
growing faith, but was due to the wave of widows and orphaned girls taking the tonsure in the aftermath of political disturbance and warfare.64 There are numerous references to nuns participating in sanzen (consultations with Zen masters) and listening to priests deliver dharma lectures at convents.

With the exception of the founders, the age that women were tonsured and entered these convents was often quite young. Many girls were placed in convents rather than entering of their own desire, but this was little different from them being placed in marriage. It was an honor to lead a great convent and brought honor to the family just as would an appropriate marriage. It did not force a life of austerity on the women who entered them, but rather provided an environment in which they were trained and educated in refinements similar to those cultivated in imperial palace life. Like the Zen priests at the gozan monasteries, the resident nuns of the gozan convents were also involved in intellectual and artistic pursuits as well as religious ones.65 The “salon culture” that developed early and flowered over centuries has been preserved and passed down to the present day.

V. Edo Period: Revival and Renaissance

Abbesses of convents originally founded in the medieval era also poured energy into restoring lost structures, putting documents in order, and compiling convent histories. Tokugon Rihō’s sister, Taisei Seian (1668-1712), restoration abbess of Donkein, compiled a history of her convent’s parent temple, Tsugenji, as well as a biography of the founder, and had new portraits of the founder painted and carved.66 Abbesses of the convents also effectively used their unique

64 Ibid.
65 The Rinzai sect identified major convents as Five Mountain (Gozan) convent association, which were the equivalent of the Five Mountain elite temples for Rinzai monks.
66 Deal, A Cultural History, 90.
talents for a diversity of purposes. Abbess Daitsu Bunchi (1619-1697) expanded her convent Enshōji into a strict training center for nuns. Her more reclusive half-sister Shōzan Genyō (1634-1727), founder of Rinkyūji, endeavored to transmit Buddhist teachings through making and disseminating thousands of images of Kannon, the Bodhisattva of Compassion (Sanskrit: Avalokiteshvara), in memory of her father. These nuns are just a few of the remarkable women who figure prominently in imperial convent lineages and whose endeavors deserve to be highlighted in the history of Buddhism and Buddhist visual cultures.

Abbess Tokugon Rihō (1672-1745), restorer of Hōkyōji, sought to commemorate founding Abbess Mugai Nyodai (1223-1298) through restoring temples connected with her, refurbishing her gravesite, and writing a biography. For years scholars of East Asian art history have conducted careful research on a Japanese Zen portrait genre known as chinsō. Within the medium of sculpture, chinsō are a category of remarkably realistic, life-sized, wood, lacquer, and clay portrait statues from the Kamakura period (1185-1333) that depict the seated figures of historical Zen masters made as a stand-in to convey the essence of the master to his disciples after his death. A particularly fine example of chinsō depicts the 13th-century female Zen master Mugai Nyodai (fig. 1). The realism of her superb statue portrait reveals a serious woman in her seventies, with a warm face and meditative posture whose glimmering eyes of crystal emanate a sense of great power. The chinsō statue has now been studied carefully by art historians, and it has been designated by the Japanese government as an important cultural property. An extraordinary woman from the influential Adachi family, Mugai Nyodai was a

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67 Ibid.
68 Ruch, Engendering Faith, xlv.
69 Kaigen kuyō (“opening of the eyes”): A ceremony to “open the eyes” of, or consecrate, newly created statues or painted Buddhist images. It is performed in the belief that the image can thereby be endowed with spiritual properties. Through this ceremony, the image is believed to become equal to the living Buddha.
woman highly educated in both the Chinese and Japanese classics. Abbess Nyodai took the tonsure in her fifties and studied the newly imported school of Rinzai Zen Buddhism under the Chinese monk Wu-hsueh Tsu-yuan (1226-66) who recognized Nyodai as his heir. As his heir, Wu-hsueh Tsu-yuan bequeathed to her his relics and placed the future of his teachings in her hands. She became the first woman in Japan to become fully qualified as a Rinzai Zen master, and yet her name cannot be found in standard Zen histories. She went on to become the founder and abbess of Keiaiji, a temple and convent in the city of Kyoto that grew to have more than fifteen sub-temples.

Abbess Nyodai was the first Zen abbess and master. As was customary for all monastic leaders, a chinsō portrait statue was made of Nyodai. Carved towards the end of her life, it is now enshrined in Hojin convent in Kyoto. A cursory glimpse may give the impression that the statue is male, with a shaved head and monk’s robes; but further inspection reveals a strong matriarch with her hands resting in proper Zen contemplative form. The rediscovery of this life-size chinsō portrait of Abbess Nyodai was one of the initial revelatory events that drew scholarly attention to the much-ignored female history of Buddhism in Japan, and, more broadly, to the role of women in Japanese religious history.

The hierarchy among the imperial convents developed based on the strength of their affiliations with the imperial palace. Abbesses of the convents were often related by blood, but there were times when they vied with one another for prestige and support. Beginning in the second half of the eighteenth century, emperors began bestowing “gosho titles” on convents

70 Ruch, Engendering Faith, xliiv.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid, xlvii.
whose lineage comprised primary princesses. Listed below are the imperial convents with their official “gosho titles,” arranged chronologically in the order in which they were assigned.

1764 Hōkyōji- Dodo Gosho (Palace at the Place of Hundreds)
1769 Daishōji- Otera no Gosho (Temple Palace)
1789 Kōshōin- Tokiwa no Gosho (Ever-Green Palace)
1797 Rinkyūji- Otowa no Gosho (Palace in Otowa)
1807 Donkein- Take no Gosho (Bamboo Grove Palace)

The zenith of prosperity for Kyoto and Nara imperial convents was the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Changes occurred as a result of the dynamics of politics, the individual personalities of the abbesses, and the amount of economic support that they received. By the end of the Edo period, there were fewer imperial princesses available to enter into convents, and many abbbacies went unfilled. It was not uncommon for an abbess of one convent to hold a post simultaneously at another. Among remaining documents at convents are letters soliciting recommendations to fill abbess positions, and more abbesses selected from aristocratic families can be found in convent lineages.

75 Fister, *Ama Monzeki*, 54.
Chapter II: Religious Life

I. The Lives of Imperial Nuns

During the Edo period (1603-1868), the daughters of emperors who became abbesses of the imperial convents generally spent their early years in the palace. They entered the convent at an early age, became novices, and took the tonsure soon after. Their lives were filled with the daily performance of rituals, prayers, and various kinds of religious practice through which they sustained the continuity of their convent’s history. The personal treasures preserved by the nuns over the ages and the accounts they left of important events in their lives provide a window for understanding the life cycle they shared as well as allowing us to catch a glimpse of the individual personalities of some of the women themselves.

Childbirth was forbidden in the Imperial palace; the mother would not have been given birth within the precincts of the imperial palace, since childbirth had been from ancient times considered defiling. About thirty days after birth, when the period of defilement had passed, the baby princess would be taken to see her father in the palace. The decision to place the daughter of an emperor in a convent was usually made while they were very young. The age at which princesses entered the imperial convents during the Edo period varied from seven to sixteen, with most of them entering at between seven and twelve years, and they would take the tonsure sometime between the ages of nine and sixteen. As the day neared for a princess to enter the convent, she would pay a farewell visit to the emperor, empress, and crown prince. These farewells were the occasion for great celebration and elaborate palace events were held called Warawa oshimi, or “Child’s Farewell.” The princess was accompanied in her entry into the

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76 Childbirth took place in *ubuya*, or parturition huts, which were constructed away from the palace in order to contain birth-related “pollution.”
convent by her nurse and attendants. She was carried by palanquin with a train of attendants, including members of the court.

A princess entering the convent would go through the ritual of becoming a novice (kasshiki), a ceremony in which she exchanged her previous attire for the garb of a kasshiki. During this training period as a novice preceding the time of tonsure, she learned the sutras and Buddhist rituals. It was decided when Princess Tomo no Miya (1721-1759), daughter of Emperor Nakamikado (1702-1737; r. 1709-1735), was only two months old that she would enter Donkein Imperial Convent, which she did in 1728 when she was eight years old. When she departed for the convent, she was dressed in hakama, with a red-plum-blossom-patterned over-kimono and a child’s hair style. On this day the nuns of Donkein held the ritual transforming Tomo no Miya into a proper novice of the convent. After the ceremony, her head would be shaved, and clothing changed to novice’s robes. The procedure of administering the tonsure differs from one sect to another, but in the Edo period the majority of the Imperial princesses entered Rinzai Zen convents. Taking the tonsure might give the impression that from that day forth the young princess-nun would be withdrawn from the secular world and live a strictly religious life, but various accounts attest to the princess’s continued lives in a similar style to their previous lives at court. The princesses entered the convents with their nurses, attendants, and stewards; they continued to live their lives in a style they had enjoyed in the palace. They would continue to receive gifts from the palace and often made visits with courtiers and other women of the convents. Taking the tonsure celebrated a ritual of the princess’s independence from palace life.

78 Fister, Ama Monzeki, 61.
79 Rinzai-shū: One of the major Zen schools brought to Japan from China in 1191 by the Japanese Buddhist monk Eisai (1141-1215). In addition to the seated meditation (zazen), Rinzai employs a form of training called kōan, problems comprising sutra passages that are beyond logical solution.
80 Fister, Ama Monzeki, 63.
II. Honoring the Convent Founders and Restorers

The identities of the imperial convents are inextricably linked to the founders and subsequent nuns who engaged in extraordinary activities such as expanding or renovating a convent. To the present day, these women have been continuously revered and memorialized by means of commemorative portraits (*chinsō*), which are treated as religious icons. Upon her appointment, the abbess of an imperial convent acquired a new “family ancestry” in the lineage of the convent’s historical abbesses, beginning with the founder, and all subsequent abbesses who preceded her. The names and death dates of all a given convent’s deceased abbesses are recorded in lineage documents as well as a worship roster that faces the altar where the daily sutras are read. Sutras are received on behalf of the deceased abbess on the anniversary of her death. In addition, elaborate memorial services are held at set, yearly intervals. The visual and liturgical focal points of these services are the abbess’s formal commemorative portraits - sculptures and/or paintings - that are displayed on such occasions and that embody the deceased abbess’ physical and spiritual presences. For this reason, these portraits are among the most sacred and treasured objects in the convents, along with items that the abbesses wore, or were in some other way associated with.81

Only a small number of early portraits in the form of hanging scrolls (*kakemono*) survive today at the imperial convents, due to periodic fires over the centuries, shifting locations, and the wear and tear that results from repeated use. The oldest portraits in the exhibition were painted in the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries - they are the “spiritual faces” of the convents - but the majority were produced between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Nearly all are hanging scrolls painted with ink and pigments on silk. The circumstances surrounding the creation of

these sacred portraits are diverse. The standard practice for male monastic institutions was to employ a professional artist to paint a portrait just before or after a person’s death. The situation was somewhat different in the imperial convents. In at least two cases, the founder or the restorer painted her own portrait. In other cases, portraits were painted by close courtier relatives, attendants, or later abbesses connected with the convents.\textsuperscript{82} Memorial portraits were also commissioned from professional painters who worked for the imperial court. Usually only one portrait was made for the exclusive use of the convent, but in some cases additional portraits were made and donated to other temples founded or patronized by an abbess to be used in memorial rites held in her honor.\textsuperscript{83}

In cases where portraits of a convent’s founder painted during her era did not survive, new memorial portraits were commissioned, often for the occasion of death anniversaries (\textit{onki}) long after her death.\textsuperscript{84} Several of the imperial convents have sculptural portraits of their founders enshrined on the altar in the main worship hall or in a separate founder’s hall (\textit{kaisandō}). Painted portraits of a founding abbess, however, are hung only once a year, on the anniversary of her death, which is one of a convent’s foremost yearly events. The importance of this day is manifest in convent records and in the abbesses’ personal writings.

In classic Rinzai Zen portraiture style, imperial abbesses are most often depicted seated in a chair, in three-quarter view. It is commonly thought, though not confirmed, that the direction of the subject’s face is related to whether the portrait was made before or after death.\textsuperscript{85} It is impossible to judge just how closely the portraits resemble their subjects. Since the shapes of the heads, facial features, and sometimes gaze are quite idealized, it can be assumed that the artists

\textsuperscript{82} Fister, p.38
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid, 40.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid, 216.
attempted to capture some characteristic or likeness of their subjects. This is clearly related to their function, i.e., the portraits served not only as reminders of, but as actual substitutes for, the deceased in memorial rituals. Bunchi was a keen ascetic who reportedly cleared away thorn bushes by hand to found the convent of Enshōji, near Nara. Her portrait (fig. 2) presents a credible picture of a tough, uncompromising spiritual matriarch. The portrait depicts her in robes befitting an abbess, seated in a high-backed chair, facing slightly right with a staff (shujō), at her side. She holds a whisk (hossu) and wears the purple robes with chrysanthemum design granted her in 1707. The staff, whisk, and robes are symbols of her status as an abbess. An elaborately decorated surplice is draped over her left shoulder, held in place with a large ring. In most portraits, the abbess is attired in colorful formal robes with a kesa, the traditional outer garment of Buddhist vestments, draped over her left shoulder. (Fig. 3) Some more austere and modest abbesses are dressed in simple monochrome hemp robes, perhaps expressive of their desire to shun ostentation in accordance with strict Zen practice. Presumably the painters were shown the abbesses’ actual robes and kesa for reference so that the textile patterns and design would be authentic. The abbesses are often shown holding implements that are part of the regalia of a high-ranking monastic: ceremonial whisk (Fig. 4, hossu), staff (shujō or shakujō), or short bamboo staff (shippei). Most portraits bear inscriptions. These inscriptions, which are often cryptic and difficult to understand, can divulge a great deal about how the abbesses viewed themselves, how they were regarded in contemporary religious circles, and how they were looked upon centuries later. What is clear from these elegant, yet powerful images and words is that the vows of these women created a lasting legacy that is still celebrated in each of the remaining imperial convents today.

86 Ruch, Engendering Faith, 122.
87 Ibid.
III. Zen Paintings and Calligraphy by Imperial Nuns

Japan’s Imperial convents now represent a variety of Buddhist sects, but historically the majority belong to the Rinzai Zen school, which has an avid following among the imperial family and court aristocracy.88 Prior to entering convents, princesses had opportunities at the Imperial Palace to hear dharma talks by eminent priests, and some sought out further instruction.89 Their monastic training after entering the convent included studying the Buddhist scriptures and classic Zen texts such as the Record of Linji (Rinzai Roku) and The Blue Cliff Record (Hekiganroku).90 They also practiced meditation and contemplated koan through one-on-one consultations with the resident abbess or a Zen master from an affiliated monastery. Imperial convents embraced not only Zen religious teachings, but also the culture and arts associated with it. Familiarity with verses composed by famous Chinese Zen masters was regarded as essential, and princess-nuns were expected to study the Jianghu fengyueji (Japanese: Gōko fugetsu shū), a compilation of Zen verses published in China in the fourteenth century.91 Some abbesses learned to compose verses in Chinese, and also wrote out single-line Zen maxims. Those with artistic aptitude painted Zen figural subjects, primarily Daruma (Sanskrit, Bodhidharma), the sixth-century Indian monk who allegedly transmitted Zen (Chinese: Chan) to China, and thus is regarded as the first patriarch of Chan/Zen Buddhism. In Zen art, the master does not paint Daruma as simply a historical figure, but rather as a timeless symbol of penetrating insight, self-reliance, ceaseless diligence, and the rejection of the physical world. A Daruma painting is a

88 Monika Wacker, Research on Buddhist Nuns in Japan, Past and Present. Asian Folklore Studies, Vol. 64, No.2 (Nagoya, Japan: Nanzan University, 2005), 292.
89 Dharma: a term fundamental to Buddhism, referring originally to the teachings of the Historical Buddha Shakyamuni. Some of the more common translations of the term are the Law, or Ultimate Truth.
90 Ibid., 158.
91 Ruch, Engendering Faith, 131.
spiritual self-portrait, based on the experience of each Zen practitioner, and not a strict iconographic model; each Daruma portrait is delightfully idiosyncratic.

To most adherents, Daruma is synonymous with Zen teachings, his spartan form a reminder of what to aspire to in Zen practice. It was not uncommon for imperial family members who admired the austerity of Zen and the simplicity of its aesthetics to try their hand at depicting the Indian monk. Most Daruma portraits are completed in a few minutes. Zenga (literally “Zen pictures”) are usually ostentatious ink paintings rendered in a minimal number of brush strokes, based loosely on Daruma paintings by Zen priests or professional painters. Rather than expressions of spiritual insight, their paintings demonstrate their veneration for the first patriarch, and should be viewed as works in which Zen religion, culture, and art are all bound together.

The Daruma painting attributed to Abbess Tokugon Rihō (fig. 5) is owned by Hōkyōji Imperial Convent, where she served as abbess. Paintings of Zen figural subjects tend to be small in size; the informal nature of the brushwork imparts a personal quality. Tokugon Rihō broke convention with her curious painting showing Daruma seated in meditation from behind. She cleverly arranged the brushstrokes with an eye for design, filling in the interior with brilliant red pigment to represent Daruma’s legendary red robe. The painting appears to be a kind of “word picture” (moji-e), where pictures are formed by the strokes of characters - a genre that was popular in the late Edo period. The curvilinear strokes forming the head and right and left sides of Daruma’s body resemble the character for “heart/mind” (心). Daruma himself is supposed to have spoken the words, “Zen points directly to the human heart; see into your nature and become Buddha.” The chrysanthemum crest is prominently featured and the choice of silk cloth, at times displaying bold color combinations, is indicative of courtly taste. This style of Daruma is

92 Ibid, 160.
93 Ibid, 158.
referred to in Zen as a “one-stroke” (ippitsu) Daruma. It is typical of Zen art that the founder of the whole sect should be disposed of in this way, with one swift motion of the brush. Modest works such as these were probably intended for display in living quarters or small worship spaces. Larger, more formal paintings of Daruma were made for use in the annual ceremony commemorating Daruma, exemplified in the work by the founder of Rinkyūji Imperial Convent, Abbess Shōzan Genyō (fig. 6). The death anniversary of the patriarch Daruma marks an honored event, known as Daruma-ki. The painting of the patriarch is hung above the altar area and special foods set out for the occasion.94 The incantation of sutra begins with three prostrations to the image and includes special prayers.95 For imperial nuns, painting Daruma images constituted a form of devotional activity. In this large painting, Genyō used a few strong, flowing brush strokes to show the upper half of Daruma, his dark, bearded face and hairy body wrapped in a robe that also covers his head. His round eyes stare straight to the front in deep contemplation and his hands are clasped under his robe, which is indicated by a light red wash. In the majority of Daruma paintings, the Patriarch has his eyes fixed on the viewer. This painting is a perfect example of seeing Zen, in that the viewer sees Daruma and Daruma sees the viewer. In the majority of Daruma Zenga, the patriarch has his eyes fixed on the viewer. This is a type of darshan, or opportunity where the eyes of the disciple meets the gaze of the master.

Abbess Tokugon Rihō of Hōkyōji Imperial Convent was a fine calligrapher as well as a talented painter. While she – as was typical of elite women during the Edo period – received education in calligraphy, her large-scale calligraphy was also informed by her Zen studies. Like most Zen clerics of her status, she wrote out phrases from famous Zen texts in the format of

94 In Buddhist tradition, one honors the dead by feeding them at the butsuden, or Buddhist altar. Food offerings are usually made of tea, grains, fruits and vegetables. The arrangement and types of items in and around the altar can vary depending on the sect.
95 Ibid. 158
single lines of calligraphy. The single line included here reads “a large elephant does not take a rabbit’s path” (fig. 7). This is the first line of a verse in the compilation of recorded sayings of the Song-dynasty Chinese Zen priest Yuanwu Keqin (1063-1135), who is the famous author of The Blue Cliff Record (Japanese: Hekiganroku). The elephant is employed as a symbol of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni (Japanese, Shaka). It is an admonition to live straightforwardly, without pretense of deception. Abbess Rihō brushed the six characters in her characteristic bold, vigorous cursive script. Abbess Rihō also wrote out the names of sacred Buddhist and Shinto deities. The names, called myōgō, are often used as incantations, and the calligraphy itself is treated with reverence, as though it were the physical embodiment of the deity itself. Abbess Rihō’s myōgō (fig. 8) bears the name of the great Shinto deity Asukata Daimyōjin, venerated at Asukata Shrine in Gifu prefecture. Records at Hōkyōji recount that on special occasions Abbess Rihō would write hundreds, or even a thousand myōgō, to give away to worshippers. Here the characters are animated by Abbess Rihō’s dynamic brushwork, giving physical vitality to the deity they symbolize. Each character is distinct from the others, yet connected through the movements of the strokes. The abbess lifted her brush lightly between the six characters, revealing the white spaces within the line of her brushstroke, but without losing the continuity of the deity’s name. Of uniform thickness, they clearly show the fibers of the brush as Rihō paused at the top of each stroke, pooling ink and leaving trails of the brush hairs. The technical skill involved in producing the large characters showcases the name, emphasizing the importance of the deity. Abbess Rihō was often asked to write the names of temple and shrine buildings in large, bold characters, and her calligraphy was carved into wooden plaques that can be found at temples and shrines throughout Japan. Three of the abbess’ seals are also placed on the scroll; on

96 Ruch, Engendering Faith, 292.
97 Ibid, 293.
the left side is her name “Tokugon” in red square intaglio, and below that is her artist seal in red square relief. On the top right side is a longer red rectangular intaglio seal.

Several princess-nuns became adept at composing poetry in Chinese. Their verses were gathered together by disciples or followers and are preserved in the convents as individual poetry collections or in volumes of the nun’s recorded sayings (goroku). One such collection is the Chūkō tsūgen taisei oshō donke shū (Collected Poems of Abbess Taisei, Restorer of Tsūgen Temple), a collection of Chinese verses by Taisei Seian (1668-1712) daughter of Emperor Gosai (r. 1655-1663) and abbess of Donkein Imperial Convent, an institution founded as Tsūgenji.(fig. 9) It contains a poem entitled “Written on a Winter Day,” which captures the semblance of quietly passing the years in an imperial convent. The poem is mounted as a hanging scroll.98 The connections between the motif, painting style, and the text are varied and, as exemplified here, personal to the artist. In the same way, the presence of a poem-painting in an imperial Buddhist convent, rather than simply recalling the abbess’ upbringing, reflects the interrelatedness of seemingly different inspirations in aristocratic nuns’ lives.

Ryōnen Gensō served at the imperial court and became celebrated for her achievements in poetry, calligraphy, and painting. She made the momentous decision to leave her family and become a nun around the age of twenty-six. When a Zen abbot refused her request to enter his temple because she was too beautiful, she burned her face with a hot iron in order to make herself acceptable.99 Ryōnen is primarily recognized for her skills in Japanese waka poetry composition, which she brushed in her bold, distinctive script.100 Bold and forceful single lines of calligraphy are an important genre in Zen brushwork; many examples were written to be hung

98 Wacker, Research on Buddhist Nuns, 290.
99 Weidner, Flowering in the Shadows, 221.
100 The word Waka was a general term for poetry composed in Japanese.
in a Japanese tokonoma alcove during the tea ceremony. Because of their striking simplicity and the meditative nature of the messages, such large-character calligraphy was highly praised and sought after. Examples of single lines by Zen nuns, such as A Single Lump of Iron (fig. 10) are quite rare. The reason for their scarcity may be accounted for by the fact that traditionally, large-scale calligraphy was brushed only by Zen abbots, and Ryōnen was one of few women who achieved this position. Single lines commonly consist of a phrase of five or seven Chinese characters, often steeped in complex Zen meanings. Characteristic of much of the abbess’ calligraphy, the koan was brushed with mostly unmodulated ink in a semi-cursive script.

Completed in a fluid movement, the abbess was able to achieve strength and vitality through the thick, saturated ink from her large brush, as well as spontaneity and suppleness through the rounded brushstrokes and fluid movement throughout the characters. The five characters in Ryōnen’s hanging scroll can be translated “Everything is contained in a single lump of iron.” Interpretations of such Zen maxims can be difficult, but the meaning underlying these five characters relates to one of the goals of Zen Buddhism - to reach a state of mind in which one is completely self-contained, with no imperfections. It refers to a primordial state of being, where elements are undifferentiated. This phrase may have had a special significance to Ryōnen because of her rejection at first due to her sex; the reference to iron may also allude to the incident of burning her own face. The large-scale rendering of these characters causes one to stop and ponder their meaning. Here Ryōnen has exploited the technique known as “flying white,” letting the brush run dry while moving quickly in order to let areas of white paper show through.

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101 Chanoyu, “the Way of Tea” is a Zen Buddhist practice. The use of Japanese tea developed as a transformative practice, and began to evolve its own aesthetic, in particular that of the wabi and sabi principles that place importance on the sober refinement of imperfection, simplicity, naturalness and spontaneity.

102 Fister and Yamamoto. 31
the ink. The resulting rough, dry texture of the “flying white” areas contrasts dramatically with
the more heavily inked areas, creating a work which is visually as rich as its Zen meaning.

IV. Faith in the Bodhisattva Kannon

The Buddhist deity known as the Kannon Bosatsu (Bodhisattva of Compassion; Sanskrit, Avalokiteshvara), who is believed to embody the highest state of wisdom and compassion, was a vivid presence in the lives of women living in the imperial convents. Veneration of Kannon is still strong at the convents, regardless of sect, as can be confirmed in their surviving artifacts. The name Kannon means “to heed or perceive all the sounds of the world,” i.e., the sounds of sentient beings in distress. The twenty-fifth chapter of the Lotus Sutra (Myōhō rengekyō) is devoted to describing the spiritual powers and saving grace of the bodhisattva.103 This chapter is popularly known as the Kannon Sutra (Kannon-kyō), and is one of the best known of the Buddhist sutras, used regularly in ceremonies. The sutra relates how Kannon has the ability to assume thirty-three forms and promises to appear in a form and role in any given situation that is most effective to alleviate suffering and rescue a sentient being from disaster or distress. Seven of the thirty-three forms are female, among them a nun. It is no wonder that women identified with this bodhisattva and turned to “her” for comfort and guidance. In ancient Japanese tradition, women had particular importance as a symbol of cosmic power, a role which is exemplified in her procreative function as well as the role of the Shinto Sun Goddess Amaterasu as progenitor of the supposedly unbroken Japanese imperial lineage. In early Buddhist in South Asia, the bodhisattva was typically depicted as a male figure, because the twin pillars of spiritual enlightenment, wisdom and compassion, were gendered respectively as female and male. With

103 Ruch, Engendering Faith, 137.
the development of the Mahayana Buddhist teachings in China after the 3rd century CE, the Bodhisattva of Compassion (Chinese: Guanyin) acquired feminine features as the embodiment of great compassion, in spite of the earlier Indian reluctance to depict the bodhisattva in female form. Women were originally used as symbols of the desire that causes suffering in every human’s life (as per the Four Noble Truths); therefore, representing a bodhisattva in feminine form suggests that females, too, are able to become enlightened or to become bodhisattvas themselves. For many imperial nuns, these female manifestations of Kannon served as role models. The lack of significant mythic and symbolic feminine figures is a major psychological and spiritual handicap for women. Though the presence of divine femininity may not secure political and economic freedom and equality for women, it allows women power over their own bodies. This is mirrored and validated by the powerful and generally venerated goddesses in religions such as Hinduism. The maleness of the Buddha is as important to Buddhism as God is to monotheistic faiths. The ultimate level of Buddha and the relative levels of Buddha occur both in female and male form, according to most schools of Buddhism.104 Though Buddhism doesn't have a gendered Supreme Being who creates and saves, it does have a vast pantheon of mythic, symbolic heroes and models of deity-like figures of both genders. The unexpected gift to some Buddhist women is the comforting and empowering presence of female myth-models such as Kannon.

The founder of Hokkeji Imperial Convent, Empress Kōmyō, was deified as an emanation of Kannon, and according to medieval popular narratives, the convent’s main icon, the Eleven-headed Kannon, was modeled upon her figure.105 More than half of the imperial convents contain

104 Gross, Buddhist after Patriarchy, 249.
105 Ruch, Engendering Faith, 140.
images of Kannon as their principal religious icon. In addition to these major icons, sculptures and paintings of Nyoirin Kannon, the most prevalent form, are commonly found in imperial convents. The connection between this form of Kannon and imperial women is thought to be related to a dream of the Tendai priest Jien (1155-1225) in which an empress appeared as a female spirit described as a “jade woman,” or manifestation of Nyoirin Kannon. This form gained favor with women of all classes, not only those within the imperial class. Traditionally, bodhisattva transcend gender categories, but over the centuries Kannon images became feminized as a result of artists striving to express the deity’s divine compassion in a human manner that people could easily understand. The Nyoirin Kannon at Enshōji (fig. 11) is a wooden image generally kept enclosed in a portable shrine in an old building called the Shirakadō, separate from the convent’s principal icon of Nyoirin Kannon located on the altar of the Entsūden (Hall of Perfection), the temple’s main image hall. Both images were installed during the lifetime of the convent’s founder, Abbess Daitsū Bunchi, who also composed Chinese verse in honor of the sculpture. Following standard iconography, the bodhisattva is shown sitting in the “royal ease” pose. The six arms are symbolic of the deity’s extensive powers to save sentient beings. One holds the wish-granting jewel (nyoi hōju) and another a wheel (rin) emblematic of the Buddhist dharma or teachings. It is from these two implements that the name Nyoirin is derived. Other hands hold a lotus and prayer beads; another hand rests on the

106 The Eleven-headed Kannon (Jūichimenkannon) is an important bodhisattva in the esoteric schools of Buddhism. Atop the deity’s own head are eleven additional heads. Ten of these take the form of bodhisattvas and represent the ten stages toward enlightenment. The topmost head is that of Amida, the Buddha from whom Kannon emanates.  
107 Nyoirin Kannon (nyo: the wish-fulfilling jewel, and rin: the wheel of the Dharma, the two implements wielded by depictions of this figure) is one of the esoteric Buddhist forms that the Bodhisattva of Compassion Kannon (Sanskrit: Avalokiteshvara) assumes. It is commonly employed by female Buddhists who would assemble on the nineteenth of the month to pray for health and the safe delivery of children.  
108 Ruch, Engendering Faith, 140.  
109 Ibid, 141.
lotus platform while the last hand gently supports the bodhisattva’s own chin in a gesture of contemplation.

The founder of the Rinkyūji Imperial Convent, Abbess Shōzan Genyō, stands out for the zealous energy of her devotions. Her reverence for Kannon fused with her artistic creativity, resulting in the productions of hundreds of Kannon paintings, and thousands of sculptures of Kannon, most of which were presented to allied temples or given away to pious lay believers. Among them is an imposing painting of Kannon (fig. 12) standing on a cloud with wrists crossed, depicted in a silvery white pigment on black to resemble an ink rubbing. The box that houses this painting has an inscription identifying the work as being based on an image by the Chinese Tang-dynasty painter Wu Daozu (ca. 689-758) that gained fame after it was disseminated throughout the Buddhist world through painted copies. Abbess Genyō must have had access to a Chinese ink rubbing which she faithfully copied. Another of Abbess Genyō’s favorite manifestations of Kannon was the White-robed Kannon, which had been a popular subject in Zen painting since the tenth century. Genyō painted untold versions that can be found in temples and private collections. The Kannon descending through clouds on the head of a dragon (fig. 11) was donated by the abbess to Jianji, a temple in Shiga prefecture that she revived as a memorial to her emperor father. Kannon Riding a Dragon (fig. 13) is one of the thirty-three standard manifestations of the bodhisattva. Here the bodhisattva holds an open scroll on which the characters are illegible, but perhaps she intended to represent the bodhisattva reciting the vows recorded in the Kannon Sutra, making the sutra literally embedded in the

110 Ibid. 188.
111 When ink painting (suibokuga) became popular in Japan, a clean and pure impression, often expressed by white garments attracted artists, and Kannon in a white garment became a favorite motif among Zen Buddhist artists. Ibid. 195.
112 Kannon is respected as the Great Compassionate Bodhisattva. In Buddhism, greed, anger, and delusion are the Three Afflictions of the Mind. Kannon riding a dragon symbolizes the conquering of anger.
image. Since the *Kannon Sutra* teaches that even just chanting or writing the name Kannon could secure salvation, it was not uncommon for imperial abbesses to write *Namu Kannon Bosatsu* (I place my trust in Kannon) as a single-line calligraphy, and to give them away.114
Chapter Three: Bodily Gift and Spiritual Pledge

I. The Status of Women in Buddhism

Many of the ascetic devotional artistic practices created by aristocratic Buddhist women are macabre corporeal objects attesting to their will to overcome their femaleness. In contrast to the grim meditation practices of Buddhist monks, who sought to achieve liberation through the contemplation of revolting things - most commonly, a putrid female corpse - women were determined to not only overcome their spiritual condemnation, as it was believed that women could not attain Buddhahood or enter the Buddhist heavens, but to also overcome this stigma within their earthly lives. Through art they professed their individual faith, performed charitable works, and sought to overcome the defined social roles impressed upon them.

The position of women in Japan was a lowly one under the patriarchal system which became entrenched after 1600 when Japan was unified under a feudalistic government. Prior to the ninth century, the descriptions of female deities in myths, and the numerous women rulers indicate that the status of women was similar to that of men. However, the feminine image suffered drastic changes as a result of the influences of Buddhism, Confucianism, and the growth of feudalism. Many Buddhist texts taught that women’s nature was inherently evil, associating them with attachments to the sensual world as opposed to the spiritual realm. Some texts went as far as to declare that women had no hope for salvation until their rebirth as men. Consequently, once Buddhism began to permeate the fabric of Japanese society, the status of women began to deteriorate. As noted earlier in this study, the position of women declined even further in Japan after the adoption of the Chinese philosophy of Neo-Confucianism by successive military rulers. From the seventeenth century on, the Tokugawa government fervently promoted Neo-Confucianism.

115 Fister and Yamamoto, 10.
teachings which generally regarded women as inferior to men, reinforcing the doctrines of Buddhism.116

As recent studies by Rita Gross and other scholars have shown, numerous early Buddhist texts state that women are in their present state due to their karma, the effect of their past sinful behaviors in previous incarnations. To make matters worse, women have an inferior position in patriarchal societies, and furthermore, are thought to be inherently deficient biologically, intellectually, and spiritually. Their present suffering exhausts the negative karma from their past, praying that male birth will be the eventual positive outcome. To rebel against the system by trying to change patriarchal norms concerning the treatment of women creates negative karma for women. Because of this, all efforts to restore their karma are concentrated in spiritual charitable works, such as repetitious sutra writing in support of a loved one’s soul, or creating works of art for other temples and homes of the elite. Incorporating bodily fluids, remains, or parts of one's own body only increases the spiritual potency of the art object through personal sacrifice. In the hopes of furthering their path to spiritual salvation, any physical attempt to render oneself genderless, such as shaving one’s head, wearing men’s clothes, or deforming their own body was justified. Perhaps more evocative of this effort is in their initial decision and transition from lay society to the tonsure.

II. The Duplicity of the Female Body

Buddhist scriptures present a wide variety of meditations that focus on overcoming bodily attachment. Meditation on mindfulness of the body is essentially an exercise in anatomical analysis that combines the insights of meditation and medical practice. The central

116 Weidner, Flowering in the Shadows, 11.
point in this pursuit is to cultivate tranquility through awareness of the body’s loathsomeness. In the course of the meditation, the body is broken down into thirty-two constituent parts, including internal organs, all things that are believed to consist of dead matter: hair, nails, teeth, and skin. Moreover, when we become excited about someone’s exterior appearance, we are stimulated by what is dead on the outside and slowly dying within.117

After meditating on the foulness of the human body, many Buddhist texts posit that the body is a collection of bones, bound up with sinews, plastered with flesh, covered with skin, loathsome, and subject to impermanence, erosion, abrasion, dissolution, and disintegration.118 According to this attitude, the body is a container that is nicely decorated on the outside, but excrementally impure on the inside. These texts state or imply that the female form is particularly more foul and sinful compared to the male body, and because of this it is a dangerous instrument of destruction that is covered with a false but unwitting façade. Because of this misogynistic attitude, women believed that in order to alleviate their inherent sinfulness, a certain level of physical suffering was needed in order to promote spiritual awakening.

Early Buddhist texts frequently present the body in extremely negative terms in the effort to overcome bodily attachment. One is encouraged to think of it as an open wound exuding a noxious stench, or to meditate on a corpse through the various stages of its decomposition. Early Buddhism gave particular attention to the problem of sexual desire, which was viewed as one of the chief obstacles to the attainment of liberation. Sexual intercourse was an offence that resulted in expulsion from the community, and a number of prohibitions that governed the life of monks and nuns. Treatments of sexual passion reflect almost exclusively the male rather than the female

118 Ibid, 93.
viewpoint and, in many texts, take on a misogynistic tone. Buddhist women viewed entering the convent as liberative because it allowed them to leave their domestically subordinated, feminine social roles as wives and mothers and join with other men and women in a spiritual path that rendered gender largely insignificant. It is a common misconception that Buddhism is egalitarian and gender-neutral. Women are frequently subordinated to men in institutional practice, and villainized in texts that promote androcentric perspective of the male renouncer. Moreover, women need no independent spiritual life while her husband exists, because a woman's spirituality consists entirely in serving her husband.

The concept that women were inherently subordinate to men became widely accepted wherever Buddhism spread, in large part because these discriminatory attitudes were embedded in existing cultural norms and spiritual beliefs. It is difficult to reconcile these misogynistic realities with the fact that Buddhist scripture teaches that an enlightened individual is one with the dharma, possesses a pure mind, realizes that all things are fundamentally empty, identifies with and is compassionate toward all sentient beings, and unconsciously abides by all Buddhist ethical precepts. Such a person transcends all ordinary human relationships and has gone beyond the distinction of male and female. All dualities have been left behind, including the temporary marks of maleness and femaleness, and the individual abides in a state of asexual purity.

119 Ruch, Engendering Faith, 329.
121 Ruch, Engendering Faith, 333.
IV. Horrific Figurations of the Female Form

As objects of sexual desire, women are often seen as obstacles in the celibate path of the monk. As a method of aesthetic shock therapy, *kusōzu*, paintings of the nine stages of decay and decomposition of a corpse, were executed in Japan from approximately the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries in various forms, commonly hanging scrolls, handscrolls, and printed books. The subject itself is derived from the Buddhist tradition that urges contemplation of the nine stages of a decaying corpse. Buddhist meditation on death and the transience of the human condition is linked with spiritual progress. Seen from the perspective of emptiness or essencelessness, the body is a hollow shed, a material vessel containing mothing of value. One of the lessons that the Buddha is said to have taught again and again in his capacity as head of the monastic order (*sangha*) is the utter perversity of pursuing sexual gratification when the human body, in its natural state, emits substances as foul as those emitted by putrefying corpses. The Buddha reportedly urged his monks to visit charnel fields in order to contemplate the various kinds of disfiguration to which rotting corpses are subject. As was frequently mentioned in Buddhist sutras, the practice of contemplating a decaying corpse was adopted widely by monks regardless of their sectarian affiliations. Some medieval tales give accounts of contemplation on a decaying corpse and reveal how monks may have performed the practice with visual aids. At this time, corpses were typically left exposed in cemeteries or in fields, since the practice of burial did not become widespread in Japan until after the fourteenth century. The medieval

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123 Wilson, *Charming Cadavers*, 15.
124 Ibid, 234.
accounts provide anecdotal confirmation that Buddhist monks exercised the method of contemplation on the nine stages of decomposition.

The handscroll of the nine stages in the Nakamura private collection, dated to the early fourteenth century (fig. 14), is generally called the Kusōshi emaki (Illustrated Handscroll of the Poem of the Nine Stages of a Decaying Corpse; hereafter, the Nakamura version). The handscroll includes ten narrative illustrations, arranged from right to left. Before the depiction of the nine stages of decay, the sequence is prefaced by a portrait of a seated woman with long hair, in aristocratic attire, clearly a rendering of the painting’s subject before death (fig. 14). The pre-death portrait suggests that the subject relished her beauty and wealth, a characterization expressed as well in the subsequent first stage of the newly deceased. In this stage, she lies with her head supported by a pillow on a raised tatami mat with ornamental trimmings. Her leaf-patterned undergarment covers most of her naked white body but leaves her right breast exposed, a distinctive feature of the Nakamura version. The first two illustrations seem to emphasize the sexual attractiveness springing from the woman’s voluptuous figure and noble background. In arousing an interest in the young beauty before delivering its lesson on taming desire, the image amplifies its cathartic value. In the third through tenth illustrations, a highly realistic process of decay unfolds in the scroll. Each corpse looms large in its frame, aggressively confronting the viewer with its image of corporeal decay. The order of the stages of decay in the handscroll is as follows (fig. 14): (a) newly deceased; (b) distension; (c) rupture; (d) exudation of blood; (e) putrefaction; (f) discoloration and desiccation; (g) consumption by birds and animals; (h) skeleton; (i) disjointing.

126 Ibid. 237.
The *Sutra of the Secrets for the Essential Way of Meditation* is one of the oldest texts for Zen practice, and it no doubt influenced later meditative practices.\(^{127}\) In fact, the content of the sutra was incorporated into actual Zen practices; from early times monks meditated on bones and (especially) on the whole skeleton as part of Zen practice.\(^{128}\) The significance of the practice is reinforced by the emphasis given to the contemplation of the whole skeleton in other meditation manuals. Two different levels of contemplation on the nine stages are described. The lower level is contemplation on all stages up through the ninth, when the bones are parched to dust.

What, then, is the functionality of this rendering of the nine stages? In this genre, the purpose was not only directed towards killing physical desire among monks, but many paintings were produced for the moral education of women. Instructing women in the ways of proper conduct on the basis of Buddhist teaching was prevalent through the second half of the seventeenth century, when women’s education became more informed by Confucian teachings. The study of the nine stages has revealed their transformative functionality at the nexus of Buddhism. This image represents a rare case of a single, narrative Buddhist subject being painted and distributed beyond the sects and monasteries for a variety of uses. The visual sensationalism of depicting a decaying corpse and the fundamental Buddhist concept of human transience motivated the consistent production of the image over the centuries. Since the arrival of Buddhism in the sixth century, the notion of human transience became deeply ingrained in Japanese cultural consciousness, and the idea found its most enduring and direct manifestation in the images of the nine stages of decomposition. The depictions of female corporeal decay delineate the destiny of the physical body and portray the mysterious transitional state between this world and the afterlife.

\(^{127}\) Ibid. 239
\(^{128}\) Ibid. 239
III. Corporeal Relics Created with Skin, Nails, and Hair

As physical beings, humans have strong attachments to their own bodies and the bodies of those close to them. Our identities are linked to our bodies, not only within our biological reality, but as the widely perceived vessel or embodiment of a soul or spiritual component. This attachment to the body increases the personal connection to a deceased person through possession of a personal object that had belonged to or been in direct contact with him or her.\(^{129}\) This treasuring of personal belongings, including bodily fragments suggests that the spirit of the deceased is believed to still inhabit objects such as body parts. Deferential attachment to the body created a custom in many cultures of preserving or enshrining body fragments of the deceased. Moreover, corporeal relics were often used to create objects that are commemorative or devotional in nature. Coexisting with the Buddhist teachings of impermanence and non-attachment, there is a powerful tradition in most Buddhist countries of preserving and enshrining body parts, sometimes even in the form of the mummified corpse of revered practitioners.\(^{130}\) It follows, then, that a religious object crafted with bodily relics is, by its very nature, more potent than an object made with conventional materials.

Two imperial nuns, Shōzan Genyō and Daitsū Bunchi, daughters of Emperor Go-mizunō (1597-1680) were inspired by Buddhist teachings to plunge into practice and to become “daughters of the dharma.” Both would go on to establish and lead their own convent. In addition to studying Buddhist texts, sitting in meditation, and reciting and transcribing sutras, creating devotional art was an integral part of their Buddhist practice and faith. As abbesses, they were responsible for educating and training successors in order to preserve and maintain their


convent's lineage. Emperor Go-mizunō’s eldest daughter, Princess Ume no Miya (1619-1697) and eighth daughter Princess Teruko (1634-1727) were particularly close to their father and stand out among his twenty-six children for their rigorous and creative aspects within their devotional practices. They founded their own temples and shared the lifelong ideal of cultivating selfless compassion and deepening their spiritual attainment.

Among the prelates invited to give dharma talks at the Imperial Palace was the Rinzai Zen priest Isshi Bunshu (1608-1646). The words and demeanor of Isshi resonated deeply with the princess Ume no Miya, who had shown an inclination toward religious life since returning to the palace following an early marriage reportedly terminated due to her poor health. The loss in 1638 of her mother at the age of nineteen may have intensified Ume no Miya’s spiritual leanings. Moved by Priest Isshi’s sermons and determined to become his disciple, she persuaded her father to allow her to take the tonsure. The tonsuring took place in 1640 when Ume no Miya was twenty-two. Impressed with her commitment and fervor, Priest Isshi gave Ume no Miya the Buddhist name Daitsū Bunchi, using one of the characters (bun) from his own name Bunshu.

Bunchi was drawn to the strict regimens of Rinzai Zen practice promoted by Priest Isshi, and soon after taking the tonsure, she took up residence at a small temple retreat called Enshōji in northeastern Kyoto. Leaving the palace to live in such an isolated place was a formidable and independent step for an emperor’s daughter. In choosing this path, she was clearly following the model of her teacher, who chose to avoid temple politics and live a reclusive lifestyle devoted exclusively to ascetic Buddhist practice. Priest Isshi was a keen ascetic who wrote a lengthy

131 Ibid, 236.
132 Ibid, 236.
document condemning the eating of meat, likening it to sexual desire and passion. He stressed that while embarking on the “bodhisattva path,” unconditional attention must be directed to attaining a compassionate heart, but in comparison with men, women have more deeply imbedded sins and are more prone to indulge their desires. Therefore, nuns should shave their heads and avoid colorful clothing in favor of plain black robes, as such habits will aid them in eliminating attachments and cultivating a pure and peaceful body and mind. Isshi’s teachings to Bunchi were strict, but encouraging, as he urged her to transcend her gender and dualistic ways of thinking.

The beliefs that Abbess Bunchi practiced and taught were grounded in Zen, but tempered with Shingon and Ritsu elements. This simultaneous embracing of different sects was not unusual for members of the imperial family. As part of her own personal practice, Abbess Bunchi continued to challenge and push herself to the edge of abandoning attachments to her body, and on at least two occasions engaged in such harsh ascetic acts as peeling off pieces of skin from her hand and using them as paper on which to write sutras (fig. 15). The extreme spiritual asceticism of Abbess Bunchi attests to her extraordinary devotion and personal sacrifice. Bunchi inscribed a passage from the Perfection of Transcendent Wisdom Sutra (般若波羅蜜多 hannya-haramitta) onto a square fragment of her own skin that reads, “If you truly love the Buddhist law, you should take your skin and use it as paper, take one of your bones and use it as a brush, and use your blood to write this.” Bunchi held this sutra passage in great reverence as she frequently brushed this sutra, as well as many others, in her own blood. She did

134 Ibid, 172.
135 Ibid.
not promote such austerities among her disciples, but rather used these exacting measures as a means to test the strength of her own resolve in the path to transcend worldly life.\textsuperscript{137}

Princess Teruko (later Shōzan Genyō) persuaded her father, Emperor Go-mizunō to let her take the bodhisattva precepts in 1665.\textsuperscript{138} With her genuine interest in Ōbaku Zen teachings and benefitting from her imperial status, Genyō over the years developed close relationships with many other high-ranking Ōbaku Zen priests, to whom she looked for both religious and artistic guidance.\textsuperscript{139} Bunchi and Genyō’s deep spiritual energy and devotion manifested itself in creative ways. Abbess Bunchi’s practice included copying Buddhist scriptures and making devotional imagery, including paintings, sculpture, and embroidery. Her pictorial works range from austere ink paintings of Daruma to shimmering gold Willow Kannon paintings based upon Chinese rubbings. A few months after her father died, she captured the Retired Emperor’s likeness in clay, even attaching strands of his hair to the sculpture’s face.\textsuperscript{140} Abbess Bunchi inherited her father’s preoccupation with bodily relics and made several plaques with \textit{myōgō} formed from the emperor’s fingernail clippings (fig. 16). The writing of and devotional use of \textit{myōgō} has long had a presence in Japanese calligraphy; in the Zen calligraphic tradition, it dates back to the fourteenth century. Writing \textit{myōgō} upon request or for parishioners was not unusual for Zen priests and abbesses. The visibility and strong visual effect of the large characters lend themselves to display in public spaces, where they can be the focal point of incantations or prayers. A religious object crafted with bodily relics is, by its very nature, more potent than an object made with conventional materials. Bunchi assembled them out of filial piety, while also

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{137} Ibid, 236.
\item \textsuperscript{138} Ibid, 235.
\item \textsuperscript{139} Ōbaku Zen is the third and latest of the three major Zen sects in Japan, after Sōtō and Rinzai Zen. Introduced to Japan in the mid-17th century by the émigré Chinese Chan Buddhist master Yinyuan Longqi (Ingen Ryūki, 1592-1673), the Ōbaku sect is centered upon the head temple of Manpuku-ji, established by Yinyuan Longqi in 1661 in Uji, near Kyōto.
\item \textsuperscript{140} Ruch, \textit{Engendering Faith}, 128.
\end{itemize}
mimicking Buddhist relic veneration, the custom of enshrining and venerating the bone relics of the Buddha, his disciples, and other holy persons. While functioning as a memorial to the deceased, the creator also accrued karmic merit in its making. Aristocratic nuns such as Bunchi often used corporeal relics to create objects that are commemorative or devotional in nature, believing that the body garment enhances the relic because the spirit of the deceased inhabits the object. The motivation behind placing hair, skin, fingernail clippings, teeth and blood was also an act of uniting with the divine. Evoking the presence of the dead, while also serving as a declaration of faith, nuns of the Amamonzeki incorporated ascetic practices within their art to make tangible manifestations of their devotion. As noted above, on occasion she would also transcribe sutras or write invocations in her blood (fig. 17). The purpose of transcribing sutras is to ensure the continued existence of the Buddhist teachings and for the transcriber to acquire karmic merit. Nuns copied sutras to secure their future salvation or the salvation of a loved one. Blood was drawn from the nose or ears and added to the ink for symbolic purposes. Using one’s own blood instead of ink was a way of showing extraordinary devotion involving personal sacrifice. Through writing sutras with blood, a small portion of one’s bodily fluids literally becomes one with the Buddha’s words, and by painting a Buddhist image with blood a portion of one’s body symbolically becomes one with the Buddha’s body. This practice coexists with the Buddhist teaching of impermanence and non-existence, and relics made of such materials are by nature more spiritually potent than an object made with conventional materials. It is a metaphorical sacrificial act of writing sutras, a way of venerating teachers, creating a closer bond with the Buddha, and ensuring salvation for the transcriber and her loved ones.

142 Ibid, 24.
Abbess Genyō showed filial devotion to her emperor father by painting memorial portraits and donating them to temples with which he had been intimately connected. Her cultivation of painting skills provided the foundation of what would become a dominant aspect of her religious practice. Her preoccupation with depicting Kannon seems to have begun prior to her father’s death. According to an account by Priest Gaoquan Xingdun (Japanese: Kōsen Shōton, 1633-1695), after she distributed food and clothing to residents in her area during a famine in 1675, Genyō decided to abstain from eating in order to directly experience their suffering. While intoning the Fumon Chapter of the Lotus Sutra (popularly known as the Kannon Sutra), she wrote out invocations consisting of Kannon’s name and made thirty-three images of Kannon as a vow to rescue those suffering from famine. In addition to paintings of Kannon, around the time of her Father’s death Genyō began crafting small images of Shō Kannon, the fundamental, non-esoteric form of the Bodhisattva of Compassion. Inspired by a method she learned from a Chinese tale, she collected shikimi leaves, and after drying them, inscribed the name of Kannon on each leaf. She then ground the leaves into a powder, and after mixing this with other incense, nikawa (animal glue), and lacquer, impressed the mixture into a mold (fig. 18). Throughout the process she recited the Kannon Sutra, so that the statues were imbued with sacred powers as well as made from sacred materials, increasing their efficacy. The act of producing multiple copies of images of the Buddha was a practice associated with the Lotus Sutra, which advocated that creating images of the Buddha was a way to accumulate merit and attain awakening. Abbess Genyō gave these statues to monastic friends and lay believers, often presenting them on occasions such as death anniversary memorial services. The uniqueness

143 Ibid, 235.
144 Ibid, 235.
145 Ibid, 236.
of the creation process, into which she poured her heart and soul, and the staggering scale of replication (she reportedly made thousands), earned her acclaim. Genyō also piously transcribed numerous complete sets of scriptures and donated them to temples with prayers for the salvation of her parents. Concerning the surfeit of imagery and transcription, the *Lotus Sutra* (fig. 19) promoted the transcription of scriptures and creation of images in quantity, and thus Abbess Genyō believed that she was accruing karmic merit not just for herself, but for others. The act of sutra copying continued to be seen, even in the early Edo period, as a way to embrace the dignified and solemn Buddha mind and the great virtue of Buddha. The dedication to sutra writing by nuns such as Bunchi and Genyō is an indication of Emperor Go-mizunō’s power to command reverence and admiration.

The spiritual energy emanating from the words and remaining artifacts of the two daughters of the dharma commands respect. Their religious ambitions fueled by the teachings found in the *Lotus Sutra* and other Buddhist texts, they actively sought instruction from qualified teachers, and were fortunate to have encountered Zen masters who were sympathetic to their aspirations and offered instruction and encouragement. Bunchi’s creation of artifacts with her father’s cast-off body fragments, especially his fingernails, indicates her concern with configuring the body as memorial art. In particular, Bunchi’s *myōgō* crafted with fingernail clipping of her deceased father may well have been her own unique invention. Go-mizunō was heir to a long tradition of relic veneration. By his day, it was not uncommon for people to have a fragment of their body deposited in a temple or within an image. This was often accomplished after a person's death by his or her family member. However, Go-mizunō was directly involved in the distribution of “himself.” His preoccupation with his own body relics surely must have had

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146 Ibid, 240.
an impact on Bunchi. We can only speculate on how and when she acquired her father’s fingernail clippings. Possession of her father’s body fragments allowed Bunchi to remain intimately connected to him both while he was alive and after his death.

Human hair was also used to create devotional works in Japan, the most common being embroidered images of Buddhist deities or myōgō. If the hair was from a deceased person, the work served as a tsuizen or memorial.147 Women also wove their own hair into embroidered Buddhist hangings as a kind of devotional practice or offering. Since hair and fingernails were regarded equally as containing some of a person’s life essence, the creation of such works from hair is thus conceptually similar to Bunchi’s fingernail myōgō. Japanese Buddhist embroidery can be traced back to the sixth and seventh centuries, the time of the introduction of continental culture, but the incorporation of human hair in embroideries did not begin until the Kamakura period (1185-1333). The practice then gained momentum and became widespread in the Muromachi period (1333-1573). Hair symbolizes both normality and abnormality, wildness and enculturation, as well as sexuality and female reproductive power. Hair becomes dirty and greasy, is associated with sexuality, and has an unruly nature that needs to be controlled and transformed. The positive and negative powers associated with hair - its association with vitality or fertility on the one hand and with disease or death on the other - must be partly a result of its biology. In addition to the hair with which we are born, there is a significant growth of new kinds of hair with the onset of puberty and sexual maturation. As we grow older, that hair turns grey or white, signifying the approach of death. As the site of the life force and fertility, it can repel evil demons and spirits and is sometimes worked into amulets. Women have offered strands of their hair to shrines and temples as amulets to protect men sent away to war because it is believed hair

147 Ibid, 235.
has the power to attract the spirits of loved ones who are absent. The fact that hair, like fingernails and toenails, continues to grow after the death of one’s body out of one’s conscious control, may account for its positive association with life force and energy, as well as wild or untamed energy.

The Japanese believe that incorporating something of one’s own body in a devotional object serves to assure its effectiveness. Locks of human hair have been found inside Buddhist statues and inside the rollers of Buddhist hanging scrolls. Abbess Daiki of Kōshōin Imperial Convent used her hair to write out prayers. Daiki incorporated human hair into her embroidery, creating hanging scrolls of Buddhist images. Woven examples of human hair, however, are very few, the best-known being one at Byōdoin temple in eastern Kyoto. The hair was allegedly gifted by a tonsuring nun. With her head shaved, a woman dispenses with one of the most readily discernible markers of gender. Shaving one’s head in Buddhist ordination plays an important symbolic role. The hair was then woven into the Mantra of Light, one of the most prevalent esoteric magic formulae, intoned daily during the morning rites in Zen practice. Chanting it can expiate sins, remove illness, and protect the user. More importantly for female practitioners, the Mantra of Light (fig. 20) guarantees escape from the Six Realms of reincarnation. Repeating the mantra ten times for a given realm allows one to escape rebirth in that realm. Therefore the standard number of repetitions of intoning the mantra is sixty, by extension the weaving of sixty blocks of the mantra can be seen as a way to enable the escape from the Six Realms and guarantee rebirth in the Buddhist heavens. In this example, human hair has been woven to create

149 Ibid.
150 Ibid.
a design spelling out the *Kōmyō Shingon*, or Mantra of Light.\textsuperscript{151} The mantra, a type of magic formula, consists of twenty-three Sanskrit characters, which are written here as twenty-nine characters in a block of three rows of ten characters each, the last row being short by one character. These blocks are repeated sixty times: ten rows of six columns each. The characters appear in dark brown hair against a white background on the face of the fabric.

The 15\textsuperscript{th}-century hanging scroll painting *Welcoming Descent of the Amida Triad* (fig. 21) at first glance appears to be made entirely of silk, but close examination of the embroidery reveals a startling fact: human hair was used to embroider the snail-shell curls of Amida and also the child’s hair. This image was commissioned by the parents of the child whose hair was incorporated within the embroidery.\textsuperscript{152} The child’s actual hair is apparent within the main figure, as well as the two kneeling figures. This incorporation of the child’s hair in the embroidery indicates the prayerful intentions of the child’s parents, who endeavor to petition for their child’s union with Amida Buddha after death, through rebirth in the Western Paradise (*sukhavati*) over which Amida reigns. In works like these, human hair was customarily used to embroider the Buddha’s snail-shell curls, the black stripes on monastic robes, and any inscriptions.\textsuperscript{153} The use of human hair in Buddhist embroideries can be understood in different ways. Hair in Japanese popular belief is a substance that lingers on as a potent, even *living* force after death. Hair thus symbolically bridges the worlds of the living and the dead and proves a logical material or medium to connect the world in which believers live and the afterlife. Hair, symbolizing the body, undergoes a metamorphosis when it is used in these embroideries to depict the bodies and garments or the names of sacred figures.

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid, 31.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid, 33.
Conclusion

The contested place of women within Buddhism is a theme as old as the sacred texts of Buddhism itself. The sutras and writings of eminent monks repeatedly address the “problem” of how to deal with women; what to think of them: how to save them despite their “inherent hindrances,” and how they are to function within the ecclesiastic structure. Women were occasionally acknowledged as having attained the ideal of spiritual enlightenment or rebirth into Paradise, both elevated aims of Buddhist endeavor. However, the achievement of these goals was facilitated by other women in their acts of devotion and personal sacrifice. As this study shows, despite the purported transcendence of gender categories implicit in the Buddhist rejection of the material world, a plethora of Buddhist texts stipulate that the female form is particularly more foul and sinful compared to the male body, and because of this it is a dangerous instrument of destruction that is covered with a false but unwitting façade. In order to grapple with this misogynistic ideology, devout Buddhist women believed that in order to alleviate their inherent sinfulness, a certain level of physical suffering was needed in order to promote spiritual awakening. This study shows the multiple ways in which these attempts at overcoming female gender were expressed directly or implicitly in the works of art created by aristocratic Buddhist nuns in Early Modern Japan.

Feminism asks us to question conventional gender arrangements and stereotypes in a radical way. Serious attention to linguistic precision has always been a concern within Buddhist philosophy, even though Buddhism does not regard verbal expressions as capable of capturing ultimate truth. Just as language’s influence on consciousness is a deliberate consciousness-raising device in Zen Buddhist practices such as the contemplation of koan, so contemporary feminism and its close analysis of precise word choice promotes a critical consciousness of the
hidden meanings of everyday language. As the Buddhist feminist scholar Rita Gross has shown, an androgynous, two-sexed model of humanity has long played a central role in mainstream feminism. In contrast, many fundamental Buddhist texts view the universe as a vast, interdependent system of beings located in one of six realms of rebirth, none of which are separated by gender. Feminist critics of Buddhism decry the contradictions between the transcendence of socially constructed notions of gender implied by Buddhist teachings on the one hand, and the consistently misogynistic realities of institutional and cultural contexts. The extraordinary artistic achievements of Zen abbesses such as Daitsū Bunchi provide an aesthetic confirmation that just as the Six Realms do not naturally discriminate according to gender, the dharma applies equally to all sentient beings in all realms of existence.

The aesthetic and intellectual richness of aristocratic Buddhist nuns was built despite the increasingly restricted sphere for women’s religious activities in the centuries after the introduction of Buddhism in the 6th century. The juridical repression of women in the Edo period saw the emergence of written precepts for the proper conduct of women in service to the shogunal military administration’s desire to strengthen the hierarchical nature of the household in line with misogynistic Neo-Confucian gender ideologies. Tokugawa officials therefore encouraged the production of the circulation of moral instruction to guide women to become ideal wives. The tactic of these moral tracts until the mid-seventeenth century was transparent: they indoctrinated morals by reinforcing the innate inferiority of women as presented in both Neo-Confucian and many Buddhist teachings. For example, the view that women faced five obstacles to attaining salvation and had to submit to three kinds of obedience was reasserted. The encumbrance of these barriers to salvation provided the rationale that compelled women to strive for a high level of feminine morality.
Despite the explicitly discriminatory gender ideologies that animated Edo-period law, women in imperial Buddhist convents were not artistically marginalized in before or during the Early Modern period. Instead, they were active producers, recipients, and participants in creating visual culture in their convents. As examples of “women’s art,” their works of sculpture, painting and calligraphy must not be viewed only as static symbols of court life or “the past.” Rather, the visual and material culture of the convent reveals the nexus of religious, aristocratic, and individual achievement attained by women in the Early Modern period, in the face of complex contradictions that both enabled and circumscribed their creative endeavors. In the late Edo period, imperial Buddhist nuns belonged, by family right, to a segment of society interested in maintaining traditional culture, yet at temporal odds with the actual culture because of their intellectual and creative autonomy and productivity. The art that was created in the Amamonzeki represents how the perpetuation of tradition has become part of the nuns’ artistic legacy. Inspired by the Lotus Sutra, the Buddhist nuns within the Amamonzeki saw the creation of art as a pious, meritorious act. Their artistic contributions were prayers for amassing karmic merit in the afterlife, or were intended to assist temples in furthering the spread of Buddhism.

Recent scholarly critiques of the gender biases of prevailing Japanese art historical scholarship have led to greater exploration and validation of the longstanding marginalized visual and material culture produced within imperial convents, giving shape to a largely overlooked field of materials that will help change the understanding of Japanese art. Drawing upon the work of recent feminist scholars, this study seeks a balance between focusing on a collection of objects exclusively created and largely used by women, and showing how this art ultimately reached beyond the convent walls and impacted early modern Japanese society. This study argues that it is only by analyzing these works of art within their broader socio-cultural and
ritual contexts of production, use and preservation that we can gain an understanding of their historical significance. The creative endeavors of individual nuns, most notably the abbesses Bunchi (1619-1697) and Genyō (1634-1727), demonstrate their religious devotion, filial piety, and artistic agency within broader social contexts inimical to women’s exploration of their intellectual, spiritual and artistic potential. The material and visual culture created within the Amamonzeki serves as a reminder of what “women’s art” means to the history and culture of Buddhism within Japan.
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(Fig. 1) Unknown sculptor. *Life-size Portrait Statue of Abbess Mugai Nyodai* (1223-1298), wood and lacquer, Kamakura period, 1298, private collection.
(Fig. 2) Unknown artist. *Portrait of Abbess Daitsū Bunchi* (1619-1697), hanging scroll, ink and pigment on paper, 131.2 x 55.1 cm. Private Collection.
(Fig. 3) Abbess Daitsu Bunchi’s Kesa and Shippei, Enshōji, Nara.

(Fig. 4) Abbess Daitsu Bunchi’s Hossu, Enshōji, Nara.
(Fig. 5) Abbess Tokugon Rihō (1672-1745). *Daruma*, hanging scroll, ink and pigment on paper. 122 x 29 cm. Hōkyōji, Kyoto.
(Fig. 6) Abbess Shōzan Genyō (1634-1727). Daruma, hanging scroll, ink and pigment on paper, Rinkyūji, Kyoto.
(Fig. 7) Abbess Tokugon Rihō (1672-1745). *Asakata Daimyōjin*, hanging scroll, ink and pigment on paper. 118.5 x 43.2 cm. Hōkyōji, Kyoto.
(Fig. 8) Abbess Tokugon Rihō (1672-1745). *A Large Elephant Does Not Take a Rabbit’s Path*, hanging scroll, ink and pigment on paper. 123 x 41 cm. Daishōji, Kyoto.
Abbess Taisei Seian (1668-1712), *Poem: Winter Day.* Wall scroll, ink on paper. 27.9 x 44.6 cm. Donkein, Kyoto.
(Fig. 10) Abbess Ryōnen Gensō (1646-1711). *A Single Lump of Iron.* Hanging scroll, ink on paper. 77.5x 15.2 cm. Private Collection.
(Fig. 11) Abbess Daitsū Bunchi (1619-1697). *Nyoirin Kannon.*
Enshōji, Nara.
(Fig. 12) Abbess Shōzan Genyō (1634-1727). Kannon Bosatsu, hanging scroll, ink and pigment on paper 135 x 30 cm. Rinkyūji, Kyoto.
(Fig. 13) Abbess Shōzan Genyō (1634-1727). *Kannon Riding a Dragon*, hanging scroll, ink and pigment on paper 80.6 x 31.8 cm. Jianji.
(Fig. 14) Unknown artist. *Illustrated Handscroll of the Poem of the Nine Stages of a Decaying Corpse (Kusōshi emaki).*
Handscroll, ink and colors on paper, 12s/8 x 1951/8 in. 14th century.
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(Fig. 15) Abbess Daitsu Bunchi (1619-1697). *Sutra Characters transcribed on Skin.*
Enshōji, Nara.
(Fig. 16) Abbess Daitsū Bunchi (1619-1697). Myōgō, Name of Deities formed with Fingernails, Edo period, 1686. Enshōji, Nara.
(Fig. 17) Abbess Daitsū Bunchi (1619-1697). The Heart Sutra Transcribed in Blood, Edo period, 1686. 29.6 x 36.1 cm. Enshōji, Nara.
(Fig. 18) Abbess Shōzan Genyō (1634-1727). Shō Kannon, Rinkyūji, Kyoto.
(Fig. 19) Abbess Shōzan Genyō (1634-1727). *Lotus Sutra*, Edo period, 1725, Rinkyūji, Kyoto.
(Fig. 20) Unknown artist. *Mantra Woven with Hair*, 122 x 27.3 cm. Jijuin Temple.
(Fig. 21) Unknown artist. *Welcoming Descent of the Amida Triad*. Hanging scroll, ink, color, gold and human hair embroidery on silk. 15th c. 167 x 85.1 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art.