REVIEWS

Willa J. TANABE, *Paintings of the Lotus Sūtra*. New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1988. xviii + 318 pp. US$65.00 / ¥6,000.

Willa Tanabe's *Paintings of the Lotus Sūtra* is a well-organized study of the style of illustrations of the *Lotus Sūtra*, which has been beautifully produced by Weatherhill. It begins with an introduction which sets forth the significance of the text and the particular value the sūtra itself attaches to reverence for the text. The author states her thesis: that "the paintings of the *Lotus Sūtra* produced in these varying ritual contexts changed as their ritual use changed," and that these changes can be observed, "in the shifting relationship between the paintings and the accompanying text." She defines three stages in this process. In the first she places all varieties of decoration of the text scrolls themselves, frontispiece illustrations and covers; in the second, the paintings in which the *Lotus Sūtra* fascicles are written in the shape of a pagoda and surrounded by illustrations of the text; and in the third, those paintings which show episodes of the text but which do not include the text itself. Her purpose is "to present the paintings of the *Lotus Sūtra* within the textual, ritual, and artistic traditions that shaped the art."

The first chapter is an overview of the text which includes a synopsis. Having myself gone through the *Lotus Sūtra* time after time looking for a particular passage, I was grateful for the synopsis, particularly well tailored to the needs of an art historian. The second and third chapters present practice associated with the sūtra, with particular emphasis on the practice of copying the text. This concludes the presentation of background material. Chapter four begins the author's discussion of style and the paintings themselves. She restricts herself to painting, leaving out such things as the sculptures of Shaka and Tahō, and further limits her treatment of paintings to those which are closely tied to the narrative. She introduces a new system of classifying these paintings. This system seems reasonable and does, as she points out, have the virtue of fixing each painting firmly in one category. I found the rest of Chapter four, on the decorations and decorative frontispiece illustrations of the sūtra, the most interesting. Chapter five covers the frontispiece illustrations, usually in gold or silver on indigo dyed paper, which show scenes of the Buddha preaching. The author divides these into three groups which she calls: sinicized, transitional, and conventionalized frontispieces. These names bother me (why "conventionalized" rather than "conventional") and I found the discussion rather heavy going. Chapter six is on the paintings in which the text is writ-

ten in the shape of a pagoda. The author relates these to the *etoki* tradition and sees in them a gradual freeing of the paintings from the text and a transformation of the text into painting. Continuing and completing this tendency are the *hensō* paintings, which the author presents in the seventh, concluding chapter.

Within the limits within which Tanabe obviously felt she had to work, *Paintings of the Lotus Sūtra* is a good book. It is careful, clear and, considering the quality of contemporary scholarly prose, well written. The work involved in doing the research, organizing material that resists being organized, and preparing the book for publication, must have been enormous. However, though I respect Tanabe's work and the thoroughness with which she did what was expected of her, I felt disappointed when I finished her book. I do not agree with the limits within which she worked and I would like to address this matter in this review.

Remarkably few books on Japanese art history appear that are not surveys, translations of books by Japanese scholars, or catalogues of museum exhibitions. Of those very few indeed focus on pre-Edo art. The reasons for this include the serious problems of getting permission to use photographs of the art, the expense of publishing the illustrations, the inherent difficulty of the material and its organization, and the need to discuss style.

It is miraculous that *Paintings of the Lotus Sūtra* was published: the list of agencies which subsidized its production is impressive, as is the list of individuals who helped the author secure permission to publish photographs of the paintings. This does not usually require permission of the photographer but of the owner, who sells a photo or allows the scholar to photograph the object and makes some arrangement about its publication. Often permission cannot be had until a publisher is found, since the owner wants to know details about the publication. It is generally felt that an author cannot talk about anything not illustrated, so the problems of getting photographs and permission to publish them cannot be underestimated. It may be necessary to make a special trip to Japan, get a Japanese scholar to accompany you, and make a long trip to some tiny temple which owns the art. Yet the results of this process are not always equal to the effort and the expense involved. On the other hand, I doubt whether anyone reading this book actually needs to see the *Sūtra of Past and Present, Cause and Effect*, which is illustrated in color. It is a very familiar piece. Nor does anyone need to see seven illustrations of the Ryūhonji set of jeweled-stupa mandalas since they are, at this reduction, practically indistinguishable from each other. The one color reproduction and details are enough. Anyway, do we always need to see a good illustration? It gives us the illusion of having seen something, but can we see enough to follow the author's discussion of style? Can we see enough in *any* illustration, or at least in any

that the publisher can afford? Would it not be better to publish a small, inexpensive illustration in the text, such as those often used in Japanese scholarly books, to remind you which painting was being discussed and rely on the large picture books for better illustrations (which are usually still not good enough to deal with style or fine enough to distinguish details such as a mudra). It is not that the reproductions, especially those in color, in *Paintings of the Lotus Sūtra* are not nice to have, but I could do with less, and like many of the people who will buy this book I have the Nara Museum catalogue of its exhibition of the art of the *Lotus Sūtra* next to my desk.

We need a convention to allow the publication of black and white reproductions of art in scholarly books without permission and a clearing house for photographs. The present requirements are meant to assure owners that their belongings will not be used for someone else's profit. In a book which is subsidized, through the author's efforts or publisher's endowment, there is no profit.

An obvious objection to my comments is that books such as *Paintings of the Lotus Sutra* are not intended exclusively for a reader like myself, but are meant to appeal to the general reader, who will be attracted to the book by its fine presentation, its large distribution, and by the quality of the reproductions. I have no objection whatsoever to appealing to people on this level, but the content of the book should match its presentation, and it does not. Despite Tanabe's obvious care, it is too difficult to read easily without already knowing a great deal; it is too condensed, and the passages on style make even me sleepy. The average educated reader, seeing the book in a museum bookshop, may be intrigued by the subject of the book or the pictures, but will not actually be able to read it.

The material which Tanabe dealt with in writing this book is extremely difficult. There are mountains of detail, hints that lead in one direction and then another, old theories which are not useful, and questions which require knowledge of Buddhist studies, religion, history, and literature. However, the art historian also has an advantage precisely because concentrating on objects leads one to cross borders of academic fields and to examine set theories against the weight of material evidence. Even reference materials used frequently by art historians are different from those used in other fields. Thus fresh insights come easily, though confidence comes hard.

It is particularly challenging to decide how to approach medieval art and religion. First, you need an anchor. As Allan Grapard once persuasively argued (1984), a place is a convenient anchor. Another would be a deity, like Kannon or Hachiman. The *Lotus Sūtra* is certainly a possible anchor, but while Tanabe's choice of the art of the *Lotus Sūtra* suggests that she is interested in the content of the art, she states in her conclusion her belief that her book

"has been a study of style, which is, as Meyer Shapiro expressed it, the essential object of the art historian's investigations" (p. 122). She is interested in history and religion as the background of style. Yet, to my mind, religion connects the paintings she has chosen and style does not. There is no more visual resemblance between a decorated copy of the *Lotus Sūtra* and a *hensō* painting than there is between a hand copied Bible and a painting of the Nativity. Moreover, one sort of painting did not lead to and then replace another; much of the time they coexisted.

Part of the problem is the meaning of terms like style. I use the word style to refer to such things as composition and color in a painting—to the visual form of the picture apart from its content. Tanabe includes within her definition of style the choice of which episode of the *Lotus Sūtra* is illustrated. In practice, her definition of style includes all of *the ways in which the Lotus Sūtra is decorated and illustrated.* This I cannot accept, for it is so broad it become uncomfortably vague. Its breadth also conflicts with her decision to deal only with certain groups of scrolls and paintings (as though two paintings had more in common than a painting and a sculpture); and with her paying attention to slight differences of line and shading when she treats a closely related group of paintings. The chief movement she describes is that from text to replacement of the text by pictures. I think this idea is invalid and that it stems from a desire to tie together disparate items. Surely it would be better, if discussing style, to discuss art that visually makes a coherent group: sūtra scrolls or Kamakura period priest sculptures. Here the American or European scholar is at a severe disadvantage because he is unlikely to be able to become familiar enough with the objects to make a new statement.

What foreign scholars can do is to bring fresh eyes and fresh minds to the study of Japanese religious art. They can take advantage of being outside the Japanese academic world and also take advantage of the example set by Japanese art historians in treating such things as temple histories, religious cults, and the actual practice of religion as it is reflected in the production of art.

When I finished reading Christine Guth Kanda's *Shinzō*, and when I finished Tanabe's book, I felt disappointed that they were not somehow more interesting; that Hachiman seemed dull and that the art of the *Lotus Sūtra* was not as touching as I had always found it. The authors are so cautious! Although they must genuinely love the material they deal with, their communication of the reasons for their involvement is compromised. I believe that if they felt free to concentrate on subject rather than on style, to use art as a document with which to investigate history, they would be doing what they suggest, with their choice of focus for their work, they would truly like to be doing. Ideas about art historical research should change to accommodate this sensible desire.

REFERENCES

KANDA, Christine Guth
1985 *Shinzō: Hachiman Imagery and its Development*. Harvard East Asia Monographs, No. 119. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University.

GRAPARD, Allan
1984 Japan's ignored cultural revolution: The separation of Shinto and Buddhist divinities in Meiji (*shimbutsu bunri*) and a case study: Tōnomine. *History of Religions* 23/3:240–265.

Susan TYLER
Kyoto, Japan