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BETWEEN HEAVEN AND HELL

Salvation, Damnation, and Memorialization in the Arts of Death

... Together we shared both bitter and sweet.
Expecting a hundred years of love,
How could I know you'd go one evening?
I still remember that last hour,
You held me, but you could not speak.
Although this body yet survives,
Finally we'll be dust together.
—Mei Yaochen, (1002–1060), “Sorrow”¹

Thoughts arise endlessly,
There's a span to every life.
One hundred years, thirty-six thousand days: The spring through,
the butterfly dreams.
—Daichi (1290–1366)²

AS POIGNANTLY VOICED by these two poems—the first by a Chinese Song dynasty literati poet, whose work was inspired by the deaths of his wife and several children; the other, a *jisei* (poem written at the end of life) by a Japanese Zen monk—death's inevitability is an uncomfortable, yet undeniable, aspect of life. Through time and space, artists and their patrons have responded to this unpleasant truth by creating works of art that help the living cope with the passing of loved ones, ensure that the dead are not forgotten, and secure salvation and comfort in the afterlife. Death-related art may convey terror, devastating loss, resolution, heroic paradigms, or paths to liberation.

This themed volume of *Ars Orientalis*, titled “The Arts of Death in Asia,” is the culmination of a panel of the same name held at the 2012 Association of Asian Studies annual conference in Toronto. The panel examined arts of death in pan-Asian visual cultures and in different media, from ancient times to the present. As panelists, we were inspired by the continent's rich and varied visual expressions of death, memorialization, the afterlife, soteriology, and eschatology. Rather than accepting fixed meanings for these artworks, we highlighted their dynamic nature and examined ways in which their audiences, meanings, and functions change over time. Several of the essays offer innovative reinterpretations and new insights into canonical works of Asian death art, from a wide temporal and chronological scope, bringing multiple visual cultures, religious, and ritual practices into pan-Asian dialogue.

Much of the extant scholarship considers art, ritual, and religious beliefs as they relate to singular memorials or, more broadly, typologies of funerary art of a particular region or historical era.³ Scholars such as Wu Hung⁴ examine early imperial

Chinese tombs, reading their contents, symbolism, and spatiality against contemporaneous understandings of death and the afterlife. As demonstrated in the work of Fusae Kanada⁵ and Ikumi Kaminishi,⁶ who also contributes to this volume, Japan has a long and well-developed artistic tradition of depictions of the macabre. Both Kanada's and Kaminishi's work expands the cast of characters in Japanese images of the afterlife beyond the better-known *gaki zoshi* (twelfth-century Japanese Buddhist scrolls of "hungry ghosts") to include traditions of corpse paintings. In South Asian art history, scholars such as Catherine Asher,⁷ Wayne Begley,⁸ and Ebba Koch⁹ have produced a steady stream of scholarship on the forms and functions of Indo-Islamic tombs.

Among the few publications to embrace a wide geographical and cultural scope for death arts, the 2012 spring/autumn issue of *Res* ambitiously compared Roman and Chinese Han dynasty sarcophagi. This volume of *Ars Orientalis* was inspired by a similar goal: to bring multiple examples of the Asian arts of death into dialogue with each other. As researchers and teachers of Asian arts and humanities are well aware, Asia is by no means a monolithic entity. The continent, now home to billions of people, is characterized by countless languages, cultures, religions, and artistic traditions. Nonetheless, as we hope to demonstrate, there is much to be gained by bringing the arts of death, which are well represented throughout Asia, into a wider purview and by comparing works of art and practices in multiple Asian contexts. While our contributions represent different religious traditions, including Hinduism, Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, and Islam, as well as great swaths of time and space, they are united by several shared issues, such as the functions of death-related spaces and artworks and intersections of remembrance, ritual, and art. More universal concerns addressed in these essays include communal memory and the past and questions about the function and meaning of spaces and objects for their audiences over time. In addition to generating conversations around these topics, we hope that this volume inspires further study, particularly on the rich topic of intercultural encounters and influence.

Another aim of this volume is to honor the memory of Dr. Melanie Michailidis, a gifted young scholar of Islamic art, whose essay, "Dynastic Politics and the Samanid Mausoleum," is featured in this issue. Melanie was tragically killed on February 1, 2013, two days after she submitted her essay. She is deeply missed by her friends, family, and her colleagues and students at Washington University in St. Louis, where she held a postdoctoral fellowship in both the department of art history and archaeology and at the Saint Louis Art Museum. After receiving her doctorate in Islamic art history from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2007, under the direction of Professor Nasser Rabbat, Melanie gained international recognition as one of the few specialists in the world on Samanid architecture. Her

numerous publications and lectures also addressed a wide variety of other types of art and architecture from Iran and Central Asia, including visual cultures of trade routes,¹⁰ castles,¹¹ and funerary architecture.¹² Melanie's untimely passing was cruelly ironic, given the theme of this volume and her own essay on a medieval Islamic tomb. Thus, we dedicate this issue of *Ars Orientalis* to her in the hope that it will be a fitting tribute to a bright and promising career that was cut short. Once again, we are reminded of death's omnipresence and inevitability, awareness of which has inspired art throughout the world for millennia.

Universally, the arts of death raise questions about their intended audience that are particular to this category of art. As demonstrated by several essays in this volume, perhaps paradoxically, death art may be just as much for the benefit of the living as the deceased. That is, while honoring the dead, many of the patrons discussed in the essays exploited their commissions to also claim their own power. As with several notable studies of Sultanate and Mughal tombs,¹³ Melanie Michailidis and I offer cases in our respective essays about patrons commissioning uncommonly large memorials with meaningful decorative programs for their predecessors to announce their dynastic lineages and thus, their own worth to rule. We both also consider those funerary memorials as visual rallying cries, which were intended to be chronotopes for new, politically upwardly mobile communities.

Michailidis's essay revisits the monumental Samanid mausoleum in Bukhara; while well known among Islamic art historians, it has not yet been the subject of critical examination. She offers compelling evidence that contrary to claims in the few earlier studies, the first Samanid ruler Ismail (died 907) commissioned the tomb for his father. She interprets Ismail's commission of the building as a territorial act; he sought to weave Samanid corporeal remains into the land his new dynasty had recently conquered. Michailidis draws from the writings of historian Eric Hobsbawm, who argued that the reinterpretation of communal identities and strident references to a specific (and often fictive) past historically occur during times of sociopolitical change and unrest. The Samanid dynasty was indeed founded against such a backdrop of upheaval. Michailidis reads Ismail's appropriation of the earlier Sasanian Zoroastrian fire-temple form as a visual expression of the Samanids' aim to associate their dynasty with the Persian past and present Ismail as the Sasanians' legitimate political heir.

My essay, "Monumental Pride: Mayawati's Memorials in Lucknow," engages in a similar reading of two memorials in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India, which were completed only a few years ago. The Ambedkar *stupā* and the Bahujan Samaj Prerna Kendra (the latter is a cenotaph) were commissioned by Mayawati, a female low-caste (*dalit*) politician, and enshrine monumental statues of historical *dalit* social reformers and narrative friezes. Like Michailidis, I too read the exceptional

scale and appropriation of earlier, politically meaningful forms—in this case, from ancient Indian Buddhist structures—as a promotion of their patron’s political career. The extensive decorative programs in the two Lucknow memorials present Mayawati as heir to earlier notable male leaders. While Ismail’s commissions, as Michailidis notes, are evidence of his attempts to inaugurate a Persian renaissance, Mayawari’s present her rule as a revival of ancient Indian Buddhist culture.

Several global traditions of memorial art serve didactic functions; they aim to inspire heroic or pious behavior among the living. For example, religious and political martyrs are memorialized to celebrate their selfless acts and to inspire the living. Mary Storm’s essay, “An Unusual Group of Hero Stones: Commemorating Self-Sacrifice at Mallam, Andhra Pradesh,” analyzes images of male auto-sacrifice on medieval South Indian hero stones and interprets them as heroic paradigms to their original audiences. Specifically, Storm’s essay concerns images of auto-decapitation. She argues that these images are not metaphoric, but depict praxis, which was deemed necessary during times of social or natural crisis. Her essay thus contributes to our understanding of religious ritual and gendered ideals in medieval South India and complements the wealth of studies on *satī* in North India.

If depictions of martyrdom and other forms of self-sacrifice are intended to galvanize the living toward similar acts, then, as Ikumi Kaminishi argues in “The Political Culture of a Scroll: Jien’s Appropriation of Kitano Tenjin,” art also may dissuade people from committing immoral acts, such as treachery and deception. Kaminishi analyzes the *Kitano Tenjin engi emaki*, a thirteenth-century Japanese handscroll that illustrates the tale of the vengeful ghost of a wronged courtier. The ghost was a historic figure, now popularly known as Kitano Tenjin, who died in exile some three centuries prior to the scroll’s creation. He tormented those who conspired against him and was pacified only when he was ceremonially transformed into a deity. He remains an object of worship and veneration at several shrines today. Like Storm, Kaminishi provides valuable insight into the confluence of death, art, belief, and popular practice at a specific historic moment. The paintings in the *Kitano Tenjin engi emaki* are also an example of the rich cross-fertilization between Buddhism and the pre-Buddhist religions of Japan. Kaminishi considers how Buddhist concepts, such as the Eight Hells (*jigoku-e*) and the Six Realms (*rokudo-e*), were woven into and given graphic renditions in a popular story rooted in pre-Buddhist concepts of the afterlife. This essay contributes to the numerous studies on ghosts in Japanese Buddhist art and culture¹⁴ and offers a compelling comparison to the paper by Christiane Gruber (discussed below). Both authors consider graphic images of hell and torturous punishments as they relate to specific crimes. For their respective audiences, these images doubtlessly were commissioned to divert the viewer from sin and avoid the perils of hell.

“Onward to Heaven: Burning the *Nok Hatsadiling*,” Rebecca Hall’s essay about elaborate royal and monastic Thai cremation structures (*nok hatsadiling–prasat*), considers objects that fulfill various needs for both the living and the dead. Hall demonstrates that funerary art may be designed not only to keep the dead “alive” and “with us” but, just as important, to comfort the living by ameliorating their loss and horror as they are reminded of their own mortality. Furthermore, Hall argues, in Thailand people’s comfort may be derived from the belief that the cremation structures assist with the transition of the dead person’s soul to an auspicious afterlife. Specific traditions of death art, such as Thai *nok hatsadiling–prasat* and Chinese *mingqi* (“spirit objects” that are buried with the dead and are useful to the soul in the afterlife) can be understood in relation to psychoanalyst Donald Wilcott’s concept of “transitional objects.” These are “comfort objects” that ease a child’s anxiety during moments of change, such as when she is separated from her mother.¹⁵ Traditions of funerary art may have similar uses, as they help the living and the dead at the transitional moment of rupture between life and death.¹⁶

The final category of death art created specifically for the living included in this volume is *memento mori*, and the closely related topic of eschatological art. Among the most popular medieval and Renaissance European examples are paintings and prints of the Dance of Death and Doom paintings. The latter includes renditions of the Last Judgment by Michelangelo and Raphael, which depict Christ judging souls at the “end of days” and dispatching them to either heaven or hell. Such artworks warn of death’s inevitability and encourage viewers toward a path of piety and righteousness with promises of salvation or warnings of eternal damnation. Similarly, Asian renditions of the afterlife tantalize with luxurious depictions of paradise and admonish with terrifying renditions of perdition. The *gaki zoshi* and the *Kitano Tenjin engi emaki* are just two examples. Christiane Gruber’s “Signs of the Hour: Eschatological Imagery in Islamic Book Arts” analyzes depictions of heaven, hell, and Armageddon in Persian and Ottoman courtly manuscripts. This study is in conversation with the corpus of scholarship on European Christian eschatological art and beliefs.¹⁷

Gruber also brings to light and analyzes images of the Prophet Muhammad’s celestial ascension (*mi’raj*), a topic central to her ongoing research.¹⁸ In these *mi’raj* paintings, Muhammad travels to heaven and hell and converses with earlier prophets and God. Scholarly analyses of these rare depictions of the Prophet complicate popular beliefs regarding Islam and its arts. As ample evidence attests, prohibitions of depictions of the faith’s most revered human figure were not universally formulated or applied. The inclusion of Muhammad serves devotional and didactic purposes: we ascend with him on the fabulous therianthropic Buraq and are instructed how to attain salvation and avoid hell. Gruber also demonstrates that

religiopolitical issues are frequently entangled with art. She shows, for example, how Sunni Ottoman and Shi'i Safavid patrons exploited eschatological paintings and picto-diagrams to defame and discredit one another's faith or support their own sectarian agendas.

A volume on "The Arts of Death in Asia" would be incomplete without essays on East Asian tombs. "Claims of Buddhist Relics in the Eastern Han Tomb Murals at Horing: Issues in the Historiography of the Introduction of Buddhism to China" by Minku Kim and "The Eternal Link: Grave Goods of the Koryŏ Kingdom (918–1392)" by Charlotte Horlyck are dedicated to this topic. Informed primarily by complex indigenous belief systems that the afterlife is a continuation of life on Earth, early Chinese and Korean tombs were created as microcosms of the world the deceased inhabited in life. This, it was believed, enabled the occupants to continue to "live," rule, and lead armies amid familiar surroundings.¹⁹ Reaffirming such values of mortuary space in Eastern Han China, Kim's essay reconsiders the iconographic program of the murals in a second-century tomb in Horing, Inner Mongolia, and challenges accepted readings of the Buddhist "relic" inscription on the ceiling of the tomb's antechamber. Relying on archaeological evidence, iconography, philology, and anthropology, Kim calls for a reexamination of the influence of Buddhism on Han dynasty Chinese tombs, which he asserts has been overestimated. "Claims of Buddhist Relics in the Eastern Han Tomb Murals at Horing," therefore, not only contributes to scholarship on early Chinese funerary art, but also enriches our understanding of how Buddhism and its arts were synthesized with preexisting Chinese traditions.

Horlyck considers the much later case of Koryŏ era tombs and premodern Korean mortuary practices, subjects that are part of her ongoing research.²⁰ She engages with primary sources to read the "transitional objects," placed in Koryŏ tombs, including celadon and earthen wares, bronze bowls and spoons, and chopsticks. She also considers how Korean burial customs and objects changed over time in response to evolving religious and philosophical notions about the dead. The close of the Koryŏ dynasty witnessed a dramatic shift in Korean funerary culture. During the Koryŏ and earlier eras, the dead were typically buried with precious family heirlooms. The rise of Neo-Confucianism and the popularity of ritual manuals in post-Koryŏ Korea initiated entirely different ways of burying the dead, including the practice of internment with purpose-manufactured grave goods. This, in turn, launched an entire industry of death art, which was intended to be enjoyed exclusively by the deceased.

In addition to contributing to their respective art historical disciplines, the authors of these essays anticipate that, collectively, their work will enrich the wider field of Asian art history. To our knowledge, this volume represents the first schol-

arly attempt to unite examinations of death art from across Asia, which represents millennia of practice and belief. It is also our belief that our essays will initiate a wider, cross-cultural conversation on how artists and their patrons in Asia and beyond created art in response to the horror of being forgotten, to establish themselves comfortably in the afterlife, or to weave their dynastic lineages and political legitimacy into the urban fabrics of contested spaces.

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NOTES

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- 1 Kenneth Rexroth, *One Hundred Poems from the Chinese* (Whitefish: Literary Licensing, 2011), 42.
- 2 Lucien Stryker, "I Fear Nothing: A Note on the Zen Poetry of Death," *The American Poetry Review* 20, no. 3 (May/June 1991), 35.
- 3 The following list of studies on Asian death art is by no means exhaustive. An overview of the extensive corpus of literature on the material cultures of death from all communities, religions, and regions of Asia is far beyond the scope of this essay.
- 4 Wu Hung, *Art of the Yellow Springs* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 2009). Further sources on early imperial Chinese funerary art include Lillian Lan-ying Tseng, *Picturing Heaven in Early China* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2011); George Kuwayama, ed., *Ancient Mortuary Traditions of China: Papers on Chinese Ceramic Funerary Sculptures* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1992); Jane Portal, ed., *The First Emperor: China's Terracotta Army* (London: British Museum, 2007); Cary Y. Liu et al., *Recarving China's Past: Art, Archaeology, and Architecture of the "Wu Family Shrines"* (New Haven: Yale University, 2005).
- 5 Fusae Kanada, "Behind the Sensationalism: Images of a Decaying Corpse in Japanese Buddhism," *The Art Bulletin* 87, no. 1 (2005).
- 6 Ikumi Kaminishi, "Dead Beautiful: Visualizing the Decaying Corpse in Nine Stages as Skillful Means of Buddhism," in *A Companion to Asian Art and Architecture*, ed. Rebecca Brown and Deborah Hutton (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).
- 7 Among Catherine Asher's several publications on political readings of Sultanate and Mughal tombs is "Legacy and Legitimacy: Sher Shah's Patronage of Imperial Mausolea," in *Shari'at Ambiguity in South Asian Islam*, ed. Katherine P. Ewing (Berkeley: University of California, 1988).
- 8 Wayne E. Begley, "The Myth of the Taj Mahal and a New Theory of Its Symbolic Meaning," *The Art Bulletin* 61, no. 1 (1979).
- 9 Ebba Koch, *The Complete Taj Mahal* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2006); Koch, *Complete Taj Mahal and Its Riverfront Gardens* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2012).
- 10 Melanie Michaildis, "Samanid Silver and Trade along the Fur Route," *Mechanisms of Exchange: Transmission in Medieval Art and Architecture in the Mediterranean, ca. 1000–1500*, ed. Heather E. Grossman and Alicia Walker, special issue of *Medieval Encounters* 18, nos. 4–5 (December 2012).
- 11 Melanie Michaildis, "The Lofty Castle of Qabus b. Voshmgir," in *Early Islamic Iran*, ed. Edmund Herzog and Sarah Stewart (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012).
- 12 Melanie Michaildis, "Empty Graves: The Tomb Towers of Northern Iran," *Proceedings of the Ninth Conference of the European Society for Central Asian Studies*, ed. Tomas Gacek and Jadwiga Pstrusińska (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars, 2009).
- 13 Among others, Asher, "Legacy and Legitimacy"; Glen D. Lowry, "Hamayun's Tomb: Form, Function, and Meaning in Early Mughal Architecture," *Muqarnas* 4 (1987); Michael Brand, "Orthodoxy, Innovation, and Revival: Considerations of the Past in Imperial Mughal Tomb Architecture," *Muqarnas* 10 (1993).

- 14 William R. LaFleur, "Hungry Ghosts and Hungry People: Somaticity and Rationality in Medieval Japan," in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, vol. 2, ed. Michael Feher (New York: Zone, 1989); Michiko Iwasaka and Barre Toelken, *Ghosts and the Japanese: Cultural Experience in Japanese Death Legends* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1994).
- 15 Donald Winicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock, 1971), chap. 1.
- 16 Laurie Schneider Adams, *The Methodologies of Art: An Introduction* (Icon Editions, 1996; Boulder, CO: Westview, 2007), 203.
- 17 Nancy Grubb, *Revelations: Art of the Apocalypse* (New York: Abbeville, 1997); Nigel J. Morgan, *Illuminating the End of Time: The Getty Apocalypse Manuscript* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2012); Morgan, *The Douce Apocalypse: Picturing the End of the World in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, Bodleian Library, 2007); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York: Columbia University, 1995).
- 18 In particular, see the following works by Christiane Gruber: *The Ilkhanid Book of Ascension: A Persian-Sunni Devotional Tale* (London: I. B. Tauris and British Institute for Persian Studies, 2010); *The Timurid Book of Ascension (Mi'rajnama): A Study of Text and Image in a Pan-Asian Context* (Valencia, Spain: Patrimonio Ediciones in collaboration with the Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2008); and "Between Logos (*Kalima*) and Light (*Nur*): Representations of the Prophet Muhammad in Islamic Painting," *Muqarnas* 26 (2009).
- 19 Jessica Rawson, "The First Emperor's Tomb: The Afterlife Universe," in Portal, *The First Emperor*; Hung, *Art of the Yellow Springs*, 20.
- 20 Among Horlyck's publications on Korean tombs and their contents is her forthcoming volume with the University of Hawaii Press, which she coedited with M. Pettid, *Death, Mourning, and the Afterlife in Korea: Critical Aspects of Death from Ancient to Contemporary Times*. Her essays include "Kkoktu: Guides, Guardians and Keepers of the Soul," in *Korean Funerary Figures: Companions to the Journey to the Other World*, ed. Carrie Frederick (New York: Korea Society, 2007); "Burial Offerings to Objets d'Art: Celadon Wares of the Koryŏ Kingdom (AD 918–1392)," *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society* 73 (2008–2009); "Confucian Burial Practices in the Late Goryeo and Early Joseon Periods," *The Review of Korean Studies* 11, no. 2 (2008).