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P.O. Box 37012, MRC 707
Washington, DC 20013–7012

For deliveries
(DHL, FedEx, UPS, courier):
1050 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20560

ISSN 0571-1371

Printed in the United States of America
© 2016 Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, D.C.

Ars Orientalis is a peer-reviewed annual volume of scholarly articles on the art and archaeology of Asia, the ancient Near East, and the Islamic world. It is published jointly by the Freer and Sackler Galleries and the University of Michigan Department of History of Art. Fostering a broad range of topics and approaches through themed issues, the journal is intended for scholars in diverse fields. *Ars Orientalis* provides a forum for new scholarship, with a particular interest in work that redefines and crosses boundaries, both spatial and temporal. Authors are asked to follow *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 16th edition.

Ars Orientalis is now available online at arsorientalis.si.edu.

Ars Orientalis subscriptions are handled by Turpin Distribution. (For contact information, go to www.asia.si.edu/research/ArsOrientalis.asp.)

Current subscription rates (including shipping):

U.S. individual	U.S. institution	International individual	International institution
Print: \$48	Print: \$58	Print: \$55	Print: \$68
Online: \$40	Online: \$48	Online: \$40	Online: \$48
Bundle: \$55	Bundle: \$65	Bundle: \$60	Bundle: \$80

Subscription-related inquires (invoice, payment, and change of address):
turpinna@turpin-distribution.com (Canada, Mexico, USA)
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The full text of *Ars Orientalis* is also available in the electronic versions of *Art Index* and online through JSTOR (www.jstor.org). Beginning with volume 42 (2012), it is also indexed and abstracted in the Art and Humanities Citation Index.

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INTRODUCTION

1

Buddhas of the Four Directions
circling an empty center, installed on
the third level of the Timber Pagoda
at Fogong Monastery, Yingxian,
Shanxi, China, 1056. After Cheng
Mingda. *Yingxian Muta* (Wooden
Pagoda in Yingxian), plate 74
(Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1966)

AN EXCITING ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERY was made during the Xianhe 咸和 era (326–34 CE) of the Jin 晉 dynasty in southern China. At the Zhanghou Bridge 張侯橋, a gilded Buddhist icon was retrieved from the waters of the bay by Gao Li 高浬, the prefect of Danyang 丹陽. Not only did the icon appear to have an important provenance, bearing an inscription that connected it to the clan of the great Indian monarch and Buddhist patron King Aśoka, but it also had been crafted with great skill and care. Sometime later, five monks from the Western Regions visited Gao Li and told him that they had dreamt of precisely this statue and its emergence from the water. They subsequently traveled far and wide, hoping for a chance to worship it. Gao Li escorted the monks to the Changgansi 長干寺, where the statue was kept. Upon seeing it, the monks wept, and the statue emitted a light that filled the interior of the hall.¹

By what means do Buddhist artworks and structures manifest and communicate their spiritual efficacy? The tale above answers this question by relating the rapport between the foreign monks and the miraculous statue. The monks felt compelled to travel over mountains and across seas in an effort to catch but one glimpse of and worship the statue; the statue, gilded and crafted skillfully and carefully, responded to the monks' devotion by emitting a bright light. The essays in this volume of *Ars Orientalis* seek to respond to this question more broadly. They offer a transcultural perspective on performative agency—defined as the visual and material properties of Buddhist artworks and sites that have the capability to both engage *with* as well as be engaged *by* devotees in a transformative manner, similar to that of the Changgansi statue and its bright, golden hue.²

In doing so, we build upon earlier scholarship in the disciplines of religious studies and art history that has considered the ritual contexts and devotional functions of Buddhist objects. This body of research has generally explored Buddhist icons in context and their functions in image worship or ritual performance, reorienting the study of Buddhist art and architecture away from earlier approaches that focused on issues of formal and stylistic analysis.³ Outside our field, theories of performativity have been developed, particularly in literary theory, anthropology, and gender studies. This research has provided art historians with a new theoretical apparatus through which to view art and architecture as active agents in shaping and mediating worldly experience, which in turn provides access to numinous realms and experiences. We propose to apply such insights to the study of Buddhist artworks and architecture.

J. L. Austin, author of the landmark work *How to Do Things with Words*,⁴ is credited as the first scholar to employ the notion of “performativity.” Initially, as a linguistic concept, performativity was applied to define the ways in which spoken language is more than descriptive and may be understood as “speech acts” that

actually do something. For instance, the words “I pronounce you husband and wife” at a wedding are more than a straightforward statement; they constitute a performative act that transforms the social status of the engaged couple into that of a married couple. Building upon Austin’s theories of performativity, Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*⁵ has characterized gender as a performance rather than a biological fact, an identity that is enacted by a series of outward acts or expressions. Gender thus represents a “doing” rather than a “being,” a verb rather than a noun.

To a certain extent, these seminal works on performativity and the recent scholarship on Buddhist art and architecture have given weight to the performance of human actors rather than to the agency of inanimate objects.⁶ According to Austin and Butler, states of being are brought about through the utterances or actions of human actors. We can see evidence of this in Buddhist rituals: for example, though the ritual action is often prescribed, it is still the devotee who acts upon Buddhist objects, moving at will within Buddhist worship sites. In light of this, how do we come to terms with “living” icons recorded to have been able to act by their own volition? Furthermore, what if ritual spaces were designed to intentionally exclude human “actors”? Some recent scholarship has delved into the practice of inserting ritual objects inside icons to enliven the icons and thus endow them with agency.⁷ Other scholars have developed the notion of “eternal rituals,” perpetuated by *dhāraṇīs*, *maṇḍalas*, or other ritual paraphernalia, that elide the role of the human practitioner and transfer the agency to the site or setting and its ritual accoutrements.⁸

The transformative potential of Buddhist art as the focus of image worship or ritual performance is now generally taken for granted. In this issue, we pursue the “performative turn” as a means of exploring how that transformative potential is established not solely through the actions of human actors, but also through the visual, material, and spatial qualities of Buddhist art and architecture.⁹ Most importantly, we contend that Buddhist artworks and sites are created in order to cause something to happen or to bring something into being. As explored in our essays, performativity begins with the recognition of the agency of Buddhist art and architecture. This agency is manifested through visual and material qualities that, in turn, enable the devotee to bring about the intended efficacy and religious experience through orchestrated gestures, movements, words, and other actions.

While acknowledging the importance of icon worship and ritual functions in the study of Buddhist images, we assert that considerations of the sacrality of Buddhist artworks and how they mediate religious ideas and experiences should not obfuscate the significance of their visual and material qualities. The potential and enactment of these qualities assist the devotee or practitioner in negotiating

between the visible and invisible realms and communicating the intangible through the tangible. In other words, paying attention to the visual and material qualities of Buddhist artworks does not contradict but rather enriches our understanding of their place in devotional contexts, particularly in regard to how those qualities elicit certain actions or reactions from the practitioner.

In this manner, Buddhist artworks and architecture actively shape religious programs and numinous encounters, simultaneously engaging with and being engaged by devotees. The reciprocity between object and subject thus comprises the immediate context for our examination of how Buddhist artworks and architecture actively construct sacred presence and experience. At stake are the following ontological questions: How do Buddhist artworks and architecture manifest their own agency? What do they do in order to fulfill their functions? Finally, how do they prompt devotees to act in performative ways?

The essays in this volume respond to these questions from multifaceted perspectives, with an emphasis on how the performative agency of Buddhist artworks and sites is manifested visually and materially. The agentic power of Buddhist art may be illustrated in Chinese literary tales of animated statues, as analyzed in Michelle C. Wang's contribution. Not content merely to be the passive recipients of the devotee's gaze, these statues willfully impose themselves on the humans around them. Their range of locomotion is reflected in the construction of their bodies, which both mirrors that of ordinary human bodies in their vulnerability and underscores the statues' status as icons capable of inspiring awe and wonder. The material aspect of the performativity of Buddhist artworks is particularly intriguing in Rebecca Hall's discussion of Thai funerary banners. Made of textile or paper, the banners, recognizable by their characteristic three-tailed form, play a pivotal role in the funeral ceremony. But given the fact that the banner is made to be cremated alongside the body of the deceased, its "ephemerality," in addition to its form, acts out the essential meanings of a Buddhist funeral—impermanence, transition, and transformation. Both of these essays offer examples in which Buddhist artworks are important points of contact with human devotees, whether within or outside of immediate Buddhist ritual contexts, and elicit emotions ranging from reverence and astonishment to comfort and fear.

The next two essays address architectural sites that demand ways of seeing and approaching according to their elements of size, scale, material, and location. The focus of Sunkyung Kim's essay is not so much on the individual icons carved into a stone monument on the Korean peninsula, but rather on their totality as deities inhabiting a Buddha land. Importantly, it is the path dictating the viewer's movements at the monument that experientially transforms the site. The placement of individual icons is made meaningful only through the viewer's circumambulation

of the site, which in turn is circumscribed by natural and architectural features. In Wei-cheng Lin's essay, there is no doubt that the dizzying height of multilevel pagodas in China visually engages visitors. The physical structure is endowed with agency, drawing devotees to enter, circumambulate, and ascend—acts that in turn enact the presence of the cosmic Buddha Vairocana, which the pagoda embodies. In these two case studies, site and devotee work together in a reciprocal manner, allowing the full performative potential of the site to emerge and the presence of Buddhas to be revealed.

The final three contributions illustrate the ways in which the material and visual properties of Buddhist artworks construct knowledge through their enactment of devotional actions or ideals. Akiko Walley's essay demonstrates that the efficacy of Japanese reliquaries as a means of salvation lies precisely in their shape, form, material, and ornamentation. The visual narrative of nesting reliquary containers represented and even performed miraculous acts that were attributed to the relics' sympathetic response to devotees' supplication. A work of Japanese Zen calligraphy, as considered in Charlotte Eubanks' essay, carries the specific semantic content of how to meditate; the content in turn resonates with the calm and measured style of calligraphic forms realized in ink on paper, which evokes the act of seated meditation. Eubanks goes on to draw important links between the performative dimensions of calligraphy and the embodied nature of calligraphic practice. Finally, Jinah Kim's analysis of miniaturized figures seemingly relegated to the periphery of Indian stelae demonstrates that they are more than mere donor figures. They embody actual devotional actions, allude to personal visions of the devotees, and serve as a place of exchange between the human and divine realms.

In sum, Buddhist artworks and architecture do things. This volume explores how they do things by means of their performative potential, which is realized through their agency and manifested in their visual and material qualities. Through expressions of their agency, Buddhist artworks and sites engage with us and command our attention in important ways, ultimately transforming us into ideal devotees.

NOTES

AUTHORS' NOTE

This volume began as a panel titled “Performative Dimensions of Buddhist Art in East Asia” that we co-chaired at the 2014 Association of Asian Studies Annual Conference. We express our thanks to fellow panelists Yui Suzuki and David Quinter for their papers, which will appear in other venues, and to our discussant Paul Copp for his helpful feedback. To the authors whose work is featured here, we extend our gratitude for their valuable contributions to our discussion of performativity. Finally, we would like to express our sincere appreciation to the members of the *Ars Orientalis* editorial board, and to Nancy Micklewright and Zeynep Simavi for their guidance and skillful coordination of the print and digital formats of the present volume.

- 1 *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 (*Biographies of Eminent Monks*), T50:2059.409c1-17. This tale is analyzed in Alexander Coburn Soper, *Literary Evidence for Early Buddhist Art in China, Artibus Asiae Supplementum* 19 (Ascona: Artibus Asiae Publishers, 1959), 9. Other important details from this tale are the rediscovery of the statue's pedestal and halo, which were gradually reunited with the statue over a period of forty years.
- 2 It is precisely because of our focus on the visual and material properties of Buddhist objects of devotion that we actively choose to use the terms *art* and *artworks* rather than *icon* or *devotional image*, as the latter two privilege the agency or actions of human devotees. In this volume, as articulated throughout the introduction, our prerogative instead is to emphasize the performative agency of Buddhist artworks and sites as expressed through their visual and material properties. In doing so, we follow the distinction drawn by Fabio Rambelli

between the devotional uses of Buddhist sacred texts and the value that they hold for their material aspects, in what Rambelli terms their “sacred materiality.” See Fabio Rambelli, *Buddhist Materiality: A Cultural History of Objects in Japanese Buddhism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 90–91. Elsewhere, he emphasizes the aesthetic dimensions of sutra copying as intrinsic to their material forms, despite the fact that art-making in the conventional sense was probably not a primary incentive (Rambelli, *Buddhist Materiality*, 107–8). On the problematization of “Buddhist art” as a discursive category, see Charles Lachman, “Art,” in Donald Lopez, ed., *Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 37–55.

- 3 To provide but a few examples, the essays in K.R. van Kooij and H. van der Veere, eds., *Function and Meaning in Buddhist Art* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1995) explored the ritual contexts of Buddhist artworks across East, South, and Southeast Asia from a comparative perspective, using textual and epigraphic evidence to deduce the functions of Buddhist imagery. This was followed by Robert H. Sharf and Elizabeth Horton Sharf, eds., *Living Images: Japanese Buddhist Icons in Context* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), which examined the roles that empowered Buddhist icons in Japan played in monastic life, primarily from the perspective of image worship. The concern with image worship and its historical reception was the focus of Phyllis Granoff and Koichi Shinohara, eds., *Images in Asian Religions* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), which presented a series of case studies from East, South, and Southeast Asia.

- 4 J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).
- 5 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2nd edition (New York and London: Routledge, 2006).
- 6 One example of the emphasis upon performance is a recent special issue of the *Journal of Religion in Japan* (2013) titled “Buddhism and the Performing Arts (*Geinō*),” guest edited by Bernard Faure. The papers in this volume explore the critical roles played by the performing arts—music, dance, theater—in Japanese Buddhism. Fabio Rambelli analyzes the performance-oriented aspects of Buddhist texts, including practices such as oral recitation, in Rambelli, *Buddhist Materiality*, 88–128. Separately, Victor Turner’s *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1986) tries to define “performance” in a broader sense (beyond theater and stage dramas) in order to include religious rituals and “social dramas” in a manner that accounts for their performative qualities and transformative powers. Erika Fischer-Lichte’s *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2008) explores performance as an active event or agency that provokes transformation in both actors and audiences, thus blurring the distinctions between them.
- 7 See, for example, Helmut Brinker, *Secrets of the Sacred: Empowering Buddhist Images in Clear, in Code, and in Cache* (Lawrence, KS: Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas; Seattle: in association with University of Washington Press, 2011) and James Robson, “The Buddhist Image Inside-Out: On the Placing of Objects Inside Statues in East Asia,” Tansen Sen, ed., *Buddhism Across Asia: Networks of Material, Intellectual, and Cultural Exchange 1* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014), 291–307.
- 8 For his most recent treatment of this issue, particularly in the Buddhist context, see Eugene Wang, “Ritual Practice without a Practitioner: Early Eleventh Century Dhāraṇī Prints in the Ruiguangsi Pagoda,” *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie* 20 (2011), 127–60. See also Youn-mi Kim, “Eternal Ritual in an Infinite Cosmos: The Chaoyang North Pagoda (1043–1044)” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2010).
- 9 More recently, the volume *Performativity and Performance in Baroque Rome*, co-edited by Peter Gillgren and Mårten Snickare (Farnham, Surrey, England, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012) continues the dialogue concerning the performative turn in the humanities by looking at early modern ceremonies, rituals, and the arts.