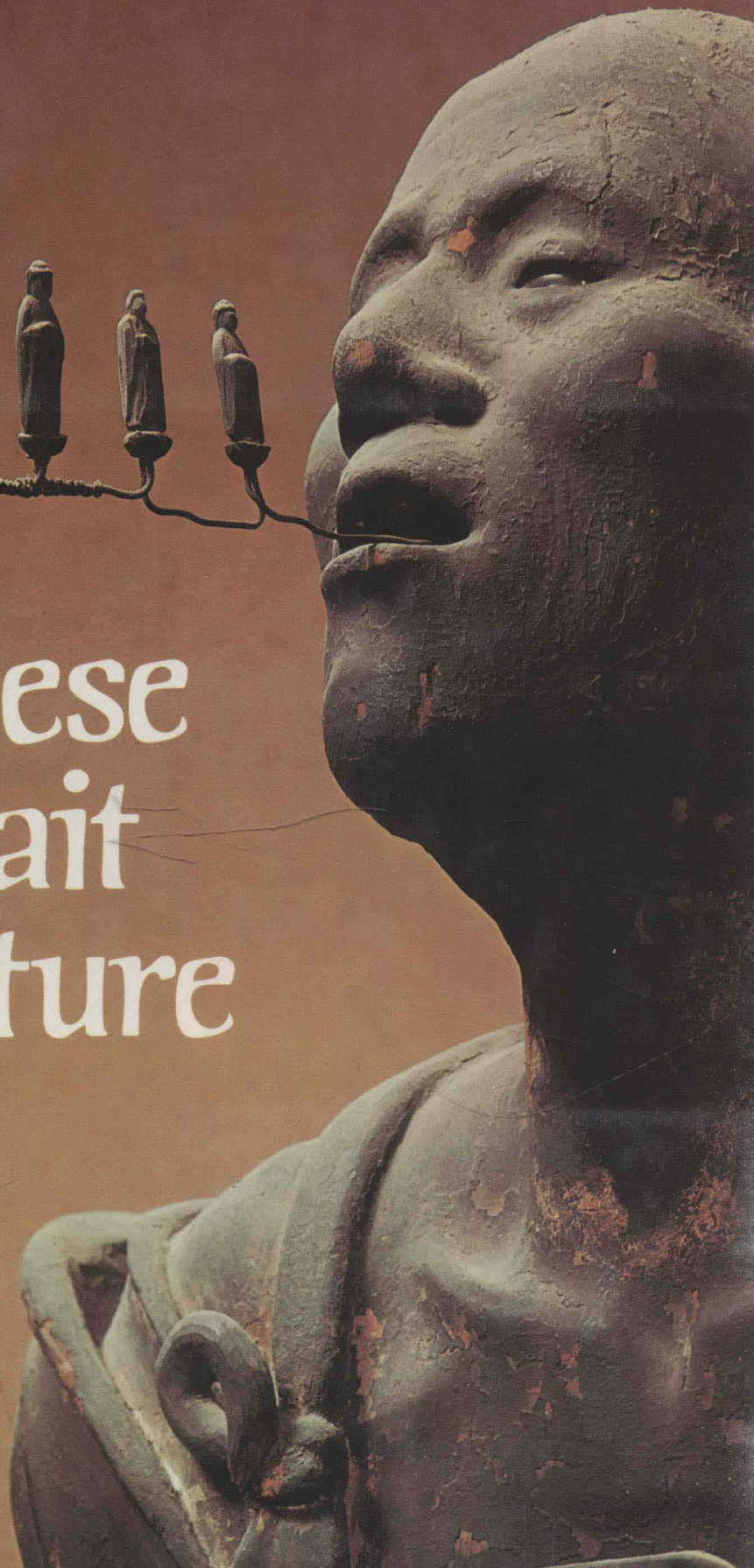




# Japanese Portrait Sculpture

Hisashi Mōri



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# JAPANESE PORTRAIT SCULPTURE

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translated and adapted by  
W. Chië Ishibashi

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#### A Note to the Reader

Japanese names are given in the customary Japanese order, surname preceding given name. The names of temples and subordinate buildings can be discerned by their suffixes: *-ji*, *-tera*, *-dera* referring to temples (Tōshōdai-ji; Ishiyama-dera); *-in* usually to a subtemple attached to a temple (Shōryō-in at Hōryū-ji); *-dō* to a building with a special function (Miei-dō); *-bō* and *-an* to larger and smaller monastic residences, respectively (Gokuraku-bō; Ryūgin-an).

# INTRODUCTION

Before attempting to analyze and evaluate the body of works classified as Japanese portrait sculpture, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of the term "portrait." John Pope-Hennessy, in the preface to his volume *The Portrait in the Renaissance*, defines portraiture as the "depiction of the individual in his own character." One can presuppose that the present-day reader understands the phrase "individual in his own character" since the Renaissance tradition of individualism still survives in modern attitudes concerning individuality, character, and personality. When this definition is applied, however, to the portraiture of periods and places having little or no relationship to the cultural traditions of the modern West, no such correspondence of attitude can be assumed between the creator of the portrait and the present-day beholder; for portraiture, perhaps more than any other form of visual art, reveals the self-conception of the culture that produced it. To interpolate modern Western concepts of personality into a portrait before ascertaining the extent to which the culture that produced it subscribed to these concepts is not only to misunderstand the work of art, but also to misunderstand the culture.

A portrait may be apprehended on three levels. The first is on the formal plane where it is judged primarily as a work of art, compared stylistically to other related artistic productions, and placed within its proper niche in the formal evolution of works of its kind. The second level concerns the relationship between the portrait and its subject; that is to say, its identification—the extent to which it faithfully communicates the physical appearance of the subject, and the manner in which this descriptive process is executed. These first two dimensions of appreciation may contradict each other, for they are essentially at cross-purposes; G. M. A. Hanfmann, in his analysis of Roman portraiture, remarks upon this basic contrast in viewpoint: "The historian asks for the most faithful portrait of Augustus; the art historian for the best portraits in the Augustan style."\* The third level of appreciation is that of the exegetical, where the observer may be able to discern, from the nature and identity of the subject and the style of execution, the character of the culture by and for which

\* *Observations on Roman Portraiture*, p. 20.

the portrait was created. All three levels must be taken into consideration when analyzing a portrait in order to understand it as a complete entity.

Keeping these thoughts on the general nature of portraiture in mind, one can begin to focus on a specific area—in this case that of Japanese sculpted portraits, a noteworthy body of works that has yet to be given full consideration among the world's significant portrait traditions.

Japanese portrait sculpture developed in a Buddhist context and never completely divorced itself from that religious setting. From the beginning, the majority of the subjects portrayed were religious personages, whether legendary or historical. Even when lay subjects began to appear in the latter part of the Kamakura period, their portraits were enshrined in temples with which they were closely affiliated.

The intimate connection between Buddhism and portrait sculpture creates complications in the very definition of portraiture, for the association of portraits with Buddhist liturgy blurs the distinction between historical and imaginary portraiture, and between portraits and objects of worship. Even among Japanese scholars there is disagreement concerning the definition of a portrait: there are those who assert that any work representing an individual personage, whether mythical or historical, can be classed as a portrait; others hold that only depictions of historical personages whose representations are in some way grounded in personal observation can be termed portraiture. The genre itself defies absolute categorization. In attempting to distinguish between portraits and objects of worship, it is immediately apparent that there are numerous portraits that serve as objects of worship. In attempting to differentiate between mythical and historical personages, one is faced with representations of historical personages produced so long after their deaths that they may as well represent legendary figures. And if one attempts to establish stylistic criteria for differentiating between depictions of historical personages and representations of figures from legend, it is soon discovered that historical figures are at times rendered according to the canons regulating the proportions of images of Buddhist deities, while mythical figures may be treated in a realistic manner. Indeed, the development of Japanese portrait sculpture is so closely allied to the Buddhist establishment and Buddhist art that an understanding of the relationship between them is absolutely essential to the appreciation of the sculpted portrait.

Whatever form portraiture may take—whether specific physical traits or more general features are stressed, whether overt expression or subtle nuance is preferred—it would seem essential, if portraiture is to exist, for the culture involved to possess an affirmative attitude toward physical form. Yet, from its beginnings, Buddhism has had a negative outlook toward the material world and the human body. In the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra*, dating to the second century A.D., the sage Vimalakīrti delivers an eloquent sermon on the infirmities of the human flesh:

weak; it is without solidity, is perishable, of short duration, is filled with sorrow and unease, filled with ailments and subject to change. . . . The wise man trusts it not.\*

When the human body is held in such low esteem, the only reasonable rationale for the physical depiction of a specific individual would be that the production of the image of a venerated monk or devotee might help to further the spread and understanding of the Buddhist faith. Such a practice would be permissible according to the concept of *upāya kauśalya* or "skill in means," the teaching method of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni, who used different approaches according to the needs and limitations of the individuals seeking guidance.

The monk portrait, probably derived from the strong tradition of arhat representation in China and transmitted to Japan, was surrounded by a strongly devotional atmosphere and invested with great religious significance, a physical reminder of the achievements of the subject and his position in the chain of transmission of the Buddhist law. In such a setting it was natural for a portrait to be commissioned by the disciples of a monk shortly after his death in order to commemorate his memory; it was not until the later stages of Japanese Buddhism that portraits of living subjects came to be produced, or that portraits were commissioned by the subject himself for purely personal reasons.

With an understanding of the general religious ambience of Japanese portrait sculpture, one can attempt to evaluate its degree of success as true portraiture. Once Pope-Hennessy's definition of true portraiture as the "depiction of the individual in his own character" is accepted, a term is then needed for those works that fall into the more general category of portraiture but yet do not satisfy the requirements of a true portrait. It is here suggested that these works should be described as "attributive portraits," that is, representations of specific personages characterized not by an attempt to penetrate the psychology of the subject but by an identification or depiction of the subject through his accepted external attributes.

It is of interest to note that the term "true portraiture" is most applicable to Japanese portrait sculpture in the following two situations: when the character and achievements of the subject portrayed are of primary importance to the transmission of religious beliefs, especially apparent in the representation of Zen monks (see pls. 3, 83-84, 85, 120-22); and when sculpted portraits in Japan are subject to the influence of realistic currents in Chinese art, as in the case of the statues of Ganjin (Chien-chen) (pls. 5-6), and Shunjōbō Chōgen (pls. 73, 81). It appears that the further the character of the portrait subject is from serving an essential religious function, and the greater the distance from vitalizing artistic influences that promote realism, the greater the tendency to rely on the attributive qualities of the portrait subject, and the less

\* *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra* II: 7-13, trans. Étienne Lamotte. In *L'Enseignement de Vimalakīrti (Vimalakīrtinirdeśa)*. Louvain : Publications Universitaires, 1962.



the inclination to portray the personality of the individual involved. Intellectually though not aesthetically interesting examples of this phenomenon are to be seen in the group of statues of the fifteen generations of the Ashikaga shoguns in the Tōji-in in Kyoto, the figures of Toyotomi Hidetsugi and the nun Nichihide in the Zenshō-ji in Kyoto, and the image of Fujioka Chōbee in the Kyoto Fukutoku-ji, all of which date to the period of decline of Buddhism from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, and all considerably smaller than life-size, highly stylized, and doll-like.

The application of Western art-historical methods to the study of Japanese religious art is an approach now practiced by many Japanese scholars. That is to say, paintings and statuary once considered purely as religious objects have now come to be studied as works of art and subjected to stylistic, iconographic, and iconologic analysis. The author of this volume is just such a scholar, and this translation endeavors to retain the spirit of his analytical approach.

A problem arises, however, in the meaning given to certain descriptive terms, which when used by the author possess different connotations from those which have accrued to them in Western art history. For example, the term *shajitsu*, literally "to copy reality," and usually translated "realism" or "naturalism," is applied in the text to any work on which realistic techniques were employed. To the Westerner, whose artistic traditions have conditioned him to different nuances in naturalistic imagery, the disparity between the terms "realism" and "realistic technique" is immediately apparent: the works of the great Greek sculptors of the fifth century B.C. are not considered realistic simply because they are not treated in an abstract manner; rather, they are considered idealistic in overall conception though rendered in realistic technique. Furthermore, in Western terminology, "idealism" related to the perfection of human proportions, while, in a Buddhist context, "idealism" refers to the abstract canonic proportions regulating the representation of Buddhist deities. Therefore, in translating the descriptive vocabulary of the Japanese text, potentially confusing terms have been adjusted to meet the expectations of the Western reader.

Although the subjects of the portraits discussed in this book belong to the historical memory of the Japanese, the majority is totally alien to the Western reader. Therefore, an appendix of frequently depicted historical personages has been included, and, wherever necessary, brief biographical accounts have been inserted into the text. The original sequence of the author's presentation has been preserved, but certain additions and deletions have been made with the author's knowledge, and material rearranged within chapters for the sake of clarity and precision.

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# JAPANESE PORTRAIT SCULPTURE

