CHAPTER 15

Materiality

Halle O'NEAL

Those of us who choose to study a culture and its religion through visual material often do so because we find objects the most compelling way to make sense of history. Buddhism, a religion that reveals the illusion of the phenomenological realm, nevertheless makes constant use of material objects and relies on metaphors that are gloriously visual and elaborately descriptive. Much like the metaphor of the inexhaustible jeweled net that sparkles and reflects ad infinitum, doctrine, ritual, and the spaces of Buddhism show consistent concern for the aesthetic. Buddhist objects, in the form of embodied icons, ritual implements, rolls of texts, mandalas, relics, censors, and all other manner of rich material culture, were central components of Buddhist experience throughout Japanese history. Some instantiated the Buddha, realigned sacred space, manifested cosmological order, articulated the life of a revered priest, and expressed the auspicious origins of a religious institution, while others served as private devotional objects or tailored expressions of righteous authority and social cachet. And of course, objects were multivalent and expressed a richness of overlapping purposes.

Part of the enduring curiosity surrounding the materiality of Buddhism are the boundless varieties, functions, and afterlives of objects, from the beautiful to the ordinary, the functional to the decorative, and the marginal to the monumental. We are told repeatedly in all varieties of texts and records and by the extant objects themselves that visuality and materiality were at the heart of Buddhist life. And by pulling at the multifaceted threads emanating from artifacts, scholars of material culture uncover rich networks entangling things and people. These investigations center the materiality of Japanese religions in order to disclose the indispensability and interconnectedness of objects to the stories of historical figures and forgotten people, to the complexities and efficacy of ritual and doctrine, to the layers of literature and poetry, and to expressions of sociopolitical and soteriological power. Moreover, objects expose the important links between the internal world of the devotee, the external worlds of teachings, rituals, and texts, and the immaterial though nonetheless highly imaginative realms of the buddhas. This short chapter, heavily weighted toward premodern Buddhist objects, highlights just a few of the important past and current movements in cross-disciplinary scholarship on this subject and concludes with a few thoughts about future directions and questions.

Several friends and colleagues to whom I owe thanks helped shape this piece by commenting on meandering lists and chapter drafts: Mimi Chu, Sherry Fowler, Hank Glassman, Gregory Levine, Max Moerman, and Morgan Poella. Andy Hom, as always, provided insightful critiques and humor. My sincere thanks as well to the editors of this volume for the invitation to contribute.
RECONSIDERING AUTHENTICITY AND ART

Asian art historical scholarship and connoisseurship for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had become fixated on questions of style and authenticity for a narrow range of objects (Fenollosa 1912). And while these studies laid an important foundation for the understanding of formal and chronological qualities of (primarily) paintings and sculptures, clarion calls for change (notably Sharf 2001) spurred a fruitful reaction, resulting in contextual studies of artifacts. For at least the past twenty years, scholars have treated objects as aesthetic and religious works that embody the particular sociohistorical contexts of their production by grappling with not only issues of style and iconography but also of gender, sexuality, ritual function, economics, patronage, labor, belief systems, literary links, and sociopolitical implications.

One of the most important interventions in the broader field of Japanese studies has been the recovery of the lives and stories of premodern women and non-elites. This critical literature has brought to light the diverse roles and practices of women eclipsed by a patriarchal society as well as the complex daily lives of non-elites ignored by scholarship, which tended to focus on institutional histories and the tales of powerful men.1 This focus on the recuperation of lost or neglected stories has also impacted scholarly discourse and activism on issues of representation within the field, spurring new initiatives such as the Women in the Study of Asian Religions, cofounded by Natasha Heller and Elena Valeska.2

Scholars likewise continued to interrogate methodological approaches to religious objects, such as the fundamental and critical question of the appropriateness of classifying Buddhist icons as art when all evidence points to the understanding that many were vivified and embodied, and that these icons, along with a great variety of Buddhist artifacts, were not art in any Eurocentric sense (Gell 1996; Marra 2002; Pfister 2008). Art is still widely used as the most convenient catchall, but it is usually done with the understanding of the term’s limitations that must be countered within the body of the analysis. And even though the use of the term is no longer inextricably bound up with old value-laden assumptions and problematic methodologies, its continued, qualified application is nevertheless rooted in epistemological biases in art history that still govern our language and, if we are not careful, our analysis. Using art to describe premodern religious objects in our scholarship and in our teaching sends the reader and student signals as to what kind of things they can expect to encounter, namely, paintings and sculptures of various types. This, on its face, does little to dispute the hierarchical ordering of objects embedded within the term and its legacy, a subject I shall return to soon.

Within the world of museums, curators also confront this issue when considering the care and display of icons divorced from their religious context. With temples and shrines increasingly struggling for visitors and donors, more religious objects have entered the museum, gallery, and art market.3 In this displaced stage of an icon’s modern afterlife,
has it finally transitioned into art? The Museum of Fine Arts (MFA), Boston, established in 1909 the Japanese Buddhist Temple Room, modeled on the architecture of the famous temple Hōryū-ji, in awareness of the problem posed by the white gallery wall for the display of religious icons. In a dramatic contrast to the brightly lit presentations of the adjoining rooms, altar-like wooden platforms raise clusters of Buddhist deities interspersed with wooden columns in a darkened space illuminated overhead by lanterns. The ambience attempts to approximate the atmosphere of a Buddhist temple for a general public who might not have the opportunity to experience icons in a Japanese ritual space.

**VISUAL AND MATERIAL CULTURE**

Visual culture as a term helped scholars of Buddhism to problematize art as the label for artistic productions meant for worship, offerings, sacred spaces, and other practical or functional uses because of its failure to capture the objects' religious dimension. But visual culture is itself not without issue due to its overreliance on the “image” and neglect of the materials, issues of materiality, and mechanics of making. One might wonder if we need visual culture if material culture is capable of encompassing the full diversity of things without hierarchical strictures, particularly if material studies also ensure investigations into the meanings encoded within an object’s surface and visuality. Skilled craftsmanship and beauty do not equate to superficiality, so why should we turn away from studies of what is exquisitely and carefully made?

The Buddhist concept of *shōgon* (elaborate effort and beauty engendering karmic merit) accounts in part for the artistry and abundance we see in artistic projects, but we should also allow for these artifacts to operate on different registers. That is, artistic, even opulent, commissions in addition to their karmic merit and ritual function held other value, from the highly personal to the overtly public. Moreover, sculptures, paintings, sutras, and other religious artifacts were not always ritualistically functional, indicating that their value could and did lay elsewhere. And aside from their religious registers, countless artistic productions were also social objects, and tracking the crisscrossing vectors of an artifact’s many lives is part of the joy of these investigations. Paying meticulous attention to the surface’s visuality and aesthetics as well as the object’s materials and mechanics of production is a complex and fecund source of information. Therefore, by analyzing religious material culture through both its visuality and materiality, we have the possibility of attaining the best of both analytical worlds. We need not lose sight of the meanings communicated by an object’s crafted formal qualities and intervisual community, but we can also open up questions into the process of making, the importance of materials, and its thingness.

Just as it is important to recognize the meaning within the beautiful—allowing for the understanding that beauty is a mutable concept, particularly when dealing with premodern productions—it is also imperative to open up the range of artifacts we study to include ordinary or “modest” objects (Hirasawa and Lomi 2018). The material turn that has swept through scholarship since 2000 has fundamentally and positively changed the nature of object-based studies. Somewhat curiously—but also indicative of the field’s past:

---

4 Another case is the careful consideration given to creating the most resonate ways of displaying icons, and even more trickily, the interior contents of those sculptures in the newly redesigned Harvard Art Museums. See Saunders (2019).
tendency toward established canonical material and questions—the focus on materiality and “thingness” did not originate in art history, a discipline grounded in the study of objects, but rather with anthropologists like Alfred Gell (1998), literary historians like Bill Brown (2001), and social scientists Bruno Latour (1993) and Jane Bennett (2010), to name but a few. One of the key impacts of material culture studies has been its challenge to the art historical canon. The previous divisions between low and high art that elevated painting and sculpture over all else are being jettisoned. Bells, talismans, relics, reliquaries, ordinary ceramics, letter sutras, maps, censors, bezoars, and countless other material things are increasingly coming under investigation, and this diversification takes us closer to seeing the richness of objects through which religious life was experienced, rather than material culture being relegated to footnotes or mistrusted as primary sources.5

Beyond expanding the range of objects we study, material studies also asks different questions of the artifact (Rosler et al. 2013). What does the object’s material composition and tangibility reveal about its history and social lives? But as pertinent calls have also articulated, it is not enough to qualify material culture as simply objects of use because this erects a false dichotomy between objects valued for being purely aesthetic and those with either functional qualities or stained by their affordability, creating the potential to reinforce elitist hierarchies that privilege the wealthy (Yonan 2011). Indeed, it is an ill-fitting dichotomy for many other reasons, but most certainly because when dealing with premodern Buddhist artifacts, the visual, material, and functional are very often inextricable. Furthermore, the concept of the “embodied object” in material culture studies is augmented when treating Buddhist artifacts because of the ritual ability to invest ordinary materials with Buddha nature. As a result, questions posed about Buddhist objects have the potential to illicit an alternative understanding of “objecthood.”

Another way of accessing the full spectrum of an object’s biography (Kopytoff 1986; Hoskins 1998; Gosden and Marshall 1999) is through the prism of reuse and recycling. One of the benefits of this approach is that it theorizes the religious, social, political, and personal reasons underlying the different practices and manifestations of repurposing in order to foreground the significant role that material refashioning played in Japan.6 By focusing on the alterations both materially and conceptually, the framework of repurposing reveals an object’s biographical trajectory and inevitable shifts in meaning, function, ownership, and agency. It can also expose a premodern understanding of both the commoditization and the multiplicity of purposes encompassed by a single object. The topic of reuse and recycling draws a plethora of other important discussions from the background into the scholarly conversation, including larger issues of embodiment, fragmentation, materiality, and transference, all of which help uncover the many lives of Japanese religious artifacts after their creation. In other words, it is important to interrogate the assumptions around what it means for a religious object to be “extant” today.

Other queries might concern access to objects. Who might have touched it? Experienced its material dimensions? Materialist questions (Doy 1998) into who would be allowed to see an object are particularly complex in the history of Japanese religious institutions,

5An early example is Hanley (1997), who uses material culture to explain the economic history of early modern Japan. Fabio Ramelli’s work on Buddhist materialities is extensive (2007, 2019). See also Matsuzaki (1996), Mracek and Prielka (2008), and Raffel and Caple (2019).
many of which would have been inaccessible to most of the population, whether from lack of wealth that restricted their travel, lack of status that barred certain doors, or issues of gender and pollution that medieval and early modern women faced. Even today, access to objects can be incredibly complicated. Some involve a dizzying number of permissions through institutional and temple bureaucracies, years’ long wait, and the right connections within the Japanese academy and museum world in order to gain direct access.

Digital innovations are providing a rewarding alternative for objects difficult to access, as museums, libraries, and religious institutions increasingly make available high-quality scans of objects and texts to the interested public. While no replacement for direct study, digital humanities (DH) has opened up a wealth of inventive possibilities. With the ability to reveal and reveal in exquisitely fine detail and to return time and again to digital renditions for continued study rather than rely exclusively on memory and lesser-quality photography, DH has changed the way we conduct research. DH projects make it possible to animate the process of production, to deconstruct the constitutive components in order to disclose their layered relationships, to demonstrate the use of the object by rendering it in motion, to uncover the meaning within the virtuality of the object—all things that traditional scholarship does but with the communicative immediacy of digital engagement that brings the artifact to life before your eyes. They also allow for interactive intervisual analysis across a range of objects, such as Akiko Walley’s fragmented calligraphy online exhibition and database, Tekagami and Kyōgire: The University of Oregon Japanese Calligraphy Exhibition. Text mining and exciting advances in artificial intelligence (AI) are unlocking with inhuman rapidity information long embedded within and across texts as well as demystifying challenging calligraphic script.

DH has also had profound implications for how museums communicate with their audiences. For instance, looking to the technical art historical practices of the MFA Boston, the museum has recently introduced an “open conservation space” where visitors can witness first-hand the conservation of Buddhist sculptures, involving visible and ultraviolet light photography, X-Ray, and 3D modeling. Indeed, with technological advances in computed tomography (CT) scanning in the museum and art market worlds, sculptures have transformed from lacquered icon to mummified monk with a miraculous splendor that recalls the astonishing feats of premodern icons. Digital pedagogies have also made a major intervention in how we teach religious material, particularly for those instructors and students who lack direct access to Japanese objects.

---

"The digitization of the Taishō Shinshū Daiizokyo [http://21dlzkl.u-tokyo.ac.jp/SAT/index.html] and the associated image database, Taishō Shinshū Daiizokyo Zazō [https://drkings.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/SAT/images.php?lang=ja], were landmark moments in the contemporary study of Buddhism.


"For more on digital approaches to Buddhist material, see Veitl (2019).

"Caroline Fowler (2019) points out that multiple graduate school programs in the United States and a large initiative by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation are bridging the application of technical art history, traditionally seen as the purview of museums and conservation labs, with traditional art historical scholarship and training.

"The museum created a segment to reach out to potential visitors about the project: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QmM3Es8o0.


"Paula R. Curtis runs the very useful Digital Resources and Projects on East Asia (https://precurtis.com/DH/resources/).
FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Future directions in the study of religious objects might take into greater account the haptic nature of artifacts (Sedgwick 2003). Paying attention to the sensual dimension of objects, the experience of their physicality, and the mechanics and performativity of use can reveal how their materiality was perceived by the senses, both then and now. Scholarly explorations into the thingness of objects, their tangibility and materiality, can reveal the sometimes-hidden ways in which they were designed to be handled or seen and what senses they were created to engage. For instance, one might imagine how it felt to hold an object, for the hand to experience its weight and texture, to consider the physical requirements of its performance for the handler and any viewers.

This strand is closely linked with the ever-growing study of performativity of religious rituals and objects. These types of questions unlock the possibility of understanding the lived experience around artifacts and deepen our conceptualization of the full range of an object’s design, function, and materiality. There is, of course, the impossibility of knowing for certain how contemporary viewers experienced Buddhist objects, and any exploration into the tactile dimension of objects requires imaginative thinking. However, this should not cause us to swing too far to the extreme to the neglect of the obvious sensory information of artifacts, which can tell us more about why they look the way they do—a deceptively simple question that, in the answering, can draw out the experientiality of things. And while it might seem paradoxical, explorations into the materiality and haptic nature of objects could fruitfully lead to more future studies on the immaterial, ephemeral, and intentionally invisible dimensions of Buddhist material culture, a fecund ground for further study. In addition to material studies of the immaterial, developing areas on music, sound, orality, and movement will surely produce exciting new understandings on the performance of the impermanent.

Relatedly, making as methodology and pedagogy is another way to interrogate the thingness of objects and the intentionality of their design through the direct experience of making replicas. Making in the form of replication opens up questions into the selection and sourcing of materials, the visuality of their combination and design, and allows for us as modern scholars to approximate their sensual dimension. It helps us to understand the required bodily mechanics involved in the production process, thereby enlivening the role of the original maker. For students, it engages them in creative learning and somatically encodes the material in different and perhaps more profound and lasting ways. Facsimiles have long augmented classroom study, but taking it a step further and asking the student to make a replica or produce their own take on the object engenders a deeper engagement with the artifact. For researchers, it sparks new questions based on the experience of making a version of the object and of handling it physically and considering its substance. In the process of making, renewed emphasis is placed on makers, context, and means of first production as well as the labor and transmission of knowledge and skills. Making as research methodology and pedagogy has historic links to the tradition of creating and

14For instance, I ask students to create their own relics and reliquaries (religious associations not required) in order to engage the process of creation, of encoding memory, and of concealment. Paula R. Curris recreates wooden tablets (mokkan) for her students so that they can handle the slender strips of wood and contemplate the texuality of the inscriptions. Mindy Landeck mixes tea with her students to bring this fundamental cultural practice to the classroom. Charlotte Eubanks uses a cartographic exercise whereby students map the Han imperial court in order to understand the relationship of individuals to the spaces in which they labor and live and to visualize the flow of movement and areas of interaction.
worshiping copies of Buddhist icons, fostering fascinating discourses on the nature of original, replica, authenticity, transference, and embodiment.

And while without a doubt many additional exciting avenues of innovative research and teaching are percolating, I will close with eco art history because of its crucial links to our own perilous position in the global climate crisis (Lee 2019). Within this newly developing area, both historic and modern/contemporary material culture is being critically reexamined in light of environmental shifts, political economies, structural inequalities, and accountability in the anthropocene. At its current trajectory, this area is also primed to confront issues of colonialism underlying the field. And by probing the relationship between the materiality of art and its environmental origin and impact, an entirely new perspective about materials, sourcing, and environmental care but also degradation in the creation, maintenance, and loss of Buddhist material culture opens up.

See also Chapter 16, “Media and Technology,” Chapter 24, “Sound,” and Chapter 29, “Women.”