Reimagining Ancient India in Modern Japan

Interactions between Buddhist Priests, Scholars, and Artists at Ajanta

〈in English〉

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Abstract

In the early twentieth century, the Ajanta caves became an essential destination not only for Japanese artists interested in their wall paintings, but also for Buddhist priest-scholars and intellectuals who often joined them. The collaboration of these two groups of travelers-pilgrims resulted in efforts to preserve and spread the knowledge of the murals, which also became a source of inspiration for the production of new art at both secular and sacred places. This article analyzes examples of Japanese artistic-religious co-travelling at Ajanta and links the cultural networks between India and Japan facilitated by Okakura Kakuzō with the significance of the role that studies of ancient India played in developing modern scholarly approaches to Buddhism. Specifically, it illustrates the expedition to Ajanta led by priest-scholar Fujii Senshō and the collaboration between the Indologist priest Izumi Hōkei and the painter Inoue Toshimasa. In addition, it presents two cases of echoes of Ajanta in visual culture: the decorations of Yōkisō villa in Nagoya, and the artistic production of nihonga painter Nousu Kōsetsu in Japan, India, and North America. These connections show the importance of including visual culture in the study of modern Japanese Buddhism and transnational Buddhist modernism. In addition, the article argues that a combination of Indology with the art of the Ajanta murals expanded Japanese Buddhist priest-scholars and intellectuals’ knowledge of India, providing them with a rich cultural repertoire for defining forms of transnational identity and collaboration based on the idea of a shared Buddhist heritage. However, the article also questions an idealistic approach to this transnational aesthetics by revealing how the context of the artistic production did not include only cosmopolitan encounters, but also the experiences of colonialism, migration, and displacement.
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In a 1970s picture-book, the renowned scholar of Buddhism Nakamura Hajime 中村元 (1912–1999) tells the life of Shakyamuni using illustrations modelled on the mural paintings realized in the 1930s by a Japanese artist, Nousu Kōsetsu 野生司香雪 (1885–1973), at the Mulagandhakuti Vihara in Sarnath, India. In an explanation meant for the mothers who would read the book to their children, Nakamura stresses the world significance of such images, as they represent the contribution of Japanese art in spreading the knowledge of the ‘spirit of Shakyamuni’ to the vast audience of visitors who travel to the holy city of Varanasi and nearby Sarnath to learn about Indian culture.¹

Nakamura’s considerations and Nousu’s murals in India point to an important aspect of the history of modern Japanese Buddhism which only recently has started to receive scholarly attention: the role of the circulation of images along transnational networks that linked Japan not only to Europe and North America, but also to other Asian countries. Nakamura’s comment recalls an important aspect of the experience of modernity for Japanese Buddhists: the reconception of their place in an expanded worldview. While earlier research has focused on interactions between Japanese Buddhists and European or North American culture since the Meiji period,² recent research has pointed to the role that travel and intellectual networks in South Asian

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² For earlier research, see James E. Ketelaar, Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan: Buddhism and its Persecution (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), and Judith Snodgrass, Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West: Orientalism, Occidentalism and the Columbian Exposition (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), for more recent research on the topic, see Dake Mitsuya 嵯満也, Yoshinaga Shin’ichi 吉永進一 and Ōmi Toshihiro 碧海寿広, eds., Nihon Bukkyō to seiyō sekai 日本仏教と西洋世界 (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 2020).
countries had in the construction of modern Japanese Buddhism.\(^3\)

It was not only people and ideas that travelled along these routes: images too circulated along the same networks and contributed to create an *imaginaire* of ancient Indian Buddhism that spread across continents. Japanese Buddhist priests and scholars who visited India since the Meiji period often travelled in the company of artists, and their collaboration led to artistic commissions. The aim of this article is to present the intersection of these scholarly and artistic reimaginations of India. In addition, it will show the beneficial perspectives that accompany a methodological inclusion of visual sources in the study of religion, and, on the other hand, what art historians can learn from considering religious-artistic networks.

1. Ajanta as a Modern Pilgrimage Destination for Japanese Buddhist Priests and Artists

In his memories of the days spent studying the Ajanta caves, the Bengali artist and etcher Mukul Chandra Dey (1895–1989) recalls the deep impression made on him by a number of Japanese with whom he shared an expedition in 1917. Among them were *nihonga* painter Arai Kanpō 荒井寛方 (1878–1945) and art historian Sawamura Sentarō 沢村専太郎 (1884–1930), who had been sent there to copy the murals on behalf of the art periodical *Kokka* 国華, and who had met Dey during his 1916 travel to Japan in the company of Nobel laureate Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941).

Dey expresses admiration for the painstaking efforts of the Japanese who copied the frescoes to preserve their memory. He points out that the Japanese artists are Buddhists, and notices Arai’s attitude toward the murals: “having come at last to the altar, he bowed many times to the large cross-legged Buddha, and afterwards took off his puttees, and by undoing his sash let down his long white robes, so that now he looked like an artist-monk.”\(^4\) The observation of the Bengali etcher reveals a potential interest in the Japanese visitors to Ajanta that goes beyond the aesthetic: their Buddhist faith turns the travel experience into a form of pilgrimage, and while their expedition was framed within the scientific endeavor, the motivations to preserve the frescoes could include religious nuances.

In the early twentieth century, the Ajanta caves became an essential stop for

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Japanese intellectuals, artists, and priests who visited India. Very often they travelled together, and in the company of British and Indian counterparts. The images and ideas these different kinds of visitors produced were not disconnected, and together fueled an *imaginaires* of India that affected the visual and religious culture of modern Japan.

The best known example of cultural connection between India and Japan in the early twentieth century is the one between Tagore and the Japanese scholar Okakura Kakuzō 岡倉覚三 (1863–1913), who visited India in 1901. The network of artists and intellectuals they established between Tokyo and Calcutta—today’s Kolkata—had a deep impact on the history of modern art in Japan and India, and much scholarship exists regarding this connection.5 Recent art historical research has contributed to consider the aesthetic aspect of the Indian *imaginaires*, expanding from the textual focus of Buddhist priest-scholars’ interest. However, art historians have dedicated less attention to the collaboration of the Japanese artists with Buddhist priests and scholars who were also visiting India, or to the religious and intellectual background of this shared interest for India. Recent publications by scholars of religion and of art have instead started to reveal the networks between artistic and religious imaginations of India in modern Japan.6

Knowledge of India through textual study and direct travel provided artists and Buddhist priest-scholars with a cultural repertoire for rethinking Asian and Japanese identity while confronting the concepts of history, religion, and art that had come from Europe since the beginning of the Meiji period. The pursuit of new knowledge on ancient India must be understood within the effort of Buddhist sects to build a scientifically-defined approach to the history of Buddhism. By mastering the tools of modern Indology and comparative philology, Japanese priest-scholars could answer to the criticisms of East Asian Buddhism that were often raised by Western scholars and redeployed for apologetic purposes by Christian missionaries in Japan.

Both the Ōtani and Honganji sects of Jōdo Shinshū were pioneers in the development of modern Buddhist studies and Indology, and sent young priests and intellectuals such as Nanjō Bun’yū 南条文雄 (1849–1927) and Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 (1866–1945) to study in Europe. However, as Richard Jaffé and Okuyama Naoji

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have shown, Europe was not the only destination: many of these Japanese Buddhists also established networks of collaboration with local intellectuals and religious reformers in South Asia.

The Ajanta caves represented a shared destination for both kinds of travelers: Japanese artists and Buddhist priests and scholars. The former valued the wall paintings as one of the earliest and best preserved expressions of Indian art, which could provide inspiration for a redefinition of modern Asian art. The latter were attracted by the representations of Buddhist scenes and the monastic use of the complex. The two categories of behavior were not necessarily distinguished, and likely fueled each other: the spiritual value associated with the sacred place and content of representation called for the efforts to preserve the paintings and spread their knowledge.

The intertwining religious and artistic interests for Ajanta is linked to the antiquity of the site and the exceptional status of the wall paintings. The caves contain the best preserved examples of pictorial art of ancient India, and the investigation of the site has provided important evidence both for art history and for the history of early Buddhism. There are still debates around the exact chronology of the caves and on the identification of the images of the wall paintings, but the general agreement is that they were built in two phases, the earlier during the second century BCE, and a later one under the Vakataka dynasty in the fifth century CE. Although the association of the earlier and later phases with Hinayāna and Mahāyāna Buddhism is still questioned, the wall paintings attracted many Buddhists and scholars of Buddhism for their possibility to offer a lively portrait of the development of Buddhism in India.

Ajanta constitutes a unique place to consider the way ancient India was reconceieved to construct modern identities, and the Japanese priests and artists I am presenting in this article participated in this reconceission process where art and archeology intersected with transnational Buddhist modernism. The caves were rediscovered in 1819, and their wall paintings generated a mixed response in Victorian Britain: admiration for the aesthetic quality, but also debate around their comparison with European art and association with more criticized Hindu sculpture, often blamed for their representation of naked human figures. Positing the murals as the origins of Indian art provided inspiration both for

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7 One of the most accredited chronologies is by Walter Spink, see his multivolume *Ajanta: History and Development* (Boston, Brill: 2006–2018).
9 On the reception of Indian art in Europe, see Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of*
European artists and at the same time for the rising construction of an artistic and cultural identity of modern India. Especially in the context of modernist movements in Calcutta and Bombay—today Kolkata and Mumbai—the art of Ajanta was increasingly presented as a counterpart to European classical or Renaissance art, and as a model to educate young generations of Indian painters. Japanese artists and Buddhist priest-scholars who visited the caves participated in this global reimagination of ancient India by linking it to ideas of Asian civilization and modern Japanese identity through the concept of a shared Buddhist heritage.

One of the earliest Japanese expeditions to Ajanta was the one led in 1902 by priest-scholar Fujii Senshō 藤井宣正 (1859–1903). His travel was part of the Ōtani expeditions, a series of three major archeological missions funded by the Honganji sect, which explored Buddhist sites in India and Central Asia. Fujii had been previously sent to London in 1897 in order to learn about church-state relations, and also to explore the Indological knowledge produced by British scholars. While doing research at the Victoria and Albert Museum, Fujii was struck by the reproductions of the Ajanta cave murals made in the 1870s by John Griffiths (1837–1918), and once he was asked to join the Ōtani expedition to India, he took the chance to lead a group of members of this expedition to Ajanta in December 1902.

The travel account is short, but Fujii gives detailed information on the location of the caves. He mentions the art, but he is also impressed by the nature and position of the caves, the sound of falling water and the alternation of light and darkness which he associates with the awe of a sacred place. Interestingly, while Dey records the religious attitude of a Japanese painter before a Buddhist image in the caves, a Buddhist priest like Fujii expresses stronger concerns with practical and geographical details of the mission, crossing and inverting scholarly and religious purposes in approaching Ajanta.

During the exploration of the caves, Fujii was already suffering by an infection that would take his life on his way back to Europe the following year. His poor health...
conditions might have also been the reason why instead another member of the expedition, Shimaji Daitō 島地大等 (1875–1927), did most of the survey work. Once back in Japan, Shimaji also published a number of articles on the archaeology of India, contributing to the spread of interest in the Ajanta murals and concern for their preservation.

After the 1917 artistic expedition to Ajanta organized by the previously mentioned art periodical Kokka, another relatively unknown case of a priest-artist collaboration encouraged by shared travelling in India is the one between priest-scholar Izumi Hōkei 泉芳璟 (1884–1947) and painter Inoue Toshimasa 井上利正. Izumi, who would become the leading Indologist at Otani University, was introduced to the artist in 1919 in Sri Lanka, and the two met again after Inoue completed his two-month survey work at Ajanta. The collaboration between the two developed later in Japan, when Izumi used Inoue’s sketches as illustrations for his publications on India, and organized an exhibition of the copies of the murals at Otani University. Seven panels of Inoue’s reproductions were acquired by the university and publicly shown there in 1924, together with 44 sketches and a number of photographs. The lecture that accompanied the exhibition stresses the way in which Inoue’s copies were meant to allow the observers a veritably in-person experience of being inside the caves.

Izumi and Inoue’s collaboration shows not only the lack of a barrier between those Japanese who visited India for pilgrimage and those who visited it for artistic inspiration. It also points to the participation of Buddhist universities in the international effort to preserve and spread the knowledge of the Ajanta murals, which must be connected not only to their value for art history, but to the development of Indology as a basis for modern Buddhist studies. Izumi, like Fujii, does not approach Ajanta from the perspective of a pilgrim, but uses the language of the scholar concerned with preservation of the art. He does not claim the superiority of Inoue’s reproductions over those of the Western artists based on his Asian identity or Buddhist faith, but on the choice of a technique that resulted

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14 For more information on this expedition, see Fukuyama, “Japanese encounters with Ajanta.”
16 Izumi Hōkei 泉芳璟, Indo mandan 印度漫談 (Kyōto: Jinbun Shoin, 1931). It is significant to note that this acquisition and exhibition happened immediately after the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923, that destroyed the copies of the murals made by the Kokka expedition, similarly to what happened to previous British copies which were also lost in fires. This history of losing even the reproductions of the murals might have inspired Izumi’s effort to preserve Inoue’s work.
17 “Ajanta heki” 『アジャンタ壁画展覧』, in Ōtani Daigaku Shinpō 大谷大学新報 19, November 10, 1924: 2.
in more faithful copies.\textsuperscript{18}

It is not only the personal networks between artists and priests travelling in India which make the study of their interactions regarding Ajanta interesting. If we think of the visual \textit{imaginaire} of the ancient murals and their modern reproductions in connection to the scholarship on Indology produced by priest-scholars such as Izumi, we can identify resonances that expand the significance of India for modern Japanese culture beyond the Buddhist textual and doctrinal focus. For example, the lecture on the Ajanta caves which accompanied the exhibition of Inoue’s copies stresses the importance of the images not only in terms of their reference to Buddhist narratives, but because of their rich representation of human beings, plants, and animals, and for the expressivity of bodily movements and faces.\textsuperscript{19}

The Ajanta murals opened a window for modern Japanese Buddhists into a world of living beings and nature that surrounded tales of buddhas and bodhisattvas. This conception of a living Buddhism through visual imagination echoes the words of the English poet Laurence Binyon (1869–1943) in his introduction to Mukul Dey’s account of his pilgrimage to Ajanta: “here the divine is not divorced from the human, nor the spirit from the body... If one were asked to put into one word the secret of these paintings—the secret of their continuing power to impress and charm us—one might well answer life.”\textsuperscript{20} Izumi’s own Indological scholarship expanded the scope of knowledge from his predecessor Nanjō Bun’yū’s focus on Buddhist texts to include a broad range of topics which stressed what modern Japanese could learn from the study of India.\textsuperscript{21}

If the richness in details and expressivity of bodies and nature of the Ajanta murals suggested to certain observers the copresence of the human and the divine, some others did not appreciate the sensuous quality of the aesthetics. This mixed reaction did not characterize only Victorian Britain, but also some of the Japanese visitors to the caves. For example, as also reported by Jaffe, the Buddhist priest of the Ōtani sect Akegarasu Haya 晓鳥敏 (1877–1954) visited Ajanta in 1926 but found in the aesthetic richness an element that expressed the decay of Buddhism in ancient India, and was particularly critical toward the presence of naked figures: “if you could accompany Shakyamuni to Ajanta, he would frown on the images of embracing naked men and women on the

\textsuperscript{18} “Ōtani kenkyūshitsu e kuru Ajanta no hekiga yuiitsu to iwaruru” 大谷研究室へ来るアジャンタの壁畫唯一と云はるる, in Ōtani Daigaku Shinpō 16, September 5, 1924: 4.
\textsuperscript{19} Izumi Hökei 泉芳璟, “Ajanta no hekiga” アジャンタの壁畫, in Ōtani Daigaku Shinpō 20, November 23, 1924: 6.
\textsuperscript{20} Dey, \textit{My Pilgrimage to Ajanta & Bagh}, 15–21.
\textsuperscript{21} See for example the broad range of topics in Izumi’s volume decorated with Inoue’s sketches: Izumi, \textit{Indo mandan}. 
pillars.”

2. Echoes of Ajanta in Secular and Sacred Spaces
The presence of naked human figures inspired by the Ajanta murals has been a source of confusion also for the visitors to Yōkisō villa in Nagoya, which constitutes a significant example of the echoes that Ajanta had in Japan. In this section of the article, I will show how the art of Ajanta became not only the focus of preservation concerns and scholarly study in Japan, but also a source of active reimagination for decorative arts at secular and sacred spaces. The examples I present also reveal the transnational nature of this process of reimagination, based on the travels of Indian and Japanese artists and on pilgrimage experiences of Japanese Buddhists in India.

The Ajanta-inspired decorations at Yōkisō villa were realized in the 1930s by a young Indian artist, P. Hariharan (1905–1970), commissioned by the owner, Itō Jirōzaemon Suketami (1878–1940), after he had been on a pilgrimage to India. Suketami was the scion of a wealthy family of textile merchants from the city of Nagoya. Since the 1910s Suketami hosted many young people from different South Asian countries at his villa, and the artist Hariharan was among them. It was the encounter with the Burmese monk and independentist leader U Ottama during the latter’s visit to Japan in 1910 that motivated Suketami to foster relations between Japan and South Asia.

In 1934 Suketami fulfilled his project of a pilgrimage to India. This travel was a main source of inspiration for the decorative style of Yōkisō villa, especially in the Chōshōkaku building. Hariharan functioned as a guide for Suketami during the travel, which was documented by the official photographer of the expedition: Hasegawa Denjirō (1894–1976). In addition to visiting the former guest-students in Burma, meeting Tagore in Shantiniketan, and touring the Buddhist sacred sites, the

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23 Jaffe, Seeking Śākyamuni, 146.
24 The P. of the name stands for “Palpu.” Hariharan studied pottery at Shantiniketan and moved to Japan in the 1930s to study Japanese ceramics. After moving back to India, he became director of a handicrafts center and also fostered industrial collaboration between Japan and rural India. See “Handicraftsman P. Hariharan,” in Enlite, The national newsmagazine, September 27, 1969: 9–13.
25 On the life and philanthropic activities of Suketami see Yōkisō no kai, Yōkisō to Suketami.
company also visited the Ajanta caves in November 1934.26

The visit to Ajanta became the major inspiration for Hariharan’s decorations of the underground rooms in the Chōshōkaku building, as the Yōkisō nonprofit organization has shown by comparing the decorations with scenes and motifs of the Ajanta murals, and also based on the photographic report of the pilgrimage.27 The underground floor is equipped with a small stage that was used for theatrical performances, and also as a screen to project the photos taken during the pilgrimage. The expedition’s photographer Hasegawa published his photos in multiple volumes, and this, together with the many exhibitions of the photos promoted by Suketami, turned the villa into a stage to spread the exotic imaginaire of India, within a surrounding of decorative elements that recalled Ajanta. While the reproductions of the Ajanta murals at Otani University aimed at providing a faithfulness to the originals for scholarly purposes, here we have an example of Ajanta inspiration for the production of a new visual culture within a private space. In both cases the images were aimed at inspiring the Japanese audience and making them feel closer to India.

While the influence of Ajanta on the Indian style of the underground rooms is evident, the mediation of other sources is also present: flower decorations inspired by Mughal period art, as well as a Gothic style niche enshrining a female figure in the “meditation room.” The rest of the building, with rooms in Chinese and European style, further expresses Suketami’s cosmopolitan interests and the transnational networks that allowed for the building’s construction. The composite nature of these decorations shows that, despite the scholarly efforts to study Ajanta, the reimagination of India in modern Japanese religious and visual culture was not the result of a scientific rediscovery of an objective past, but a creative project that addressed contemporary international connections between Japan, South Asia, and Europe.

If in the case of Yōkisō it was an Indian artist who decorated a Japanese private space, the final example of the transnational reimagination of ancient India we will examine is provided in the form of the work of a Japanese painter who decorated a modern Buddhist temple in Sarnath, India: Nousu Kōsetsu. Nousu, the son of a Jōdo Shinshū priest, studied at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, where his interest in Indian art was encouraged by his interaction with artists who had followed Okakura to India.28 Tagore’s

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26 For the photographic account of the pilgrimage, see Hasegawa Denjirō 長谷川傳次郎, Indo 印度 (Tokyo: Meguro Shoten, 1939, republished in 2013) and by the same author Busseki 佛跡 (Tokyo: Meguro Shoten, 1941).
27 Yōkisō no kai, Yōkisō to Suketami, 63–126.
28 Biographical information are available in Kagawa-ken Bunka Kaikan 香川県文化会館, Nousu Kōsetsu kaikoten: Tōyō no kokoro, Indo eno atsuki omoi 野生司香雪回顧展: 東洋の心・インドへ
visit to Japan in 1916 further raised Nousu’s interest, and the following year the Japanese artist left for a research trip to India. While there, he joined the Kokka expedition to Ajanta and contributed to the copying of the murals.

Nousu’s work was not limited to the survey of the art of Ajanta: he also turned the murals into an inspiration for new art, in a fashion similar to what Hariharan did at Yōkisō. Echoes of Ajanta’s influence in Nousu’s later artistic production found their way back to India in the 1930s, when the Japanese painter was commissioned by the Mahabodhi Society to decorate the newly built Mulagandhakuti Vihara in Sarnath with scenes of the life of the Buddha (fig. 1).29 In a booklet that includes photographic reproductions of Nousu’s frescoes, the Mahabodhi Society praises the work of Nousu for “bringing back to life the ideals of Buddhist art, that reached their climax at Ajanta.”30

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With Nousu’s work in Sarnath, we see how the Japanese interest in ancient India expressed by the research efforts at Ajanta was redeployed to foster the resurgence of Buddhist practice at a newly-built temple in India. The concerns expressed by Japanese Buddhist priests and artists for the preservation of Ajanta became an integral part of the modernist reconstruction of Buddhism across Asia. The artistic reimagination facilitates the intersection between a scholarly-defined investigation of the past and a re-enactment in modern religious practice, dissolving barriers between art, religion, and scholarship. While the artist Arai impressed Mukul Dey by bowing in front of the cave murals before copying them, the poet Tagore invited Nousu to rely on a shared devotion to the Buddha to support his artistic effort and realize what Nousu himself defined “sacred frescoes.”

The continuity between effort toward studying and preserving ancient India, reimaginaion of this past for artistic inspiration, and mission to promote Buddhism internationally produced a further echo of Ajanta visual culture within the mediation of Nousu’s later art. One of the last works realized by the painter is a series of scenes from the Buddha’s life modelled on his precedent work at Sarnath and commissioned by the Buddhist philanthropist Numata Yehan 沼田恵範 (1897–1994) in the 1950s. The commission was possible through their connection to the Indologist Takakusu Junjirō.

In the post-WWII years, Nousu’s frescoes at Sarnath became a source of inspiration for another example of the transnational reimagination of ancient India facilitated by collaboration between Japanese artists and Buddhist priest-scholars. In 1952 Kubose Gyomay 久保瀬暁明 (1905–2000, “Gyomay” is the Americanized form he chose for his name), head priest of the Chicago Buddhist Temple, commissioned the local Japanese-American woodcarving artist Harry Koizumi (1909–1977) with the realization of scenes of the Buddha’s life to decorate the main hall of the temple. Of the six wood panels Koizumi made, four were modelled on Nousu’s frescoes in Sarnath (fig. 2).

31 The dialogue between Tagore and Nousu was reported by the latter in his welcoming speech at the Nippon Club of Calcutta in 1932, available online through the Mukul Dey Archives website: Satyasri Uki, “Kosetsu Nosu: The Japanese Artist who Painted at Sarnath.” http://www.chitralekha.org/articles/kosetsu-nosu/kosetsu-nosu-japanese-artist-who-painted-sarnath. The inauguration ceremony of the frescoes is described with the Japanese Buddhist term for the consecration of images: the eye-opening ceremony (kaigen kuyō 開眼供養).
32 The seven paintings Nousu managed to complete before his health deteriorated were recently exhibited at Ryukoku Museum and at the Byōdōin temple: https://www.byodoin.or.jp/news/special/post-15/.
It was Kubose that directed Koizumi to Nousu’s art for inspiration. Kubose was likely acquainted with it from the period of study he had spent in Japan in the late 1930s. Kubose was a disciple of Akegarasu Haya, and he contributed to the promotion of the latter’s trans-sectarian approach to Buddhism in the form of the temple he built in Chicago in 1944, after the forced relocation from the West Coast during World War II. Despite Akegarasu’s criticism of the Ajanta murals’ aesthetics I have previously mentioned, the reimagining of ancient Indian Buddhist sources in textual scholarship and visual culture was the basis of the modernist construction of a trans-sectarian and transcultural Buddhism as a world religion, the echoes of which reached 1950s Chicago through the collaboration between a Buddhist priest and a Japanese-American artist. In the context of

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the Chicago temple, the Ajanta-inspired *imaginaire* was deemed suitable to present Buddhism as a cultural bridge that allowed for the postwar redefinition of Japanese-American relations.

**Conclusion**

In the introduction, I reported Nakamura Hajime’s appreciation of the Sarnath frescoes as a product of the modern internationalization and transcultural nature of Buddhism as a world religion. With this article I wanted to show the centrality of India, especially the Ajanta murals, in constructing the idea of Buddhism as a world religion, but also to demonstrate that this process was very much a creative one, built by recontextualizing and reimagining the archeological remains of ancient Indian Buddhism. The collaboration of Buddhist priests, scholars, and artists made this process possible, and their interaction with European and South Asian counterparts facilitated the circulation of these ideas.

However, the narrative of modernity as a coming together of different cultures and of rediscovery of shared roots and heritage, which Nakamura stresses, hides certain aspects of this historical process. Nakamura was also aware of the wood panels modelled on Nousu’s frescoes in the Chicago temple, and suggested how this further step in the travel of the images points to the existence of a shared spirit of humanity. Yet the wooden panels tell another story of transnational movement: one that is less characterizable in terms of cosmopolitan encounters among intellectuals and artists. Harry Koizumi learnt to carve wood while he was relocated in the internment camp of Rohwer, Arkansas, during World War II, when Japanese-Americans were seen as a threat, and their Buddhist faith served only as a further confirmation of their foreignness to American culture. The development of arts and crafts in the camps was, as Jane Dusselier has argued, a way to express agency, redefine one’s identity, and survive the sense of loss and dislocation generated by their imprisonment.

The process of art production should not be understood as the expression of a pre-existing spirit, but as a response to the specific historical context. Koizumi learnt wood carving as a way to survive the experience of imprisonment. The reimagination of the Indian past of Buddhism was integral to the construction of Buddhism as a world religion, one that was espoused by Kubose in order to facilitate the integration of Japanese-

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Americans. While the aesthetics of the scenes of the Buddha’s life are an echo of the Ajanta imaginaire, the materiality of wood carving embodies the experiences of Japanese migration to North America, discrimination and displacement, which are also part of a transnational history of modern Buddhism.

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