

CURATING BUDDHISM: REIMAGINING BUDDHIST STATUES IN A MUSEUM  
AND TEMPLE SETTING

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis considers whether a Buddhist statue in a museum context can be both aesthetic and devotional. By reexamining the relationship between a devotional object, its surrounding space, and its viewer, this thesis will suggest how a museum gallery, though not a consecrated ritual space, can still potentially be a place for spiritual engagement akin to a religious sanctuary. Through a comparison of Gallery 16 of the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco and Mengjia Longshan Temple, Taipei, Taiwan as a case study in terms of their spaces and the movement of people within the space in relation to the objects, this thesis will consider how Buddhist statues may continue to exist as spiritual objects and works of aesthetic appreciation without losing their past as devotional icons, and I will do this by applying Victor Turner's concepts of liminality and the liminoid.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The exhibition of the permanent collection of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, organized by culture, roughly chronologically, begins on the building's third floor. The last gallery on that floor (gallery number 16), consisting mostly of sculpture, is dedicated to Chinese Buddhist art. Although it is a quiet and contemplative space, a historian of art or religion or a practicing Buddhist may feel that the original context of these works, that of an organic and vibrant temple, is not reflected in the museum setting.

While Western art museums have been acquiring Buddhist art since the late nineteenth century, the works were primarily valued for their aesthetic appeal.<sup>1</sup> Today they are often displayed as objects not too dissimilar from, for example, a beautiful celadon vase (which is almost equally displaced from its initial place of use). Buddhism scholar T.G. Foulk has written that in comparison to a temple setting, “when [he] encounters such works in a museum, [he] cannot help but see them as things somehow severed, incomplete, and out of place.”<sup>2</sup> Foulk also reveals a desire that many with highly specialized knowledge of Buddhist art have probably felt in a museum context “to reconstruct in [ones] imagination the world in which they were first produced, used and understood.”<sup>3</sup>

Anyone who is familiar with the original devotional setting of a Buddhist icon may experience a similar desire and attempt to imagine the original context as he or she walks through a museum gallery. However, even if a devotional object in a museum setting is separated from its original context, is it necessarily true to say, as Foulk does,

that it is somehow “incomplete?” Is the “use” and “understanding” of such devotional objects solely contingent on its environment? Is it not so that, to the eye of a believer, Buddhist statues hold just as much “use” – or more significantly, efficacy – as they did in the “world in which they were first produced, used, and understood?” While conversely, to the eyes of a nonbeliever, Buddhist statues may have very limited “use” or “understanding” even in the original devotional setting.

Questioning Foulk’s comment on the museum space, as well as my own inclination to envision an “original” setting of some sort for a Buddhist work of art in a museum gallery, this thesis reexamines the relationship between a devotional object, its surrounding space, and its viewer. More specifically, this thesis compares Gallery 16 of the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco and Mengjia Longshan Temple (艋舺龍山寺), Taipei, Taiwan as a case study in terms of their spaces and the movement of people within the space in relation to the objects in it. I will do this by applying Victor Turner’s concepts of liminality and the liminoid. Liminality refers to an in-between state of existence where something is neither one thing nor another. Liminality for Turner is specifically related to religious ritual and thus part of a collective cultural cycle or rhythm. Liminoid objects, however, sit on the margins of normative culture.<sup>4</sup> One-way in which Turner explores the differences between liminal and liminoid is the sphere in which they function. In terms of Buddhist statues, in a temple setting they are part of a culturally understood devotional practice, functioning as the embodiment of a spirit and the focus of both collective and private rituals. As statues in a museum and liminoid objects, they retain a “possibility rather than [an] actuality.”<sup>5</sup> Based on Turner’s definition, in a museum setting Buddhist statues exist on the edges of culture, where the interaction is

independent and varying, instead of ritualistic and regular. The concept of the “other” which is part of the world of the museum, in which objects from a multitude of cultures are presented as a buffet of information places the liminoid object into a passive state, a fragment of what it was meant to embody, in part abstracted into alterity, in part carrying synecdochic implications.<sup>6</sup>

The differences between liminal and liminoid are dependent on two main distinctions: setting and function. Rather, one can say that there is often a working assumption that the sacred significance of the Buddhist icon in the temple is tied to setting, and that the same image in a museum is performing a function that is relatively independent of setting. Yet, as we will see, this distinction may not hold as consistently as is often thought.

Can a Buddhist statue in a museum context be both aesthetic and devotional? This thesis will consider how a museum gallery, though it is not a consecrated ritual space, can still potentially be a place for spiritual engagement akin to a religious sanctuary, allowing religious objects to exist as works of aesthetic appreciation and examples of cultural endeavor without losing their past as devotional icons.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> One example can be seen in Ernest Fenollosa’s comparison of the Yumedono Kannon’s robes to those of the Charioteer of Delphi, which emphasizes the “aesthetic dignity” of the Yumedono Kannon. Ernest Fenollosa, *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art, an Outline History of East Asiatic Design*. Rev. ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 1963.), 74-75

<sup>2</sup> T.G. Foulk, “Religious Functions of Buddhist Art in China,” *Cultural Intersections in Later Chinese Art*, ed. Marsha Weidner (Honolulu; University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Foulk, “Religious Functions of Buddhist Art in China,” 13-14

<sup>4</sup> Victor Turner, *Blazing the Trail*, (Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 1992), 56

<sup>5</sup> Turner, *Blazing the Trail*, 57

<sup>6</sup> Turner, *Blazing the Trail*, 57; This concept of fragmentary is also seen in Faure's concept of icons as tesserae. Bernard Faure. "The Buddhist Icon and the Modern Gaze." *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 24, no. No. 3 (1998): 768-813. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344089>.

## CHAPTER II

### BUDDHIST ICONS TO “BUDDHIST ART”

Historically, images of the Buddhist pantheon have often been at the center of Buddhist devotional practices. Indeed, in China, Buddhism was called the “religion of images” by Confucians.<sup>1</sup> The ubiquity of Buddhist images both past and present attests to the appropriateness of this observation. Historical documents allude to the central role already played by Buddhist images in the transmission of the religion from India to China and subsequently the rest of East Asia.

The “original” image of the Buddha begins with the story of the King Udayana Buddha.<sup>2</sup> According to legend, King Udayana commissioned a sandalwood statue of the Buddha and when the Buddha saw the image of himself he experienced a profound understanding that became “a mirror-like self-reflexive recognition.”<sup>3</sup> The Buddha saw himself reflected in the image and the image saw itself reflected in the Buddha. The story goes on to say that the Buddha proclaimed that the image would eventually reach China and continue his teachings there. The story suggests that it was not just that the image looked like the Buddha, but that the statue was able to contain the essence of who or what the Buddha was: an enlightened being. The Udayana Buddha legend thus establishes “the magical efficacy of images”, something often associated with Buddhist images.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the proclamation made by the Buddha about the statue traveling to China provides validation for “the role of art in promotion of the faith.”<sup>5</sup>

The connection that subsequent images have back to the original sculpture establishes an image’s ability to embody the presence of the Buddha.<sup>6</sup> While images of

the Buddhist pantheon come in different media, distinguishing them in terms of their presence within ritual space, not to mention their function, in today's museum categorization such works are often lumped together as "Buddhist art." At first glance such generalized categorization may seem to corroborate Foulk's concern regarding the loss of iconicity or spiritual aura of a Buddhist icon as it enters into a museum setting.

In Stanley K. Abe's essay "Inside the Wonder House" he describes the museum as having "a magical quality... because it collects fragments of whole works, elides their original context, and recasts the art in the organizational structure of the Western archival institution."<sup>7</sup> For anthropologist Victor Turner the dismembering and scattering of things that were once grouped together in a ritual or religious context is the "liminoid".<sup>8</sup> This includes activities and objects that have transitioned from ritual into the sectors of both work and leisure in the modern world. Music, theater and sports are several examples of liminoid phenomena that Turner gives. Art is another.

Applying Turner's concept, separating Buddhist statues from the rituals and original settings is what makes them liminoid objects.<sup>9</sup> If we shift our perspective and reconsider this through Buddhist teaching, however, we might realize that the presence of a Buddhist icon in fact is fundamentally unaffected by such perceived change of status or labeling. In order to argue this point further, we must first of all understand how Buddhism understands the process in which an image becomes an icon.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Buddhism has been called the "religion of images". Xiangjiao in Chinese, "teaching [vi., religion] of images" a pejorative term coined by Confucians to refer to Buddhism, derived from the emphasis in Buddhism on bowing before images during rituals and ceremonies." Robert E. Buswell, and Donald S. Lopez, *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, (2014), 1008

<sup>2</sup> For the complete story of the Udayana Buddha and King Udayana see *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, 932

<sup>3</sup> Swearer, Donald K. *Becoming the Buddha : The Ritual of Image Consecration in Thailand*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004.)

<sup>4</sup> quoted in Charles Lachman, "Art" in *Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 38

<sup>5</sup> Amy McNair, Weidner, Marsha Smith., Berger, Patricia Ann, and Helen Foresman Spencer Museum of Art. *Latter Days of the Law : Images of Chinese Buddhism, 850-1850*. 1st ed. (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 225

<sup>6</sup> Images of the Buddha have a "typological link with the 'original' image of the Buddha." quoted in Lachman, "Art", 38.

<sup>7</sup> Stanley K. Abe, "Inside the Wonder House" in *Curators of the Buddha*, ed. Donald S. Lopez (Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1995), 65

<sup>8</sup> Turner, *Blazing the Trail*, 56

<sup>9</sup> Abe, "Inside the Wonder House"; Faure, "The Buddhist Icon and the Modern Gaze."; and Foulk, "Religious Functions of Buddhist Art in China". All express this concern regarding the isolation of Buddhist art.



## CHAPTER III

### PRESENCE OF A BUDDHIST ICON AS LIMINALITY

Generally speaking, a Buddhist image begins its life as a devotional icon through a formal consecration ceremony. The consecration of a Buddhist icon, a ritual known as the “eye-opening” ceremony, is the canonical step taken to empower a Buddhist image with the spiritual efficacy needed to serve as a focus of devotional practices.<sup>1</sup> In the case of a Buddhist statue, this ritual imparts the essence of the Buddhist deity into an immaterial shell of a form (or a “sheath”), transforming it into an icon.<sup>2</sup> After this rite, the Buddhist deity is then seen as present in the icon through which “the life of the Buddha assumes a present reality not simply as a reminder of a sacred story, but as a physical representative of the story’s protagonist.”<sup>3</sup>

During the consecration ceremony the statue enters a phase where it is no longer just a statue, but is not yet fully imbued with the presence that makes it an icon. I believe it is fruitful to understand this phase in terms of the Turner’s definition of liminality. As a transitional phase liminality, deriving from the Latin word “limen” for threshold, implies an intermediate state during which something is betwixt and between.<sup>4</sup> Turner, building on the work of Arnold Van Gennep, fully developed the idea of liminality as a part of ritual, specifically discussing it as the transitional phase in the context of a rite of passage.<sup>5</sup> According to Turner, rites of passage can be broken down into three phases: separation, margin and aggregation.<sup>6</sup> The first phase separates those who are going through the rite and segregates them from the general populace and the third phase returns them back to the community, albeit with a new status or state, having gone

through a process of sacralization. Turner defines the middle, marginal phase as the liminal state.

During the consecration ceremony, a Buddhist statue goes through an equivalent state of liminality when it is more than just a thing, but not yet an icon. Significantly, just as the story of King Udayana's statue illustrates, Buddhist teaching clarifies that the materiality (thingness) of a Buddhist statue is never lost or overlooked even after it is imbued with the sacred presence of an icon through a consecration ritual. Neither is it the case that a formal ritualistic consecration is an absolute necessity for a Buddhist statue to assume sacred potency. T.G. Foulk has noted that most art historians overestimate the number of consecrated icons in a museum's Buddhist art collection.<sup>7</sup> One may make a similar claim with regard to Buddhist images that are assuming their intended function as devotional icons, particularly for those in private homes, or at neighborhood shrines, or statues by the roadside.

The metaphysical link of Buddhist statues to buddha-nature can be categorized as what the Chinese called *ganying* (感應), which Robert Sharf has translated as "stimulus-response" or "sympathetic resonance."<sup>8</sup> Sharf defines this phenomenon as "objects belonging to the same category or class spontaneously resonat[ing] with each other just as do two identically tuned strings on a pair of zithers."<sup>9</sup> Sharf explains that the term *ganying* occurs frequently in Chinese discussions concerning the process of invoking a deity, a mainstay of Buddhist practice that often occurred before an image of some kind.<sup>10</sup> Sympathetic resonance between a Buddhist image and a viewer may occur when the supplicant stimulates or activates the deity via some form of engagement with the image, which in turn elicits a "compassionate response".<sup>11</sup> Although there are multiple

levels in which a viewer might engage and multiple ways in which the deity might respond, much like the Buddha recognizing himself in the Udayana Buddha statue, a sympathetic resonance may occur when an icon recognizes that spark of buddha-nature in a devotee. The response by the deity is often what is attributed as the “magical efficacy” and miraculous powers associated with many Buddhist statues.<sup>12</sup>

The idea of sympathetic resonance underscores the critical difference between a person going through a rite of passage, and the transition of a Buddhist statue from its state of thingness to an icon: if one could understand each encounter a Buddhist statue has with a devotee as an instance of “activation,” then this statue arguably goes through a liminal state, not just once but repeatedly.

Applying this elaboration of liminality to Buddhist statues means that even after the consecration ritual ends an icon may continue to exist in a liminal state. One aspect of an icon’s continued liminal existence is dependent on the link that physical statue creates to both the past and the present. This embodiment of a physical presence that connects multiple states can also serve as a visual metaphor for the concept of nonduality as described by Nagarjuna’s *Treatise on the Middle*: “Everything is actual, or not actual, or actual and not actual. Or neither actual nor not actual; this is the Buddha’s teaching.”<sup>13</sup> In this treatise, Nagarjuna rejects the notion of inherent or independent existence that is part of the Brahmanic understanding of the world; instead, he postulates that there is no fixed self. From this understanding then, the icon continues to function as a paradox in which it is both present for the viewer and engaged with the past through embodying a presence. The icon becomes the physicality of Nagarjuna’s concept of both/and, neither/nor. It is both in the past and in the present.<sup>14</sup> It is neither the presence of the Buddha nor not the

presence of the Buddha. Sharf puts the existence of icons into terms of the signifier and the signified, or the map and the territory.<sup>15</sup> In this case, the map and the territory are one and the same. The presence contained within the Buddha image and the Buddha are one and the same.

The icon encompasses a presence that both reaches into the past to access an historical spirit and exists in the present as the center of daily observances. What activates the liminality of the icon is engaging with it in some way. In the temple setting this engagement is usually, but not always, through a devotional ritual of some sort. To quote Sharf, “Through ritual we rediscover a world wherein... a stone image is a god. In ritual the form/content, subject/object, and self/other dichotomies are intentionally confounded, creating a transitional world... that is neither inside the “mind” nor outside in the “objective world.”<sup>16</sup> The icon acts as a threshold linking the presence of the deity as representative of an ideal and the present in which both the icon and the viewer engage. Thus, during ritual practice the presence of the icon becomes the threshold itself, breaking down the barriers of the physical world and the mind to allow the devotee access to the spiritual through the statue. This kind of engaged experience puts the icon into a protracted liminality. This spiritual link may be accessed through the idea of sympathetic resonance, a metaphysical experience enacted between statue and devotee.

The word liminal implies a physicality, materiality or thingness. The original translation of the Latin “limen” to mean a threshold suggests the physical divide of one space from another. Liminality, however, is a state of being that can be experienced. While the majority of this thesis discusses the liminality of Buddhist statues and how viewer then takes part in that experience, it may be helpful to further explore how

liminality can have a transformative affect. I will do so by giving examples of two experiences with a physical object that allowed the viewer to tap into an experiences akin to the spiritual.

The first example is of a woman on vacation in a Southeast Asian country. While walking around the town where she is staying, she sees the colorful gateway of a Buddhist temple and decides to enter. She does not speak the language and has very little knowledge of the history or practice of Buddhism. The temple complex is not large, but there is a small courtyard that precedes the main hall. At the entrance the woman notices a row of shoes. After removing her own shoes and placing them in this row, the woman crosses the threshold into the temple proper. The noises of the street seem to fade away. There are three paths in front of her and to the left she sees a large tree in a courtyard. The planter and soil that the tree is going out of serve as a kind of altar for a stone statue of a seated Buddha. The Buddha statue is wrapped in yellow silk and has offerings of flowers and fruit placed all around it. As she stands in front of this image she suddenly feels tears spring to her eyes, so she sits down and weeps. She is not sure why she is weeping, but something about the image in front of her has deeply affected her. In just a few brief moments of looking and being in this place she has felt a cathartic release of emotion.

The second example is of a man who has been cajoled into visiting an art exhibition at a museum (despite wanting to do almost anything else). It is a hot day outside, but the air inside the museum is cool and the noises of the city are cut off as the doors to the building close behind him. Most of the pieces are of little interest to him. He glances at them casually, but does not stop to take in any details. He does notice that the

gallery has a calm and quiet atmosphere. The man takes a deep breath and slows his pace, letting his mind wander. As he walks around a particular piece catches his eye from across the room. For some reason the colors and shapes of the painting are enticing, so he walks over to get a closer look. The man stands in front of the painting and allows his eyes to follow the movement of the artist's brush and the build up of paint on the surface. He has no idea what the abstract forms are supposed to be, but his eyes alight on small moments of color and shape that seem to speak to something in him. He finally blinks and realizes that he has lost track of time standing in front of this painting. The man shakes his head and continues to walk through the gallery, albeit more slowly than before. As he leaves he glances back at the painting, but still cannot express why it fascinated him.

Both of these examples are of brief transcendent moments where a physical object created a state of absorbed engagement. The act of looking, while it may seem to be a passive act, still engages the viewer and allowed the viewer to experience something outside of the normal or mundane. Art and religion can often tap into this state of liminality. Perhaps it is the combination of aesthetics and access to the spiritual that makes Buddhist images so appealing. However, it is through some form of action that the state of existence of a Buddhist statue is experienced; this may be the devotional ritual performed by devotees or it may be the action taken by the deity itself. The actions, whatever form they may take, are what charge the icon, allowing it to be the center of worship or to reach out to a devotee. While the space and atmosphere of a consecrated temple setting may help the devotee to enter a certain mindset, and certainly provides historical context, it is not always necessary for a spiritual dialogue between statue and

devotee. The importance of the physical statue over that of the setting is perhaps demonstrated in the survival of Mengjia Longshan Temple's Guanyin during World War II while the majority of the hall was destroyed.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Theravada Buddhism, mainly in Thailand, has a well documented and described eye opening ceremony called "*buddhābhiseka*". For more information see Swearer, Donald K. *Becoming the Buddha : The Ritual of Image Consecration in Thailand*. Buddhisms. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004)

<sup>2</sup> For more information see Helmut Brinker's discussion of the Sheath Buddha or "sayabutsu" in Brinker, Helmut, and Helen Foresman, *Secrets of the Sacred : Empowering Buddhist Images in Clear, in Code, and in Cache*. 1st ed. (Seattle: in association with University of Washington Press, 2011)

<sup>3</sup> Swearer, *Becoming the Buddha*, 4

<sup>4</sup> "Variations on a Theme of Liminality" Turner, *Blazing the Trail*, 48-67

<sup>5</sup> Turner, *Blazing the Trail*

<sup>6</sup> Van Gennep's three phases of rites of passage are separation, margin (limen) and aggregation. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*, (Chicago: Aldine Pub., 1969), 94

<sup>7</sup> Foulk, "Religious Functions of Buddhist Art in China", 17-18

<sup>8</sup> Robert Sharf, *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism*, (Honolulu, University of Hawaii, 2001), 78

<sup>9</sup> For more information on sympathetic resonance see Sharf, *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism*, 83

<sup>10</sup> Sharf, *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism*, 114

<sup>11</sup> Sharf, *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism*, 120

<sup>12</sup> Amy McNair, quoted in Lachman, "Art", 38

<sup>13</sup> "Buddhism: Details about 'Fundamental Verses Of The Middle Way'" Buddhism / Nagarjuna / Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way. Accessed March 1, 2015. [http://www.buddhism-guide.com/buddhism/fundamental\\_verses\\_of\\_the\\_middle\\_way.htm#24:18](http://www.buddhism-guide.com/buddhism/fundamental_verses_of_the_middle_way.htm#24:18).

<sup>14</sup> Mark Unno, "Key Ideas – Nagarjuna and the Thoughts of Emptiness"

<sup>15</sup> Sharf, "Ritual," *Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism*, 245-270

<sup>16</sup> Sharf, "Ritual", 257

## CHAPTER IV

### MENGJIA LONGSHAN TEMPLE

While the atmosphere at Mengjia Longshan Temple on a given day is more frenzied than that of the AAM Gallery 16, it is an organized chaos that is contained by the ritual of devotional practices centered on icons. Longshan (Dragon Mountain) Temple is several blocks east of the Tamsui River (淡水河) in Taipei, Taiwan. It is situated in Wanhua District (萬華區), formerly known as Mengjia (夢佳), one of the oldest districts in Taipei. Longshan Temple serves a dual function: first as a consecrated and sacred space for worship, and secondly as a cultural destination. The primary function of Longshan temple remains that of a sacred space. However, its secondary role is as a cultural destination where the architecture and objects housed within can be appreciated by those with little to no information about their history or use.

Longshan is the oldest Buddhist temple in Taipei and as such has both architectural and historical significance. The temple was originally built by Han Chinese who emigrated to Mengjia from Fujian province in Mainland China in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, during the Qing Dynasty.<sup>1</sup> Due to the ravages of time on its timber structures, as well as multiple natural disasters including fires and earthquakes, the temple needed to be reconstructed. So, in 1919 the governing board hired architect Wang Yi-shun, a master of temple construction who also happened to be from southern Fujian, China, to design the new temple.<sup>2</sup> The main hall, where the icon of the Bodhisattva Guanyin is enshrined, was destroyed again in 1945 and a reconstruction was completed around 1955. In 1963 the



temple foundation was created and the gates through which one enters today were finished in 1969. The final architectural feature is a waterfall, which was finished in 1996.

Today although the temple has a general association with Pure Land Buddhism and loose connections to the humanistic Buddhism of Fo Guang Shan, Longshan is a lay, community temple. There are a few resident monks who maintain the site and take on more formal ritual roles when required. The temple is governed by a foundation, which is run by members of the community.<sup>3</sup>

Although this temple has an interesting 300 years of history, the true importance of this site comes from the temple's creation myth and from the magical properties of the Guanyin statue. It is said that a Fujian merchant left a Guanyin amulet hanging on a tree in the Mengjia neighborhood, and when night came the amulet began giving off light. The people of the neighborhood discovered that the charm had the power to grant wishes, and so built a temple there to house the goddess.<sup>4</sup> A consecrated icon was brought, along with many of the original building materials, from the mother temple in Fujian province. This temple is called Guangzhou Longshan Temple (泉州龍山寺) and was originally built in the Sui Dynasty.<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century the Mengjia Longshan Guanyin icon was taken back to the Guangzhou Longshan Temple on a somewhat regular basis to be re-consecrated.<sup>6</sup> However, after the icon survived a World War II bombing raid that destroyed the surrounding buildings, including the main hall that housed it, the devotees recognized it as a living incarnation of the Buddha and as an object that forms a direct link for devotees to connect with this presence.<sup>7</sup> Guanyin's survival is the source of the statue's efficacy and independence from the mother temple in Fujian. What this change in

status of the Mengjia Longshan Guanyin seems to indicate is that although the statue was housed in a temple, a consecrated ritual space, the sacredness of the space did not automatically activate its central statue as an icon, nor helped to maintain its efficacy. In the minds of devotees before World War II, the Guanyin was apparently an entity that inevitably reverted back to the state of thingness without the act of re-consecration. Theoretically, then, the Guanyin moved back and forth through the liminal state when it reverted back to a thing as the efficacy transferred from the Guanyin in the mother temple wore off, and when it was once again re-consecrated. After it survived the WWII bombings, however, the status of the Mengjia Longshan Guanyin appears to have fundamentally changed to a permanent state of iconicity, evidenced by the fact that its devotees no longer felt the necessity to re-consecrate the statue.

The survival of this statue, while the buildings around it burned away, may suggest that the efficacy of the statue is not necessarily dependent on the setting. For the devotees of the Mengjia Longshan Guanyin, the temple setting, while important, is not what made the statue an icon. Instead it was the ability of the statue to survive, perhaps an action made by Guanyin the deity, which demonstrated the statue's efficacy as independent from both the mother temple's icon and the temple setting. This may also suggest that re-categorizing the Mengjia Longshan Guanyin, or similar statues, as "Buddhist art" and placing it in a museum setting does not end the statue's status as an icon.

## Longshan Temple Today

Longshan is both a cultural destination and an active place of worship, this combination of tourism and ritual activity makes for an energetic atmosphere that swirls around the icons of the more than 165 deities worshipped there. The temple entrance is a large, ornate and extremely colorful gate of traditional hip and gable architecture. The dragon motif that is a dominant feature of the ornamentation of this temple is easily visible on this gate. Four dragon sculptures sit along the eaves of the gate's roof. Once inside this first boundary, visitors walk into a transitional courtyard with a large waterfall to the east and a water fountain to the west [Figure 1; see the Appendix for all figures]. The transitional and purifying aspects of this space serve to move one from the mundane world bustling outside into the sacred.

The overall layout of this site is a square within a square, with a north to south axial orientation, traditional for Buddhist temples. The entrance to the temple courtyard containing the two main halls is on the east side of a second gate. An architectural detail of note as one proceeds up the few steps are the scroll-like decorations on the stairs. They are probably meant to invite the visitor inside and suggest to those who are paying careful attention that what is housed within has the status of sacred writings. This temple, like a sutra scroll or reliquary, is a protective container for the objects housed within.

The gate through which visitors are directed is called the dragon gate (longman 龍門) [Figures 2 and 3]. Once through, visitors and devotees may purchase incense and offerings of flowers and food. Like the AAM, there is also a map that demonstrates the path one should walk through the temple. Unlike the AAM, this path is one of circumambulation meant as a devotional ritual that is an interaction of the devotee with

the images of the deities enshrined there [Figure 4]. The prescribed path begins at the first of seven censors. This first censor is named for Guanyin, the main deity of this temple [Figure 5]. This censor is a large gilt tripod with a full, round bowl containing incense ash. The dragon motif is carried onto this object with dragons decorating the large bowl. Three guardian figures hold up the roof structure that protects the burning incense. The roof is also capped with a jewel-like cinta-mani (如意珠) surrounded by flames. The second censor is placed on the porch of the main hall, directly in front of the Guanyin icon. This is the Tiangong (天宮), Heavenly Lord, censor and is identical to the Guanyin censor. This may show the hierarchy of deities that has developed here at Longshan. As previously noted for this community this Guanyin icon has taken on the status of a Buddha through its survival over the years, so by duplicating the censors for both gods they give equal status to Guanyin.

In addition to the golden Guanyin statue, the Middle Hall (中廳) at the center of the temple also houses gilt statues of the Bodhisattvas Monju (文殊) and Puxian (普賢) who flank the Bodhisattva of Compassion. Monju is on the right and Puxian is on the left. There is an iron railing and three gates that allow viewers to see into the main hall, one gate in front of each of the main icons. Each icon has its own altar and offerings of fresh flowers, fruits and sweets. The interior of the hall is ornately decorated with columns painted red and wooden carvings of arhats, guardians and dragons dripping from every available surface.<sup>8</sup> Tucked right by the railings in front of Puxian is the only large sculpture of the Buddha, depicted as the rail thin renouncer Shakyamuni. In addition to Puxian and Monju, the 18 arhats are also displayed in this hall.

Inside the dimly lit hall the figures of all three Bodhisattvas seem to glow. This effect is created through the gilt paint that covers the wooden statues and the flickering candles placed throughout. Placed behind glass, the icon of Guanyin looks demurely down with hands in the benediction and wish-granting mudras. If gold is the first impression of this hall and its main icon, the color red is second. The features and small details of the statue are created with red paint. The god is also draped in luxurious red robes. He is seated in the meditation position on a lotus pedestal with a flaming mandorla surrounding her head. Two small, angel-like figures are placed directly on either side of him. A smaller table is set immediately in front of the icon's case and a series of smaller statues of manifestations of the Buddha and other Bodhisattvas are placed on view on a somewhat regular basis.<sup>9</sup> The draw and aesthetic value of this icon is unmistakable. The numbers of devotees, visitors and offerings gathered around this main figure mark him as special. All told there are more than 165 deities enshrined at Longshan Temple. However, the movement around the temple complex creates cohesion among all of the images and pockets of calm in which devotees focus on particular images as the center of their practice. In front of all of these icons, devotees bow, offer gifts, perform auguries and pray. The noise of prayers and snatches of sutras adds to the chaos of this space, but also provides the atmosphere that helps demarcate this site as sacred. The path of circumambulation at this temple is counter-clockwise, which also helps to control the anarchy. While one is not required to follow this exact path, observation shows that devotees are meant to move through the space along this counter-clockwise route. There is a feeling of organized chaos that swirls around this temple. It is a place of constant activity as community members come for regular practice and tourists come to

gawk. However, the hierarchical arrangement of icons reflects the Buddhist cosmos and this organization helps to guide the turmoil. The metal fences and gates, while helping to protect the icons, also visually divide the many sculptures and provide brief moments of visual quiet. The sheer number of people and the many statues in this temple can become overwhelming; nonetheless, moments of quiet reflection are evident as people pray, burn incense, perform auguries and some simply observe. While it may seem contradictory, the lively atmosphere at Longshan Temple can sometimes serve to intensify the moments of quiet contemplation that happen amongst the chaos.<sup>10</sup>

The movement and rituals performed at Longshan Temple are just some of the examples of devotional interaction with Buddhist statues. However, it is this interaction that charges the statue and places it into a liminal state so that it serves as a spiritual conduit. As previously suggested, a Buddhist statue's liminality is based in its connection to the Buddha or Bodhistattva and the interactions of a devotee. The ritualized aspects and the setting of temple, such as Longshan Temple, may help the ability of the devotee to engage, but are they essential for that engagement to occur? Several sutras, such as the *Scripture on the Production of Buddha Images*, emphasize the importance of the physical statue, as well as the merits of producing and maintaining such sacred images.<sup>11</sup> Such emphasis on the physical object itself raises several questions relevant to those posed in the introduction. The Mengjia Longshan Guanyin may serve as just such an example, for while it has remained in its "original" setting, that setting has been destroyed and rebuilt numerous times. In the case of the Guanyin statue, the temple setting is not what makes the iconicity of the statue. So, when removed from its original setting does a statue's potential to become a liminal threshold through ritual disappear? If the physical statue is

what is important, then might the efficacy of such a work remain when that statue moves from the liminal into what Turner has described as the liminoid?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mengjia Longshan's "mother" temple, called Quanzhou Longshan Temple or An Hailong Temple, is located in Quanzhou, Fujian. So many people have left the Fujian area over the centuries that the Quanzhou Longshan Temple, apart from being dedicated to Guanyin, is also a pilgrimage site for those who have left for other places. Mengjia Longshan's position in the community is an inversion of that of the Quanzhou temple. "Temples in the Rain, Jinjiang and Quanzhou, Fujian, China." Ursula's Weekly Wanders. Accessed April 6, 2015. <http://www.ursulasweeklywanders.com/travel/temples-in-the-rain-jinjiang-and-quanzhou-fujian-china/>.

<sup>2</sup> The multiple destructions of this temple are chronicled on the temple's website "艋舺龍山寺." 官網." [http://lungshan.org.tw/tw/01\\_3\\_chronology.php](http://lungshan.org.tw/tw/01_3_chronology.php).

<sup>3</sup> This reflects the temples origins as a dual site, originally functioning as a religious temple and as a meeting hall for local guilds and other municipal matters. Over the years it has been used as makeshift school house, police station. It now also incorporates a number of Daoist deities in addition to the main Buddhist icons.

<sup>4</sup> "Temples in Taipei." Temples in Taipei. [http://www.asianinfo.org/asianinfo/taiwan/taipei\\_temples.htm#Wanhua](http://www.asianinfo.org/asianinfo/taiwan/taipei_temples.htm#Wanhua).

<sup>5</sup> "Mapping Buddhist Monasteries." Longshan Monastery, (in) Anhai, Fujian, CN -. <http://monastic-asia.wikidot.com/longshan>.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Brewer Jones, *Buddhism in Taiwan : Religion and the State, 1660-1990*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999)

<sup>7</sup> "艋舺龍山寺." 官網." [http://lungshan.org.tw/tw/01\\_2\\_build.php](http://lungshan.org.tw/tw/01_2_build.php).

<sup>8</sup> The *horror-vqcu* often associated with Indian temples is carried over to the ornamentation at Longshan.

<sup>9</sup> This rotation of smaller sculptures is based on personal observation at the site and careful study of pictures which show several different sculptures placed in front of Guanyin.

<sup>10</sup> Much of the observations regarding the balance of chaos and contemplation are from time spent at Longshan temple during summer of 2014

<sup>11</sup> Sharf, *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism*, 116

## CHAPTER V

### ASIAN ART MUSEUM OF SAN FRANCISCO

#### History of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

The nucleus of the Asian Art Museum's collection came from Avery Brundage, a Chicago industrialist most known for his role as the fifth president of the International Olympic Committee. Brundage donated part of his collection in 1959 with the stipulation that the city of San Francisco build a new museum to house it.<sup>1</sup> In June of 1966 a newly constructed space was opened to accommodate Mr. Brundage's collection, which was a wing of the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum in Golden Gate Park. The museum was housed here for the next 35 years. In 1994 San Francisco passed a bond measure allowing the former Main Library, part of the downtown Civic Center, to become the new home of the AAM. Two years later Gae Aulenti, an architect known for redesigning already built spaces into museums, was chosen as the architect for the new AAM.<sup>2</sup> Finally in 2003 the AAM opened its doors again to the public.

#### Movement and experience at the Asian Art Museum

Today the museum holds more than 12,000 objects from over 40 cultures and spans 6,000 years of human artistic production. Roughly 1,000 of these are of Chinese Buddhist origins.<sup>3</sup> Entering through the front doors on the southwestern side of this neo-classical style building, you move through the transitional space of the building. This is where the museum ticket and help desk, as well as the museum gift shop, are located. In order to access the permanent collection visitors are directed to the back of the museum,



along the southeastern side of the building. An escalator ascends the three stories of galleries so that one begins at the top and works down through the U-shaped exhibition spaces [Figure 6].

The entire third floor of the AAM is dedicated almost exclusively to Buddhist art. It begins with an introduction to Buddhism and its origins in India; in fact, the layout of the entire museum, even of the galleries that display secular art, is based on the geographical transmission of Buddhism out of India through the rest of Asia. From this starting point in India the galleries progress by culture: South Asia, West Asia, Southeast Asia and finally East Asia. The objects on the third floor are predominately sculpture and carvings of wood and metal, which are arranged roughly chronologically. The flow of the space is divided by partitions to separate the cultures, but points of continuity or extreme differences create transitional zones from one civilization to another. The wall colors also indicate a shift from one group into the next.

There are 16 galleries total on the third floor. The last quarter of the U-shaped space is dedicated to China and its material culture related to religious practice. There are jades and bronzes, as well as other figural sculptures in the first three galleries devoted to China. The final gallery on the third floor, Number 16, is an image hall of sorts, completely dedicated to Chinese Buddhist art. It is this space that is my main example of the gallery as a place for process.<sup>4</sup>

#### Gallery 16: Chinese Buddhist Art

Moving from Gallery 15 into 16 the space narrows into a corridor. This corridor is lined with small bronze and stone images grouped together inside glass cases. These are

some of the earliest Chinese Buddhist images and are coupled with descriptive text about the arrival of Buddhism in China during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, during the later Han Dynasty. Following these small sculptures are larger stone carvings. One of these is a large, disembodied Buddha's head dating from the Tang Dynasty and taken from the Longmen caves.<sup>5</sup> There are also two stele, which each depict a Buddhist triad of the Buddha flanked by two Bodhisattvas. However, the most important statue in this area is a small gilded Seated Buddha from 338 CE, making it the oldest dated Chinese Buddhist statue. This work will be discussed further below, but suffice it to say it is something which the museum takes care to highlight as a masterwork of the collection.

From the confined area of the corridor the final gallery opens into a large image hall [Figure 7]. The viewer's gaze is directed to the far end of Gallery 16 where a brightly glazed stoneware Buddha is illuminated in a niche.<sup>6</sup> This vibrant seated Buddha helps to draw the visitor through this hall [Figure 8]. After entering the gallery, there is a small seating area immediately to the left. On the right are placed pedestals and sculptures that alternate with windows. Two permanent panels divide the long room and also function as display plinths that allows for additional sculpted images to be shown. On each side of these platforms two to five small statues are installed. Approximately three life-sized statues fit in this same space and there is enough room to comfortably walk between these two plinths. Lining the northwest wall are elevated display areas that alternate niches and projections on which to place pedestals and sculpture. Approximately twelve images are displayed along this wall [Figure 9]. At the far end of this space is installed a large silk painting of a Bodhisattva, the only painted image in Gallery 16. Next to this

painting is a large sculpture of the Bodhisattva Guanyin reclining in the position of royal ease [Figure 10].<sup>7</sup>

A description of Gallery 16 gives a basic understanding of the area, however the flow created by the visual cues of the visitor's map and arranged vistas creates an unclear traffic flow. The mixed message of where to go is an inherent issue of many museums. In comparison, temples create flow through patterns of movement that are dictated by daily rituals and by the cues given through the temple space that is reflective of a specific cosmology. Museums also create patterns of movement, but because the architecture is often viewed as a blank canvas on which to present the art, much is left up to the viewer.<sup>8</sup> For some visitors, this perhaps creates too much freedom of movement and causes uncertainty and chaos as they move throughout the gallery. This confusion can also lead to a disruption of the narrative of Chinese Buddhism being built around the statues in this gallery.

### Movement Through Gallery 16

As described above, Gallery 16 is a long gallery with a view from the entry point all the way to the exit. The curators have taken advantage of this long vista and placed a polychrome Seated Buddha from the Ming Dynasty in a niche at the end, which draws the viewer's eye through the gallery. The Song Dynasty Guanyin statue discussed above is also easily visible from the entrance. The map provided by the museum at the ticket counter, however, indicates that one of the collection's masterworks is immediately to the left as one enters. This masterwork is the previously noted gilt Seated Buddha, dated 338 CE. If the viewer is paying attention to the cues on the map or has done enough research

to be on the lookout for this object, then they turn to their left to look at this small statue and a suggested pattern of movement emerges. Also placed on the left side of Gallery 16 is a sitting area, the first one in several galleries, which can also encourage the visitor to move into the space and to the left. Once they have moved into this area, then the images that line the northeastern wall become clearly visible. Coupled with the images on the western sides of the plinths, a path is created and then anchored by the painting of a Bodhisattva at the end of this space.

Another route available is towards the colorful seated Buddha at the end of the gallery. This will lead the viewer through the space created on the right side of the central plinths, which is a type of image hall created by the alternating windows and statues on pedestals along the southeastern wall.<sup>9</sup> Stopping to look at the Song Dynasty Guanyin statue, placed on the corner of the gallery that leads towards the exits, can serve to create movement here. If the visitor stops to look at this statue then their eyes may be drawn to the left and they will see that there is curator-made corridor on the other side of the central plinths. Additionally, no matter whether the visitor turns and moves to the left or continues on the right-hand path, the gap between the two plinths offers a shortcut onto the other path. This provides an S-shaped movement through Gallery 16.

A third option is to simply fixate on the glazed Seated Buddha at the far end of the gallery and walk through the right hand path without noticing any of the other psychologically suggested routes. It should be noted that despite the work done by the curators to nudge the viewer deeper into this space, it is not uncommon for many visitors to walk through Gallery 16 without looking at anything. This may be due to the view of the glazed Seated Buddha that attracts them to the opposite end of the gallery, to the fact

that Gallery 16 is the last on the third floor, or that both the restrooms and exits are at the end of Gallery 16.

All of the patterns of movement discussed so far assume that the visitor is going to move in a linear direction from the entrance towards the exit. There is however, another option that begins to form a direct link to temple space and ritual patterns of movement, like those seen at Longshan Temple. No matter whether a viewer walks to the right or left side of the central plinths, one could circumambulate around them and the gallery in its entirety. A circular movement through the space could also become a figure 8 or infinity figure path if one crossed through the opening between the pair of plinths. Both of these pathways through Gallery 16 suggest a type of circumambulation as previously described at Longshan Temple.

All told, I have described five pathways through Gallery 16. A sixth path could simply be to walk and look at random through the space, although given the time and attention paid by curators and designers to this space, this seems unlikely. Through the description of these six routes, one of the issues of this museum comes to light. There is too much ambiguity and fluidity. In comparison to Longshan Temple, where the dominant path is one of counterclockwise circumambulation with stops at specific locations, the comparatively smaller space of Gallery 16 at the AAM might become overwhelming with the number of choices that one has through it. However, that ambiguity can also be interpreted as liminal space in which Buddhist sculptures can slip the confines of the museum and be activated as objects at the center of devotional practice.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Museum History." Asian Art Museum. <http://www.asianart.org/about/history>.

<sup>2</sup> "San Francisco's Asian Art Museum had been a library in its previous life, defined by a mock-classical style popular in the early 20th century. In Aulenti's hands it became an open, light-filled space with unexpected touches, such as a courtyard with volcanic stone floors and seating." Aulenti also redesigned the Musee d'Orsay, that redesign reopened in 1986, although the museum also went through yet another remodel. "Gae Aulenti Dies at 84; Architect Designed Paris' Musee D'Orsay." Los Angeles Times. November 5, 2012. <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/nov/05/local/la-me-gae-aulenti-20121105>.

<sup>3</sup> "Collection." Asian Art Museum. <http://www.asianart.org/collections/collection>

<sup>4</sup> Barry Bergdoll, "The Museum as Architectural Activist" Lecture at University of Oregon, October, 2014

<sup>5</sup> This was one of the original works in Avery Brundage's collection.

<sup>6</sup> Seated Buddha, dated 1500-1600, Ming Dynasty, stoneware with five glazes

<sup>7</sup> This sculpture is made of wood and dates from the Song Dynasty (960-1279). It is also one of the pieces from the original collection of Avery Brundage.

<sup>8</sup> Carol Duncan writes that "where the focus [of a museum] is on collecting or a collection, the museum environment itself is often ignores, as if its spaces were neutral or invisible." *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, (New York: Routledge, 1996), 1

<sup>9</sup> For more information on image halls and Buddhist images see Abe, "Inside the Wonder House: Buddhist Art and the West", 63–106

## CHAPTER VI

### COMPARISON OF TWO GUANYIN STATUES

The majority of this thesis focuses on the setting and liminality of Buddhist statues, however this section will compare the Guanyin icon from Longshan Temple and a statue of Guanyin from the Asian Art Museum to demonstrate some of the issues of contextualizing Buddhist art in a museum setting. Longshan Temple is famous for its Guanyin icon, which originated in Mainland China around the same time that the temple was constructed in 1738. In the Chinese Buddhist art gallery at the Asian Art Museum one of the largest works on display is a Bodhisattva Guanyin statue from the Song Dynasty. Both works are highly valued, although the emphasis each institution places on the statues is very different.

Longshan Temple was built in 1738 and the statue is dated from around that same time. More information than this on the construction of the icon is difficult to track down. The temple's website and the few available resources all emphasize the efficacy of the statue as an embodiment of the Buddha over its earthly origins.<sup>1</sup> By the Tang Dynasty Guanyin was one of the most popular deities in Chinese Buddhism. This has remained the case at Longshan Temple. Visitors and devotees alike are directed towards this statue by the map at the entrance, the location of two large gold censurs in front of the main hall and the sheer number of people gathered in front of the hall that houses this image.

The Longshan Guanyin icon is a gilt statue, with red pigments outlining the features and ornamentation. The Bodhisattva wears a crown, which has a small image of Amida Buddha in it and who is identified as Guanyin's spiritual teacher. A flaming

mandorla surrounds the statue's head; the eyes are down cast, with gentle feminine features. The statue is depicted seated in the meditation position with crossed feet and hands in the gesture of protection, wisdom and blessing. Other attendant statues surround Guanyin and the altar before the statue is covered with offerings of flowers and fruits. Both the Guanyin and the attendant figures are encased behind glass, although this is hard to see from a distance since metal gates keep devotees outside of the hall. Nonetheless the importance of this statue, enshrined in the main hall, as the focus of devotional practice at this community temple cannot be ignored. In situ, with a building surrounding him, offerings in front as well as devotees praying and chanting there is no question of the importance of this statue, if not its devotional status.

Unlike the Longshan Guanyin, information on the Song Dynasty Guanyin statue from the AAM is readily available.<sup>2</sup> This statue was one of the original pieces belonging to Avery Brundage, the man whose collection of Asian art began the AAM. The AAM's Guanyin statue is carved from wood with traces of pigments and dates to the Song Dynasty. Its height is 52 inches and it is one of the largest statues in the gallery, is a depiction of the Bodhisattva reclining in the position of royal ease, right hand resting on bent knee and the left in the gift bestowing mudra. The AAM's didactic label for this object and two museum catalogues all focus on the aesthetics of this statue. They describe the Indian-style *dhoti* robe, ornamentation and the absence of a Buddha figure in the crown of this sculpture.<sup>3</sup> However, none of these sources discuss how the statue might have functioned in its original space. One catalogue does note that "the figure lacks its original and probably elaborate sculptural setting," but makes no mention as to what that setting might have been.<sup>4</sup> While I do not want to speculate on what that setting might



have been without further research, the suggestion that there was an “original and probably elaborate sculptural setting” with no mention of specifics is the kind of characterization that marks Buddhist statues in a museum as liminoid. Instead of a temple or an altar, the statue is placed on a square plinth in a corner of Gallery 16 where it is easily viewable. However, given the intrinsic link that Buddhist images have to the Buddha and buddha-nature, is it not possible that this Guanyin statue has an inherent liminality? Despite its classification as a liminoid object in an art museum, it can still act as a threshold through which the grace or presence of Guanyin might be felt. Given the parameters of movement created in Gallery 16 and an engaged individual, the separation of this statue from its original context does not necessarily mean that it is unable to connect and engage with its history and function as a representation of a Buddhist deity.

This is not meant to suggest that the statue of Guanyin at the AAM is an icon. Longshan Temple is site for Buddhist practice, but the aesthetic appreciation of its architecture and its icons is encouraged in conjunction with the religious functions. So if a temple can also function as a cultural destination, is there then the ability for a museum to be a place of ritual wherein the aesthetics are appreciated, but the function of statues as devotional objects is also encouraged? In the case of the Song Dynasty Guanyin at the AAM, the movement similar to ritual movement at a temple is already there. While Foulk might wish to recreate the original setting, an engaged viewer may simply need to know a little more about how this statue might have functioned. Or for those true believers, even this may not be necessary and the inherent liminality of images such as this might already be accessible within the museum gallery.

Anne Morse, in the catalogue for the 1996 exhibition of Japanese Buddhist art called *Object as Insight*, also highlights that museums have often emphasized the aesthetics of Buddhist art over its ritual function.<sup>5</sup> Recent scholarship in both religious studies and art history are beginning to examine the ritual and devotional aspects of Buddhist art that have been largely ignored over the last century. We have also begun to see a shift in museums and exhibitions of Asian art to incorporate this. For example the Guimet Museum in Paris or the Miho Museum outside of Tokyo are both examples of museums that are beginning to frame their Buddhist art collections as devotional objects. These institutions are both examples of museums with large collections and spaces to work with, but is it also possible in a small exhibitions space like that of the AAM's Buddhist art gallery to begin to focus the appreciation of Buddhist art not just on the aesthetics but also on the devotional function?

Necessary to this argument are those shared aspects between the temple and the museum as places that are extra-ordinary. Temples and museums are both places that are outside of the mundane, day-to-day existence of most people. Both the temple and the museum are places that are “carefully marked off and culturally designated as reserved for a special quality of attention.”<sup>6</sup> A museum is never going to be a religious temple, nor should it be. However, the experience of a museum can be used to reimagine and to highlight the history and function of Buddhist icons. The sense of enlightenment or restoration of spirit that is felt with active engagement coupled with the statues in these spaces can create a type of ritual with the potential to activate Buddhist statues as icons. From the beginning, the museum was conceived of as transformative space where utopian ideals intertwined with educational ones.<sup>7</sup> There are multiple theories and

interpretations of what and how the museum does what it does.<sup>8</sup> Michaela Giebelhauser comments that there is an inherent tension juxtaposed in the museum as a “space both sacred and blatantly modern.”<sup>9</sup> A Foucauldian interpretation sees the museum as a tool for emerging nation states to reinforce hierarchical arrangements.<sup>10</sup> However, the concepts most applicable to galleries of Buddhist art are those put forward by Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, who identify the museum as a space for the enactment of the “civilizing ritual”.<sup>11</sup> The kind of ritual Duncan defines is not exactly a traditional or a religious one, but something akin to the experiences often associated with places of deep spirituality. That is “according to their advocates, museum visitors come away with a sense of enlightenment, or a feeling of having been spiritually nourished or restored.”<sup>12</sup> Using this definition of the museum experience is there not the case for a spiritual engagement to happen inside a museum? Depending on the type of movement and intention of view brought into the space, Buddhist statues can be activated within museum settings without completely reconstructing a temple or negating the museum itself.

There are shared aspects between a temple and a museum in how the sites are separated from the mundane world. However, what may make the difference in perception are the actions taken within the setting and around the statues. The temple is the original context of Buddhist art and inside it the rituals serve a functional purpose to activate these statues as the focus of religious practice. Those rituals also help to shape the viewer’s perception of the statue even if they are not participating in the rituals. Just the act of seeing someone else perform devotions in front of a Buddhist statue can affect someone who has no knowledge of the object’s function or history.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> [http://lungshan.org.tw/tw/02\\_1\\_1\\_gods.php](http://lungshan.org.tw/tw/02_1_1_gods.php); Buddhism in Taiwan and Fuquan Xing, *Taiwanese Buddhism and Buddhist Temples*. (Taipei, Taiwan, R.O.C.: Pacific Cultural Foundation, 1983); Jones, *Buddhism in Taiwan*; Kao, Yuh-Fen. *An Inquiry into the Transformation of Urban Form and the Social Meaning of an Urban Space - : A Case Study of Menjia and Lungshan Temple in Taipei*. (University of Oregon, 1994.)

<sup>2</sup> "Asian Art Museum Online Collection." Asian Art Museum.  
[http://searchcollection.asianart.org/view/objects/asitem/search\\$0040/19/title-asc/designation-asc?t:state:flow=01786baa-f4bd-45aa-9761-d4d22c1bc9bb](http://searchcollection.asianart.org/view/objects/asitem/search$0040/19/title-asc/designation-asc?t:state:flow=01786baa-f4bd-45aa-9761-d4d22c1bc9bb).

<sup>3</sup> Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. *Selected Works*. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994); Lefebvre D'Argencé, René Yvon., Cline, Fred A, and Soper, Alexander Coburn. *Chinese, Korean, and Japanese Sculpture : The Avery Brundage Collection, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco*. 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1974)

<sup>4</sup> Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. *Selected Works*,

<sup>5</sup> Anne Nishimura Morse and Samuel Crowell Morse, *Object as Insight : Japanese Buddhist Art & Ritual*. (Katonah, N.Y.: Katonah Museum of Art, 1995)

<sup>6</sup> Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 10

<sup>7</sup> Although utopian ideology shaped the museum, in the early history of museums, Duncan writes that it was rarely the case that the huddled masses were welcomed into these places of privilege and power. Duncan, *Civilizing Ritual*, 56

<sup>8</sup> Charles Jencks argues that the museum is a space of spectacular contradictions and is a schizophrenic monument to contemporary culture. Jencks, "The Contemporary Museum." *Architectural Design*, no. 130 (1997): 8-13

<sup>9</sup> Michaela Giebelhausen in her essay "The Architecture is the Museum" from the book *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction*, edited by Janet Marstine (MA: Blackwell Pub, 2008), 42

<sup>10</sup> This interpretation is based on Foucault's theories that authoritarian institutions used power and knowledge to shape the social structure to their benefit. Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum : History, Theory, Politics*. Culture (New York: Routledge, 1995.)

<sup>11</sup> The name of Duncan's book *Civilizing Ritual*, 13

<sup>12</sup> Duncan, *Civilizing Ritual*, 13

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSION

Through a comparison of the space of the Asian Art Museum and Mengjia Longshan Temple in Taipei, both of which are important cultural sites that house Buddhist images, I would conclude that it is possible for the museum setting to function as a space for ritual where the galleries become a “place for process.”<sup>1</sup> This is not meant as a criticism of the overall function of museums, but rather as a suggestion that the potential for ritual that already exists in museum spaces can be used to reshape the discussion of the history and function of Buddhist statues. I have tried to make the case that museums and temples are both spaces of movement that involve single-minded immersion through ritual, although different intentions are evoked at each site.<sup>2</sup>

As previously elucidated, architectural space is often reflective of a belief system. Museums are themselves microcosms that are rich in symbols and provide visitors with maps in order “to guide them through the universe they construct.”<sup>3</sup> They are not consecrated space like temples, but they share many of the same architectural elements and transitional aspects that temple spaces have. So what does it mean when we place objects from another paradigm into a building whose space does not reflect the same worldview, but still acknowledges the original setting in some way? Therein lies the potential of the museum and particularly for certain gallery spaces to become a “place for process.” Many of the similarities between museums and temples, suggests that while the sites are important as places that may allow us to more easily enter a liminal state and to

engage with the spiritual, the “original” setting that Foulk wanted to envision in not always necessary to engage with a Buddhist statue in a spiritual way.

I would suggest that any time spent contemplating a Buddhist statue and thinking about the deity portrayed can bring the icon out of the passive state and activate the essence within and can connect to the “original” setting that Foulk wished to envision. Contemplation of the icon along with the history and ideas of Buddhism that pertain to that icon, can create a situation akin to the ritualized activation of the icon in the temple setting. Thus, the contemplation of the icons within Gallery 16 falls into that category established by Duncan as nearly-but-not-quite-ritual behavior. The movement creates the ritual and the experience of looking at the statue can potentially activate the presence within. Perhaps a corollary that might be drawn is between these statues and prayer wheels. A prayer wheel, or a series of them, have a sutra inscribed on them and when they are spun one has “read” that sutra and gains the merit from it. Reading the didactic label, the name of that particular statue or contemplating the image, even on a superficial level, might awaken the statue’s status and use as an icon.

Museums with Asian art collections provide an experience of other cultures and perspectives. Museums are in their own way temples, particularly for art historians. That being said, many do not have the carefully crafted architectural space or economic ability to dictate that space which is available to many temples or religious sites. One aspect of this is that museums, at least public ones, are a relatively new concept. In comparison with more than two millennia of practice that Buddhism enjoys, the 19<sup>th</sup> century concept of a museum is in an infant stage. There are of course exceptions to this, but for the most part museums make the most of preexisting spaces. Nonetheless, museums do create flow

and a type of secularized ritual that is enacted around the collection.<sup>4</sup> The act of viewing art has become a cultural ritual.<sup>5</sup> Combining it with a ritualized movement or experience of the space may suggest a way to reshape the discussion of Buddhist art.

For the cultural innocent, those uninitiated in either one or a variety of ways, the understanding of the object is dependent upon its setting. This is true in both a temple and a museum setting. Until the viewer determines a specific meaning, a Buddha image exists as both an icon and work of art. However, these are not necessarily mutually exclusive understandings of the object at hand; in fact, as previously, discussed a Buddhist understanding of these objects can accommodate them as both a religious piece and as a work of art. I would like to end this essay with how we might encourage this non-dual concept. Victor Turner and Robert Sharf also noted that there is the potential in ritual for play.<sup>6</sup> Turner defines play as freedom: “freedom to transcend social-structural normative limitations, the freedom to play – with ideas, with fantasies, with words... with paint... and with the social relationships.”<sup>7</sup> Our perception of the world should not be static. There is room for play in both ritual and secular settings, and for me at least this is where a museum can encourage a paradoxical understanding of Buddhist icons. By providing information to those who want it or simply refining away the dominant secular setting, the museum can allow for mental play, thereby allowing the objects to continue to exist as paradoxes that both enhances their cultural meanings, including the aesthetically pleasing elements, while not denying the existence of the Buddha presence within, or the history with which that spirit connects.<sup>8</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bergdoll, “The Museum as Architectural Activist”

<sup>2</sup> Single-minded immersion is discussed by anthropologist Mihaly Csikszentmihaly in relationship to flow in his book titled *Flow : The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. 1st ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1990.

<sup>3</sup> Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 8

<sup>4</sup> Duncan’s book *Civilizing Rituals* discusses her theories on the secular ritual that happens in western art museums of western art, I have built on these theories and adapted them for Buddhist art in western museums.

<sup>5</sup> Victor Turner observes this too.

<sup>6</sup> Turner, *Blazing the Trail*, 54-55 and Sharf, “Ritual”

<sup>7</sup> Turner, *Blazing the Trail*, 54

<sup>8</sup> The argument concerning play is hinged upon Turner’s point that the Protestant religion has deliminalized many Christian rituals, stripping them of a levity in order to focus on the solemnity of the ritual. Protestant religions “stress the solemn at the expense of the festive.” Turner, *Blazing the Trail*, 53



APPENDIX

FIGURES



Figure 1- Courtyard, Waterfall and Dragon Gate of Longshan Temple, Taipei, Taiwan



Figure 2- Drum Tower and Main Hall, Longshan Temple, Taipei, Taiwan



Figure 3- Gate and altar in front of the Main Hall, Longshan Temple, Taipei, Taiwan

Longshan Temple,  
Taipei, Taiwan

Circles indicate  
incons

Pentagons  
indicate incense  
censors

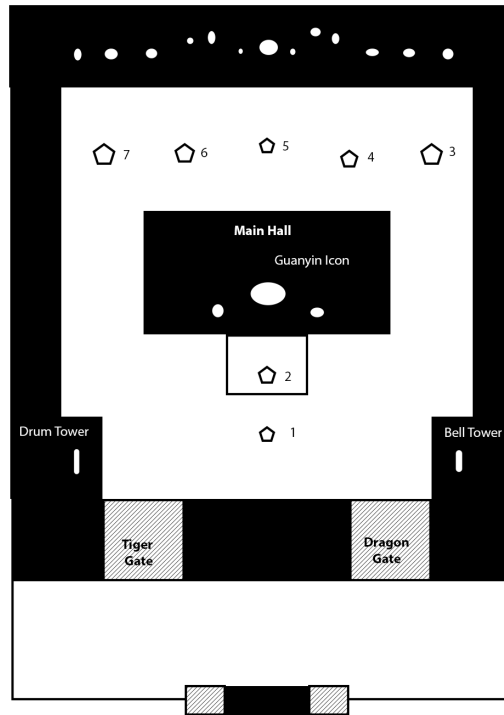


Figure 4- Layout of Longshan Temple, Taipei, Taiwan



Figure 5- Guanyin (surrounded by attendants), ca. 1738, Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), Main Hall, Longshan Temple, Taipei, Taiwan



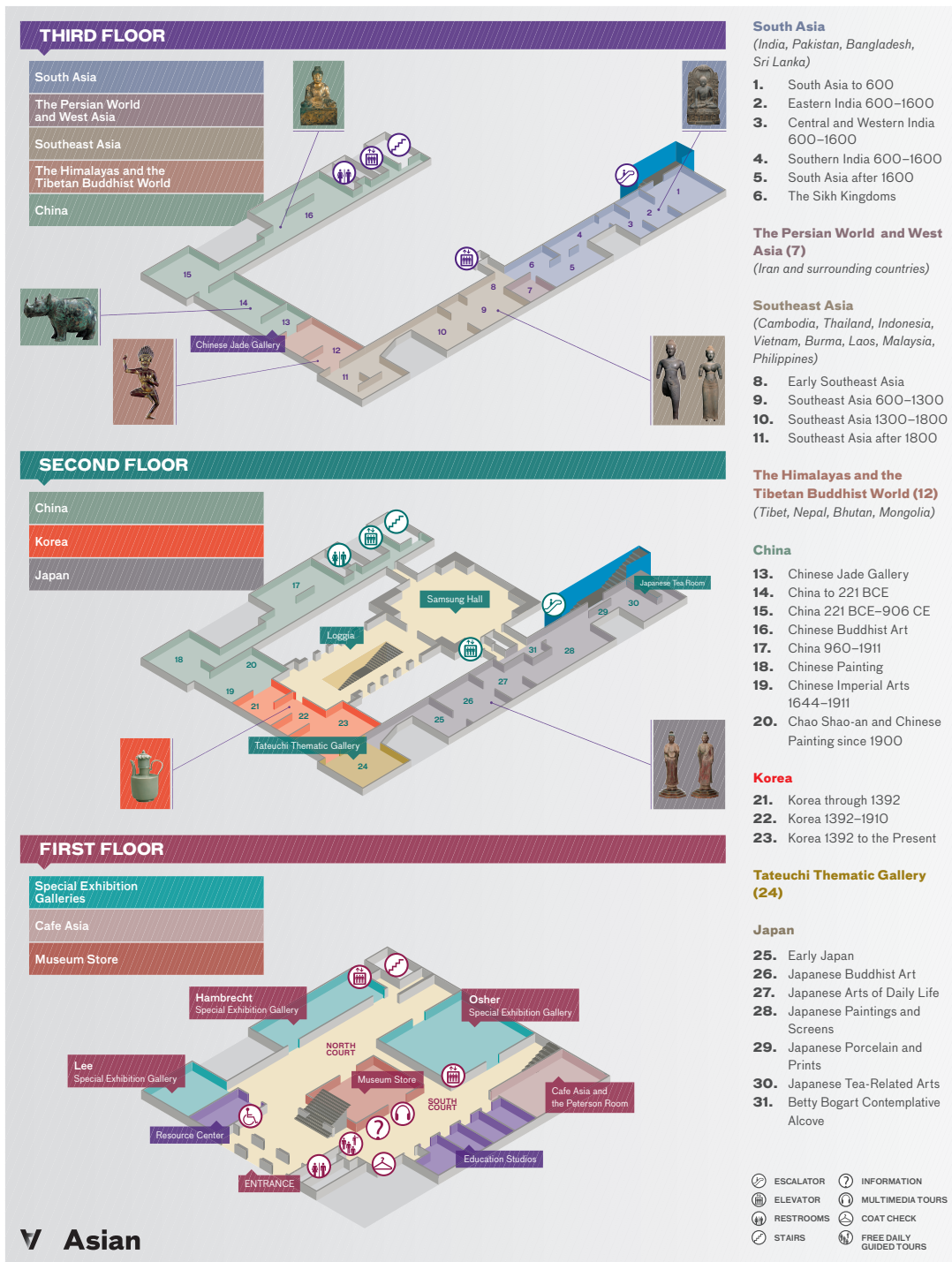
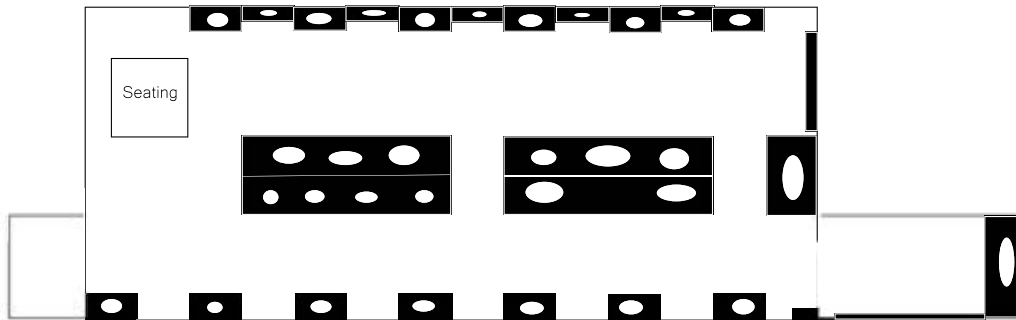


Figure 6-Map of the Asian Art Museum (provided by museum), San Francisco, California

Asian Art Museum  
Third Floor  
Gallery 16  
Chinese Buddhist Art



Black Rectangles indicate Plinth or Pedestal  
White Ellipses indicate a Statue

Figure 7– Layout of Gallery 16, Chinese Buddhist Art Gallery, Asian Art Museum



Figure 8- Right side of Gallery 16, Chinese Buddhist Art Gallery, Asian Art Museum





Figure 9- Left Side of Gallery 16, Chinese Buddhist Art Gallery, Asian Art Museum





Figure 10- Guanyin, ca. 1100-1200, Song Dynasty (960–1279), Wood and polychrome, Avery Brundage Collection, Asian Art Museum



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