

Analyzing the Characteristics of Buddhist Art in Japan's Asuka Period: A Case Study of Horyu-ji Temple

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Abstract: In the 6th century AD, Buddhism was introduced to Japan from China through the kingdoms of Baekje, Silla, and Goguryeo. Concurrently, the distinctive artistic styles of the Northern and Southern Dynasties of China, which combined traditional Chinese elements with influences from the Western Regions, also made their way into Japan. This had a profound impact on the development of Buddhist art during the Asuka period, establishing itself as a dominant force in Japanese cultural aesthetics. The artistry of the Asuka period, with its classical charm and exquisite craftsmanship, continues to be admired today. This paper takes Horyu-ji Temple as a case study to explore the characteristics of Buddhist art in Japan's Asuka period and the influence of Chinese culture on it. The research primarily focuses on three aspects: the architecture of Horyu-ji Temple, the sculptural representations of Buddha, and the paintings. As an emblematic representation of early Buddhist art in Japan, Horyu-ji Temple also stands as a significant testament to the influence of Chinese culture on Japanese art, contributing significantly to the cultural development of Japan.

Keywords: Horyu-ji Temple, Japanese Buddhism, Buddhist art, Asuka period

1. Introduction

The establishment of Horyu-ji Temple marked a golden era for Buddhism in Japan and served as a pivotal symbol of Buddhism taking root in the country. Full name Horyu Gakumon-ji, also known as Ikaruga-dera, Horyu-ji Temple's founding is documented in an inscription on the halo of the principal image of Yakushi Nyorai, which states that it was founded in the first year of Emperor Suiko's reign (586 AD) when the emperor fell ill [1]. After Emperor Suiko's passing, Empress Suiko and Prince Shotoku continued to promote the construction of Horyu-ji Temple. In the ninth year of Emperor Tenji's reign (670 AD), a fire ravaged Horyu-ji Temple, leaving only one building standing, the Daikodo. The present-day Western Precinct of Horyu-ji Temple, including the Kondo (Golden Hall), was constructed from the late seventh century to the early eighth century, with the Kondo being completed in 672 AD. It stands as a representative achievement of Buddhist art in the Asuka period, housing over 40 structures and preserving hundreds of artistic masterpieces from the 7th to 8th centuries. Seventeen of these buildings have been designated as national treasures, and in 1993, the Horyu-ji Temple area's Buddhist monuments were declared a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization World Heritage site. Additionally, the temple boasts a treasure trove of

sculptures, paintings, and crafts from various eras, making it a repository of Buddhist art. This paper examines the characteristics of Buddhist art in Japan's Asuka period, with a focus on Horyu-ji Temple's architecture, sculptural representations of Buddha, and paintings, while exploring China's influence on the development of Japanese Buddhist art.

2. Architecture

Horyu-ji Temple's architecture is a testament to the art of blending materials and structures, being one of the world's oldest surviving wooden structures and exemplifying what is known as "Japanese architecture." Japan's abundant forests, which have been conserved and utilized for centuries, have played a significant role in shaping the country's architectural style, including that of Horyu-ji Temple. In terms of architectural style, structural components, decorative elements, building materials, and interior arrangements, Horyu-ji Temple showcases the unique charm of ancient Japanese architecture. The temple is divided into two precincts: the Eastern and Western Precincts. The Kondo (Golden Hall) and its associated buildings in the Western Precinct are collectively known as the "Western Precinct," comprising corridors, a central gate, the Kondo (Golden Hall) itself, a five-story pagoda, lecture hall, sutra repository, and a bell tower, among others. Notably, the central gate, the southern section of the corridor, the five-story pagoda, and the Kondo (Golden Hall) preserve architectural styles from the Asuka period. The five-story pagoda is an iconic structure of Horyu-ji Temple and, by extension, of ancient Japanese temples. It was built by Prince Shotoku in the 7th century. The construction of the pagoda predominantly employs wooden structures and mortise-and-tenon joints. Standing at 32.6 meters tall, it is the oldest extant wooden multi-story pagoda, featuring a three-bay, five-story layout [1]. The interior of the pagoda houses a central pillar, with the eave roof gently sloping and deep eaves with diminishing proportions. Architectural elements include bracket complexes with curved wooden dougong brackets and cloud-shaped corner brackets, reflecting characteristics of Asuka period Buddhist architecture.

Horyu-ji Temple's Kondo (Golden Hall) is the oldest extant wooden structure in the world [2]. Built in 672 AD, it is a two-story, north-facing gabled roof building, showcasing the Asuka architectural style. Similar to the pagoda, the Kondo (Golden Hall) employs wooden structures and is positioned alongside the pagoda, a layout unique to Horyu-ji Temple. Within the Kondo (Golden Hall), distinctive architectural features influenced by Chinese culture and the Asuka period can be observed. These include railings adorned with swastika motifs, cloud-and-flying-eave brackets, and entasis-shaped columns believed to be influenced by Greek architectural styles [3]. The corner brackets of Horyu-ji Temple's Kondo (Golden Hall) are placed at a 45° angle, a practice that can also be found in the upper-level bracket complexes of the hall's curved eaves and the bottom-level inner column brackets. Comparatively, this practice differs from the three-group bracket placement seen in the Buddhist Guangfu Temple in China, reflecting early architectural construction methods. The use of corner brackets at a 45° angle can also be seen in the Mingqi Wu building in Luoyang, China. Therefore, it is evident that Chinese architectural forms had an influence on Japan.

As one of the earliest Buddhist temples in Japan, Horyu-ji Temple bears witness to and represents the flourishing of Buddhism during the Asuka period. Moreover, the Western Precinct of Horyu-ji Temple, as an Asuka period relic, boasts the oldest extant wooden structures in Japan and the world, solidifying its esteemed status within Japanese Buddhist temple architecture and promoting the prosperity and development of Japanese Buddhism.

3. Sculptural Representations of Buddha

In the later period of the Southern and Northern Dynasties in China, sculptural styles were introduced to Japan through the Korean Peninsula, giving rise to the “Tori-style” Buddhist statues, with the Shaka Triad of the Horyu-ji Temple Golden Hall as a representative example [4]. This style became emblematic of the sculptures in the Asuka period. During the Asuka period, sculptural styles from China’s Sui and early Tang dynasties also made their way to Japan, resulting in a diversified form of Buddhist sculptural art. Regarding the Four Heavenly Kings statues in the Horyu-ji Temple Golden Hall, Japanese scholars have already observed their resemblance to the images of heavenly kings from the Southern Liang Dynasty, unearthed in Chengdu, Sichuan, China, indicating a close connection between the two [5].

The sculptures of the Asuka period exhibit two distinct styles: the Northern Wei style and the Southern Liang style [6]. The Northern Wei style refers to several main characteristics in the appearance of Buddhist sculptures during the Northern Wei dynasty. These features include almond-shaped eyes, crescent-shaped lips, symmetrical geometric clothing patterns, and an overall dignified and powerful atmosphere conveyed by the Buddha images. The triad of Yakushi Nyorai sculptures in the Kondo (Golden Hall) of Horyu-ji Temple belongs to the Northern Wei style. The main image initially enshrined in the Kondo (Golden Hall) was a seated statue of Yakushi Nyorai (wood, height 106 cm), and the image of the Savior Kannon in the Mieido Hall (wood, height 179.9 cm), constructed during the Tempyo period, also belongs to the Northern Wei style. In Northern Wei sculptures, the corners of the mouth always curl upward, bearing the characteristics of the Xianbei people [7]. These sculptures feature a tall and imposing figure, high nose bridge, large eyes, a dignified gaze, and drooping earlobes.

Horyu-ji Temple also houses sculptures in the Southern Liang style, with the most famous being the Baekje Kannon of Horyu-ji Temple (wood, height 209.2 cm). These sculptures exhibit smooth and rounded contours in their facial features and overall body, conveying a naturalistic quality. In the Kondo (Golden Hall), there is a group of gold-plated bronze sculptures of the Sakyamuni Triad. The central figure is a seated image of Sakyamuni Buddha with two standing bodhisattvas on either side. These three Buddha images are not attired in monastic robes but rather wear secular clothing, resembling the attire of royalty or nobility. Japanese historian Meihara Takeshi suggests that these sculptures might actually represent Prince Shotoku and his parents. Since ancient Japan had a tradition of posthumously deifying specific individuals, some scholars believe that this triad of Buddha images reflects the “emperor as Buddha” concept introduced from the Northern Wei dynasty, with the prototype of Sakyamuni representing Prince Shotoku [8]. The sculptures at Horyu-ji Temple represent a fusion of Buddhist doctrine, Indian sculptural traditions, and Chinese culture. They not only convey the spiritual aspirations of Buddhism but also exhibit the aesthetics of art and cultural amalgamation.

4. Paintings

In the earliest buildings at Horyu-ji Temple, the Golden Hall, there are a total of 18 compartments in the four inner walls, with 12 of them featuring murals. These murals straightforwardly depict the Buddhist cosmos [9]. Among the twelve murals, four of them, on the first, sixth, ninth, and tenth walls, depict Pure Land paintings centered around three Buddhas (the first wall depicts the “Pure Land of Shakyamuni,” the sixth wall depicts the “Pure Land of Amida,” the ninth wall depicts the “Pure Land of Maitreya,” and the tenth wall depicts the “Pure Land of Bhaisajyaguru”). The remaining eight smaller walls each feature an image of a Bodhisattva. The murals in the Golden Hall were created by transferring the original-sized draft onto the wall and then applying colors. The line work resembles iron-wire outlines, with an emphasis on the contrast between red and green in the coloring [10]. Although the original colors of the paintings have faded due to natural wear, the smooth

line work created by this iron-wire outline technique, the use of shading to create light and shadow effects, and the transparent texture of the clothing are all remarkable. This style of painting is reminiscent of the work of the West Asian artist Yuchi Yiseng, popular in the 1st century in Chang'an. Today, similar murals can be found in caves such as the Kizil Caves, Kumtura Caves, and Kizilgaha Caves in Xinjiang, China, confirming the influence of this style [11].

The overall style of the Horyu-ji Temple Golden Hall murals is characterized by strong and vigorous lines, with minimal variations in line thickness. The central pen strokes are appropriately executed, and the handling of form transitions in the line work is skillful, resulting in a solid sensation reminiscent of "iron lines." To emphasize a three-dimensional effect, the artists employed shading along the lines, a technique known as "sfumato." This sfumato technique made its debut in Japanese art, not only representing light and shadow along the lines but also enhancing the sense of depth. This approach was influenced by Zhang Sengyou. During the Tang Dynasty, the "History of Six Dynasties Capital in the City of Jiankang" recorded: "The temple gates are adorned with raised and recessed flowers, referred to as Zhang Sengyou's handiwork [12]. These flowers are the product of traditional techniques from India, created using vermilion and green, which, when viewed from a distance, create a sense of relief, but up close, appear flat. This led to its name, the 'Raised and Recessed Temple.'" Dunhuang art experts, like Xiang Da, explained, "Both Indian and Chinese art emphasize line work, but Indian art employs the technique of raised and recessed relief within the lines to create a three-dimensional effect on a flat surface. For instance, when depicting figures, such as arms, the outline lines are bright and clean, with deep colors applied along the lines, gradually transitioning to softer, lighter tones towards the interior, resulting in a round appearance. This is the essence of the raised and recessed relief technique."

In the Horyu-ji Temple Golden Hall murals, the clothing patterns and exposed skin of the main deity incorporate sfumato with the same color, creating a layered color scheme within the murals. Examining the visual representation in the Horyu-ji Temple Golden Hall murals, we observe a shift from the earlier exaggerated style of Indian art, as seen in Western murals, to a more refined and exquisite style that blends harmoniously with native Chinese painting traditions. The result is an atmosphere of intricacy and magnificence, characterized by its meticulous detailing.

5. Conclusion

Today, Horyu-ji Temple stands as the head temple of the Shotoku sect of Japanese Buddhism and serves as a microcosm of Asuka-era Japanese culture. It represents the initial introduction of Buddhist culture from the mainland to Japan, where it merged seamlessly with Japanese culture. Since the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Japan has faced successive waves of modernization and the influence of Western thought and culture. Many Japanese individuals have repeatedly turned to the country's historical sites and ancient temples in search of their spiritual heritage. Horyu-ji Temple has been rediscovered and reinterpreted time and again, becoming a source of inspiration for literary and artistic works. As one of the earliest Buddhist temples in Japan, Horyu-ji Temple embodies the ideals and visions of early Japanese Buddhism, a product of the amalgamation of political and religious elements of its time.

In summary, Horyu-ji Temple is not only an iconic structure in the history of Japanese Buddhism but also a profound influence on Japanese Buddhist art. Its unique artistic style and cultural heritage have enriched the tradition of Japanese Buddhist art and left a lasting impact on the architecture and sculpture of future generations of temples. Horyu-ji Temple's existence represents a precious heritage of Buddhist art, attracting visitors and scholars from around the world to explore its historical and cultural value. By delving into the significance of Horyu-ji Temple in Japanese Buddhist art, this paper aims to provide multiple perspectives for understanding and appreciating this unique cultural heritage while emphasizing its enduring influence on the tradition of Japanese Buddhist art.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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