

Beyond this, the film is populated with a number of stock Orientalist tropes. The camera lingers for long shots of long-haired holy men, of the Ganges River and interviews a handful of people congregated on the riverbank at Prayag who speak animatedly about the sacred river. We get a shot of the Sikhs' Golden Temple at Amritsar, but India's 150 million Muslims—whose votes were long central to the Congress' hold on its North Indian heartland—are included only once as part of a multi-faith prayer meeting. Beyond religiosity, there is of course filth and poverty. A slum settlement near Shadipur is visited. The well-fed headman's claim that he supports a family of seven children on one Euro (\$1.25) a month is solemnly reported as fact. The obviously staged theatrics of the Youth Congress are presented as simple expressions of mass feeling. Perhaps the documentary's best moment is when the camera is allowed into the highly guarded precincts of the annual Rajiv Gandhi commemoration, which ends with a young man and woman running around the cenotaph bearing the Indian flag to the strains of Wagner's *Zarathustra*. It would be tedious to recount all the factual errors in this short film.

This documentary manages to be at once shallow and complex. It is of no value to students of any age and exasperating for any moderately well-informed person to watch. ■

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Preaching from Pictures

A Japanese Mandala

DIRECTED BY DAVID W. PLATH

PRODUCED BY MEDIA PRODUCTION GROUP

DVD, 37 MINUTES, COLOR, 2006

REVIEWED BY MARA MILLER

Preaching from Pictures: A Japanese Mandala is a remarkably dense, recently reissued DVD based on the earlier video of the same name. Extremely useful for undergraduate or high-school classes in history, art history, religion, and gender studies, whether Asian, Japanese, or general, it explores two nearly contemporary but dissimilar paintings in considerable detail, showing viewers what they reveal about the history of the times, the purposes and pleasures of the paintings, and something of the enormous variety of life during the Edo period.

The program is set up in terms of a basic contrast between the paintings, one secular and one religious, comparing and contrasting their subject matter, compositions, audiences, and patrons. This contrast is underscored by the sex of the narrators (male for the secular screens, female for the nuns' hanging scroll). The secular painting is a pair of six-fold *Edo-zu* (*Pictures of Edo*) (much like *Rakuchu/Rakugai*) screens depicting scenes in and out of the capital city of Edo, commissioned by the Tokugawa shogun around 1670 to



Section from one of the six-fold *Edo-zu* (*Pictures of Edo*) panels.

Source: Digital screen capture.

celebrate his capital city and the vitality of his rule. The narrator, historian Ronald P. Toby, helpfully clarifies some of the artistic conventions used, such as the large expanses of gold clouds that obscure parts of the city, and identifies a number of recognizable landmarks and a few of the many types of figures and activities depicted.

The second painting, the *Pure Land Buddhist Mandala of the 10 Worlds* (*Jikkai Mandala*) hanging scroll from earlier in the seventeenth century, receives considerably more attention. Commissioned for the nuns of the Kumano Temple, it was intended as a teaching aid in sermons to primarily female audiences.

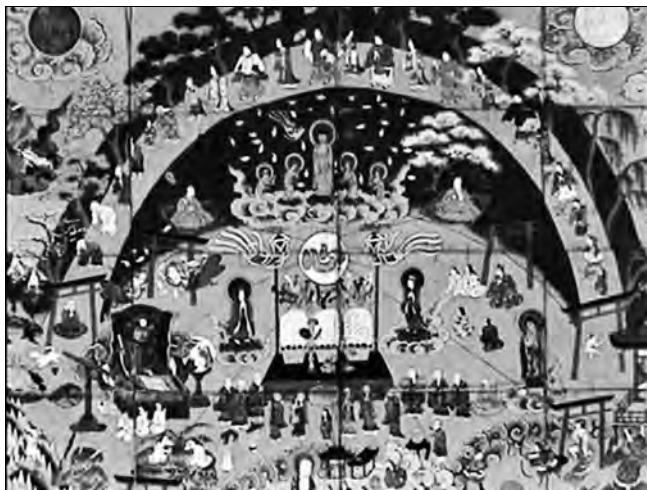
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FILM REVIEWS



Section from the Pure Land Buddhist Mandala.

Source: Digital scene capture.

The paintings are similar—the elaborate views of everyday life in the Edo period, the focus on mundane details (as well as political triumphs and cosmic implications) of daily life, their confidence in an ultimate pattern to life, and their insistence on the portrayal of order—in the face of all kinds of social experimentation in the case of the screens, and of extreme emotion (love, frustration, terror, and pain) in the case of the mandala hanging scroll—enforced in each case by means of wildly divergent but rigorous painterly composition. The DVD analyzes—in far greater detail in the scroll than the screens—the composition of the mandala, exploring the geometry of its vertical and horizontal bisections and the overlapping circle representing the ‘wheel of life,’ the human life cycle.

It then points out a number of aspects of the picture that would have made it particularly appealing and comprehensible to its female viewers. These include a strong focus on women’s lives, on personal relations, including those of parents and children, and on the stages of life that every human being goes through (as opposed to parades or celebrations marking the political achievements of some men). The main purpose is to show women how to be saved; it also depicts hells that were devoted exclusively to women, such as the hell for women who died childless, who suffer endless frustration, a hell with women as horned demons. It suggests that this female-centrism contributed to making this form of Buddhism appealing to women, pointing out that by the mid-1660s everyone was required to register with a temple.

The gender analysis of the screens is weaker, and I believe accepts the prevalent self-congratulatory but naïve view of American and European superiority in equality of the sexes. They point out that there are more men than women on the streets of the city, without comparing this to the often far fewer female inhabitants of street scenes in European paintings, or analyzing the various indicators of agency and power among both women and men in the Japanese examples.

The greatest weaknesses are related to each other:

The DVD does not say at the beginning that this is a comparison of two pictures; one must inform the students in advance.

It does not trace the differences (and similarities) rigorously and systematically—which ultimately can make discussing and writing about it a very useful exercise in critical thinking.

It is not always clear to viewers what they are seeing when the camera switches from screen to scroll and vice versa.

These features, combined with the fact that both paintings are primarily figurative, and crowded with images that cannot be recognized from a whole view of the paintings, make it difficult for students to know at times which painting they are talking about.

So while an upper-level Japanese art history class could probably learn to recognize which image belonged to which picture during the course of the DVD, most classes will not, and students will probably benefit from a vocal identification. To do this effectively, the two identifying labels used must be short, and should be introduced beforehand, along with a quick description:

“The pair of secular large six-panel screens is large (about five feet by eleven feet) and free-standing, commissioned by upper-class male rulers, and depicts an actual city.”

“The Buddhist hanging scroll, presumably small enough to be held by a nun, is designed to explain to townswomen Buddhist teachings about the relationship between behavior in this life and one’s subsequent life.”

Although the astute viewer will recognize that the male voice is associated with the male-centered *Rakuchuu-Rakugai*-style screens and the female with the Kumano mandala, not everyone notices, and there is simply too much fascinating information to expect all students to notice. So help them out ahead of time by pointing this out—even doing a voice-over to identify the painting under discussion. ■

MARA MILLER, a philosopher, artist, and historian of Japanese art, teaches at the University of Oregon. She is especially interested in gardens, literati arts, aesthetics, women’s issues, and film. She is the author of *The Garden as an Art*, SUNY Press, 1993.

Errata Spring 2007 Issue

On page 38, in the third complete paragraph of the first column of Conrad Totman’s article, “Japan and the World, 1450–1770, Was Japan a Closed Country?” two lines of text were inadvertently dropped. Below is the correct paragraph:

More importantly, even as the Tokugawa were regularizing their European connection, epic changes were convulsing China. These produced by 1650 a new, powerful, Manchu-dominated dynasty. Fully aware of Manchu power and mindful of the two Mongol invasions of Japan some 350 years earlier, Tokugawa leaders tried to avoid any repeat of those episodes by distancing Japan from China. To that end, they declined any sort of political relationship and tried to channel all direct Chinese trade through a regulated “Chinatown” adjacent to Dejima in Nagasaki. That policy also limited Chinese trade via the Ryūkyū Islands—trade that was controlled by and mainly benefited the powerful Satsuma daimyō in southern Kyūshū.

On page 47, the Lesson Plan Handouts URL should have read www.aasianst.org/EAA/mcdevitt.htm.

The editors sincerely apologize for these mistakes.