Introduction

Buddhism, at its core, espouses compassion for all living things and deep respect for the sanctity of life. It richly rewards devotees who follow these principles by guiding them to a state of awakened consciousness or enlightenment (satori in the Zen Buddhist sects and often referred to as the Buddha Mind by Western Buddhist practitioners), freeing them from desire and releasing them from suffering within an endless cycle of reincarnation. Some denominations of Buddhism decree that the path to this self-realization lies in intense meditation and performance of rituals, while others teach that it can be reached through submission to the benevolent powers of myriad Buddhist deities.¹ Some sects preach that achievement of this awakening is possible in one’s lifetime, others only after death, when the faithful will be reborn into a paradise world (Skt. Nirvāṇa). However, for all sects, as well as for those who practice Buddhism apart from its formal institutions, Buddhism’s sacred imagery, and special sites, where rituals designed to create a receptive psyche in the worshiper take place, create an essential framework that allows for visualization of the faith’s abstract beliefs.

In Japan as elsewhere, Buddhism’s visual culture has always been fundamental to the faith’s practice. Buddhist clerics and lay practitioners alike place great emphasis on the forms of worship halls and the appearance of devotional, didactic, and liturgical imagery. These visual materials do not merely reflect Buddhism’s tenets, but also possess great power to shape them. Many places of worship emerged at particularly beautiful, awe-inspiring, or strategic locations. Religious cults devoted to famous icons spread through tales of their miraculous origins or supernatural powers. Pious teachers stressed that abstract concepts, such as visions of Buddha worlds depicted in mandalas, could best be explained through imagery, which conveyed concepts beyond the scope of words.
This book centers on an important, but largely overlooked, aspect of Japanese Buddhist arts—materials that date from the seventeenth century to the dawn of the twenty-first century. My selection of works from among the vast quantities of Buddhist art and architecture created from these centuries highlights those that elucidate the thread of change over time to the practice of Buddhism: temple worship halls and other nontraditional sites of devotion, and imagery that represents the religion’s most widely popular deities or that devotees created as expressions of faith. These images, in both pictorial and sculpted form, can be found in traditional settings and in less formal locations, both within and apart from Buddhist institutions, including the modern secular environment of the art museum.

Dearth of study about these materials results from scholarly presumptions of the aesthetic superiority of early Japanese Buddhist cultural artifacts and a concomitant asserted decline in the institutional power of the religion after the sixteenth century in Japan. When assessed as a group, the visual arts reveal these claims to be erroneous. I believe they constitute a significant contribution to the history of Japanese art and architecture and provide evidence of a persistent and compelling presence at all levels of Japanese society of Buddhism, which has evolved in response to the needs of new generations of supporters both within and beyond its orthodox institutions.

When most Westerners think of Buddhism in Japan, they associate it with the Zen sects as practiced by a limited group of adepts who followed its rigorous, meditative practices on a quest for spiritual enlightenment through a focus on the awakening of their innate subconsciousness. Zen, as promoted in the West by D. T. (Daisetsu) Suzuki (1870–1966) and others, is credited with giving rise to the most celebrated of Japanese art forms, including gardens, the formal, ritualistic tea service (chanoyu), and spontaneous ink painting. Artists in the West have found creative inspiration in Zen ideals and its related arts as well as in the practices of Buddhism’s esoteric (Tantric) sects, particularly the Buddhism of Tibet and Nepal, which places similar emphases on introspective meditations. Yet in reality, few Japanese Buddhists have ever been able to afford to devote their lives to the highly disciplined lifestyle required by these Zen tenets, although many of them belong to Zen and other Buddhist sects as lay practitioners. Rather, these lay followers seek in the faith something else, a way to improve their own or their loved ones’ fortunes in this life or chances for salvation after death.

Faith in Buddhism on the part of its individual devotees presupposes belief in the divine powers of its deities as channeled through their images. Indeed, many of the arts I consider were created in response to belief in this power. But donors frequently had another reason for their offerings of Buddhist images.
and temple buildings: such donations enhanced their prestige by demonstrating publicly a link between secular and spiritual authority. That is why Buddhism was so well received in Japan by those who wielded political power. From its first appearance in Japan in the sixth century, emperors invoked the power of Buddhist deities to assure inheritance of their authority by descendants and to protect, heal, and materially benefit the nation. By the seventeenth century, individual commoners and groups of devout followers had realized that they too could elevate their social status, attaining a kind of secular power among peers as a by-product of donating great sums for temple buildings or impressive imagery. As Ikumi Kaminishi has eloquently stated, “the power of religious art empowers those who control its images. The finely made statues and ornaments housed in Buddhist temples created a theater: a showcase to display a patron’s splendor” (2006, 16).

Very broadly, this book has three main goals: (1) to reassess the canon of Japanese art history to allow for the inclusion of later Buddhist imagery and architecture; (2) to define the social history of recent Japanese Buddhist art and architecture; and (3) to identify Buddhism as an important source of inspiration for artists and architects whose work is generally not associated with institutional Buddhism and its canonical visual requirements. I intentionally do not organize this book along traditional lines, distinguishing among arts and architecture for the various Buddhist sects or following the separate stylistic or hereditary lineages or workshop ateliers of artists.

The buildings included in this study are mainly those designed for worship at Buddhist sites, with emphasis placed on defining their cultural contexts and functions. I discuss style and building techniques only when relevant to issues of religious practice or popular perception. The imagery I survey illuminates major liturgical, devotional, and didactic practices. Much of this Buddhist imagery is based on orthodox iconographic models, but artists invoke popular styles of the day to dynamically transform them into images that resonate with their audience. In the context of discussing these images, I emphasize how the people involved with the production of Buddhist imagery, as both makers and patrons, both reflected and shaped changes to the nature of religious practice. My study also encompasses the creations of Buddhist image-makers active in Japan’s modern period (after 1868) that are not traditionally defined as “Buddhist art” because they have no association with institutional Buddhism. Artists created these often nondenominational and seemingly heterodox images of spirituality, loosely inspired by Buddhism, as an expression of personal and private religious faith, sometimes during the maker’s unique forms of meditative practices. These types of images are often designed for display not in temples or other formal places of worship, but in art museums. Inclusion of this material helps to define
Buddhism’s broader impact on Japanese culture. It also underscores an ever-increasing tendency toward the separation of Buddhist worship from its institutions and the intertwining of religious practice and secular culture.

This study begins at a seminal moment in Japanese Buddhist history, when the warrior Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616), the first of fifteen successive Tokugawa-family shoguns who ruled Japan during the Tokugawa or Edo period (1600–1868), consolidated power over the nation in the early seventeenth century. In broader classifications of Japan’s history, scholars define this era as the early modern period, a precursor to Japan’s modern era, which is conventionally agreed to begin with the overthrow of the Tokugawa house and the restoration of imperial authority at the inception of the Meiji period (1868–1912). Scholars generally note that key elements of modernity include shifting the locus of power from regional feudal lords to a strong central authority and from the religious to the secular sphere. Tokugawa Ieyasu is widely credited with initiating these shifts in Japan, in part by suppressing the threat to his and his descendants’ authority by powerful Buddhist institutions, a policy begun on a more limited scale by his immediate predecessors Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582) and Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–1598), the warriors who attempted to unify Japan in the Momoyama period (1568–1615). The scholar Neil McMullin has described this moment as a time when “Buddhism underwent not just a ‘quantitative’ change, in the drastic reduction of the temples’ power, wealth, and independence, but also a ‘qualitative change.’ . . . Buddhism lost the privileged, center-stage position that it had occupied in Japanese society for almost a millennium and was relegated to a minor position in the wings” (1984, 5). This is the widely held perception about the state of Buddhism in Japan and the attitude of the country’s rulers towards it from the Momoyama period forward, and one that a number of scholars from various Japanese studies disciplines, including myself, now question.

The general assumption has been that the Tokugawa shoguns, beginning with Ieyasu, sought to wield power outside of and over Buddhist institutions’ spheres of influence by invoking another belief system, Chinese Confucianism, as their authority in ethical matters. Confucianism, founded in the sixth century BCE, evolved over the centuries to become a complex ideology, knowledge of which the Chinese imperial bureaucratic system relied on to train its civil servants. These bureaucrats were selected for service by proving their knowledge of the Confucian classics, mostly moralistic tales, in rigorous examinations. Confucianism specified each person’s function in society and taught officials to administer with justice, compassion, and order and assume responsibility for their subjects. The masses in turn would obey the authorities because just laws benefited all strata of society. In short, the ideal Confucian society was one in which all citizens knew their place and what was expected of them, and this mutually beneficial arrangement led to social stability and a flourishing civili-
Confucianism encouraged education to enrich, calm, and sharpen the mind and offered examples of proper behavior in its texts—detailed descriptions of the lives of a group of ancient sages who lived honorably by following Confucian principles. Students of Confucianism could attain this sagelike wisdom through mastery of four scholarly pursuits: painting, calligraphy, playing go (a board game), and proficiency with the musical instrument called qin (a type of zither). Of course, neither the Chinese nor their Japanese counterparts fully realized Confucianism’s vision. Further, in the case of Tokugawa Japan, the philosophy’s tenets were considerably revised to adapt them to a social hierarchy quite unlike that envisioned by China’s Confucian adherents.

Confucianism had first become influential as a value system among elite warriors in the Momoyama period. Learned Buddhist clerics who had studied it as part of their education in Chinese language and civilization helped spread it among their warrior patrons. Written Chinese was the language of the Buddhist scriptures and of Confucian texts, and literature based on Confucian principles was an integral part of monastic life in China, which Japanese monks, especially those of the Zen sects, had learned to appreciate from their Chinese mentors since the preceding Muromachi period (1392–1568). Yet in a newly published book on the life and times of Tokugawa Tsunayoshi, Beatrice Bodart-Bailey argues that Confucianism remained virtually unknown among the general population until the fifth Tokugawa shogun, Tsunayoshi (1646–1709; r. 1680–1709), encouraged his vassals, the daimyo (the elite samurai warriors who administered the various regional domains into which the country was politically divided), their samurai foot soldiers, and the nation’s commoners all to study it.⁷

Bodart-Bailey convincingly argues that the domination of Confucianism over Buddhism through the four Tokugawa shoguns prior to Tsunayoshi is a myth perpetrated by the authors of the Tokugawa jikki (The memorable true record of the Tokugawa shoguns). This text, written to serve as an official history of the reign of the first ten Tokugawa shoguns, was compiled between 1809 and 1849 by Confucian scholars working for the shogunate. Its air of authority is so convincing that most subsequent scholars consider it factually correct. Bodart-Bailey notes, however, that there have been some who question the common interpretation of a passage in this document that states Ieyasu “wisely decided that in order to govern the land and follow the path proper to man, he must pursue the path of learning. Therefore, from the beginning he encouraged learning” (Bodart-Bailey 2006, 50). This is normally taken to mean that he promoted Confucianism in his new realm, although he “established no Confucian schools or Confucian public service examinations, nor did he delegate important administrative functions to Confucian scholars” (Bodart-Bailey 2006, 51). Bodart-Bailey concludes instead that Ieyasu made Buddhism his state religion because “it was the only system that could provide the Tokugawa hegemony with the
kind of ideological and administrative support Shinto afforded to the imperial institution” (2006, 52).

Shinto, Japan’s native religion, explained the divine origin of the country by kami (Shinto divinities), who continued to reside in the land to protect the nation and its inhabitants. The earliest tales about the origin of Japan in the eighth century relate that the imperial family directly descended from these kami and thereby are themselves divine. Thus the stability of the country depended on perpetuation of the imperial lineage.

According to Bodart-Bailey, only when the fifth shogun authorized the founding of the Yushima Seidō as the first official Confucian academy in 1690 did Confucianism become central to shogunal policies. But even then the shogun did not exclude or demean Buddhism. Yet Tsunayoshi received only mixed praise from the authors of the Tokugawa jikki, partially because the authentic Chinese form of Confucianism he promoted stripped the daimyo of their power, and the authors held great sympathy for the rights of the daimyo to rule their domains as they saw fit (Bodart-Bailey 2006, 295–297).

In China, the political elite that promoted Confucianism used it to create a stratified society with the emperor at the apex, followed by his civil servants, who were selected by merit. The rest of the population, generally defined as commoners, was ranked according to their perceived public worth: farmers came next, followed by artisans, with merchants at the bottom of the social ladder. Education provided a path for individuals to rise above their inherited status and enter the civil service system. Japan emulated this system only partially because it had no tradition of promotions based on intellectual accomplishment, which ran counter to its more rigid social structure predicated on inherited status. Also, because of belief in the divine origin of the imperial lineage, the emperor and his extended family were excluded from this hierarchical categorization, as were priests and outcasts. Through might, since the thirteenth century, the warriors (the samurai class) had established themselves as the highest status group in Japan. However, status did not always equate with wealth in Japan. The aristocrats had become impoverished by the Edo period, and merchants were getting richer. This conflict between status and affluence began to create fractures in the system, especially for samurai, many of whom lost their livelihoods due to their own or their overlord’s transgressions and to the linkage of their income with the rice market, whose value fluctuated considerably in relation to annual harvest yields. As the distribution of wealth changed and citizens from the different classes came to interact in shared cultural pursuits, class distinctions began to dissolve. Nevertheless, the Tokugawa insisted on maintaining status distinctions, a factor that contributed to their eventual downfall (Bodart-Bailey 2006, 298).

From the latter part of the Edo period, Buddhism had begun to be loudly
criticized by both intellectual supporters and detractors of the Tokugawa clan as well as popular writers, who complained that its institutions and clergy had become degenerate and corrupt and devoid of morals and that Buddhist temples had grown too numerous, thereby straining domain treasuries, peasantry, and townspeople. When scholars in the early Meiji period began constructing a history of Japan’s premodern civilization, they took these complaints seriously. When combined with the Tokugawa jikki’s lauding of the Confucian ideals promoted by the early shoguns, the result was that Buddhism and its visual culture were conspicuously absent in discourses identifying the defining features of Japanese culture and society of the Edo period in historical memory (Gluck 1998).

These critiques have influenced the direction of much modern scholarship on Edo-period Buddhism, which has lagged behind Buddhist studies of other periods. They have also contributed to the long-standing and widely held scholarly perception, recently challenged by younger Japanese scholars, that talented artists and craftsmakers of this era expended greater effort on their production of secular arts, many influenced by Confucianism, than on Buddhist imagery, resulting in a substantial decrease in the quality — both aesthetic and technical — of Buddhist art and architecture then created. Recent studies in Japanese, especially catalogues of exhibitions by the eminent Japanese art historian Tsuji Nobuo and some younger scholars, many of them his former students, have begun to reassess this contention. As for scholarship in Western languages, except for copious writings about Zen painting and calligraphy, a few studies of important sites associated with the highest-echelon samurai, unusual images (by imperial nuns), and some materials categorized as folk arts, much of this later Buddhist art, and especially its architecture, remains overlooked.

Because of these biases, until quite recently few Japanese Buddhist sites and little imagery of the Edo period were surveyed at all or considered candidates for conservation. Much recent and still preliminary effort towards restoring newer buildings is due to municipal or prefectural initiatives rather than national ones. Since the late nineteenth century, the national government has instead encouraged this de-emphasis of later Buddhism’s material culture with its policy of assigning designation as Important Cultural Properties (Jūyō Bunkazai) mainly to older imagery and buildings associated with famous and ancient Buddhist temples built for the elites. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the global preservation organization, has reinforced this perception by adding a number of early Japanese temple complexes to its list of World Heritage Sites. Current restoration practices in Japan celebrate mainly the antique structures at these sites at the expense of more recent, but still premodern, ones (Enders and Gutschow 1998, 55). For example, specialists dismantle some early Edo-period structures so that they can create modern replicas, with varying degrees of accuracy, of the earliest buildings at these sites.
They also seek to reconstruct the original appearance of buildings lost to natural disasters centuries after construction. These practices obscure or devalue the evolution of Buddhism and its material culture in Japan.

When most art historians study early modern and modern-era Japanese arts and architecture, they overlook most Buddhist materials and do not consider the broader issue of Buddhism's cultural impact on these arts because their studies focus on the arts of the secular world: residential architecture and the creations of individual, often eccentric, artists, multigenerational ateliers of artists working for wealthy and elite groups in society, and art associated with the urban townspeople. Such historians assess these arts within specific media, a practical approach that closely links aesthetic studies to that of the technical production.¹⁷ Since most scholars have been trained to regard only Japanese Buddhist arts of the ancient and early medieval periods (seventh through mid-fourteenth centuries) as Buddhist art worthy of consideration as “art,” they do not recognize this omission.

These ancient and medieval Japanese Buddhist sculptures and paintings first became exalted as artistic masterpieces during the late nineteenth century by Japanese and American scholars, who included them in their newly created art history canon—a canon that has only recently, and slowly, begun to change.¹⁸ The large body of ancient and medieval Buddhist imagery, originally created in service to the religion and not as art in the modern sense, came to form the core of this early canon, in part because very little early secular art had survived.¹⁹ Those who first conceived the canon sought to demonstrate both that the Japanese possessed a cultural heritage equal to that of European nations and that Japan belonged to the modern world of academic scholarship. They privileged older art over that of more recent times, partially to position their new era of modernity as superior to the backward culture of the immediate past. The foreign scholars who contributed to the canonization of this early Buddhist art did so for these and other reasons, including their romanticized notion of the need to reassert the importance of spirituality into discourses on modernity.²⁰

As with much of the European canon, the Japanese canon focuses on art and buildings dignified by their great age, by their creation in the old imperial and political capitals (Nara, Kyoto, and Kamakura), by the elite status of their patrons (the imperial family, courtiers, and high-ranking samurai warriors), and by their association with identifiable and prestigious artists or artistic lineages. Scholars proclaimed their highest admiration for the most sacred of the early Buddhist imagery, bronze and carved-wood icons placed on the altars of worship halls, despite the fact that only a few of the numerous surviving examples of Buddhist imagery fit into this category. More recent Buddhist arts and architecture—especially those associated with temples largely patronized by commoners, buildings and images at provincial temples, and the often anonymous
images created in bronze or stone and frequently found amidst temple grounds or carved upon the sides of buildings—were largely omitted from this canon.

Admitting the more recently produced Japanese Buddhist material into the canon of Japanese art challenges conventional notions of the parameters of Japanese art. I do not question the aesthetic and technical merits of these early arts and architecture that have led scholars to value them so highly. Yet emphasis on products made in the old imperial and political capitals of the distant past for the elites of Japanese society has caused much worthy material to escape scholars’ scrutiny and has skewed understanding of the sustained impact of Buddhism and its arts on later Japanese cultural history. Determining what material culture of any civilization to consider as art is always the subjective judgment of the person or group undertaking the assessment. Art is a defining creation of the human spirit and is only sometimes synonymous with luxury products for elites or, recently, with modernist creations of individuals who define themselves as artists.

My assertion of the need to reassess the canon of Japanese art history to allow for the inclusion of these later Japanese Buddhist materials derives from recent studies in historical consciousness and the history of taste. These reveal connoisseurship (judgments on authentication and aesthetic quality) as highly subjective, shaped by a number of factors, including personal preferences, politics, fashion, and access to materials.²¹ Particularly in the case of Japan, traditionalist scholars decree that the technical sophistication, the rarity and cost of the raw materials, and the high social standing or wealth of the patrons determine whether or not a particular artifact should be defined as art. This emphasis stems from Japan’s intense desire for equality with Western nations during the Meiji period, the time when Japanese scholars first defined the national canon of art in the late nineteenth century. This attitude persists and holds true even for many recent broad studies of Edo-period arts, including those in Western languages.²²

As the materials presented in this book will show, from the seventeenth century onward, although the elites did continue to influence the production of Buddhist imagery and sites in Japan, commoners, sometimes wealthy and sometimes not, became an even greater force in the construction of the physical appearance of later Japanese Buddhist culture. So, too, did private, personal, and often non-denominational expressions of religious devotion. Because these tendencies first appeared in nascent form during the Edo period and have continued to proliferate during the modern and contemporary eras, I believe it crucial that a study of later Japanese Buddhist art and architecture begin with Edo-period developments and encompass this broad four-hundred-year time span. Understanding modern Japanese Buddhism’s prosperity and the religion’s continued stimulation of artistic production requires a solid grasp of Edo-period Buddhism’s mate-
rial culture. Conversely, the significance of Edo-period artistic achievements in the Buddhist realm becomes clearer when examining the relationship of that period’s Buddhist-inspired art and architecture with later materials. Curiously, because of arbitrary divisions of scholarly inquiry on the part of scholars working both in Japan and in the West that generate separate studies of premodern and modern Japanese art and architectural history, I know of no studies that address this significant relationship between the Buddhist art and architecture of the near past and the modern and contemporary eras.

Furthering my conviction of the need for this book to encompass modern Buddhist art and architecture is the fact that specialists of modern and contemporary Japanese art and architecture—that is, those who focus on artistic developments after the Meiji Restoration of 1868—even more than those who specialize in Edo-period art, ignore it. They generally do not consider modern religious objects made for temples in workshops of professional Buddhist imagemakers as art and focus instead on the creations of independent secular artists.²³ Similar omissions plague scholarship on modern and contemporary Buddhist architecture.²⁴ These omissions stem from scholars’ belief that Buddhism has continued to decline in cultural importance, where it serves only as a framework for administration of funeral rites and memorials to the deceased or as an ideological platform for cultlike new sects. Thus significant art and architecture could not possibly be produced in its service. This attitude reveals that the Japanese scholars who constructed the discipline of Japanese art history in the late nineteenth century possessed awareness of the ideas of European intellectuals, primarily sociologists, who in the first half of that century had begun to belittle the value of formal religious institutions to the modern world. Such critiques derived from Western civilization’s Enlightenment period have continued well into the twentieth century and are now described as the Secularization Theory of Modernity (Promey 2003, 584). This theory became a potent issue for Japan as it sought to reinvent itself as a modern nation on equal footing with Western powers. Its impact on the belittling of traditional religious practice during the modernization process of various Asian nations has been noted by a group of scholars studying modern Asian religion.²⁵ Indeed, their complementary studies of discrete religious practice in various Asian nations revealed that religion and ritual are essential to “the life of ‘modern’ nations and communities, in Asia, as elsewhere” (Comaroff 1994, 301).

The relationship of this secularization theory to the study of art has been addressed by Sally Promey, a scholar of American art history who noted that until recently modern religious imagery has not been considered part of the canon of American art. She argues that this exclusion is closely tied to this theory, which has significantly shaped the direction of modern art historical studies in
Western civilizations. She notes that this theory, “harnessed to a developmental model of civilization, suggested that religion’s lasting impact on Western cultural production was negligible,” and more specifically that “modernization necessarily leads to religion’s decline, that the secular and the religious will not coexist in the modern world, that religion represents a premodern vestige of superstition” (2003, 584). She further notes that “according to this conceptual framework, religion represents an immature, or ‘primitive,’ stage in cultural evolution, a trace of civilization’s childhood that stultifies and inhibits the mature imagination” (584). Consequently, she concludes that according to this theory, art assumed the place of religion, a new locus for spirituality as religious dogmatism and orthodoxies seemed to render impossible authentic spiritual expression in that traditional domain and that the marginalization of religion has been reinforced by prevalent modernist intellectual assumptions concerning religion’s restriction of creative individuality, its responsibility for an inferior aesthetic or taste culture, and its presumed universal proclivity toward conservative, sectarian, and ideological obsessions. (585)

Perhaps most significantly, Promey also points out that an important aspect of the argument for the obsolescence of religion in the modern world revolves around the issue of how social science scholars define the discipline of religious studies. She notes how they tend to separate studies of religion from that of spirituality, with religion emphasizing the formal, doctrinal, institutional, and public side of religious practice and spirituality referring to more private and personal religious concerns. Yet she believes, as I do, that religion should be understood in its broadest context, encompassing spirituality, which “in this sense, intersects life and art at multiple and complex, even competing and contradictory, sorts of commitments and engagements within a single artist, artifact, or beholder” (583).

Thus in one sense modern spirituality can be construed as the logical progression and transformation of traditional religion into the modern age. But as Promey notes, imagery inspired by nonsectarian spirituality accounts for only one side of modern religious visuality. Traditional religious institutions and their rituals continue to thrive in the modern world, where they inspire the production of orthodox religious imagery.²⁶ Even before I read Promey’s arguments, I had begun to question the omission of this large body of later traditional religious material culture from the Japanese art and architecture canon, influenced by my readings in the emerging interdisciplinary fields of material and visual culture studies. Yet as relatively young and not so clearly defined fields of inquiry, their parameters and methodologies are not entirely consistent.²⁷ These disciplines encouraged me to seek to expand the canon of Japanese art history as well as to
study religious artifacts for reasons other than aesthetic assessment, including probing discrepancies between doctrine and religious practices and the intuitive appeal of sacred icons for reasons other than aesthetic attraction.²⁸

My methodology is also informed by new approaches to the study of Japanese religion pioneered by the Japanese scholar Tamamuro Fumio (b. 1935) and his disciples in the West. He encouraged the study of religious life among individuals other than eminent priests, of localizing the study of religion, and of transcending sectarian boundaries.²⁹ These important social facets of Buddhist worship in Japan have remained overlooked until recently because many religious studies scholars study the history of individual sects separately. Following Professor Tamamuro’s lead, I look at the material products of the religious life by and for overlooked groups of devout worshipers: women of various social classes, from those associated with imperial Buddhist convents to the wives of high-ranking feudal lords; urban townspeople; and newly powerful feudal lords who patronized existing provincial temples and founded others. I also examine Buddhist imagery made for provincial temples by itinerant, self-taught monks and by artists trained originally in Nara or Kyoto workshops. This provincial patronage of image-makers from the old capitals accounts for increased dissemination of urban artistic influence from the nation’s cultural centers to its peripheries. Also influenced by Professor Tamamuro, I explore how devotional imagery represents the transcendence of sectarian boundaries. This took place in various ways, such as through deities that commanded universal appeal, and through artistic styles employed to represent imagery associated with one sect of Buddhism, such as the abbreviated brush paintings of Zen monks, that became appropriated by artists affiliated with other sectarian traditions.

Omitting later Buddhist art and architecture from the Japanese art and architectural canons denies the existence of a significant body of material, including the Buddhist-inspired creations of independent, secular artists. Many of these artists are best known for their wholly secular work, though they often undertook religious commissions not only to earn money, but also because of their deep personal devotion. Many also produced images of popular religious subjects for lay clients that were intended not for repository in religious institutions, but in private residences. At the same time, devout amateurs, both priests and laity, became increasingly involved in the production of Buddhist imagery for dedication to temples and for use in home altars. In the modern period, a number of artists have also incorporated religious imagery and ideas into creations intended not for places of worship, but for display in art museums, galleries, and other secular spaces. The work of all these artists reflects important, new, and largely overlooked developments in the practice of Buddhism in later Japanese culture.

I divide this book into two broad chronological sections. Part I explores Bud-
dhism in the arts of early modern Japan, roughly 1600–1868, emphasizing pa-
tronage of worship sites and the production of Buddhist imagery with larger poli-
tical, social, and economic concerns of the time as a backdrop. The first 
three chapters survey important and representative Buddhist sites for people 
from all levels of society, from the elite samurai and aristocrats to commoners, 
who range widely from wealthy urban dwellers to residents of small, rural vil-
lages. Chapter 1 assesses Buddhist policies and temples patronized by the rul-
ing Tokugawa family, whose leadership, funding, and taste dominated Buddhist 
temple construction at the beginning of the era and influenced much of what 
came afterward. In chapter 2, my focus shifts to Buddhist temples patronized by 
the nation’s elites who served the Tokugawa, the high-ranking samurai (daimyo), 
and the aristocrats, whose funding depended on Tokugawa largesse. I also in-
troduce a newly formed Zen sect, Ōbaku, patronized initially by both the sho-
guns and the imperial family and later also by commoners. This chapter leads 
into a discussion in chapter 3 of the transition to popular, commoner support 
for Buddhist institutions and worship practices, such as pilgrimages and public 
exhibitions of temple treasures. The overall diversity of sites surveyed reflects 
the wide range of motivations for patronage of Buddhism at that time. The re-
main ing three chapters of part I focus on Buddhist imagery of the era. Chapter 
4 introduces several deities newly popular at the time whose devotees have con-
tinued to proliferate and other types of religious practices that inspired imagery 
production. Chapter 5 considers both the patrons and makers of professionally 
made images that were created nationwide for virtually all the different social 
groups in Japanese society. Only some of these makers belonged to the heredi-
tary ranks of specialists’ workshops; most others were freelance, secular artists. 
Chapter 6 addresses religious imagery created as personal, visual expressions of 
faith by both amateur devotees and professional artists, sometimes monks and 
nuns and sometimes lay Buddhist practitioners, of various ranks in society. 
The four chapters that make up part II concentrate on Buddhist visual culture 
in Japan’s modern age, 1868–2005. The first two chapters survey various aspects 
of pre–World War II Buddhist arts. In chapter 7, I focus on government policies 
and changes within Buddhist organizations that encouraged resurrection of the 
faith in the aftermath of government-authorized persecution in the early Meiji 
period. Increased acceptance of Buddhism resulted in funding for reconstruction 
of worship halls and creation of new and diverse types of sacred imagery for 
temple compounds. Chapter 8 focuses on the transformation of sacred imagery 
from icon into art, stimulated by two important developments. The first was 
the government’s new policies on preservation of cultural heritage that promi-
nently included Buddhist temples and their treasures. The second was the rise 
in modern scholarly studies of the faith that led to its separation from its insti-
tutions and its domination by nondenominational practitioners who expressed
their devotion privately and personally. Influenced by this latter current, devout Buddhist secular artists began, for the first time, to create Buddhist images for display as art in galleries and museums rather than halls of worship. The final two chapters look at Buddhist sites and imagery in post–World War II Japan. Chapter 9 explores some of the most unusual and representative of the many modern and contemporary Buddhist sites of worship, and chapter 10 focuses on makers of modern Buddhist art, including traditional workshops of professionals serving Buddhist organizations, independent secular artists inspired by personal devotion who create both representational and abstract imagery inspired by Buddhism, and devout laypersons who function as both makers and patrons of Buddhist devotional art.