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Tanabe & Tanabe/Japanese Buddhist Temples in Hawai'i

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INTRODUCTION

If we had to pick one word that describes most Buddhist temples, it would be “ornate.” This is especially true of the altar area, where golden ornaments dangle from ceilings, altar tables are carved in intricate detail, rich brocades hang as curtains and coverings, incense burners are teeming with dragons and other mythic animals, and sculpted and painted images represent ancient masters, buddhas, and bodhisattvas. And there is more, so much more that people often see these ornate displays as a kind of blur, a glittering of lacquer and gold that overwhelms the senses and makes it difficult to focus on the details. And even when they stop to take a good look at details, many are puzzled about what they are seeing. If we had to pick a second word, it would be “complex.”

This book is designed to help us look carefully, to see details that might catch our attention for the first time and to understand what they mean. Look closely at the altar table, and you might see a bird with two heads. You might notice on the incense burner that one dragon has its mouth open while the other has its mouth closed. Each object, every detail, has a reason for being there, a meaning that often is hidden in ancient symbolisms. Unless we know how to decipher these objects, we will miss what

they are trying to say to us. Buddhist temples are ornate in décor because each detail is trying to tell us something, convey a message, a teaching, a story. From the external architecture to the interior accoutrements, temples are like texts written in a special, graphic language, and this guidebook is designed to help us learn to read them. Our hope is that this book will make long-time temple members notice what they have never before noticed and to be inspired—as well as for first-time visitors to respond to what they see with appreciation and understanding.

As much as this is a guidebook for visiting temples, it is also a primer on Buddhist history and ideas that are necessary for understanding. We begin in chapter 1 with a brief account of the origins of Buddhism in India. This is especially significant because temple architecture in Hawai‘i, more so than in Japan, often makes explicit references to the land of Buddhism’s birth. From the sixth century CE on, many forms of Buddhism arrived in Japan, and to these diverse versions of the Buddha’s teachings, Japanese monks added interpretations that were so creative that many of them were declared heretics.

We limit our account to the medieval Japanese priests who founded the sometimes controversial denominations that still exist in Japan and Hawai‘i, and here too, people have often looked upon the diverse sectarian traditions as a kind of intellectually ornate blur that obscures their understanding. Why is there a Nishi (West) Hongwanji and a Higashi (East) Hongwanji? Why is Shinran’s teaching the foundation of the True Pure Land sect as opposed to the Pure Land sect of his teacher Hōnen? Who is Nichiren or Dōgen or Kūkai?

No doubt there are common elements to be found in all sects of Buddhism, but the differences are just as real, and they determine what we see in a temple, especially in the main objects of worship and the portraits of the masters. Japanese immigrants brought these inherited traditions to Hawai‘i, and each succeeding generation added local and Western elements to create a rich texture of architecture, worship services, and organizations that are unique to our islands.

While we offer a quick overview of the journey of Buddhism from India to Hawai‘i via Japan, our primary purpose is to decode what is packed, sometimes in bewildering fashion, into temples. We are interested in explaining what we see, in unlocking the meanings and stories buried in hundreds of objects, beginning with the buildings themselves.

Chapter 2, “Architecture and Interiors,” lays out our typology of the five basic architectural styles, describes interior layouts, and provides a catalogue of important objects found in temples. Who is Amida Buddha? What are the glittering ornaments hanging from the ceilings? Why is the hollowed drum called a *mokugyo*, “a wooden fish”? This chapter provides the basic keys for unlocking the many meanings to be discovered in the material culture of temples.

Chapters 3 through 5, organized by islands, form the heart of the book, with individual entries for the ninety sites in the state. Since many of the objects are found widely in temples, we do not repeat explanations for them in each temple entry, and we refer readers back to chapters 1 and 2 for detailed explanations. No two temples are alike, even those in the same denomination, and we highlight what is unique about each site. The common and unique features exist side by side and add up to a remarkable diversity that makes each temple worthy of a separate visit. Every temple has its own surprise.

At the end of the book, we provide a table of statistics and a list of special features of temples. The statistics include formal membership numbers at the time of the writing of this book. These numbers were provided by temples themselves, though many admit that their numbers are best estimates. Temples count members by families, and we have multiplied their reported numbers by two, which ministers and lay leaders agreed was the best way to estimate the number of individuals formally belonging to temples. Obviously this is an approximation, but no one has asked each temple as we have, though we suspect that the actual number is higher.

How to Use This Book

This book is not primarily a history of temples (though brief historical information is included), nor is it an architectural history (though architecture is analyzed). Our main objective is to explain the meanings of what you will see on your visits. In the temple entries, we point out the objects, but it is in chapters 1 and 2 that we explain their meanings.

You may choose to read chapters 1 and 2 before visiting a temple. But you may also skip these chapters and go straight to the entries for particular temples in chapters 3 through 5, and use the index to refer back to explanations of any object.

Temples include several elements in their names—place, sect, and official Japanese designation (which not all temples have)—and each temple uses different combinations in their popular usage. Within each chapter organized by islands, we have for the most part listed the temples alphabetically according to their geographical locations to make visiting easier. Some temples, however, do not use place names, for example Kōganji or Kōbōji, which do not indicate that they are in Manoa and Kalihi respectively. As a rule, we have listed temples with their name elements in the following order: place, official Japanese designation (if used), and sect. Thus, for example, we have Aiea Taiheiji Sōtō Mission. If the temple is formally or popularly known by another name, we note that in parentheses (e.g., Sōtō Mission of Aiea).

How To Visit A Temple

Not all temples are open to unannounced visits, so it is necessary to call beforehand. If you happen to drop in at a temple, be sure to introduce yourself to the staff or minister in the office. You do not need permission to attend a regularly scheduled service (usually on Sundays) or special public events such as Bon dances or bazaars. Check the local newspapers and the Internet for a schedule of Bon dances and special events. Many temples also have their own websites.

As a general rule, you should remove your shoes before entering a temple, although some of the larger temples no longer require this. Although it is not necessary, it is customary to face the central altar and bow slightly when entering and leaving. You may walk freely around the outer sanctuary, but do not enter the inner sanctuary or touch ritual furnishings such as bells and drums. There is often an offertory box near the entrance or the main incense burner, and you may leave a small donation. Most temples allow photos to be taken, but you should check with the staff or minister. Feel free to dress casually, but show respect.