

Art as Sacred Encounter: World heritage artifacts preserved in Kyoto, Japan

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三条通 **Sanjo Street** is the very center and hub of the classical Japanese city **Kyoto**, in Japan. Built in the late 8th century (completed ca 794) Kyoto from its beginnings as an Imperial city represented a conscious effort on the part of the Korea-in-origin royal family to distance itself from political and Buddhist clan rivalries in nearby Nara, the original capital, and set up a geomancy based “pure” area, modeled on the Chinese eastern Capital of Luoyang (in Japanese “Rakuyo” 洛陽), rather than the older city of Nara and its connections with the Tang dynasty western capital city Chang-an. (Note that Wikipedia, and many modern Japanese sources repeat the political myth that Kyoto is modeled on Chang-an). Kyoto, which remains until today a bastion of the purely Japanese sense of the “Golden Section” (1.618/1, or 8/5) in art, Sanjo Street, houses two of Japan’s best collections, the “Kyoto Cultural Museum,” and Tohendo (named after the Chinese poet Tao Yuanming’s “Peach Garden elegy”) at the very “golden section” heart of Kyoto. A refined selection of Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Tibetan art, are housed here, giving a sense of responsible continuity to the beauty of *Asian Art as spiritual encounter*, with the past, present, and future well being of the whole of Asia in mind.

It will not come as a surprise, when viewing the Tohendo art displayed, to realize the wide network of collectors and museum experts who helped to make the Tohendo collection possible. Priceless items preserved from destruction during the 2nd World War, the Cultural revolution, the senseless destruction of North Korean art treasures, and recent archeological findings from famous sites inside modern China, have found their way into the Tohendo collection on Sanjo Street. The actual selection of sacred art to be preserved was made by the curator, Dr Morimoto Yasuyoshi, after consulting with Japan’s finest scholars. Those who brought the pieces to Tohendo knew that they would be carefully catalogued and preserved, against the day when they can once again be fully appreciated and treasured in Korea, and China. The great scholars and artists who opposed Japan’s harming of Asia’s cultural traditions during the IInd World War, such as 仁井田 陞 Niida Noboru (who wrote the definitive works on the Chinese Family, when sent as punishment to China for opposing that war), and the award winning anti-war movies made in the 50’s and 60’s in Kyoto (羅生門, *Rashomon*, 兩月物語 *Ugetsu Monogatari*, 七人の侍, *Seven Samurai*, anti-war masterpieces), are far better known than this deliberately quiet contemporary work in Kyoto to preserve what would otherwise have been lost for posterity. Though the recent rise of capitalism in China has included selling priceless artifacts, “tuned in” sellers have been consciously careful to preserve the best of these archeological and medieval art discoveries, by sending them to collections from whence they can someday be returned, to a China more conscious of its artistic and cultural heritage.

The selected pieces of fine Chinese, Korean, and Tibetan art chronicled and carefully recorded here, were legally purchased and accurately catalogued, as to place of origin, and approximate date of origin. Only a fraction of the Tohendo collection appears here below. A full, 3 volume catalogue awaits imminent publication.

1. One of the most famous Neolithic sites recently excavated is *Hongshan*, 紅山 a Neolithic culture in northeastern China. *Hongshan* sites stretch from Inner Mongolia to Liaoning and Hebei, and date from about 4700 BC to 2900 BC. These white jade burial pieces are called “pig dragon” by archeologists.
2. *Hongshan* Neolithic jade, half human, half bird, or half animal figurines, thought to be spirit mediators between the living and the dead. Similar figures have been found in the *Qijia* 七家 Neolithic site in Gansu-Qinghai, made of more colorful kinds of jade – more than 27 classifications or “kinds” of neolithic jade have been found in these sites.
3. *Liangzhu* 良渚 (3400-2250 BC) (Liangzhu was a late Neolithic jade culture in the Yangtze River Delta of China. It extended from Lake Tai north to Nanjing on the Yangtze/Chang Jiang 長江 river, east to the ocean, and south to Hangzhou) This magnificent piece of green jade is the only one of its kind, none of this size remain in China. The 饕餮 “*Taotie*” bird mask is engraved on the top; the piece itself is shaped like the belt buckle of a huge god.
4. A *Sanxingdui* green bronze bird-human figure, 三星堆; "three stars mound" is the name of the site, given to a previously unknown Bronze Age culture, situated near to Chengdu city, Szechuan; radio-carbon tests dated it to 12th-11th centuries BCE. The quality of the green bronze is superior to and larger than the Shang dynasty bronzes, discovered in nearby central China.
5. Korean 5th century gilded bronze statue of *Kuanyin* (*Guanyin*, *Kannon*), with eleven heads arranged in a circular fashion around the top. Taken from a temple near Pyongyang, which was torn down to make a modern building, the Tohendo collections houses more than a dozen of these striking early bronze Buddhist figures from 5th-6th century north Korea.
6. The face of the Buddha, taken from an 8 ft x 12 ft early 15th century Tibetan 唐卡 Tangkha, (non-fading mineral colors on goache cloth) was saved from the 1959 destruction of Lhasa and Samye. The Tangkha belongs to the Dzogchen school, with images of Longchempa and Vimalamitri in the top left and right corners. The entire painting has more than 200 figures, and will be described fully in a coming CCC article.
7. An early Yuan dynasty wooden statue of a Bodhisattva, rescued from a burning Buddhist temple in Tianjin city, during a 2nd world war American bombing, by a Japanese artist from Kyoto. The grateful people of the temple kept the statue hidden until 2008, preserving it from the Red Guard, and then entrepreneurial sellers; they mailed it Tohendo in Kyoto for safekeeping, until China was again a place to preserve rather than sell off ancient Buddhist statues.