

The front cover image

The image of Myōken Bosatsu 妙見菩薩 that graces the cover of this volume is a detail from an early 19th century silk hanging scroll now in the British Museum, London. It is one of many Japanese paintings acquired by the museum in 1881 from William Anderson (1842-1900), a surgeon and a connoisseur of Japanese art, who amassed an outstanding collection whilst he worked as a professor of anatomy and surgery at the Imperial Naval Medical College in Tokyo between 1873 and 1880.

Myōken is depicted as a young man with long untied hair, dressed in a flowing robe with partial ornamental armour, and seated on a rock projecting out of the ocean. He holds a sword in his right hand, and with his left hand makes the sign of mighty power, pointing his index and middle fingers upwards. The golden halo behind his head is decorated with seven circles, which symbolize the seven stars of Hokuto Shichisei 北斗七星 (the constellation of the Big Dipper). Below the deity, two attendants in armour, one young and the other with demonic face, stand with their weapons on separate rocks above the foaming waves.

The painting is a work by Kuwagata Keisai 鍬形蕙斎 (1764-1824), who began his career as the *ukiyo-e* artist Kitao Masayoshi 北尾政美. In 1794 he became a painter in attendance to the lord of Tsuyama, and from 1797 trained under Kanō Yōsen'in Korenobu 狩野栄川院惟信. The signature, Shōshin 紹真 (Tsuguzane), on the right lower corner of this hanging scroll indicates that this is a work from his later years. His Kanō school training is evident in the expressive calligraphic brush strokes used for the flowing robe and the stylized rock and waves, while the delicate depiction of face and detail is more in line with the fashionable *ukiyo-e* style. The restricted palette of ink, slight colour and gold is also effective in enhancing the overall impression of refinement.

Myōken is personification of the Polar Star, and also called Hokushin 北辰. The complex iconography of Myōken Bosatsu evolved over the centuries incorporating elements of Buddhism and Onmyōdō, and several variations can be found in esoteric rituals manuals dating from the late Heian and Kamakura periods. However, the painting of Myōken in the British Museum does not conform to the traditional images found in these esoteric manuals. A new iconography of Myōken as a young boy dressed

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in armour seems to have developed from the late Kamakura period (1185-1333), in close connection to the worship of the deity by the Chiba 千葉 clan, a warrior family based in the eastern province.

One of the earliest examples of Myōken in armour is a Kamakura period sculpture in the Myōko-ji 妙光寺 temple, Chiba, which depicts him seated on a rock, holding a sword and pointing left index and middle fingers upwards, in a posture identical to the British Museum image. The worship of Myōken was taken up by the Nichiren sect during the Edo period (1615-1868). The temple Hōshō-ji 法性寺 of Yanagishima 柳島, in the Katsushika 葛飾 ward of Edo flourished as its image of Myōken attracted worshippers. The great *ukiyo-e* master Hokusai 北斎 was a devout believer of Myōken, and he is known to have frequented this temple. He changed his name from his earlier professional name Sōri 宗理 to Hokusai in 1798, incorporating the character ‘north’ (*hoku*) to honour the deity of the northern star. The image of Myōken in the British Museum is similar to the icon in the Yanagishima temple, as Hokusai and his fellow inhabitants of Edo would have worshipped him in the 19th century.

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