

Religious Items in the Museum Space: A Report
on the *Making Japan* Exhibition

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Religious Items in the Museum Space: A Report on the *Making Japan* Exhibition

The partner organisation I have been working with, Leeds Museums and Galleries, has recently opened a new exhibition at one of their country estates, Lotherton Hall. The exhibition, *Making Japan*, is set to present Japanese art, life and culture, looking at both traditional and modern aspects of the country. In this report I will discuss how the *Making Japan* exhibition has captured Japanese religion, and how these religious objects have been displayed to be consumed by the public. The main themes that I will explore is how Japanese religions are represented within the museum space, whether sacred objects within a museum space retain their sacred value or whether they become profane when taken out of context. Conversely, I will also consider whether the museum becomes a place of worship, or a sacred locale, due to the presence of religious objects. I will discuss this theme in relation to the *Making Japan* exhibition, to explore the interface of religion and the scrutiny of the museum space.

The following outlines the content of each section of the report:

1. I will first explore my partner organisation and their reasons for putting this exhibition together, as well as their aims for the exhibition. I will discuss my role in the exhibition procedure, including my own aims and intended outcomes for the placement. In particular, I will discuss my involvement in the Japanese religions section of the exhibition and how this influenced my report. This breakdown will allow me to discuss the themes thoroughly.
2. I will outline the main theme of the report and the intention of my investigation.
3. I will discuss the predominant religions and beliefs in Japan, including Buddhism, Shintoism and Christianity displayed in the *Making Japan* exhibition. I will explore these religions and beliefs in order to assess the accuracy of the representation of Japanese religions and their sacred objects in the exhibition.
4. I will explore the academic literature on religious displays in the museums and the ways in which religious items can be considered to be sacred or profane. I will also identify the gaps in the literature and how this has affected my own assessment.
5. Drawing on this academic literature, I will then point out specific examples from the *Making Japan* exhibition. I will discuss the exhibition's religion section, looking at its strengths and weaknesses and making comparisons to the academic literature. I will also assess how Japanese religion is being conveyed to what is presumed to be a non-specialist audience.

6. I will also make comparisons to previous exhibitions in the UK, which have showcased either Buddhism or Japanese culture. These exhibitions include: *Discovering Japan* at the British Museum, *Buddhism* at the British Library, the *Buddhism* display at the World Museum Liverpool and *Sultanganj Buddha* in Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. I will make comparisons between each of these displays and the way they have been discussed in literature in order to draw my conclusions on how well religion has been represented and present any recommendations going forward for the *Making Japan* exhibition.
7. I will conduct an overall evaluation of the exhibition and the placement for my partner organisation as a whole, incorporating the outcomes, recommendations and implications of the exhibition.

1. The Context and Aims of the Placement

As part of the placement, I have been working with Leeds Museum and Galleries. This organisation is host to nine diverse venues across Leeds, including heritage sites, museums, country house estates and art galleries. They were established in 1821 and are the largest local authority-run museum service in England with assorted collections. Their aim is to collect, preserve and interpret historic and cultural collections and places, to display these to the public in order both to educate and entertain (Leeds Museums and Galleries, 2020).

The exhibition *Making Japan*, which I have been involved in, incorporates the organisation's aims of displaying culture for the purpose of educating the public, in this instance, with particular reference to Japanese culture.

This exhibition was in response to:

- The 2020 Olympic games to be hosted in Tokyo.
- The connection the site of Lotherton, and its former owners, the Gascoigne family had to Japan.
- World Cultures exhibitions are programmed in every 2 years at Lotherton, and therefore there was a natural succession.

Reflecting on the current situation, the exhibition was scheduled to be open in time for the opening ceremony of the 2020 Olympic Games (which have since been postponed). It has been put together due to the popularisation and intensified interest in Japan, with its rich history, which has come in the wake of the announcement of the Games' setting. The exhibition even includes merchandise from the upcoming Olympic games (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Photo of the 'Modern Japan' section display case, part of the *Making Japan* exhibition, presenting Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games merchandise.

The exhibition itself will be held at one of Leeds Museum and Galleries more obscure locations of Lotherton Hall. Lotherton Hall is a country house just outside of Leeds and was formerly owned by the Gascoigne family, who had a close relationship with Japan. Sir Alvary Gascoigne served as a British Political Representative to Japan from 1946 to 1951. Therefore, many of the items on display have come from the Gascoignes' own collection, and contributes to the reasons for holding the exhibition here.

During the placement with Leeds Museums and Galleries, I was involved in numerous tasks that contributed to the exhibition. Initial tasks included writing drafts for the panels and labels that will display information about Japan and the individual items. Due to my own interest in religion, with theology and religious studies being my own subject area, I asked my placement supervisor, the lead curator, if I could be assigned to the religious items to write labels for. This is in order for myself to become familiar with the different religions and types of objects that will be put on display. Moreover, my interest and involvement in the placement stems from my own interest in Japan, having visited myself. Also, I wish to pursue a career path within this sector and therefore I deemed this an excellent opportunity to combine work experience with my academic interest, to aid my progression.

My overall aims for the placement were to understand the role of the curator by assisting in the creation of the exhibition, and to see how religions are represented within this museum space through following the process of putting the exhibition together closely. I set myself these aims in order to discern how this particular exhibition has conveyed both culture and religion to a non-specialist audience. Through my own assistance in writing the panels and labels for the religious objects, I have been able to gain insight into how the organisation wants information to be written for the purpose of educating a non-specialist audience. The work I have conducted with my placement supervisor has allowed me to oversee how the whole exhibition, but in particular the religion section, has been put together. I oversaw the process the exhibition went through and how it was treated at each stage of the exhibition's development.

2. The Main Theme of the Report

Due to my experience whilst on placement, the main theme I will be exploring is how Japanese religions are exhibited in reference to the *Making Japan* exhibition. In this report I intend to explore religious items in the museum space and apprehend whether sacred objects within a museum space retain their sacred stature or whether they are divested of their religious function?

From this enquiry, I will also further explore whether religions are being represented accurately and respectfully to a standard suggested by the academic literature and through the examples of other museum's displays in the UK. Moreover, I will investigate whether there is a "correct" way to display religious objects, or whether it is dependent on each individual context of the museum space.

3. An Outline of the Predominant Religions and Beliefs in Japan

In order to explore the theme of sacred objects within a museum space, I have consulted academic literature on both Japanese religion and literature on religion in general, as well as sacred objects within a museum space. However, it is vital to first understand the religious traditions, beliefs and practice in Japan in order to assess whether the representation of religion in the *Making Japan* exhibition is both accurate and representative.

When looking at religion and religious practice within contemporary Japan it is interesting to find how diverse the religious practice is within "a society frequently described as 'homogeneous'" (Prohl and Nelson, 2012, p.3). Looking back at the history of religion within Japan, the reason many consider religious practice in Japan to be homogeneous is

due to the cross-overs between Shintoism and Buddhism. Shintoism was adapted from Buddhism when it was introduced from China by way of Korea in the sixth century. This form of Buddhism later adopted the term *Shinto* (Cobbold, 2009, p.7). Therefore, both Buddhism and Shintoism were closely interlinked and co-existed in Japan for centuries. Due to this, it became scarcely possible to distinguish their individual features. For “several hundred years, Buddhists and Shinto clergy had taken their turns of officiating in the same buildings and at the same alters” (Cobbold, 2009, p.9). It was only in 1868 that Shintoism was to be adopted as the state religion and a separation of the two religions occurred. Every temple was “required to declare itself either Shinto or Buddhist, and was to remove the emblems and ornaments peculiar to the discarded cult, whichever that might be” (Cobbold, 2009, p.9). Nevertheless, many people still continued to merge the two religious traditions and “many of the Shinto temples still retain traces of Buddhist influence” (Cobbold, 2009, p.11). Therefore, many of the religious objects appear in retrospect similar to one another and are treated in similar ways. For example, sharing a similar function, such as the use of portable shrines. It was the end of WWII, however, that brought the end to Shintoism’s status as the *de facto* state religion. This allowed for the constitution to grant freedom of religion as well as ensuring that “the state could not single out a particular religion to patronize or promote” (Prohl and Nelson, 2012, p.3). With this new sense of religious freedom, individuals sought a different sense of community, swaying from their previous religious practices choosing new affiliations (Prohl and Nelson, 2012, p.3).

Shinto has been active for thirteen centuries and it is clear that the religion is deeply rooted within Japanese society. In terms of the religious practice of Shintoism and the significance of their sacred objects, Shinto shrines are the devotional site of the religion. They are significant as each shrine is dedicated to a particular deity, also known as a *Kami*, which is a spirit (Scheid, 2012, p.75). A shrine also usually contains a *Shintai* or ‘divine body’. A *Shintai* is a “concrete sign indicating the presence of the *Kami* (deity) and is therefore the main object of worship in Shinto” (Scheid, 2012, p.77). The *Shintai* is not to be looked at and is kept hidden in the sanctuary. Individuals would attend a shrine of a particular deity and would perform a ritual in front of it. The ritual would include: “bowing, clapping, offering small sums of money” (Scheid, 2012, p.76). Unlike a Christian church, the shrine does not serve as a meeting place for the religious community, rather shrines were to “store the ‘divine bodies’ of their deities” (Scheid, 2012, p.76). Therefore, only individuals would approach the sanctuary of a deity and perform ritual gestures of respect in front of it. Shinto practitioners may also have a miniature shrine at home, one is

featured within the *Making Japan* exhibition. Inside the shrine “a small paper strip with the name of a *kami* can serve as a *Shintai*” (Scheid, 2012, p.77).

Due to the aforementioned cross-overs that occurred between Buddhism and Shintoism, many Japanese Buddhist temples share similar qualities to the Shinto shrines. Many Buddhist temples similarly contain statues of deity figures. However, instead of the temple being dedicated to a *kami*, it is dedicated to a Buddha (Scheid, 2012, p.77-78). Likewise, shrines for home use are also a feature of Buddhism. Also, water basins for the ritualised purification of hands and mouths can be found at both Shinto and Buddhist sites. Overall, this indicates that “shrines share characteristics with Japanese Buddhist temples, and that the basic pattern of worship is quite similar, at least from a lay visitor’s point of view” (Scheid, 2012, p.80).

The older established Shinto and Buddhist institutions still clearly dominate the religious scene of Japan. In regards to both Christianity and new religious movements, these only represent a small portion of religion in contemporary Japan (Mullins, 2012, p.137). Christianity from its introduction in the 16th century was proscribed and severely persecuted up until the 19th century (Reader, 1991, p.50). Despite the fact it is still only a minority religion in Japan, Christianity is still the leading world religion. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the significance of its history of persecution in Japan.

However, a deeper knowledge and understanding of Japanese religions is required to truly appreciate the significance of the religion, not just in terms of religious practice, but how religion in Japan is truly intertwined with culture. In Japan, it is not unusual for Japanese people to “at least loosely be affiliated with both Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines and typically participate in annual events, festivals, and family rituals associated with multiple religious traditions” (Mullins, 2012, p.137). This knowledge is required to help understand East Asian religion and culture when displaying such within Western museums¹. Many Japanese people according to Toshimaro Ama (2005) “do not see their traditional practices, whether Shinto shrine *matsuri* or festivals, or Buddhist funerals, as religious because, in their understanding, to do so would commit them to a particular religious “sect” ...” (cited in Ellwood, 2016, p.19). Therefore, many Japanese people do not identify as being religious, which differs to our understanding of being religious or

¹ The term ‘Western’ in itself is a complex, vast and generalised category. However, here I am using the term to indicate the difference in the understanding of the definition of religion in East Asia. In this instance I will not fully discuss the term ‘Western’ in depth as it is beyond the scope of this discussion.

following a particular religious tradition in the West. As similarly, with other Asian countries, the expression of Buddhism also differs in places such as Tibet, China and India to name a few. Buddhism in these other countries has been absorbed and adapted to fit their individual distinctive cultural features and therefore the practice of Buddhism differs drastically in Japan to other Asian countries. Due to this, when museums in the West display various objects from all over the world, there is an issue surrounding the representation of 'other' cultures in Western museums. This is primarily due to the reconstruction of cultures by the curators, as the planning of an exhibition is a constructed process "implicated by both curatorial and institutional incentives" (Lidchi, 1997, cited in Inoue, 2005, pp.225-226). As it is important to truly present the correct expressions of these religions as they vary country to country.

4. The Academic Literature

In order to assess how Japanese religions are represented in the museum space, I referred to academic literature on religious representation within the museum. Yet, there are gaps in the literature, as scholarship surrounding the portrayal of Japanese religion in museums is virtually non-existent. Due to this, I have had to look more generally at the academic literature that discusses the display of Buddhism in museums, including examples of Buddhism across East Asia. I have also considered literature which discusses the display of Buddhist objects in order to extrapolate from this the representation of Japanese religious objects. However, there is a lack of literature on the display of Shintoism and Japanese Buddhism within the museum space, therefore effecting the accuracy of my conclusions on how well Japanese religion has been presented in the *Making Japan* exhibition. Nevertheless, the key debates that are prominent within this literature include whether religious objects retain their sacredness when removed from their original context and whether a museum or exhibition can function as a religious space. Moreover, the literature raises the question of whether displays of East Asian traditions and cultures are being misunderstood due to their representation within museums.

Fabio Rambelli and Eric Reinders (2012), in their book *Buddhism and Iconoclasm in East Asia: A History*, discuss the importance of the material objects in Buddhism, as well as their cultural importance. They state how Buddhism is a "religious system fully entrenched with objects" (2012, p.41). Buddhists place great emphasis on material objects for the purpose of religion, particularly in the way they relate objects to important moments in life: birth, death, study, beginning a career, finding a partner and family life

(Rambelli, F. and Reinders, E., 2012, p.6). Due to the importance of material objects in Buddhism, it is then questionable whether it is right to display such items in museums, away from their sacred settings.

Ronald L. Grimes (1992), reflects on the relationship between sacred objects and the museum space. He suggests that sacred objects within their context of a temple or a shrine are one thing and within a museum or gallery, they are another (Grimes, 1992, p.419). In particular, Grimes touches on how Western museums display sacred items, which directly relates to my own study on the *Making Japan* exhibition. Grimes raises this issue of misunderstanding sacred objects. This misunderstanding of sacred objects stems from a misunderstanding of the religion itself, as not all religions place as great an emphasis on material objects as Buddhism does, as Rambelli and Reinders (2012) discuss. Therefore, I suggested that a knowledge of Japanese religions is vital to understanding the significance of these religious items. A Western audience may misunderstand a sacred object and it may lead to a violation of some sort. A violation may include the mistreatment of the object. This includes a mishandling of the object when displaying it within the case, not acting in a respectful manner around the object, or having misconceptions about the use of the object and the religion. Grimes proposes that this is due to the “fundamental differences between the values and perceptions of Western viewers and those of the traditions and cultures out of which many displayed sacred objects come” (Grimes, 1992, p.420). It is questionable whether a sacred item becomes profane within a museum space, as the item is considered to be sacred due to its use within its own context. Therefore, if removed from this context, the question is raised whether the item still holds its sacredness. However, Grimes uses the example of the Buddha to explain that this type of sacred item is not only sacred due to resembling the *Gautama*, but is also considered sacred due to its ritual use (Grimes, 1992, p.423).

Commoditisation of religious objects is a factor that contributes to this misunderstanding. This generally occurs in the West due to “secularisation of Western culture being accompanied by the widespread commoditisation of religious and culturally treasured objects” (Grimes, 1992, p.420). The act of exchanging, in this instance the exchange of objects between museums, commodifies the object. “An object in a museum thus becomes singular, unique, abstracted from its original context” (Grimes, 1992, p.421). Therefore, if the object is extracted from its original context, its sacredness is compromised. The question is then raised whether the religious item is being treated with respect and appreciation if this process of commoditisation occurs. This is because there is difficulty in the differing “...values and perceptions of Western viewers and those of the

traditions and cultures out of which many displayed sacred objects come” (Grimes, 1992, p.420). The display of sacred objects is justified by museums as they deem their display to be of educational value to the public. However, Grimes clarifies that this process of turning a once sacred object into profane aesthetic objects is a Western method (1992, p.422).

Grimes also refers to the issue of ‘ethnocentrism’. Ethnocentrism is the belief that the values and standards of one’s own culture are superior to those of other cultures (dictionary.com, 2020). Grimes deems ethnocentrism as unavoidable when displaying sacred objects in museums. He suggests that “the very acts of possessing, conserving, displaying and viewing them are not universal but culture-specific” (1992, p.424). Due to this, Grimes proposes that there is a need for a better understanding of sacred objects, and to “learn to construe visits to sacred objects in museums as acts of ritualizing” (1992, p.424). There is a possibility of a museum being treated as a religious space by members of the public, and it should be then treated as a place of worship.

James Robson (2010), is another scholar I have consulted, as he explores how museums in Asia, (including India, China and Japan) are “structured and act like ritual spaces” (2010, p.112). Although, Robson does not discuss how Asian religions function within Western museum spaces. Instead his study looks at how religious spaces can function as museums in the East, rather than museums functioning as religious spaces. Therefore, if Robson argues that museums in Japan provide a religious and sacred function, I question whether then museums in the West should treat East Asian religious objects in the same fashion; to view the museum space they reside in, as a place of worship. Conversely, Robson refers to the anthropological literature of Carol Duncan, who “argues that museums have functioned as shrines where civil religious rituals are enacted... presenting the division between the secular (museum) and the religious (temple) and to show how museums are structured and act like ritual spaces” (Duncan, 1995, cited in Robson, 2010, p.122). However, Robson raises awareness of the theoretical challenges that underpin museums in the West and their mostly secular formation. Robson further clarifies that modern museums do not tend to function as a religious site exclusively, as similarly, not all religious sites function as museums (2010, p.128). He suggests that this is due to “modernization-secularization theories... a clear line demarcating the secular (museums) from the religious (temples and monasteries)” (Robson, 2010, p.128). Therefore, it is unusual to see a Western museum functioning in the same manner as museums in Japan, functioning as religious spaces rather than secular spaces. This is because in Japan “the religious and the secular are not easily separated” (Ellwood, 2016,

p.3). They are not entirely separate and oppositional categories and this needs to be taken into consideration when discussing religion and how it functions in Japan.

Ivan Gaskell (2003), also considers the interchangeability of objects from sacred to profane. He proposes that “the sacred spaces of churches, shrines, or temples and the secular spaces of art museums are not equally balanced alternatives to one another” (Gaskell, 2003, p.149). Therefore, the museum space cannot directly emulate that of a religious space. Here the question then arises whether the object itself remains sacred if absent from its sacred space. Gaskell states “once a sacred object has been removed to a secular space, it’s sacred qualities are often compromised” (Gaskell, 2003, p.150). From this Gaskell poses the question of whether these objects should be displayed in a museum at all. However, he notes that in some religious traditions, “objects can slip in and out of the sacred condition” (Gaskell, 2003, p.150). Gaskell gives the example of Christian tradition, where objects must first be consecrated to become sacred. He also argues that “an artefact used in a sacred manner by some does not necessarily become sacred in the eyes of others” (Gaskell, 2003, p.150). Therefore, the sacredness of an object is a subjective entity, dependent on the community, the religion and the individual viewing the object. Moreover, Gaskell refers to an example of a Buddhist object. He notes how the Buddha image is used in religious activity, in visualization meditation. This visual object, used in these ritual meditations, is to be “treated with the same respect if the living Buddha was present” (Gaskell, 2003, p.153).

The literature presented here is relevant to *Making Japan* due to the kind of issues raised being evident within this exhibition, particularly regarding representation. Moreover, the literature also raises the question of whether the presented religious items on display are considered to be sacred and how should religious items be presented.

5. The *Making Japan* Exhibition

The main issues raised in academic literature on the representation of religion are predominantly based on the mistreatment of sacred objects and misunderstanding of religious items and the religious tradition. In addition to this, the proposition of the museum as a potential religious space is made and whether religious objects maintain their sacredness. With these issues in mind, I considered how religion has been represented in the *Making Japan* exhibition.

The *Making Japan* exhibition at Lotherton Hall, consists of multiple displays on an array of aspects of Japanese history, life and culture. The 'Religion' section of the exhibition is one of eight sections.² The exhibition does not only include religious artefacts, but an array of Japanese cultural objects. It is located in the second of the four rooms, and positioned next to the 'Making' and 'Celebration' sections of the exhibition, which both relate to religion in Japan and helps to put the religions into context, by linking aspects of religion to dress and festivals.

The items that are included within the display of the religion section are from the religious traditions of Shinto, Buddhism and Christianity. These religions were chosen by the lead curator to depict the common religious traditions in the country, but also offer a look at the diversity of the religions practiced with the placement of some Christian items.

The Shinto items displayed include: A portable shrine, carving of a Shinto Priest, Prayer Boards, a *Miko* Crown and a Shinto Priests Habit (see Figure 2).

The Buddhist items include: A Shrine Pagoda, a Shrine used in the home, Daruma Dolls, an Ancestor Memorial Tablet, *Mokugyo* Drum and a Buddhist Scroll (see Figure 3).

As for the Christian items, a Doll of a nun and a Bible in Japanese are the only items included (see Figure 3).

All of these items are dated from the 1800s to the present day and offer a variety of items from each religious tradition.



Figure 2: The display of Shinto items in the 'Religion' section of the *Making Japan* exhibition at Lotherton Hall.

² The eight sections include: An island nation, The Gascoigne's in Japan, Arms and Armour, Religion, Celebration, Making, Food and Modern Japan



Figure 3: The display of Buddhist items (middle and left) and Christian items (far right) in the 'Religion' section of the *Making Japan* exhibition at Lotherton Hall.

The religion section is only one small area of the exhibition however, and is by no means the main focus. Yet, it is the one section that relates to multiple aspects of Japanese culture, and is one to be treated with caution due to the issues raised concerning the display of sacred items. However, this could also be a limiting factor. It is questionable whether Japanese religion has been thoroughly explored with it being only a small section of the exhibition. Through not fully explaining the history and the meaning of the religious items on display, this may lead to mis-representation and generalisations made by the public. This is due to many Japanese people being at least loosely affiliated with both Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines and the rituals associated with multiple religious traditions (Mullins, 2012, p.137). This could be avoided with the implementation of further educational information about religion on the panels and labels of the religious objects on display.

A more in-depth knowledge of these religions allows for the religious items to be understood despite being an outsider to the religion, and despite the fact that the items are not being viewed within their original intended contexts. Nevertheless, it could be considered inevitable that not all aspects of the religions are going to be explored due to the complexity of them. This also applies to every part of the exhibition, not every aspect of Japan can be presented in detail, as selectiveness in some instances is unavoidable due to the parameters of the exhibition space given. For example, Lotherton Hall in comparison to the British Museum is a much smaller venue and therefore cannot display as many items or panels of information as them.

With regards to the religions of Japan that were chosen to be displayed, Shinto and Buddhism are the main religions represented in the display. Though there are a couple of Christian religious items displayed, there are few in comparison to the sheer amount of Buddhist and Shinto objects. Although, the ratio of Buddhist and Shinto objects in comparison to that of Christian objects could be considered representative, as the percentage of Buddhists and Shintos in Japan far outnumbers that of Christians (Prohl and Nelson, 2012, p.137). It is also questionable whether all these religions have been properly represented to a Western audience. The mixing of the Christian objects with the Buddhist objects could be potentially problematic. Not only is it possible for visitors to be confused by the placement of a Bible with Buddhist objects, despite the labels, but to put these conflicting objects within one space could be deemed as disrespectful to those who consider the items on display to be sacred to them. This could potentially skew the impression of the significance of Christianity in Japan. As I had mentioned in the previous section, the history of Christianity in Japan is characterized by the years of persecution endured by Christian worshipers. Therefore, I recommend that this should be highlighted within the exhibition to present the meaning of the objects on display and to acknowledge their significance. However, this may not have been included to avoid overt references to religious conflict to foster a better understanding between faiths (Reeve, 2010, p.148). Moreover, as stated in the previous section, both Buddhism and Shintoism are closely intertwined with one another. Therefore, I would recommend for the Buddhist and Shinto items to be mixed together, rather than the Buddhist and Christian religious objects due to the lack of space within the cases. The Christian items should be clearly separated to present their individual significance, and each religion should be clearly signposted with further signifiers, other than the small labels, to avoid confusion.

What can be seen as both a positive and negative aspect of the religion display, which can be particularly seen with the Buddhist objects, is that nearly all of the objects are from the early 1900s. On the one hand, this categorizes the Buddhist objects as historical items and may suggest they are no longer in use and therefore can be viewed as aesthetic or historic pieces, rather than religious items with sacred stature. This is problematic as the language used on the labels does not tend to indicate whether these items are still regularly used as a part of Buddhist practice, and therefore are they still considered sacred? This reflects on the issues Grimes discusses on how the process of turning a once sacred object into profane aesthetic objects is a Western method (1992, p.422). In order to avoid this confusion, further research and an indication of whether these items are still used today within religious practice would aid in the audience's

understanding and respect for the objects on display and not be viewed as solely aesthetic objects.

Photographs are also used in the exhibition. They are useful as they “have the same capacity as to evoke knowledge ... identify stories of the people, the cultural knowledge and intention encoded in them ... to link the past and present” (Peers and Brown, 2003, cited in Inoue, 2005, p.226). However, in regards to the religion section, there is only one image available to depict religious practice (see Figure 4) other than the image of a Buddha displayed. The use of further images may be beneficial in aiding the audience’s understanding of religion and allowing for the audience to accurately visualise religious practice in Japan and the way in which the religious objects on display may be used. This would be beneficial due to the audience at Lotherton Hall being primarily families and so are presumed to be a non-specialist audience. Leeds Museums and Galleries state that overall, their “audience is many and varied... multigenerational families, young people, schools, higher and further education groups, adults and older people” (Leeds Museums and Galleries, 2017, p.5). The exhibition is tailored to make it as accessible as possible and part of this is through the language used on the panels and label text as well as through the images displayed.



Figure 4: The 'Religion' section panel text and photograph of a Shinto shrine in Kyoto, displaying ritual practice.

6. A Comparison to other UK Museum's Displays

In order to assess how well religion and sacred objects within the museum space has been handled in the *Making Japan* exhibition, I have looked at examples of religious/Japanese display in other UK museums.

With the case of the *Discovering Japan* exhibition at the British Museum 2001, it presented different themes from Japanese culture. Many of the same themes and objects from this exhibition were incorporated into the *Making Japan* exhibition, including *Daruma* Dolls, Food and Shinto shrines (Inoue, 2005, p.119). Yuka Inoue (2005, p.117) states how “when a museum develops exhibitions, especially of those introducing a different culture or people, it is important also to consider the topic through the eyes of the people whom they try to represent”. However, in this particular case of the *Discovering Japan*, Japanese people were not consulted until the final stages of implementing the exhibition. Mainly, they relied on the consultation of British academics whom specialised in Japanese culture (Inoue, 2005). This is also the case for *Making Japan*. Many of the meetings I attended for the planning of the exhibition did not include members of the Leeds Japanese community. Although, some items and consultation were needed from them in the final stages. Alongside the *Discovering Japan* exhibition ran a *Shinto* exhibition. However, these were kept quite separate. Inoue comments on this factor and indicated that “if there had been simple labels at the *Shinto* exhibition, relating to the object to the section in *Discovering Japan* (or vice versa), it might have enhanced understanding of Japanese culture” (2005, p.121). This too applies to the *Making Japan* exhibition, as I had previously mentioned, a knowledge of the religions is vital in understanding Japanese culture.

Christopher Wingfield (2010), in his Chapter *Touching the Buddha: Encounters with a Charismatic Object*, discusses the implications of presenting a sacred object, the *Sultanganj Buddha*, in a museum. The object has received both positive and negative feedback since its arrival in Birmingham. As one article posted in *The Independent* newspaper reported that Roy Pinney, a Labour councillor, “suggested that the object had been taken immorally and might be returned to its country of origin” (Bell, 1998, cited in Wingfield, 2010, p.62). Despite this, the Buddha has been well received. It has been classed by Wingfield as a “charismatic” object, meaning extraordinary. Wingfield (2010, p.56) suggests that “the charisma appears not to be confined to a particular social and cultural setting”. This is the case for many of the religious items on display at the *Making Japan* exhibition, that the sacredness of the item is not confined to a particular context,

social or cultural setting. Overall, it is the cultural and religious experience of the individual that influences attitudes towards religious objects.

Louise Tythacott (2017), also explores the issues surrounding religious representation of Buddhism in the museum, drawing on her own experience of curating the *Buddhism* exhibition at the World Museum Liverpool. Tythacott (2017, p.115) focuses on “whether sacred images become divested of their religious functions once they enter a museum or if, instead, the gallery can be considered an alternative arena for contemplation”. In her discussion of the *Buddhism* exhibition, Tythacott acknowledges that some religious artefacts will be considered sacred. However, Tythacott also recognises that to others these artefacts are also considered to be profane. Consequently, the same applies to the spaces these objects are displayed in. Museums as a space could be considered reverential to some or hold no significance to others (Tythacott, 2017, p.118). Tythacott (2017, p.117) queries “if religious objects are inevitably rendered inactive through the mechanisms of museum display, to what extent can objects in museums still, in certain circumstances, be regarded as sacred?”. In order to retain the sacredness of the religious objects, the exhibition space was thus designed to be reminiscent of a Tibetan temple, the original context of the displayed items. The usual light shades of the gallery walls in the exhibition space and bright lighting contrasted with the atmosphere found in a Buddhist temple. Therefore, to recreate the general aesthetic of a temple, Tythacott suggests that firstly, the walls are to be in dark colours, in particular red and burgundy. Secondly, a change in lighting so that it is dimly lit and also to potentially fill the room with incense smoke. Thirdly, the repositioning of the deity figures, as within the temple Buddhist statues are placed within a particular configuration. Due to this, the objects are not intended to be viewed individually, but as one functioning unit (Tythacott, 2017, p.121).

However, “despite the gallery attempting to evoke their original sacred environment, these objects are still enshrined in the sealed glass cases of a museum display” (Tythacott, 2017, p.130). Though the objects are presented within glass displays, the museum has adapted the space to function as both a place of worship to Buddhists, or as a display of historical aesthetic objects to non-Buddhists with an educational purpose. This is because despite the different perspectives of individuals, the exhibition aims for varied uses. The exhibition has thus been designed in such a way that “Buddhists may use the gallery as a place for meditation, while non-Buddhists can learn about the diverse imagery, complexity and historical depth of this religion. A space which therefore deliberately allows for multiple perceptions and beliefs” (Tythacott, 2017, p.130).

The *Buddhism* exhibition at the British Library, which I visited myself in January 2020, also took a similar approach to Tythacott's exhibition in Liverpool. The design of the exhibition space here was also reminiscent of Buddhist temples, having red and burgundy walls, dim lighting and even burned incense. The exhibition itself presented an array of Buddhist items from a selection of different countries where the religious tradition is practiced. Not only does the British Library exhibit Buddhism in the UK, each section of the exhibition explores different aspects of the religion and the different countries. The exhibition itself is broken down into sections presenting 'The Buddha', 'Buddhist Practice', 'Buddhist Philosophy', and 'The Spread of Buddhism'. Overall, the *Buddhism* exhibition presents a detailed and informative display of Buddhism within atmospheric conditions (British Library, 2019).

Therefore, if the same conditions were applied to the *Making Japan* exhibition as the World Museum Liverpool's exhibition, and the British Library's exhibition, with attention to detail of the display, it would allow for multiple perceptions and beliefs to be achieved. This would provide the retrospective needs for a religious ritualised space, as well as for non-religious education and understanding, in order to avoid ethnocentrism. Even if the sacred object is rendered of its sacred function, due to its placement within the exhibition, it should be treated with the same respect as if it was sacred, as it may be considered sacred to others. Tythacott states that the Buddhist objects at the museum were never intended to be viewed in such close proximity (2017, p.130). Buddhist objects hold a deep-rooted significance to the religion as they signify a point of contact and relate to the life of the Buddha. They are therefore used as a focus for meditation. These deity objects are not only to be admired for their visual characteristics that are looked at in detail, they are to be used in meditation, facing them, but usually with closed eyes. Nonetheless, within a museum space, these objects are commonly treated as aesthetic objects, rather than used in facilitating meditation (Tythacott, 2017, p.120).

For this reason, I would recommend that a similar approach be adopted, with providing a space that combines education and reflection through emulating as best as possible the conditions in which the religious objects were intended to be used. This would include implementing a different design to the exhibition, with the introduction of dimmed lighting, red or burgundy painted walls and the possible burning of incense. All of these aesthetic elements would replicate the space of a Buddhist temple. However, the museum space cannot directly imitate that of a sacred space, but can be treated as a ritualised space by

an individual. The *Making Japan* exhibition has already implemented an aid in reflection through the placement of a bench in front of the religion display (see Figure 5).



Figure 5: Photo of the *Making Japan* exhibition space at Lotherton Hall, presenting a bench opposite the 'Religion' section cases.

Although the creation of a space reproducing a temple would be beneficial not only out of respect for the religion but to aid in education, Buddhism is not the only religion represented within this space. Therefore, to cater for one religion with this design could potentially diminish the sacredness of the other religions represented (Shintoism and Christianity) as the original place of worship for these other religious objects differs to Buddhism, with their own set of specific characteristics. Consequently, these recommendations suggest only the ideal situation. A multi-purpose religious space still is possible, but I aim to highlight here that complications are unavoidable.

7. Conclusion

For the most part, it is evident that there are some unavoidable implications surrounding the exhibition of Japanese religions. Although the recommendations I have made would aid in creating a sacred space, there are reasons surrounding why this has not been implemented here at the *Making Japan* exhibition. What the academic literature has failed to fully consider is the logistics and practicalities of creating an exhibition, including the cost, budget, demand and audience. The reality is, that what is suggested in the literature of the ideal representation of the sacred in a museum space, does not always correlate to the reality of the busy museum life, which has to incorporate these factors. My experience on the placement has allowed me to oversee the struggle of budgeting, catering to the Lotherton Hall audience, as well as presenting the complex culture of Japan through only a select range of items available to Leeds Museums and Galleries. There is also the

limited space of the exhibition hall to consider, with limits to what and how many items can be displayed. The British Library in comparison to the *Making Japan* exhibition is presented with a larger budget due to being in the center of London, as well as a larger exhibition space which allows for them to incorporate these ideal characteristics. With Lotherton being a small venue, there is only a small budget to consider and so many of the design elements cannot be incorporated due to this. Therefore, these recommendations made suggest an ideal situation, but recognises the reality of the situation. One of the practical aspects to consider is the audience of the exhibition. Due to the exhibition location at Lotherton Hall, the primary audience consists of multigenerational families. Accordingly, the information on religion displayed on the panels and labels caters to a range of ages using simple English. Due to this they do not manage to gain the depth needed to thoroughly understand the religion.

However, with the implementation of some of these recommendations made, the experience of the exhibition would be heightened. The recommendations would also allow for a space to be provided that caters to both the religious and non-religious, “which deliberately allows for multiple perceptions and beliefs” (Tythacott, 2017, p.130). In particular, these changes would enhance the experience of the audience who wishes to gain an educational and clear insight into the religions displayed, whilst acknowledging the complexity of religion. Due to Shintoism and Buddhism being deeply imbedded within Japanese culture, there is a need for further insight to explain how religion functions in Japan to an outsider of the religions and the culture. These suggestions would allow for a more immersive experience, but would also clearly represent these religions in a respectful manner. It would eliminate any confusion with clear signposting and would facilitate a greater understanding of Japanese religions.

Nevertheless, the *Making Japan* exhibition has provided an educational and immersive insight into Japanese religions to a non-specialist audience. Leeds Museum and Galleries have ultimately fulfilled their aims to collect, preserve and interpret historic and cultural collections and places and have done so by including many of the objects collected by not only the Gascoigne family, but also by lenders in Leeds and some from the Leeds Japanese community. My own aims for the placement were also fulfilled. I gained an understanding of the role of the curator, not only for the case of my personal ambition of a pursuing a career within this field, but in understanding how the exhibition has been put together by the curator. It is evident that this is a vital role in the creation of the exhibition, from the selection of the objects, to where and how they are positioned. Although what has become evident is that through this role, there is an unavoidable predisposition in

what is deemed worthy of display, due to personal preference or due to items simply being deemed an inadequate size or shape to fit within the exhibition space. Overall, the planning of an exhibition is a constructed process.

My experience whilst on placement with my partner organisation, has allowed me to view first-hand the process of creating the exhibition, seeing how these religious items were selected, interpreted and displayed. This allowed for me to interpret the academic literature on displaying religious items and directly correlate it to the workings of the *Making Japan* exhibition. The academic work from my own subject area of theology and religious studies can also be useful to my partner organisation. It has allowed me to recognise the issues and implications on displaying religions and religious items that may have been overlooked by someone from a different disciplinary background. Due to my experience of the placement I have also foreseen opportunities for further research. From my reflection upon the placement, further research on the concept of 'ethnocentrism' and its application to the display of religions with a museum space would benefit the research into how religion is represented in Western museums. An enquiry into more religious traditions in Japan such as Islam would also help generate a greater understanding of the religious scene. Moreover, perhaps gaining the opinion of practitioners of the religious traditions may be beneficial to the study. These first-hand accounts of practitioners could distinguish whether artefacts are considered to be sacred or profane, and whether they deem the way the religions have been displayed as representative.

Overall, it is evident that there is no one correct way to display and represent religion within a museum space. It is dependent on each individual context of the museum, including its size, budget and demand. It is clear that a knowledge of religion aids in diminishing generalisations and generates understanding. Moreover, the academic literature has suggested that in some instances, the removal of a religious item from its original context renders the item profane whilst on display. Nevertheless, the sacredness of an item is a subjective view. As Gaskell (2003, p.150) had suggested, "an artefact used in a sacred manner by some does not necessarily become sacred in the eyes of others".

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