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Mystery of the Buddhas

How did 27 turn-of-the-century paintings by Japanese artist Keichu Yamada end up in a downstate attic?

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In 2001 workers were cleaning up the fourth-floor attic of the Hegeler Carus Mansion in downtown La Salle, Illinois, when caretaker Dan Irvin noticed two wooden shipping crates buried under trunks and boxes. "We thought they were full of clothes, like the other trunks," he says. But when they opened them up, they found paintings, "somewhat dirty, but not too bad--there was a little bit of soot on them." In total the crates held 27 framed watercolors on silk, standing upright in felt-lined slots. The figures, dress, landscapes, and architecture were rendered in an exquisitely delicate Asian manner, and captions in English indicated these were scenes from the life of Buddha. One titled "Buddha's Farewell Address" showed the red-robed master sitting before disciples. The text told of his preparation for death and read in part: "Hold fast to the truth as a lamp, and you will reach the very topmost height." There were no dates, but each painting had the same characters in the lower right corner.

When Irvin showed other staffers his discovery, they were perplexed. But, Irvin says, they all knew the works were "old and probably valuable, so we took them right downstairs and locked them up." What were these silk paintings--by all appearances created in the Far East a century or so earlier--doing in a dusty attic in the middle of the Illinois prairie? Their presence, once you know a little about the Hegeler Carus house, isn't hard to explain. But what remains a mystery is why they were never used for their intended purpose.

The 57-room mansion, designed by Water Tower architect W.W. Boyington, was completed in 1876 for zinc magnate and progressive humanist Edward Hegeler. In 1887 he founded the Open Court Publishing Company on the ground floor to provide a forum for discussing philosophy, theology, science, and ethics, and hired German scholar Paul Carus as editor, who eventually married Hegeler's daughter Mary. After Carus spoke at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, he invited a group of Japanese monks to stay at the mansion for several days and was inspired to bring Eastern religions to Westerners.

A year later Carus published The Gospel of Buddha According to Old Records, which he wrote drawing on translated sources. This now classic text, printed in many editions since 1894, helped popularize Buddha's teachings thanks to its Christian-friendly format: it was designed to resemble the New Testament Gospels, and a table in back compared Jesus's life and sayings with Buddha's. In 1895 The Gospel of Buddha was translated into Japanese, and eventually into 12 languages. It's now sold over three million copies and is still used in Buddhist seminaries in Japan and other parts of Asia. An expanded seventh edition, published in 1915, included black-and-white illustrations by Munich artist Olga Kopetzky. In an afterword she wrote that, among other places in India, she'd visited the monuments of Gandhara, which she says "bear witness to the extraordinary influence of Greek art on Buddhism." Her art nouveau-like drawings wouldn't have looked out of place in a book on Greek mythology--or in a book of Bible stories.

Shortly after Irvin locked up the paintings on the mansion's ground floor, he contacted Blouke Carus, Paul's grandson. At the time, Open Court was preparing the eighth edition of The Gospel of Buddha, and Carus suspected that the paintings had been intended to illustrate an earlier version. But nothing was known. Several months later, in 2002, a group of Japanese on a tour of Buddhist sites stopped at the Hegeler Carus Mansion. Before they arrived, Irvin laid out the paintings for them to look at, hoping someone could identify the artist. One woman was able to match the characters on the paintings with those in a Japanese dictionary and translated the name as Chuzo Shimane. Later various sources--the tour leader, an art historian in Japan, and Yutaka Mino, then the Asian art curator at the Art Institute of Chicago--provided information about Shimane. It turned out "Shimane" was a go, or pseudonym, adopted at one stage of the artist's career. He was better known as Keichu (or Keichyu) Yamada. Born in Tokyo in 1867 or '68, he studied under the great printmaker Yoshitoshi, did many illustrations for publications, and was one of the best-known painters of his time. He died in 1934.

Records found a few years ago in the Open Court archives at Southern Illinois University indicate that the publisher held an international contest in the late 1890s to find an illustrator for subsequent editions of The Gospel of Buddha. Blouke Carus surmises that "Yamada won it, and Paul Carus commissioned him to do the art." It's believed Yamada completed the scenes around 1898, but Carus says no one has any information about why his grandfather didn't use them. One theory is that he felt the paintings looked too exotic for the book's Western readership--hence Kopetzky's drawings. Another is that the form of Buddhism popular in Japan didn't suit Carus, who had an affinity for Hinayana (or Theravada) Buddhism, which hews closer to Buddha's original teachings.

Still, the paintings were displayed. In 1899 they were exhibited at the Art Institute. A short introduction in the catalog, published by Open Court, noted that "the illustrations represent Indian scenes, costumes and persons, and in this respect, they are according to the intention of the artist not typically Japanese." Faded lettering on the two shipping crates suggested the paintings had been shipped from the Iowa Masonic Library in Cedar Rapids. I contacted its current librarian, who later sent an item from a quarterly bulletin saying the paintings had been shown there in March 1900. Both exhibits featured 33 pieces, so what happened to the other 6? Blouke Carus assumes they've been lost or destroyed. But mansion staffers are still sifting through 130 years' worth of materials. "There's a wealth of items that are pretty much undiscovered yet," says executive director Sharon Wagenknecht. So it's possible the missing Yamadas could turn up.

In 2003 a textiles restorer at the Chicago Conservation Center cleaned the paintings, which were then reframed. The captions were moved to the back. A year later, color reproductions of Yamada's works appeared, along with Kopetzky's illustrations, in the eighth edition of Paul Carus's book. The paintings are now on display at the Japan Information Center, and starting in June, they'll be on view at the Hegeler Carus Mansion in La Salle.

When: Through 4/28: Mon-Fri 9:15 AM-5 PM

Where: Japan Information Center, 737 N. Michigan, suite 1000

Price: Free

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