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Japanese Bronze Bells in Switzerland: Global Travel and Local Interpretations

Abstract: Western museums hold numerous Japanese objects, typically gathered by collectors during travels in Japan and then donated to local institutions. This simple scenario is by no means always the case, as can be seen with the numerous Japanese bronze bells in Swiss museum collections. The story of how the bells changed from holding significant functions within Japanese monastic and secular communities to being sold for their materiality and sheer weight as they travel across the globe tells a complex story of how objects change in meaning as they travel. As the bells were eventually relegated to museum archives, their stories help to shed light on global transfers, interculturality, and cultural misunderstandings, as they narrowly escape destruction. Their stories show the futility of claiming global understanding of art when, despite globalization, we are in the end products of our own localized traditions and understandings.

Key Words: Temple bells, intercultural art, global transfer, materiality of art, museum surveys

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Introduction

For reasons first noted by Madeleine Herren, large numbers of Japanese bronze bells can be found in Swiss museums, reflecting a striking intersection of the global and the local: global in terms of their travels across the globe and modes of transport, and local in the distinctly different way that they were received in the places of their departure and arrival.¹ The focus in Switzerland has been on their materiality and, in the case of one specific bell, on symbolizing international cooperation. As we will see, the bells underwent a series of changes in meaning through their travels, and have come to reflect the local cultural background. In order to properly understand the changes undergone by these bronze bells, it is necessary to have a closer look at the functions and meanings in their country of origin, Japan.²

History and function of bells

From the very beginning, bronze bells were a fundamental part of East Asian Buddhist temple planning. Temple bells were used to ring out certain ceremonies and the times of the day, for the monks as well as for the surrounding communities. Japanese traditions surrounding temple bells originally came from China and the Korean peninsula in the 6th century. According to research by Shinya Isogawa 五十川伸矢, the oldest Japanese examples, based on examples from the Asian mainland, were made in the 7th century. In the following centuries, temple bells were made across East Asia, in a creative cross-cultural exchange of styles, techniques, and inscriptions; Japanese receptions of other traditions can readily be seen in early examples.³

The oldest extant dated Japanese example is the Myōshinji Temple 妙心寺 bell, which is inscribed with the year 697.⁴ However, archaeological evidence of earlier bronze bell castings has been found in several Japanese locations. While specialists agree that Japanese casting did not predate the 7th century, there are documentary records of early importations of bells, such as the entry in

1 See Madeleine Herren, “‘Very Old Chinese Bells, a Large Number of Which Were Melted Down.’ Art, Trade, and Materiality in the Global Transformations of Japanese Bells,” *Global Europe – Basel Papers on Europe in a Global Perspective*, no. 120 (2021): 37–54.

2 The acknowledged scholar of Japanese bronze temple bells is Ryōhei Tsuboi 坪井良平 (1897–1984), who published extensively on bronze bells across East Asia. Especially well known are his *Nihon no bonshō* 日本の梵鐘 (1970) *Nihon koshōmei shūsei* 日本古鐘銘集成 (1972), *Chōsengane* 朝鮮鐘 (1974) as well as his posthumous *Bonshō to kōkōgaku* 梵鐘と考古学 (1989) and *Bonshō no kenkyū* 梵鐘の研究 (1991). Among living scholars of East Asian bronze bells, the most notable is Shinya Isogawa 五十川伸矢 (see footnote 3).

3 See Shinya Isogawa, *Higashi Ajia bonshō seisanshi no kenkyū* 東アジア梵鐘生産史の研究, Tokyo: Iwata Shoin 岩田書院, 2016. For a western-language text, see his “Casting Sites of Bronze Bell and Iron Kettle in Ancient and Medieval Japan,” *ISIJ International* 54, no. 5 (2014): 1123–1130, https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/isijinternational/54/5/54_1123/_pdf.

4 This bell was not originally made for this temple, but arrived from the no longer existent Pure Land temple Jōkon Gōin 浄金剛院.

the annual *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀, dated 562, that describes the return of a Japanese warrior from the Goguryeo kingdom on the Korean peninsula with spoils of war that included, among other objects, three bronze bells.⁵

Careful studies have been conducted on the techniques used to cast the bronze bells and in the cross-cultural receptions across the centuries. Needless to say, highly advanced techniques were required, not only for the bells to deliver sounds with the perfect pitch, but also to create aesthetically pleasing bells, complete with inscriptions and decorations.⁶ The peak of Japanese bronze bell production occurred during the Edo period (1615–1867), during which time an estimated 30,000 large bronze bells were made for temples in locations across the country.⁷ Early modern advances in casting techniques led to a proliferation of motifs and forms.

As can be guessed by the sheer number of bells, there was a wide range of terminology and functions. For the purposes of this paper, we will divide the bronze bells into two groups; the *bonshō* 梵鐘 and the *hanshō* 半鐘.⁸ Both types were made of cast bronze, using the lost wax method and made in foundries specializing in the manufacture of bells. Ornamentation on the bells include a variety of knobs, raised bands, decorative borders, and a handle in stylized dragon form.⁹ Inscriptions were often included in the casting, including dates, addresses, names of sponsors and temples, and special circumstances of their production. Sections of Buddhist texts were also sometimes included in some temple bell inscriptions, and in early modern examples, the decoration came to include elaborate images, typically of Buddhist deities.

The *bonshō* were large bronze bells, placed outside in architectural structures within the temple precincts,¹⁰ and were used to mark time and significant occasions. They were struck with a large wooden beam that was suspended by ropes. Ringing the bells resulted in deep, sonorous sounds

5 The bells were described as 「銅鑲鐘三口」. See Hiroshi Sugiyama 杉山洋, *Bonshō* 「梵鐘」, *Nihon no bijutsu* (Shibundō) 『日本の美術』 355 (Tokyo: Shibundō, 1995), 19–23. The oldest non-Japanese bronze temple bell in a Japanese collection is a Chinese bell from the Southern Chen dynasty (557–589), dated 575. It is presently located in the Nara National Museum, see *ibid.*, 17.

6 Japanese temple bells have been extensively studied in terms of their musical values and acoustics. See, for example, Takuji Nakanishi, et al., “Influences of the Shapes of a Temple Bell’s Parts on Acoustic Characteristics,” *Acoustical Science and Technology* 25, 5 (2004): 340–346.

7 Sugiyama, *Bonshō*, 72–74.

8 Numerous other names were given for each type, for example, the *bonshō* was also called *konshō* 昏鐘, *gyōshō* 暁鐘, *tsurigane* 釣り鐘 or *ōgane* 大鐘 and the *hanshō* was also called *kanshō* 喚鐘 or *denshō* 殿鐘.

9 Dragons have long featured as functional elements in East Asian arts, appearing often as handles in various types of vessels. In this respect, contemporary Swiss records show that the foundry possessed a Japanese bronze “Sturmdrache” (“storm dragon”), of which the exact identity and present whereabouts are still unknown.

10 Buddhist bell towers were called *shōrō* or *shurō* 鐘樓 or *kanetsukidō* 鐘突堂.

that reverberated over long distances. The tolling of the bells was intended to function as signals to a wider population and not just for the temple inhabitants. In other words, they functioned as a projection of Buddhist authority across adjoining communities.

The *hanshō*, on the other hand, were smaller bronze bells that were originally used within the temple halls to mark times for monastic observances and rituals. Over time, however, they took on their other – and more widespread – function as municipal fire bells. These bells were usually less than 65 centimeters in height and were also made of bronze, but gave sounds of a much higher pitch note when struck. These bells were publicly displayed in tall fire towers (*hinomi yagura* 火の見櫓) and became an essential feature of cityscapes. In Edo, for example, fire bells were placed in all city wards, and were used to signal not only fire but other important events for the community. Different striking patterns were used to ring the bells, depending on the proximity of fires or other calamities; for example, the pattern would be different depending on whether the fire was close by or far away.

Religious and Cultural Connections

As befitting such public and visible – as well as aural – objects, bronze bells have found wide levels of resonance within Japanese culture and have become key elements in narratives, legends, and stories of heroes. This is true of both bell types, both the *bonshō* and the *hanshō*.

As for the former, the *bonshō* bell can be seen in the story of the warrior monk Benkei (1155–1189), a hero of the 12th century Taiheiki war narratives, about whom it is told that he single-handedly carried the huge *bonshō* bell of the Miidera Temple 三井寺 up the side of Mt Hiei, only to become so angry with the complaints from the bell that he sent it rolling down the mountain side, down to the temple (Fig 1).¹¹ Or in the famous medieval tale of the Dōjōji 道成寺, which has been celebrated in various formats: as historical epics, illustrated handscrolls, and as plays in *nō*, *bunraku*, and kabuki plays. In this narrative, a monk who had entered into a romantic relationship with a young girl regrets his actions and runs away from her. As she chases him through the countryside, divine powers respond to her plight by turning her into a ferocious dragon. The monk attempts to hide within the *bonshō* bell of the Dōjōji Temple, but to no avail, as the dragon

¹¹ According to the legend, the bell kept pleading to be taken back to the temple. The Miidera Temple was also called the Onjōji Temple 園城寺. It is a Buddhist temple of the Tendai sect and located at the foot of Mount Hiei in Ōtsu City. The large scratches on the bell are explained as the damage received by the bell, as it rolled down the mountainside.

senses his presence and coils itself around the bell, burning him to a crisp (Fig. 2).¹² In addition, the bells became the stuff of poetry, such as the *bonshō* bell of the Ishiyamadera Temple 石山寺 that became part of the *Eight Views* tradition of poetry.¹³ In addition *bonshō* bells appear in the visual arts,¹⁴ popular songs,¹⁵ and classical literature.¹⁶



Fig. 1. Katsukawa Shuntei (Shōkōsai) 勝川春亭, Japanese, 1770–1824. *Musashibō Benkei 武蔵坊弁慶*. Japanese, Edo period, 1811 (Bunka 8), 7th month OR 1812 (Bunka 9), 7th month. Woodblock print (nishiki-e); ink and color on paper. Vertical ōban; 37.4 × 25.5 cm (14 3/4 × 10 1/16 in.). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Source unidentified. 2009.5008.15. Photograph © [undated] Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Fig. 2. Anonymous. *The Illustrated Tale of the Dōjōji Temple 道成寺縁起絵巻*. 16th century. Handscroll section, ink and colors on paper. (Dōjōji Temple 道成寺). Wikimedia Commons. Accessed June 2, 2021. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dojo-ji_Engi_Emaki.jpg.

12 For more on the tale, refer to: Susan Blakeley Klein. “When the Moon Strikes the Bell: Desire and Enlightenment in the Noh Play Dōjōji.” *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 17, no. 2 (1991): 291–322. Some versions of the tale refer to the dragon as a large snake.

13 Based on the Chinese poetic tradition of the *Eight Views of the Xiaoxiang* 瀟湘八景, which was transferred to eight views around the Biwa Lake in Japan, the idea of the *Eight Views* was endlessly repeated in visual and poetic culture of Early Modern Japan. The Ishiyamadera Temple 石山寺 bell was originally the bronze bell of the Qingliang Temple 煙寺. The woodblock print series by Utagawa Hiroshige *Eight Views of Omi* 近江八景 is particularly famous.

14 For example, Benkei and his bell became a popular topic for Japanese woodblock print artists, and numerous examples exist by artists such as Utagawa Kuniyoshi, who created numerous versions over his lifetime. This motif also became popular in Japanese folk art, such as the Ōtsu-e painting tradition.

15 A famous example being *Yūyake koyake* 夕焼小焼, a popular children’s song written in 1919.

16 As examples, we may mention the famous war tale *Tales of Heike* 平家物語, which starts with the tolling of the great Gion *bonshō*, and the section on temple bells and their sounds in the “Essays in Idleness” (*Tsurezuregusa*, 徒然草), a collection of essays written between 1330 and 1332 by the monk Yoshida Kenkō 吉田兼好. The latter text includes a description on the above-mentioned *bonshō* in the Myōshinji Temple.

An important historical *bonshō* temple bell event is that of Hōkōji Temple 方広寺, a Kyoto temple that was constructed in 1610 and commissioned by Toyotomi Hideyori 豊臣秀頼 (1593–1615) in memory of his father, Toyotomi Hideyoshi 豊臣秀吉. The temple construction included the casting of a large *bonshō* temple bell in 1614, complete with an elaborate inscription. A clever misreading of the inscription of the temple bell became the excuse for a military attack on Hideyori by Tokugawa Ieyasu 徳川家康 (1543 – 1616), resulting in the defeat and death of his potential rival and the consolidation of power that inaugurated the long-lasting Edo period (1615 – 1868).¹⁷

In addition, the *bonshō* temple bells took on supernatural properties, since the sounds of temple bells were believed to be heard in the underworld. Thus, the important Buddhist ceremonies of Obon お盆 (the welcoming back of departed spirits) and New Year (marking the rebirth of the temporal world) include the ringing of the temple bells with their connections to the supernatural world.

The *hanshō* bells have likewise become important elements of Japanese popular culture. Here, the story of Oshichi お七 is particularly famous. Her story was based on the real story of a grocer's daughter in Edo who fell in love with a young monk in a nearby temple. Spurred on by passion, she climbed up a nearby fire tower and rang the *hanshō* fire bell in the hope of seeing her lover rush out of his temple. Although she was burned at the stake as punishment, she gained immortality with her story that became one of the standard topics in Japanese theater. Her story was transformed into numerous *bunraku* and *kabuki* theater plays, and scenes of her climbing a bell tower (constructed on the theater stage) and striking the *hanshō* bell became greatly popular with audiences. In such theatric adaptations, she would again be punished with death for setting off a false alarm and causing general panic. The story was endlessly embellished and became one of the most famous narratives of the *kabuki* stage as well as in popular literature.

Interestingly, all *bonshō* and *hanshō* related stories seem to straddle the divide between the monastic and secular worlds – there seems to have been an inherently Buddhist connection to the bells, even when they were used as fire alarms.

In short, Japanese bells – of both types – should not just be seen in their basic roles as markers of time and fire. They not only became fixtures of daily life, whether in blissful peace or in dire

¹⁷ For more information on this historical event, refer to Masayoshi Kawauchi 河内将芳. *Hideyoshi no Daibutsu zōritsu, shirizuru kenryokusha to bukkyō* 秀吉の大仏造立・シリーズ権力者と仏教. Kyoto: Hōzōkan 法藏館, 2008.

emergencies, but contained deeper religious and cultural meanings that carried over into theater, literature, and popular entertainment of the period. In this way they became essential parts of the lives and contexts of early modern Japanese citizens, in terms of both visual and aural culture, and, additionally, in terms of the popular imagination. Whether in the cities (for both types) or in the countryside (for the *bonshō*) the bells carried a whole range of meanings that would have been intelligible to most Japanese at the time.

Examples in Switzerland

In order to get a clearer impression of what the bells brought to Switzerland can tell us, let us look at two examples. One is housed in a Swiss museum collection, and another we can see on a photograph from the 1870s.

The museum example is a *bonshō* bronze bell in the collection of Museum der Kulturen in Basel (Fig. 3).¹⁸ The bell is dated the 21st day of the twelfth month of 1732.¹⁹ It was made for a no longer extant Zen Buddhist temple, Konzenji 金禪寺, located in Edo in the present-day Shibuya ward.²⁰ The bell is inscribed with a Buddhist verse, the so-called *Meijōge* 鳴鐘偈 verse, which stems from a Chinese Song-period commentary that was traditionally chanted while striking the *bonshō* bell, just before the daily assembly of monks. Thus, the verse can not only be read on the bell, it can also be heard in a chanted form by the monk who strikes the bell. The chant and the bell's inscription are read as follows:

May all Buddhists enter the
same place for Buddhist services.
May all suffering people leave the world of suffering
and enter Paradise at the same time.
願諸賢聖 同人道場 願諸惡趣 俱時離苦²¹

18 The museum accession number is Ild 408. The author gratefully acknowledges the help of Stephanie Lovasz.

19 「享保十七年臘月二十一日」.

20 The full name of the temple was: Rei'inzan Shūchōzan Konzenji 靈隱山就鳥山金禪寺 and the address was Lower Shibuya, Toyohiro District, Bushū Province 武州豊鴻郡下渋谷. The latter is described as a busy market area during the mid-Edo period. See: Noriyuki Shimizu 清水教行 and Takasuke Watanabe 渡辺貴介, "A Study of the Characteristics and Transformation of Market Places in Edo 江戸における広場の空間の特性と変遷に関する研究," *Historical Studies in Civil Engineering* 土木史研究 10 (1990): 103–112, <https://doi.org/10.2208/journalhs1990.10.103>.

21 The source of the text is the *Si Fen Lu Xingshi Chao Zi Chi Ji* 四分律行事鈔資持記, A commentary on the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya* by the Song-dynasty monk Yuanzhao 元照. Junjirō Takakusu 高楠順次郎, ed., *Taishō shinshū Daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經, vol. 40, no. 1805 (Tokyo: Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō Kankōkai, 1988), <http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T40n1805>.



Fig. 3. *Japanese Bronze Bells*. Museum der Kulturen, Basel. Photograph by author.



Fig. 4. *Detail of bonshō bell, showing the jō 上 character*. Museum der Kulturen, Basel. Photograph by author.



Fig. 5. *Detail of bonshō bell, showing Roman numerals*. Museum der Kulturen, Basel. Photograph by author.

Interestingly, in addition to the above inscriptions, the bell comes with several later marks, which were likely added both before and after its arrival in Switzerland. On its very top, the bell is marked with the Japanese character *jō* 上, which in this context probably means “good quality” (Fig. 4). In addition, the Roman numeral XXXIII has been carved into the bronze, using a mechanical tool (Fig. 5). This was likely done after its arrival in Switzerland, perhaps at the foundry, as it was numbered in

preparation for being melted down. There are also Arabic numerals brushed in white paint on the inside of the bell.²² Thus the bell carries numerous inscriptions and marks, added by different persons in different countries and at different times, attesting to the complex biography of this object.

The other *bonsō* bell can be seen on right side of the photograph of the Rüetschi Foundry (Fig. 6), featuring the Shinagawa Bell at the time of its discovery by Gustave-Philippe Revilliod (1817–1890). Whereas the Shinagawa bell survived being melted down, the fates of the other two bells in the photograph are still unknown. In fact, this photograph might be the only trace of their existence. The inscription on the photograph in the Staatsarchiv Aarau is especially informative: "724a. Ancient Chinese [sic] Bells, a large numbers of which were melted down in the bell-foundry Rüetschi in Aarau (1873). No. 16. The biggest [bell] is presently in the Museum Revilliod in Geneva (Musée Ariana)."²³ The bell to the right is interesting, however, from the inscription that we can see in the photograph (possible inscriptions on the back side of the bell are unfortunately unknown).

The *bonsō* bell is interesting for its connection to a noted Edo temple and a specific historical person. Next to the central band with the Buddhist mantra "Hail to the Amida Buddha 南無阿彌陀仏," we see the inscription: "38th abbot of the Zōjōji Temple 増上寺三十八主," and the phrase: "[Made] at the request of the great *sōjō* Byakuzui 大僧正白隨意."²⁴ Significantly, on the extreme left we see a prominently placed cipher (*kakihan* 書判), or signature, of the monk Byakuzui.²⁵

Enyo Byakuzui 演譽白隨 (1656–1730) was a leading Japanese monk of the eighteenth century. Born in the Ise province, he became one of the more influential Pure Land Buddhist monks of the early Edo period. After serving in a variety of positions in the Zōjōji Temple in Edo, he became its *gakuto*, the monk in charge of the education of the temple's monks. Eventually he became the 38th abbot of the Zōjōji Temple in 1717 and retired nine years later in 1726. During his rule, he firmly established the primacy of the temple in Edo by cementing the connections between the temple and the Shogunate by successfully orchestrating the first and third death anniversary ceremonies of the departed Shōgun Tokugawa Ietsugu (1709–1716), resulting in the donation of

22 Similar marks (the "good quality" mark, the Roman numeral, and the interior paint mark) feature on several of the extant bells in Swiss museum collections. One may conclude that they were all part of the same batch of bells brought to Switzerland at the same time.

23 "724a. Uralte chin. Glocken, von welchen eine grosse Anzahl in der Glockengiesserei Rüetschi in Aarau eingeschmolzen wurden. No. 16. Die grösste befindet sich in Museum Revilliod in Genf (Musée Ariana)." Anonymous photographer, *China, Uralte chinesische Glocken, 1890*, photograph on albumin paper, F.MG/2320, Staatsarchiv Aargau. See also Herren, "Japanese Bells," 43.

24 The *sōjō* 僧正 was one of the three highest ranks for Buddhist monks.

25 Although admittedly unclear from the photograph, there appears to be a Roman numeral on the top of this bell.

large land holdings to the temple from the following Shōgun Tokugawa Yoshimune (1684 – 1751). Byakuzui was important in the institutional history of the temple and was also engaged in reconstructing the great gate of the temple, in addition to other buildings within the Zōjōji Temple and in other associated temples.



Fig. 6. The Shinagawa Bell and Two Other Bells at the Rüetschi Foundry, Aarau. Anonymous photographer. *China, Uralte chinesische Glocken*, 1890. Photograph on albumen paper. F.MG/2320. Staatsarchiv Aargau.

He was also a promoter of the arts and sponsored an elaborate embroidery made in the form of the famous Taima Mandara. This embroidery has been designated a Cultural Property of Meguro City and is presently located in the Yūtenji Temple. The donation by Byakuzui of the embroidery is dated 1728, two years after retiring from his temple post.

The fact that Byakuzui's cipher appears on the bell indicates that it was created during his lifetime, perhaps soon after his retirement.²⁶ As he ordered the aforementioned embroidery to be made after his retirement, this likely became a time of involvement in the arts. In this way, the bell is significant for the information it provides on one of the most influential Buddhist monks of his time. The bells brought from Japan were not merely discarded bells, on the contrary, many were of high technical quality and exquisite craftsmanship and carried cultural significance.

Movement across the World

So why were they let go? Why were these culturally significant objects, some of which had been part of local communities over centuries, sent overseas? The most famous bell, namely the so-called Shinagawa Bell, might be instructive in understanding this question. A number of more or less plausible explanations have been given for the disappearance of the bell from its Japanese temple, the Hōsenji Temple in Shinagawa, where it had rung since the seventeenth century, but there have been no definitive answers. The main explanation issued by the temple suggests that the bell disappeared after being shown at the World Exposition in Paris (1867) or Vienna (1873).²⁷ As Madeleine Herren has pointed out, a publicly displayed object weighing over a ton does not simply disappear without notice. Nor would the government of Japan have sent a prominent Buddhist object to represent the country at the highpoint of Buddhist suppression in Japan. The removal of the bell remains a puzzle, since this was no minor object, but one that had kept the time for the surrounding populace over centuries. The more likely explanation for the disappearing *bonshō* seems rather to have been, at least in part, financial; that is, the bell was let go in order to gather funds at a difficult time for Japanese Buddhist temples. As James Ketelaar has described, during the early Meiji years, ca. 1868 – 1874, Japanese Buddhism experienced severe suppression in contrast to the Shinto religion, which

²⁶ *Bonshō* bells were usually dated and the date of this bell was likely inscribed on its (unseen) back.

²⁷ This is the explanation in the temple's homepage, yet there is no evidence of their being shown at either of these occasions. Other explanations have also been given, such as a fire burning down the bell tower, or (in a *kamishibai* theater piece aimed at children) that the bell suddenly disappeared one night. That the bell might have been sold for badly needed funds does not appear as a possible reason on any of the sites associated with the temple.

was declared the national religion of Japan.²⁸ This turn of events led to the disappearance of political and financial support for Buddhist temples, a process that was further aggravated by the ongoing restructuring of Japanese society and the resulting loss of funding from the now powerless *daimyō* warlords and the recently abolished samurai class. This was also the time when Buddhist statuary, paintings, and other ritual objects flowed in large numbers to western institutions such as the Musée Guimet in Paris and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. It should be noted, however, that western founders of museums, such as William Sturgis Bigelow and Émile Étienne Guimet, did not import temple bells together with their statues and other Buddhist objects.²⁹ Nevertheless, the suppression led to the closing and consolidation of temples, which in turn led to bronze bells appearing on the domestic art market – above all, in antique shops. As for what happened to them afterwards, the author refers the reader to the article by Madeleine Herren, who suggests that they were exported as scrap metal to be melted down for their metal value in Switzerland, with an intermediary function as ballast for ships.³⁰

And there were certainly bells that seem to have been brought to Switzerland in order to be melted down, for example the damaged bell in the collection of the Naturmuseum in Winterthur³¹ (Fig. 7). The bell has traces of misfiring, and has several holes in its body. It seems logical to conclude that this piece was not purchased in order to be shown in museum exhibitions, but for its material value. How it arrived here is not known, other than it was donated by the Historisch-antiquarische Verein Winterthur, an organization that was established in 1874 as one of the many societies that sprang up in late nineteenth-century Switzerland for the promotion of local industries and the arts.

But what of the *hanshō*, bells that would have seemed essential for the prevention of fire in Japanese metropolitan centers? Surely this was unrelated to the suppression of Buddhism. Here, we may notice that all the *hanshō* that have been discovered so far in Swiss museum collections stem from the city of Edo. Edo saw a massive change in the make-up of its municipal structure following the Meiji regime change, as hundreds of *daimyō* and *hatamoto* residences in the center of the city were dissembled, leaving open spaces in the city where the warlords and the merchants and other persons catering to them had previously lived. Two *hanshō* examples in

28 James Ketelaar, *Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). See also Martin Collcutt, “Buddhism: The Threat of Eradication,” in Marius Janson and Gilbert Rozman, eds., *Japan in Transition: From Tokugawa to Meiji* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 143–67.

29 The large number of Japanese bronze bells in Swiss museums makes them stand out in global contexts.

30 Here it should also be noted, as Madeleine Herren points out, that Japanese metalwork enjoyed a very high reputation in nineteenth century texts on metallurgy. See Herren, “Japanese Bells,” 46.

31 The museum was renamed from its earlier manifestation as the Ethnographische Sammlung Winterthur (“Ethnographic Collection of Winterthur”). The author gratefully acknowledges the help of Natalie Chaoui.

Switzerland (in Basel Museum der Kulturen and Musée d'ethnographie de Neuchâtel) stem from such Edo city wards (Tatamichō 畳町 and Udagawachō 宇多川町) where the disappearance of a large share of the local population likely led to the disassembly of fire towers and sale of the fire bells to Japanese art dealers, who then sold them to foreign buyers.



Fig. 7. Japanese bronze bell. Naturmuseum Winterthur. Photograph by author.

Swiss Receptions

So, what did the Swiss in Yokohama see in these bells? Let us briefly take a look at a seemingly very different example – namely, the Kamakura Daibutsu 鎌倉大仏 (Fig. 8). This monumental bronze sculpture of the Amida Buddha has become world famous and is often used as a representation of Japanese Buddhist sculpture in western popular literature on Japan. Yet this is not only a modern phenomenon. During the late nineteenth century, the Daibutsu held an enormous appeal for the westerners in Yokohama, partially through the proximity to their home, but also due to what Prof Hiroyuki Suzuki has described as its similarity to European objects.³² In Europe, large bronze statuary in public places was commonplace and could be found in all metropolitan centers, where they have long celebrated famous personages, historical rulers, legendary and religious figures, among many other subjects. It made sense for the westerners to think of the Daibutsu in similar terms; this can also be seen in the way they treated the Buddhist figure in early photographs. Ironically, the present appearance of the Daibutsu as a figure in the open was due to a tsunami in 1498, which washed away the enclosing building and left the figure exposed without its original architectural enclosure. The decision not to rebuild the structure ironically became a key reason for the resulting popularity of the figure in the nineteenth century, as well as into the present. As a result of a historical accident, the appearance of the exposed sculpture was accepted as being quite normal in Western eyes.



Fig. 8. Anonymous photographer. *Kamakura Daibutsu With Mr. and Mrs. Charles Ziegler of Winterthur*. Photograph on albumin paper, 1870s. University of Zurich, Section for East Asian Art.

32 Hiroyuki Suzuki, “The Buddha of Kamakura and the ‘Modernization’ of Buddhist Statuary in the Meiji Period,” *Trans-cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (2011): 140 – 158, <https://doi.org/10.11588/ts.2011.1.7332>.

In general, we tend to respond to objects from other cultures based on our own cultural backgrounds. This can be seen in the abovementioned case of the Daibutsu and also in the other objects collected by the Swiss merchants in late nineteenth-century Japan. As I have argued elsewhere, the Swiss museums possess a remarkable wealth of Japanese objects, taken home by Swiss merchants who had been active in Japan during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³³ The Swiss were typically long-time residents of Japan who often knew the language, were aware of the arts and culture of Japan and collected accordingly. What then did they bring back and which of these objects have been exhibited? First of all – weapons. The Swiss have had a long fascination with weapons of all kinds as aesthetic objects and have often shown them in museum exhibitions, with a large range of examples from western and non-western cultures.³⁴ Japanese weapons were especially popular, as they matched a general fascination with the Japanese samurai.³⁵ Likewise the *tsuba* sword guard has been a consistently collected and exhibited object in Swiss museums.

Or we may look at the Buddhist statuary that has consistently taken the place of representing Japan in museums. And not just older statues from the Heian and Kamakura periods, but also from more recent periods, as can be seen in the displayed examples from the late Edo period at the Historical Museum of Bern. The western attraction to Buddhist sculpture may be explained through the long-time fascination for Japanese Buddhism, ranging from the fantastical descriptions of Buddhism in early western books by Montanus, Kaempfer, and others to more recent appreciations through the widespread interest in Zen Buddhism.

Or we may look at the fascination for *nō* and *kyōgen* masks, deposited and exhibited in a wide range of Swiss museums, especially the notable Reinhart collection in the Museum Rietberg.³⁶ The interest in Japanese masks echoes a wider appreciation of masks from various cultures; exhibitions

33 Hans Bjarne Thomsen, “Japanese Collections in Switzerland,” in *Siebold’s Vision of Japan: As Seen in Japan-Related Collections of the West*, ed. National Museum of Japanese History (Sakura: National Museum of Japanese History, 2015), 89 – 98 and 273 – 280.

34 The latter half of the nineteenth century saw a great interest in modern western-made weapons from the Japanese side, as pointed out in a recent article by Harald Fuess (“The Global Weapons Trade and the Meiji Restoration,” in *The Meiji Restoration: Japan as a Global Nation*, eds. Harald Fuess and Robert Hellyer (London: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 83 – 110; or online: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108775762.005>). The difference here is that the Japanese interest focused on actual warfare, while the Swiss enjoyed the aesthetic aspects of weapons. I thank Madeleine Herren for pointing my attention to this article.

35 For example, in the recently re-installed exhibition of the Burgdorf Castle Museum, a large glass case displays weapons from various cultures, with an emphasis on medieval Switzerland and the Japanese samurai – as evidenced by the life-sized figures of a medieval knight in armor, and a samurai, likewise clad in a full set of armour. See “Cabinets of Curiosities and Thematic Rooms,” Schloss Burgdorf, accessed April 6, 2021, <https://schloss-burgdorf.ch/en/museum/exhibitions/>.

36 Brigitt Bernegger, *Nō-Masken im Museum Rietberg Zürich: Die Schenkung Balthasar und Nanni Reinhart*, (Zürich: Museum Rietberg, 1993) – see also: Hans Bjarne Thomsen, “Nō Masks in Japanese Culture,” in *Fliessende Welt, verborgene Schönheit: Schätze aus Japan*, ed. Jeanne Egloff (St Gallen: Historisches und Völkerkundemuseum St Gallen, 2014), 46 – 57.

of masks from various places in the world have been a constant feature of western museum exhibitions – for example, the Rietberg Museum in Zurich shows not only Japanese masks but also those from African cultures and even Swiss carnival masks in its permanent exhibitions. Around the time of the early Swiss settlers in Japan, a clear interest in Japanese masks could also be seen in publications from western dealers and scholars.³⁷ Masks are universal, easily displayed, and easily explained – at least superficially in terms of their materiality and their formal aspects.

But let us come back to an example that does not fit so well into this rubric, namely the temple bells of Japan. As Madeleine Herren has pointed out, her present research has shown that many of these were imported into Switzerland during the 1870s onwards as ship ballast and with the intention of being melted down, until an awareness of the fine craftsmanship apparently stopped the process. The so-called Shinagawa Bell from the Hōsenji Temple is an interesting case in point, as seen in the famous 1872 photograph from the Rüetschi Foundry (Fig. 6).³⁸ As a result of a rescue operation by still unknown persons or institutions, a significant number of these finely constructed, exquisitely made objects are now stored in Swiss museum collections.

But why did the Swiss in Japan choose to not send back temple bells with their prodigious collections of Japanese art? The early Swiss Japanese residents were of course aware of these objects – how could they ignore them, living in Japanese cities and hearing the sounds every day and viewing the bells in temples? We also know that they recorded their visits to large and significant Japanese temple bells in their writing and photographs, for example, the monumental Chion'in temple bell in Kyoto (Fig. 9).³⁹ And, just as with the Kamakura Daibutsu or with the *nō* masks, there must have been an immediate sense of cross-cultural recognition for the foreigners, as they compared the temple bells with the church bells of Europe that also rang out over western congregations and marked time and significant occasions. The comparison between East Asian bronze bells with European church bells is also not just a 19th century phenomenon. See for example the comparison between the great bronze bells of Beijing with the church bell in “Erford,” Germany (“the largest in Europe”) in Kirchner’s 1667 book.⁴⁰

37 See for example, the Parisian dealer Siegfried Bing’s journal *Le Japon artistique* (1888 – 1891) and the groundbreaking research by Friedrich Perzynski in his two-volume text, *Japanische Masken*. (Berlin/Leipzig: De Gruyter, 1925).

38 See photograph taken at the foundry in 1872 (Fig. 6 here and fig. 1 in Herren, “Japanese Bells,” 41.) Musée d’ethnographie de Genève, ed., *Le bouddhisme de Madame Butterfly: Le japonisme bouddhique*. (Milan/Geneva: Silvana MEG, 2015), 81. Photographs of this scene can be found in a number of archives, including the Rüetschi Foundry and the Staatsarchiv Aarau.

39 Or the Daibutsu temple bell in Kyoto, *ibid.*, 37.

40 See Athanasius Kirchner, *China illustrata*, 1667. It seems that Erfurt was intended.

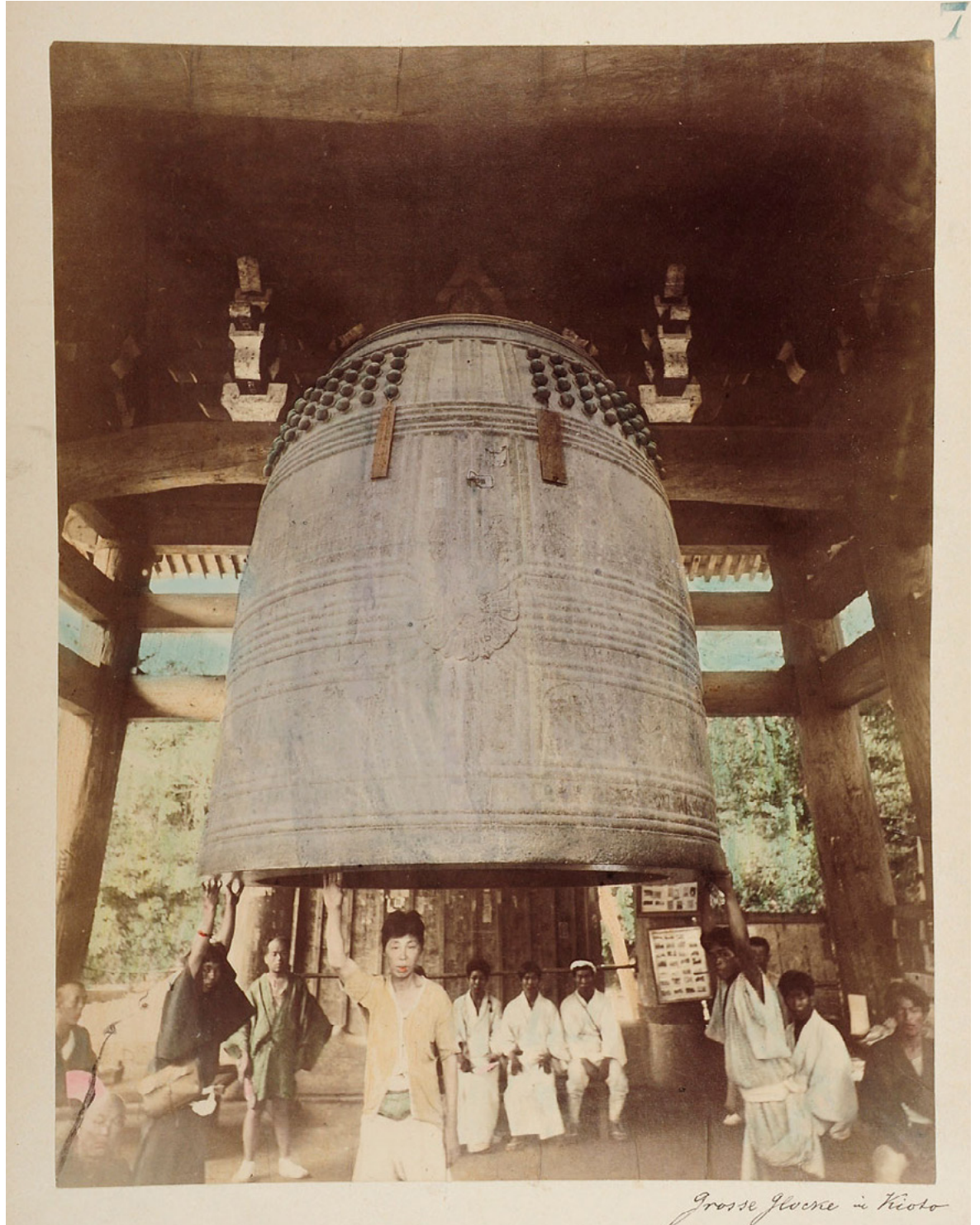


Fig. 9. Anonymous photographer. *Grosse Glocke in Kioto*. Photograph on albumin paper, 1893. P1984.447. Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg.

But despite the awareness of Japanese bells and an understanding of their function (at least on the surface), there is no indication that the bells were actually exhibited in Swiss museums, next to the swords, Buddhist sculpture and masks. And this was in spite of the large numbers of bells in Swiss museum storage and the obvious care with which the bells had been made. And, in addition, despite the many cultural and religious connections that the bells had in Japan. I would argue that the lack of a display history is partly due to the fact that there were no western traditions of exhibiting church bells in museums.⁴¹ That is, unlike statuary, masks and weapons, there were no local traditions of displaying bronze bells.⁴² This might also have been a factor that discouraged the Swiss from collecting the bells in Japan, despite their appearance in antique shops. Although the Swiss residents of Yokohama no doubt strove to live up to international vogues, such as the fascination with Buddhism, they still tended to understand Japanese culture in a personal and/or domestic way, based on their own cultural perspectives. And although discussions about globalization often assume that human reactions are basically similar from place to place and from time to time, we see that this is not always the case.

And here we might remember that although Gustave-Philippe Revilliod famously saved the Shinagawa Bell from being melted down, he did not take smaller bells back with him to Geneva, nor did he treat the Shinagawa Bell as an art object by placing it within his museum, but placed the large bell outside, in a public park, in the tradition of western public sculpture. Although he surely recognized the great craftsmanship of the Shinagawa Bell, it was still categorized within his own cultural upbringing: the proper place for such an object was in a public outdoor display, one that the bell would hold in common with western public statuary as well as with the Daibutsu of Kamakura.

41 Likely also related to the fact that disused church bells were melted down for their metal value. This was especially so in the two world wars. See, for example: “Glockenfriedhof,” Wikipedia, accessed April 20, 2021, <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glockenfriedhof>. See also: Paul Clemen, ed., *Kunstschutz im Kriege* (Leipzig: E.A. Seeman, 1919), 18 – 221, <https://archive.org/details/kunstschutzmkri02clem/page/221/mode/2up>. I thank Madeleine Herren for this information.

42 The cracked Philadelphia Liberty Bell being the exception that proves the rule. “The Liberty Bell,” National Park Service, accessed April 20, 2021, <https://www.nps.gov/inde/learn/historyculture/stories-libertybell.htm>. Recently, an exhibition at the new extension of the Kunsthau Zürich has provided another exception. The artist William Forsythe, in his exhibition “The Sense of Things,” has installed two old church bells in the still-empty rooms. The aural reception of the periodic tolling of the bells creates different tonalities, depending on one’s location in the large building. According to the artist, the ringing of the bells should bring forth thoughts of war and the many German church bells melted down for the war effort: “Die Glocken sind für mich wie Geister der Geschichte europäischer Konflikte.” (“For me, the bells are like ghosts of the history of European conflicts.”) Lilo Weber, “William Forsythe am Kunsthau Zürich: ‘Glocken sind für mich wie Geister der Geschichte europäischer Konflikte.’” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung Online*, April 22, 2021, <https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/william-forsythe-am-kunsthau-zuerich-so-klingen-chipperfields-raeume-ld.1613138>.

Postscript

Stories from the aftermath of the Second World War form some interesting parallels with the events in Switzerland during the 1870s. As in many premodern wars, the melting down of metals became necessary for the war effort and for the construction of airplanes, cannons, and other weapons of war. This was also the case in Germany, where a large number of objects, including church bells, were collected, not only from German cities, but also in the conquered regions (Fig. 10). In Japan, a stupendous number of metal objects, from cooking pots to temple bells, were collected throughout the country from 1941 onward. One expert estimates that 45,000 *bonshō* bells were collected and melted down during the period of just four years.⁴³ A poignant image of a bonsho bell being lowered down into molten metal can be seen in a Japanese war-time journal (Fig. 11). The irony is that the bronze bells that had been sent to Switzerland in order to be melted down but were instead saved, would likely have met their end in the foundries of Japan a good half century later, had they not been shipped to Switzerland for their scrap value.



Fig. 10. German bells at Hamburg harbour, to be melted down in the war effort. Anonymous photographer. *Hamburg, Glockenlager im Freihafen*. 1947. Bild 183-H26751. Deutsches Bundesarchiv. Accessed June 2, 2021. <https://www.bild.bundesarchiv.de/dba/de/search/?query=Bild+183-H26751>. License: Creative Commons CC-BY-SA 3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/de/legalcode>).

43 Sugiyama 杉山洋, *Bonshō* 『梵鐘』, 75. The number of German church bells taken to be melted down during WWII was also 45,000, in addition to the ones taken from conquered territories.

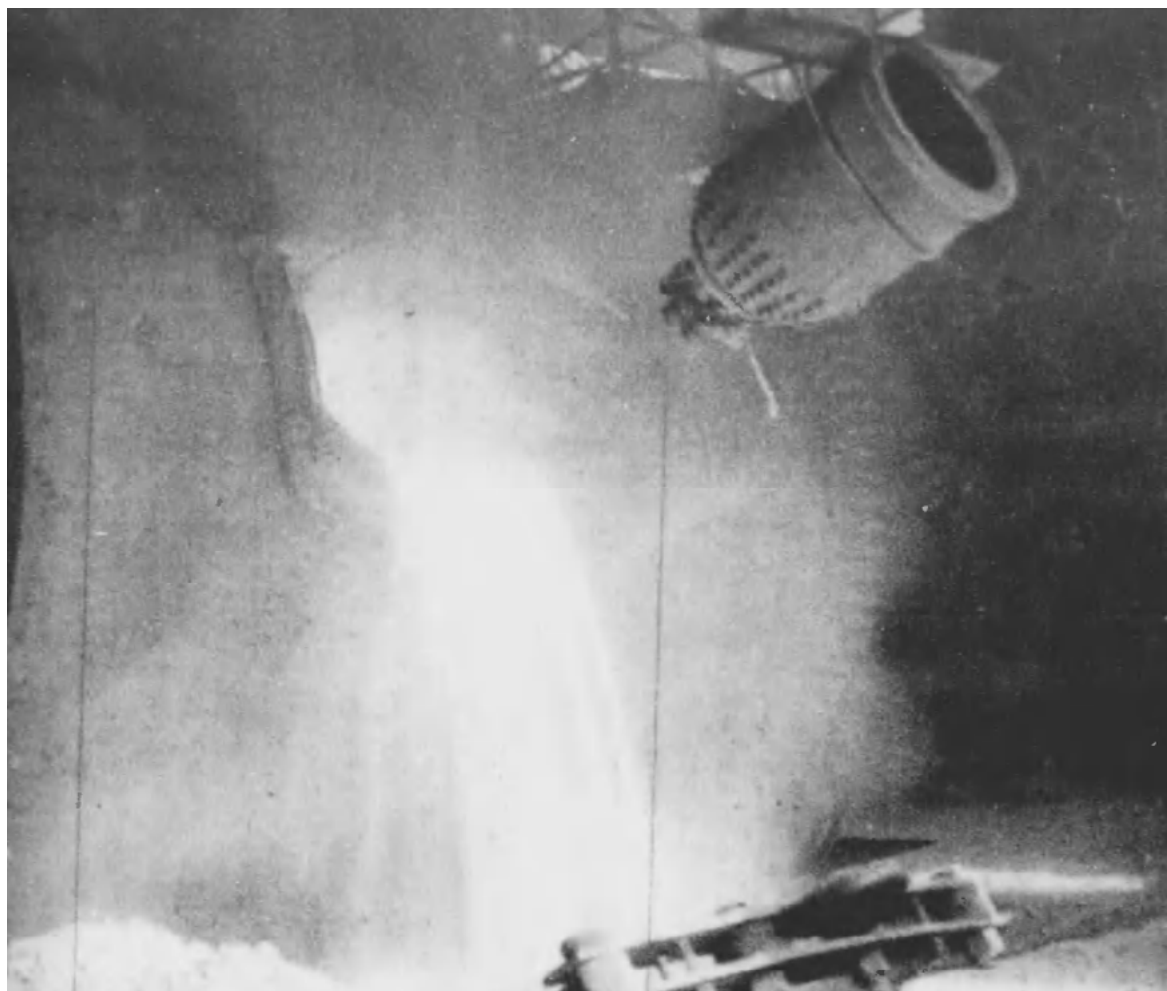


Fig. 11. Anonymous photographer. Bonshō temple bell being lowered into molten metal at a Japanese foundry. Source: *Shashin Shūhō* 写真週報 255 (Jan 20, 1943), 17. National Archives of Japan, Japan Center for Asian Historical Records.

The logistics for this wartime collecting action were remarkable, with train cars arriving filled with temple bells, destined to be melted into tanks, aircraft, and an array of other weapons, in a reversal of making swords into plowshares. Numerous photographs exist of local communities, often showing monks and abbots clad in festive gear, standing proudly in front of temple bells and other bronze ritual objects that were marked for destruction (Fig. 12). The Japanese military claimed to be aware of the cultural value of the bells and declared that certain bells were exempt, namely bells made prior to the last year of the Keichō era (1596–1615) as well as culturally important bells.⁴⁴ The Shinagawa Bell, which had returned to Japan and had escaped destruction during the war, presumably fell into the latter category due to its patriotic background, namely as a Japanese object that had been brought back from the west.

⁴⁴ Ibid. This was the “Kinzokurui kaishūrei” 金属類回収令 (“Law on the Collection of Metals”) issued by the Japanese government on August 30, 1941.



Fig. 12. Anonymous photographer. *Donation to the War Effort by a Local Japanese community*. Date: 1943. Accessed June 2, 2021. <https://www.asahi-net.or.jp/~un3k-mn/hondo-kinzokubon.htm>.

Of special interest are two groups of people that entered the abandoned foundries directly after the end of the war. One was a group of temple bell specialists, including the aforementioned scholar Ryōhei Tsuboi who visited a foundry⁴⁵ in Osaka and found a prodigious number of bells, prepared to be melted down.⁴⁶ The above-mentioned military guidelines had apparently often been ignored, as among these bells were important pieces made in the early Kamakura period (1185 – 1333). After careful detective work, Tsuboi and his associates succeeded in returning the bells to their temples – the ones that had come from defunct temples were, for example, donated to nearby temples. It was a painstaking act of restoration to original functions, where bells were placed in temples that had lost their bells due to the war effort.⁴⁷

The other group that entered the foundries at the war's end were American sailors who took Japanese bronze bells back with them as spoils of war. The bells were loaded onto navy ships and ended up in display at public sites in the USA, for example, the *bonshō* temple bell that stemmed from the Manpukuji Temple in Sendai was taken back by Capt. Marion Kelley of the USS Boston, who brought

45 The name of the foundry was Kinzoku Tōsei Kaishū Kaisha 金属統制回収会社.

46 Similar images can be seen in German sites after the war, for example, the Glockenfriedhof (“Bell Graveyard”) in Hamburg Harbor. See fig. 10.

47 These efforts are detailed in *ibid.*, 75 – 76.

it back with him in 1946 and donated it to the city of Boston. It became the Temple Bell of Boston and was placed in the Back Bay Fens. And the *bonshō* temple bell that stemmed from the Nishiarai Daishi Temple in Tokyo was taken to the USA by the sailors of the USS Pasadena, who donated it to the city of Pasadena. Most of the bells were eventually discovered and, in a similar way as with the Shinagawa Bell, requests for restoration subsequently came from the Japanese. As a result, the above examples were mostly given back to grateful temple communities in Japan.⁴⁸ An exception was the Boston Bell, which the Manpukuji Temple decided to give to the city of Boston as a gesture of goodwill.⁴⁹

A striking aspect of the examples seen in this article is the movement of Japanese bronze bells, from Japan to Switzerland and from Japan to the USA; we see them as global commodities, moving from place to place and valued primarily for their materiality. Being saved from being melted down in foundries in both the east and the west, they came to take on new, culturally significant roles in their new countries of adoption.⁵⁰ Through their travels and placement in new contexts, the bells underwent a series of significant changes in meaning, and have come to reflect the local cultural background. Although material objects can travel freely around the globe, local traditions and meanings connected with objects often have, in the end, little or no mobility.

48 Another interesting case that spanned centuries was the *bonshō* temple bell cast in 1690 for the Genkakuji Temple 源覚寺 in present-day Tokyo. The bell was in use at the temple until 1844, when the bell tower burned down. From then it remained unused until 1937 when it was given to the Nanyōji Temple 南洋寺 in Saipan, on an island chain that had been given to Japan in 1919 and which housed a significant Japanese population. During the ferocious Battle of Saipan in July 1944, the temple burned down and the bell suffered bullet holes and shrapnel damage, and disappeared shortly thereafter, only to reappear in the USA. After its discovery, the original temple in Tokyo, where the bell had last rung in 1844, asked for its “return,” which occurred through a donation in 1974. (“For Him the Bell Tolls,” *The Rotarian* (May, 1976), 50) A new bell tower was built in 1982 and the bell is now called “The Pan-Pacific Bell” 汎太平洋の鐘.

49 The narrative of the Boston Peace Bell, produced in 1675, is not without drama. In 2004 the bell was taken off its stand and rolled through the streets of Boston in an attempted theft. The bell was restored in 2011 by Japanese craftsmen and securely placed on a newly refurbished stand and can be seen today in the Boston Park.

50 Other global movements of Japanese bronze bells include the bells that were used as diplomatic presents – a large bronze temple bell was, for example, among the gifts presented to Commodore Matthew Perry during the exchange of presents in Japan. This bell can be found in the collection of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC. See: Chang-su Houchins. *Artifacts of Diplomacy: Smithsonian Collections from Commodore Matthew Perry’s Japan Expedition (1853–1854)* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995). Giving a *bonshō* as a present was a significant gesture by the Shogunate, as it demonstrated how temple bells were understood by the Japanese as being deeply representative, vis-à-vis the foreigners, of their own culture. Modern expressions of the gifting of bronze bells can be seen in the so-called Peace Bells that were given to various countries across the world by the Japanese World Peace Bell Association. The most famous being the bell placed in front of the United Nations headquarters in New York and the controversial Peace Bell placed in Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Tennessee, the birthplace of the atomic bomb. For the latter, see Jasmine Lar Tang, “Atomic Hospitality: Asian Migrant Scientist Meets the U.S. South” (Unpublished PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2013).

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