

Yumedono Kannon: Fenollosa's Comment and the Diverse Ways of Appreciating this Image

Wu, Pei-Jung

Associate Prof. | Graduate Institute of Art Studies,
National Central University

Abstract

Challenging the tradition of “secret Buddha” by forcing the Hōryūji temple to open the shrine of the Yumedono, which was said to have remained closed for more than two hundred years, was the most spectacular incident during the inspection conducted by Ernest Fenollosa (1853-1908) and Okakura Tenshin (1863-1913) in 1884. Although there are many renowned examples of the rediscovery of ancient East Asian art works during the nineteenth century, few cases are as well-known as that of the Yumedono Kannon, and even though the events surrounding the daring re-opening often appear in print, Fenollosa's commentary on the image have been little discussed.

Fenollosa's commentary touched on various aspects. He viewed this image as an aesthetic wonder and looked upon it as “the supreme masterpiece of Corean creation.” He compared it to archaic Greek art, and wrote that “a quiet mysterious smile played, not unlike Da Vinci's Mona Lisa.” This paper aims to reconsider these comments and to research whether and how these comments affected other writings.