

於竹大日如来に由來

實ん永年申上徳はしほま

江戸へ来ると大徳馬町

依久間何来の

舞女



性来

慈悲のそは

源く且大徳我

大切の一粒の飯は手所不唐

若くも松ひあげ頂へ喫をその

功德廣大なる因へ身より先時と

福ら大目各本化現す今その像

双りて羽衣羽衣の安魚

國彦 今

# The Origin of the Otake Buddha (Otake Dainichi Nyorai no yurai)

Ōtaya Takichi

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## Not on display

**Title/Description:** The Origin of the Otake Buddha (Otake Dainichi Nyorai no yurai)

**Artist/Maker:** Ōtaya Takichi (Publisher)

**Born:** 1847 approx - 1878 approx

**Object Type:** Graphics

**Materials:** Ink, Paper

**Technique:** Woodcut

**Measurements:** Image h.348 x w. 248

**Inscription:** Censor's seals

**Accession Number:** 41464

**Historic Period:** Edo period (AD 1600-1868), Meiji period (AD 1868-1912)

**Production Place:** Asia, East Asia, Japan

**School/Style:** Utagawa School

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Utagawa Kunimaro's (active 1830-1870) design centres on a young barefoot woman stood with hands clasped together in prayer. The maidservant, named Otake, wears a simple blue and brown kimono and is surrounded by a pink cloud of incense. Otake's devout nature is conveyed by the halo that frames her head and the shaft of white light projecting from her hands. In the uppermost section of the print, the story of Otake's life is narrated to the viewer in cursive script.

Utagawa Kunimaro and his publisher Ōtaya Takichi first issued a variation of this design circa 1849. The censor's seals on the print belong to Murata Sahei and Mera Ta'ichirō, indicating that the first version of the design was approved between 1847-1850. [1] It is likely that a different publisher reissued the Kunimaro's design with some modifications at a later date. The print in the Sainsbury Centre Collection is possibly the pirated version of this design.

According to an early 17<sup>th</sup>-century legend, Otake was a maidservant of the Sakuma family in Odenma-chō in Edo. She is described as being modest, frugal, hardworking and charitable. One day

Otake's divine nature was witnessed by a group of mountain ascetics who had been searching for an incarnation of the Great Sun Buddha (J. *Dainichi Nyorai*; Skt. *Mahāvairocana*). When the print was issued in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Otake was probably 'revered for her "wifely" virtues as a paradigm for virtuous women.' [2]

The 'Origins of Otake' enjoyed a revival of interest in 1849 after an extremely popular exposition of Buddhist images (J. *degaichō*) was held at Ekōin's temple precinct in Edo. This showing of religious icons and objects had been partly organized by members of a Shugendō religious cult based at Mount Haguro in Dewa province (modern-day Yamagata and Akita prefectures). [3]

Publishers sought to profit from the success of the *degaichō* and during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century printed images of Otake proliferated. There are 16 known woodblock print designs of Otake, which have been attributed to Kunimaro's teacher, Utagawa Kuniyoshi. [4] Kunimaro also produced several print designs depicting Otake as an emanation of Dainichi Nyorai.

The print design in the Sainsbury Centre Collection appears to be based on a design by Utagawa Kunimaro. A publisher may have duplicated Kunimaro's design by using an existing print as an under-drawing (J. *shita-e*) for a new set of blocks (J. *kabusebori*). Alternatively, a publisher could modify or refresh an old printing block by replacing the worn out areas with plugs of wood, and re-carving these inserted sections (J. *umeki*). [5] The original woodblocks may have been repurposed at a later date to meet the continued enthusiasm and interest in Otake Dainichi Nyorai prints.

The Sainsbury Centre design bears some design modifications. In Kunimaro's earlier version, Otake holds a serving tray and a large tub hangs behind her head giving the impression of a halo. These details are missing from the reissued design, and the position of Otake's arms and hands has been altered to convey a greater sense of the woman's piety. [6]

Vanessa Tothill, May 2020

[1] Andreas Marks, *Publishers of Japanese Woodblock Prints: A Compendium* (Leiden; Boston: Hotei Publishing, 2011), pp. 478-79.

[2] Gaynor Sekimori, 'O-take Dainichi Nyorai, an Unlikely Shugendō Icon', Centre for the *Study of Japanese Religions Newsletter*, 18-19 (Autumn 2009), 10-12 (p. 10).

[3] Sekimori, p. 12.

[4] The Kuniyoshi Project.

<http://www.kuniyoshiproject.com/Prints%20depicting%20Otake.htm> [accessed 20 May 2020]

[5] Peter Kornicki, *The Book in Japan* (Honolulu: Hawaii University Press, 2001), p. 52

[6] Impressions of the original design are found in Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow and Hiraki Ukiyo-e Foundation, Japan.

A photograph of the design from the Hiraki Ukiyo-e Foundation is embedded in following article:

Katherine Brooks, 'Edo jidai kara Nihon wa 'nyan-tomo neko darake' datta (Ukiyo-e), *The Huffington Post* (March, 2015).

[https://www.huffingtonpost.jp/2015/03/09/lolcats-of-japanese-woodprints\\_n\\_6828900.html?ncid=twetlnkjphpmg00000001](https://www.huffingtonpost.jp/2015/03/09/lolcats-of-japanese-woodprints_n_6828900.html?ncid=twetlnkjphpmg00000001) [accessed 29 May 2020]

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## **Further Reading**

Andreas Marks, *Publishers of Japanese Woodblock Prints: A Compendium* (Leiden; Boston: Hotei Publishing, 2011)

Gaynor Sekimori, 'O-take Dainichi Nyorai, an Unlikely Shugendō Icon' in *Centre for the Study of Japanese Religions Newsletter*, 18-19 (Autumn 2009), 10-12

Kornicki, Peter, *The Book in Japan* (Honolulu: Hawaii University Press, 2001)

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