

Kawase Hasui (1883-1957)

Japan

Nikkō Futatsudō (Two Temple Buildings at Nikkō)

1929, Shōwa (1926-1989) period

color woodcut

Image: 36.2 x 24.1 cm, Sheet: 41.3 x 28.9 cm

Gift of Fina C. Ott

1979.0184

Essay by Yen-yi Chan

Two Temple Buildings at Nikkō is a print made in 1929 by Kawase Hasui (1883-1957). It depicts two halls at the religious site Nikkō in Tochigi Prefecture. While the print features a religious scene, it also signifies a vision of traditional Japan before the process of rapid modernization beginning in the Meiji period (1868-1912) and continuing through Taishō (1912-1926) and Shōwa (1926-1989) periods. As Japan underwent dramatic changes at all levels of society brought by its adopting Western science, warfare, technology, philosophy, architecture, and a political system, people started to become more and more aware of their own culture. In this context, religious subjects in art were often treated as the embodiment of Japanese tradition and cultural identity.

Hasui was born in Tokyo and learned to paint under Kaburagi Kiyokata (1878-1973), a *nihonga* (Japanese neo-traditional painting) artist famous for figure paintings and Okada Saburōsuke (1869-1939), a *yōga* (Western-painting) painter who studied in Paris. Hasui also learned illustration by copying prints by such artists as Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797-1861) and Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839-1892). Hasui's link with Kiyokata led him to get to know Watanabe Shōzaburō (1885-1962), a print publisher in 1916. At this time Watanabe had plans to initiate the *shin-hanga* (new prints) movement, for which he produced prints by following the traditional

system of printmaking where publishers hire artists to make prints for commercial purposes. Moreover, Watanabe wanted his artists to work on subjects such as beautiful women, Kabuki actors, and landscape that were often featured in *ukiyo-e* (pictures of the floating world), produced in the Edo period (1603-1868). This did not mean that Watanabe defined the *shin-hanga* movement merely as a revival of *ukiyo-e*. In contrast to the emphasis on originality and creativity in *sōsaku-hanga* (creative prints), Watanabe wanted to present prints that showed a sense of modernity but also reflected Japanese identity.

As Hasui was familiar with prints and paintings in Japanese and Western styles, he was undoubtedly the ideal person to assist Watanabe in realizing the *shin-hanga* movement. Hired by Watanabe, Hasui began to make illustrations for prints from 1918 on. By collaborating with Watanabe, printers, and block-cutters, Hasui constantly worked on landscape subjects and because Watanabe sold many of his prints abroad, Hasui also became known for his landscape prints in other countries. Hasui's print style was consistent throughout his artistic career and it did not undergo drastic changes over time.

Located in a mountainous area, Nikkō is a place where a great number of temple and shrine complexes were built. It has been considered a sacred place in Japan since ancient times. Shinto (Way of the Gods) activities are thought to have existed since the fourth century, but the first building at Nikkō was a hermitage constructed by a Buddhist priest, Shōdō Shōnin in 766. More buildings were added over the course of time. Today, Nikkō consists of four main areas: Rinnōji, a Tendai Buddhist temple compound, Futarasan and Tōshōgū shrines and the Taiyūin mausoleum. The most famous building at Nikkō is probably Tōshōgū shrine, which is also the mausoleum of Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542-1616), the founder of the Tokugawa government. Ieyasu is enshrined there as a *kami* (god) and believed to protect sentient beings. The shrine, first

constructed in 1617, was later dismantled and rebuilt in 1636 by Ieyasu's grandson, Tokugawa Iemitsu (1604-1651), who built the Taiyūin mausoleum to hold his own ashes. The subsequent shōgun (general), who were leaders of the government in the Edo period (1615-1868), visited their graves regularly every year, which gradually turned Nikkō into a pilgrimage site. Nobles and laypeople made journeys there in the hope that they could gain merit and sacred power. Because of its sacredness and long history, in modern Japan the site came to be representative of Japanese traditional culture and a famous tourist spot for Japanese as well as foreigners. Images of buildings at Nikkō often serve as souvenirs. It is possible that *Two Temple Buildings at Nikkō* functions in the same way. Perhaps the print was mainly for Japanese viewers since its title "*Nikkō Futatsudō*" at the bottom was written in Japanese.

Two Temple Buildings at Nikkō might also be reminiscent of some *meisho* (famous place) prints in the *ukiyo-e* tradition. Nevertheless, it reveals impact from Western art in its realistic representations of buildings' structures. Also, Hasui's careful renderings of light and shadow cast on the buildings and trees indicate his study of Western painting. The print makes references to modern Western art by delineating the shimmering reflection of the landscape in the puddles, which recalls French Impressionist painting.

Through its visual language, *Two Temple Buildings at Nikkō* embodies Hasui's untouchable and idealized vision of Japan. Bathed in rain at night, the scene of Nikkō exudes tranquil and enigmatic qualities. The orderly composition and subdued palette counteracts the glistening reflections in the puddles and the dramatic effects in light and shadow, thus creating a tranquil nocturnal landscape. The forest behind the halls is saturated in dark green and blue and is silhouetted against the sky tinged with mist. The specific shapes of the trees are thus obscured. This, together with floating mist, seems to evoke a lonely and mysterious feeling. All these

treatments create a vision of Nikkō as a metaphor of Japan's tradition, which is lyric and detached from reality.

What Hasui envisioned in this print seems to be a Japan deviating from the reality of the 1920s. During this time, the continuous industrialization and urbanization of the Meiji period generated the movement of people from the countryside into the city. People who moved to the city were forced to change their lifestyles and traditional values into urban ones. When industrial production expanded at the beginning of the century, it also induced a recession in 1918. The effect of the recession lasted through the next decade and unemployment continued to increase. The economic instability further deteriorated because of the Great Kantō Earthquake in 1923. The earthquake destroyed the half of the buildings in Tokyo. The fires caused by the earthquake suddenly burned property into ashes. Many people died and became homeless. All in all, the 1920s was a period of tumultuous and social unrest. Nevertheless, these tragedies are completely unseen in the *Two Temple Buildings at Nikkō*, which possesses a pervading mood of tranquility. The print seems to be the antithesis to the ever-changing society of contemporary Japan. Having lived in cities and traveled to the countryside featured in his works, Hasui witnessed drastic changes in people's lives and the destruction of traditional values. In light of this, *Two Temple Buildings at Nikkō* implies Hasui's nostalgia for a traditional Japan that was disappearing in the 1920s. As Nikkō epitomized a sacred tradition, it might also speak to Japanese people's need for spirituality that was distant from materialistic modern life.

Images of temples in Japanese print culture have served as souvenirs, ritual objects, and as expressions of devotion for pilgrims before the nineteenth century. With the modernization of Japan, prints of temples came to refer to Japan's tradition and signify a timeless and spiritual Japanese identity. This interpretation is a response to the instability and materiality of modern

culture. In light of this, *Two Temples at Nikkō* presents an image that may have inspired Japanese to search for a spiritual Japan.

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