

Utagawa Kunisada II (1823-1880)

Japan

Marishiten Appearing to Prince Siddhartha on Mt. Ryōju

Number 18 from the series: *Modern Pictures for the Chronicles of the Eight Aspects of the Buddha*

1860, Edo period (1615-1868)

color woodcut

36.6 x 24.8 cm

Gift of H. Lee Turner

1968.0001.147

Essay by Yen-yi Chan

The print *Marishiten Appearing to Prince Siddhartha on Mt. Ryōju* represents how people in the Edo period (1615-1868) perceived religion. By presenting elements referring to contemporary Edo society rather than historical religious scenes, prints that carry religious themes at this time were often imbued with a sense of worldliness and playfulness. This approach to prints with religious subject matter signifies an entertaining and secular vision of religion. *Marishiten Appearing to Prince Siddhartha on Mt. Ryōju* expresses this vision in several ways.

Dated to 1860, the print is from the series of *Modern Pictures for the Chronicles of the Eight Aspects of the Buddha* and was made by Utagawa Kunisada II (1823-1880). According to the cartouche appearing in the upper left of the print, this work is number eighteen in the series. The total number of prints in the series is unknown. But from the extant examples, there seem to be more than twenty-four prints. Each print in this series displays a roundel that contains text about the story and a red cartouche that gives the title *Shaka hassō ki imayō utsushi-e* (Modern Pictures for the Chronicles of the Eight Aspects of the Buddha). The theme of Eight Aspects of Buddha refers to the eight major episodes in the life of the Historical Buddha Shakyamuni (J.

Shaka). Conventionally, they are: Maya's dream, Shaka's birth, four sights of suffering, great departure (becoming an ascetic), temptation of Mara and subjugation of demons, enlightenment, first sermon, and *parinirvana*. Sometimes, instead of the eight episodes, four episodes or a single one were represented. Illustrations of Shaka's biography, which contain more than eight scenes, were also called "Eight Aspects of Shaka" in Japan. In other words, the title "Eight Aspects of Shaka" does not necessarily refer specifically to the eight main episodes of Shaka's life, but to his biography. This explains why this series of prints contains more than eight prints.

The print represents the scene of Marishiten (Skt. Marici), God of Warriors, appearing in front of Prince Siddhartha at Mt. Ryōju or "Vulture Peak" which was located in the ancient Indian state of Magadha. Mt. Ryōju was a place where Shaka frequently delivered sermons during his lifetime. According to the *Lotus Sutra*, Shaka's disciples, Bodhisattvas, and other beings congregated at Vulture Peak to listen to his preaching. Nevertheless, there are no scriptural mentions of Marishiten's presence at Shaka's sermons. Moreover, the scene of Marishiten appearing to Shaka as the pre-enlightened Prince Siddhartha does not match with either Marishiten or Shaka's life as recorded in the scriptures. Although the text roundel indicates that the text comes from writings by Kakutei, there is no information about this person and we cannot be sure whether this is the writer's real name. According to the text in the roundel of print number nineteen in this series, which is owned by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, it depicts the episode of Shaka's enlightenment. Therefore, at least it is clear that this print tells a story situated during the time when Shaka was an ascetic.

The story represented here is possibly one that was invented and added into the Shaka's biography. Other prints from the same series, which are owned by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston provide clues about this point. Many of them have illustrations that are different from the

conventional narratives of Shaka's life. Moreover, some prints have figures that look like courtesans and scenes that seemed to be set in Edo-period society. To incorporate episodes that never appeared in the scriptural accounts of Shaka's life into his biography was not uncommon in the Edo period. Some book illustrations of Shaka's biography, such as *Shaka goichidaiki zue* (The Illustrations of Shaka's Life) (1839) and *Shaka hassō Yamato bunko* (A Japanese Book Series of the Eight Aspects of Shaka) (1845) were done in the same manner. The latter book was actually illustrated by Kunisada II and his teacher Utagawa Kunisada (1786-1865). In this book, the biography of Shaka was rewritten and contains many plots that seem to be inspired by other religious or folk stories.

In addition to creating a new plot, Kunisada II reinterpreted Shaka's life by bestowing the two figures in *Marishiten Appearing to Prince Siddhartha on Mt. Ryōju* with a sense of worldliness. One of the figures is Marishiten, an Indian deity who was incorporated into the Buddhist pantheon and became one of twenty celestial beings who protect the Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha. It is believed that he has the power of invisibility and uses this ability to defeat his enemies. In Japan, his worship became popular in the Edo period among the warrior class. Also at this time, Marishiten together with Daikokuten, God of Good Fortune, and Benzaiten, Goddess of Music, Learning, and Art were revered as deities who could generate prosperity for the merchant class. This may explain why Marishiten was included in this print's visual reinterpretation of Shaka's life. Marishiten can take a female form, but was also depicted as a male, as he is in the print. As a female deity, Marishiten is often represented as a beautiful woman in Chinese costume sitting on a lotus. In male form, he sometimes has three heads, each of them having fierce facial expressions. He also wears armor, stands on a boar, and has multiple arms holding various weapons. In this print, Marishiten has few iconographic features. Standing

on a boar, he only holds a three-pointed staff and has one head with a serious expression. Moreover, instead of depicting Marishiten in armor, Kunisada II dressed him in an elaborate robe with flying sashes. This illustration offers a dramatic atmosphere but diminishes the military quality often associated with him. As he was presented with few iconographic features that are significant indicators of his religious power, it seems that Marishiten more likely serves as a figure to help illustrate the narrative in this print, rather than as a revered deity.

The renderings of the other figure, Prince Siddhartha, in this print indicate Kunisada II's skill in actor prints, which he learned from his teacher Utagawa Kunisada. The Prince is dramatically portrayed in a three-quarter view in a highly stylized pose. Although the figure shows a posture in motion, his bulky and elaborately patterned outfit diminishes the sense of interaction between the two figures. Rather than a twisted or diagonal composition of figures that many warrior prints use, the interaction of Marishiten with the Prince Siddhartha depends more on their eye contact. These treatments also recall Kunisada's illustrations of Kabuki actors, whose presence on stage was emphasized by their heavy and opulent costumes. Through these visual comparisons, the illustration of Prince Siddhartha looks like a Kabuki actor and therefore marks the presence of contemporary urban culture in this print. Moreover, it enables us to place Kunisada II's artistic creation within the lineage of the Utagawa School, which was the dominant print-making school in the nineteenth century founded by Utagawa Toyoharu (1735-1814).

In conclusion, *Marishiten Appearing to Prince Siddhartha on Mt. Ryōju* embodies a secular perception of religion in the Edo period. First, the religious references in the print do not necessarily reveal serious or sacred meanings or ties to doctrinal descriptions. The theme of the Eight Aspects of Shaka was reinterpreted by adding invented episodes. By doing so, the narratives of Shaka's life became less familiar. In other words, rather than explain Shaka's life,

this print was intended as entertainment. In light of this, the function of illustrating Shaka's biography, which had formerly served as inspiration for Buddhist faith became unimportant. Second, the print was given a contemporary sense by using an actor-like figure to refer to a theatrical performance, one of the main entertainments for the townspeople in the Edo period. Moreover, the iconographical attributes of Marishiten in the print do not emphasize the efficacy of the deity's power. From these perspectives, although the subject of this work is historical and religious, its visual elements champion the worldly and playful aspects of contemporary urban culture. Viewing this religious subject was therefore transformed into a more casual and entertaining activity, in which people used their imaginations and daily experiences to interact with religious figures.

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