Coronation of Emperor Taishō, Nov. 10, 1915
Japan, artist unknown
1915, Taishō period (1912-1926)
color woodcut scroll
25 x 308 cm
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. William L. Mundy
1991.0051

Essay by Alison Miller

On the tenth day of the eleventh month of 1915, the newly coronated Emperor Taishō (r. 1912-1926) performed the *sokuirei*, a ritual that indicated his ascension to the imperial throne. In the succeeding days, he performed the *daijōsai*, or the Rite of the Great Tasting, completing his transformation from crown prince to emperor. The young sovereign performed these recently defined rituals in the ancient city of Kyoto, affirming his place in the unbroken Japanese imperial lineage while performing a state ritual that confirmed his status as the leader of a royal institution on par with its peers in Europe. Together with lithograph reproductions of modern photographs of the emperor and empress, this scroll, the *Coronation of the Emperor Taishō*, depicts the ceremonial events of the *daijōsai* and *sokuirei* in a print format. As the Japanese nation became an industrial and imperial power in the Meiji and Taishō periods (1868-1912 and 1912-1926, respectively), the government sought to use traditional Japanese culture to unify the nationalist sentiments of the citizenry, and simultaneously used modern technologies and arts as evidence of the progress that the nation made in the international political realm, all of which is demonstrated in the *Coronation of the Emperor Taishō* scroll.

The Japanese imperial family is considered to be the oldest unbroken monarchical lineage in the world, and at one time traced their ancestry back to the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, one of the most important figures in the Shinto religion. Shinto is a Japanese religion with a long history

in ritual practice, much of which was codified in the eighth century. For most of its history Shinto was a relatively decentralized religion, something that changed greatly in the nineteenth century with the restoration of imperial rule, the centralization of shrines, and the combination of religion with state politics. Shinto belief is centralized around *kami*, or deities, many of whom reside in places of natural beauty, or are related to ancestral spirits. Of the over 80,000 *kami* believed to inhabit the Japanese archipelago, many are local deities, and only a few are of national recognition or importance. Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess and imperial ancestor, is one of these central *kami*. Other Shinto practices include worship at shrines, giving offerings to the *kami*, participating in purification rituals, displaying amulets in the home, and taking part in *matsuri*, or festivals, many of which relate to fertility and harvest. Shinto does not have a core text, and practitioners are not required to attend regular group services. It is generally confined to Japan and the Japanese archipelago. In this scroll, as at most Shinto shrines, the *kami* are not visible, with the single exception of the emperor, about to achieve his divine status.

The *daijōsai* ceremony represented in this scroll has its roots in harvest ceremonies and rituals dating back to the seventh century and earlier. In the ritual, a small, temporary structure is built, wherein the emperor stays for a short period of purification. Two bundles of rice, one from the east and one from the west of the capital are brought to the structure, which is named the *daijōkyū*, or Shrine of Great Tasting, where the rice is offered to the *kami* Amaterasu, and shared by the emperor. It is this multi-day ritual that transforms the emperor into a divine being, or *kami*. The ceremony changed throughout history, and was not performed for a few hundred years around the 15th century, due to conflicts between the Imperial family and the then ruling shogunate, but was codified in 1909 with the Edict of Imperial Accession. In the *Coronation of the Emperor Taishō* the *daijōsai* is seen at the far left of the scroll, where the imperial procession

walks beneath a thatched-roof covered walkway and into the *daijōkyū*, the entrance of which is marked by a wooden *torii*, or Shinto shrine gate. Two ritual fires burn on either side of the walkway, and Emperor Taishō is marked by the large ceremonial parasol carried by his attendants. Out of respect for the sacred nature of the ceremonies, he is not directly represented while conducting the rituals, but a reproduction of his photograph, together with the empress, appears in a different section of the scroll.

The other half of the coronation is the s*okuirei*, or accession to the imperial throne. Also modified and detailed in the 1909 Edict of Imperial Accession, the ceremony takes place in early November, and is the official public announcement of the emperor's ascension to the Chrysanthemum Throne. The octagon-shaped pavilion at the center of the *Coronation of the Emperor Taishō* scroll depicts the *takamikura*, or throne, on which the emperor sits when the ascension ceremonies take place. Fitting with the historic ceremonial precedent for the *sokuirei*, which was loosely based on Chinese rituals, the *takamikura* exhibits Chinese and Korean style painting and metalwork. Within twenty minutes of Emperor Meiji's death in 1912, Emperor Taishō inherited the three imperial regalia—the sword, the jewel, and the mirror—in a ceremony termed the *senso*, or inheritance of the divine objects, officially giving him rule of the nation. Yet, the *sokuirei* and *daijōsai* were to take place two years later, to allow time for Emperor Meiji's funerary rites, and for the extensive planning that the two later ceremonies required. Due to the death of the Empress Dowager (Empress Shōken, wife of Emperor Meiji), the ceremonies were delayed for an additional year to allow for an appropriate period of mourning.

The *Coronation of the Emperor Taishō* scroll uses different media and symbols, both historic and modern, to represent the sacred event. The printing technique and the use of traditional flattened Japanese perspective are indicative of tradition, and are pictorial reminders

of pre-modern times. The architecture and ritual structures shown in the scroll are also reminders of the ceremony's position in the ancient capital city of Kyoto, where the imperial family resided from the ninth through the nineteenth century. Additionally, the use of the handscroll format itself is a historic symbol, as by the early twentieth century most urban Japanese were accustomed to modern visual culture such as newspapers, magazines, and cinemas. The lithographic reproductions of photographs of the sovereigns speak to this modernity, and to the combinations of old and new that were so common during the early twentieth century. Furthermore, the large, angular robes and multiple layers of colorful clothing that the emperor, empress, and their attendants wear in the scroll is in the style of the Heian period (794-1185). The use of historic costume gives an air of authenticity to the ceremony, and works to establish the validity of the monarchy both domestically and globally. It acted as a reminder of what many saw as a "golden age" of Japanese culture, and was a symbol of the city of Kyoto, which was established as the capital city during the Heian period. In the modern age, Kyoto had, and continues to have a level of sophistication that celebrates traditional culture, arts, and refinement. As part of the 1909 Edict of Imperial Accession, Kyoto was specified as the location for various official ceremonies of the imperial household. After the imperial household was moved to Tokyo in the nineteenth century, many Japanese were worried that the city of Kyoto, which was the capital for over one thousand years, would fall from its central role. Keeping ceremonies such as the *daijōsai* and the *sokuirei* in Kyoto were a way to maintain the important cultural role of the former capital, and to provide a boost to the city's economy.

Although the circumstances of the original owner are not known to us today, it is possible that this scroll was purchased as a popular memento of the imperial ceremonies. In the 1910s, the imperial institution had great popularity, and the ceremonies were widely covered in the press,

discussed in public schools, and celebrated throughout the provinces. The accession events were also covered in the international media, and were attended by hundreds of foreign dignitaries. Another hypothesis is that this scroll was a memento for one of the honored attendees at the ceremonies.

In the twentieth century, the *daijōsai* was performed in 1915, 1928, and 1990; however the most recent ritual was mired in political controversy. After Japan's defeat in World War II, the emperor resigned his divine status, and the 1946 Constitution separated the activities of religious and state institutions. As the *daijōsai* was promoted in the pre-war period as the ceremony that gave the emperor his status as a *kami*, many Buddhists, Christians, and supporters of the secular state believed that the government should not support the ritual in an official capacity. Despite the disagreement, the government covered the expense of the ceremony, stating that it was no longer associated with the Shinto religion, and was merely a ceremony to celebrate of the imperial household's status as figureheads of state.

The images presented in the *Coronation of the Emperor Taishō* represent a ritual based in history, but with the modern political agenda of imperial validation, national unification, and state ceremony. As a sample of the visual culture of Japan in 1915, this scroll has many stories to tell, and can inform viewers about the trials of modernity, tradition, and the establishment of ritual in early twentieth century Japan.

Bibliography

Breen, John and Mark Teeuwen. *A New History of Shinto*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

Fujitani, Takashi. *Splendid Monarchy: Power and Pageantry in Modern Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

Hardacre, Helen. *Shinto and the State: 1868-1988*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991.

Mayer, Adrian C. “Recent Succession Ceremonies of the Emperor of Japan.” *Japan Review* 2 (1991): 35-61.

Weisman, Steven R. “Akihito Performs His Solitary Rite.” *The New York Times*, 23 November, 1990.