

# COLNAGHI



JAPAN, KAMAKURA PERIOD

First quarter of the 13th century

*EMMA-O*

Wood with coloured pigments

Height : 82cm (32 1/4 in.)

The above date has been corroborated by  
Carbon14 analysis.

---

Provenance

Property of a Dutch collector, acquired in 2011 in Kyoto.

---

---

LONDON

NEW YORK

MADRID

# COLNAGHI



---

LONDON

NEW YORK

MADRID



# COLNAGHI



---

LONDON

NEW YORK

MADRID

# COLNAGHI



LONDON

NEW YORK

MADRID



# COLNAGHI



---

LONDON

NEW YORK

MADRID

# COLNAGHI



---

LONDON

NEW YORK

MADRID



# COLNAGHI



---

LONDON

NEW YORK

MADRID

# COLNAGHI



---

LONDON

NEW YORK

MADRID



# COLNAGHI

Wearing the robes and headdress of a Chinese judge, Emma-O is the Overlord of Hell. Chinese and Japanese Buddhists pray to Emma-O (Fig. 1) for two reasons; the first is to rescue their ancestors from the trials of hell, the second to hope for escape from his terrible verdict when their own time of judgement arrives. The formidable Emma-O is represented in all his macabre glory; as he roars through bared teeth, he strikes terror into the hearts and minds of sinners, but his gruesome appearance is just a prelude to the hellish experiences that await them.

A devout Buddhist culture has endured in Japan since the middle of the first millennium CE with many remarkable images remaining in the temples and monasteries for which they were created. Consequently, the opportunity to study such a sculpture outside Japan is extremely rare; indeed, it is difficult to locate another Kamakura period (1185 to 1333) image of Emma-O outside Japan. This sculpture is an outstanding work in every respect, expressing both the artistic finesse and the energetic sense of drama that were perfected by Japanese wood sculptors of the time. To subsequent generations, the Kamakura period is regarded as the ultimate martial culture, when devoutly Buddhist military leaders established temples to honour the reputation of their clans. These they filled with magnificent wood statues sculpted by artists who were driven by the same religious fervour. This figure epitomises the nature of the Kamakura period, at one level threatening, at another, cultured and elegant. As a spiritual image, it is intended to inspire and stir the emotions; it also has a secular purpose as Emma-O warns enemies, both in Japan and abroad, of the reaction to be expected in the event of war.

Buddhism had arrived in Japan by the 7th century, but enjoyed a massive growth during the Heian period, 8th to 13th century when several distinctively national sects developed. From their capital city of Heian-kyo (Kyoto), the Heian dynasty presided over a sublimely elegant culture. The landed aristocracy patronised the faith by establishing temples filled with devotional statues and distinctive forms of Buddhist imagery developed. The traditional raw

# COLNAGHI

material for architecture and sculpture in Japan is wood; technical innovations in the late Heian period enabled artists to create increasingly imaginative and ambitious images.

Gradually, the Heian dynasty became politically ineffectual and Japan became increasingly isolated from the rest of Asia. Although there was a figurehead emperor, by the 11th century, real power lay in the hands of the clans. Aristocratic life became more and more privileged, coexisting with a decline in living standards for the lower orders. The martial arts were neglected at court, but not in more outlying regions, where warrior clans became increasingly powerful. In the mid-12th century, rival clans began to wrestle for power in Japan; the Taira and Minamoto. After years of struggle, the Minamoto gained power and established a capital known as Kamakura, on the southern coast of Honshu. It was a military stronghold, surrounded by ocean to the south and highlands to the north, only accessible through seven easily guarded mountain passes.

The new Kamakura rulers were devout Buddhists and regarded it to be a responsibility to restore temples destroyed in the wars and establish new temples. The re-establishment of economic links with China profoundly affected the emerging Kamakura architectural and sculptural styles. Japanese scholars travelled to China and were inspired by the sacred sculptures there; it is possible that Japanese sculptors and architects travelled with them. Wood sculptures of the early Kamakura period were created to replace earlier destroyed works and although they had to contain the spirit of the originals the new patrons were keen to see their own progressive ideas expressed. The result was a renaissance in the art of wood sculpture.

A major technical innovation of the Kamakura period was the treatment of a sculpture's eyes, which intensified yet further the dramatic effects visible elsewhere in the work (Fig. 2). Known as "Gyokugan", it was only possible where the head was hollow, as it involved the insertion of rock crystal eyes from the inside. Strips of white silk were attached behind the eyes to give an opaque appearance and the pupils were then painted. It will be noted that in the sculpture under review, the eyes are painted, but not inlaid, possibly indicating a date early in the Kamakura period, which the radiocarbon dating would support.



# COLNAGHI

The nearest comparable image to this work, from the points of view both of style and date, is a figure of Emma-O made for the Hoshaku-ji Temple (Fig. 3) that lies to the southwest of Kyoto on the slope of Mount Tenno. Accompanying Emma-O are two magnificent attendant figures of “Shimei” and “Shiroku”, known personally in this temple as “Gusho Shin” and “Ankoku Doji” (Figs. 8, 9), along with two subordinate judges. The principal statue in the temple is Juichimen Kannon (the eleven-headed form of Avalokiteshvara, sometimes perceived as a goddess) which was created in 1233 by Inpan, a member of the In Busshi. The founder of the In Busshi was Injo, a sculptor who formerly belonged to the Kei Busshi in Kamakura. The close similarity between that image and the sculpture under review leads us to conclude that an early 13th century date would be applicable for our piece. A radiocarbon dating on a sample taken from this sculpture indicated the wood’s growth date of 995 +- 40, that is, late 10th/early 11th century, making the suggested date entirely possible (see Appendix).

# COLNAGHI



Fig. 1. *Emma-O, King and Judge of Hell*, 16th century, wood with gesso and traces of polychrome and inlaid glass eyes., 19 x 18 1/4 x 13 1/4 in. (48.3 x 46.4 cm). Brooklyn Museum, New York.



Fig. 2. *Head of a Guardian*, 13th century. Hinoki wood with lacquer on cloth, pigment, rock crystal, metal, 22 1/16 x 10 1/4 x 13 15/16 (56.0 x 26.0 x 35.5 cm). Brooklyn Museum, New York.



# COLNAGHI



Fig. 3. *Emma-O and attendants*, Hoshaku-ji Temple, south of Mt. Tenno, Japan.