The Lecture Hall (Kōdō 講堂) of Tōji 東寺, a monastery in modern Kyoto, houses a group of twenty-one statues unequaled in age and type among surviving esoteric icons in East Asia (figures 1–2). Once under the direction of the Japanese esoteric, or mikkyō 密教, master Kūkai (774–835), Tōji was the first urban center for his Shin-gon 真言 teachings. The present-day Lecture Hall dates to the late sixteenth century but it closely follows the original plan, with the raised altar located over the original altar.1

Six of the original statues were destroyed in a fire in 1486; the replacement statues (figure 3, circles in gray) were modeled after the lost works.

Taken together, the interior space and statues, despite repairs and reconstructions, offer the modern viewer a rare experience of the visual relationships between a building and icon altar as designed and apprehended during the early Heian period (794–1185).

The statues were completed around 839, five years after Kūkai’s death, under the direction of his disciple and successor at Tōji, Jichie (応恵, alt. Jitsue; 786–847). Only Kūkai had the esoteric knowledge to design the program of icons, recognized in contemporaneous records as a karma mandala (katsuma mandara 磨磨曼荼羅) of statues, a three-dimensional representation of the perfect buddha realm described in key mikkyō texts and Kūkai’s essays. The only surviving sculptural project associated with Kūkai, these impressive statues were likely created by a workshop situated within the Tōji monastery from the 820s.2

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1 The Lecture Hall was extensively damaged and repaired over the centuries. It burned down in 1486 and was subsequently rebuilt by 1598. The history of Tōji is well documented, especially in the Tōbōki, a work in eight scrolls compiled in 1352 by Gōhō (1306–1362); it contains all manner of historical documents relating to Tōji, some spurious. The Tōbōki is reproduced in the Zoku zoku gunsho ruijū (hereafter ZZGR), Kokusho Kankōkai, ed. 1969–1978; and in Fujita Tsuneyo 1972–1976, vol. 2.

2 We know little about the Buddhist sculptural workshop that produced the Tōji Lecture Hall statues; it was certainly sponsored by the court. Heian ibun, vol. 31,
There are three groups of five statues arranged across the altar: Five Wisdom Buddhas 五智如来 in the center (figure 4), Five Great Bodhisattvas (Godaibosatsu 五大菩薩) to the east (figure 5, color