Picturing Holy Places: 
On the Uses of Architectural Themes in Ornament and Icon

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Introduction

Landscape owes more to culture than to nature, observed Simon Schama in his *Landscape and Memory*, for it consists of “constructs of the imagination projected onto wood, water, and rock” (Schama 61). What we are told and learn to think about landscape has a far more profound effect on the way we understand it than the actual experience of nature itself. In many ways the holy places that mark off the sacred landscapes of the great religious traditions share this important feature with landscape and sacred space understood more broadly. Sanctity of place, and indeed any given holy place itself, is far more a function of the compressed formulaic imagery canonized by longstanding tradition, more a distillate of community memory, than of a geographic reality made concrete in the actual experience of pilgrims. In this instance, the construct of the imagination projected or superimposed on [sacred] nature is architectural.

During a visit some years ago to the shrine village of Chimayo, New Mexico, I noticed a curious public display of religious imagery that brought home the peculiar nature of the way religious communities communicate visually about their holy places. On the front walls of several houses were stylized depictions of the village’s *santuario*. They were clearly symbolic and adhered to a formula that called for such elements as glorified faces of Jesus and Mary floating in space around the sanctuary (fig. 1). Apart from that, the content of the images was not particularly startling in itself. That the images stood on houses within only a few minutes walk from, and within eyeshot of, the pilgrims’ goal, was far more arresting. Were these drawings merely decorative? Were the owners of the houses engaging in a competitive display of pictorial skill? Why depict a building that in several instances stood within sight of the homes that displayed the images? Chimayo’s architectural icons recalled for me a plethora of analogous imagery from several other religious traditions.

In various parts of the Middle East one encounters images of Mecca’s Ka’ba on elaborate wall tiles and simple house murals alike. Why have so...
many Muslims seen fit to represent their most sacred site in this manner? Cairene domestic mural images of Mecca and Medina (fig. 2) recall and celebrate the owner’s Hajj to a distant land, but the Chimayo images were of a very different sort, so close to the site they depicted. Kyoto museums display stylized hanging scroll images of major Shinto shrines that had once owned these pictures of themselves (fig. 3).

Why had the devotees of the shrines produced these architecturally detailed images? And why did they call them mandalas? A growing fascination with the ubiquitous use of architectural imagery in a variety of religious traditions has led me to seek underlying themes, and I propose here a way of organizing some of this intriguing visual data for further study.

Helen Rosenau observes in her Vision of the Temple: The Image of the Temple in Jerusalem in Judaism and Christianity: “The history of art deals on occasion with persistent architectural images, which, because of their religious symbolism and connotations, inspire continuous re-interpretation and