



The Face of the Buddha

By William Empson

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Taking up a teaching appointment in Tokyo in 1931, the English poet and literary critic William Empson found himself captivated by the Buddhist sculptures of ancient Japan, and spent the years that followed in search of similar examples all over Korea, China, Cambodia, Burma, India, and Ceylon, as well as in the great museums of the West. Compiling the results of these wide-ranging travels into what he considered to be one of his most important works, Empson was heartbroken when he mislaid the sole copy of the manuscript in the wake of the Second World War. *The Face of the Buddha* remained one of the great lost books until its surprise rediscovery sixty years later, and is published here for the first time. The book provides an engaging record of Empson's reactions to the cultures and artworks he encountered during his travels, and presents experimental theories about Buddhist art that many authorities of today have found to be remarkably prescient. It also casts important new light on Empson's other works, highlighting in particular the affinities of his thinking with that of the religious and philosophical traditions of Asia.

Edited by the global culture historian Rupert Arrowsmith, this edition comes with a comprehensive introduction that makes *The Face of the Buddha* as accessible to the general reader as it is to the professional scholar, and is fully illustrated throughout with Empson's original photographs.

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Editorial Review

Review

"What [Empson] was...a thinker with an incisively original mind and a fine, lucid, and always lively prose style...He was also a talented mathematician and a remarkable poet...He probably possessed most of the natural intellectual gifts of a good philosopher...perhaps the book's most revealing chapter is the last...it affords an excellent view of what fascinated Empson about Buddhism: its singular and counterintuitive ability to produce a compassionate, temperate, and contented form of life out of what looks very much like a system of metaphysical and religious despair; its cultivation of a moral grandeur uncontaminated by the tragic anxieties and morbidities he associated with much of Western religion; its remarkably civilizing influence on Eastern societies; and its serene skepticism regarding the grand metaphysical claims of the individual self. Above all, he admired all the ways in which it was unlike Christianity, which he utterly loathed." --David Bentley Hart, *First Things*

"It is a masterpiece, his descriptions subtle and amusing." --Peter Swaab, *Sunday Telegraph*

"it is a marvel and delight to have a new book from his prime ... The Face of the Buddha is brilliantly imaginative, grand in its intellectual scope, fired by intense convictions about religion, art and politics. Hats off to the British Library for spotting it, Rupert Arrowsmith for his fine editorial work, and OUP for its richly illustrated edition. We're only in June, but this must surely be one of the books of the year." --Peter Swaab, *Daily Telegraph*

"Here it is now, an amazing find, carefully edited to be the book that Empson would have published back then, with his own illustrations. It is fascinating both to those who cherish Empson and those moved by Buddhist sculpture - and if you happen to qualify on both counts, an uncovenanted treasure." --David Sexton, *London Evening Standard*

"wonderful book ... Here is a great mind pondering a great subject." --Kevin Jackson, *Literary Review*

"The introductory essay by Myanmar-based scholar and poet Rupert Arrowsmith is a tour de force of insights into Empson, Buddhist art and Buddhism itself." --*Acumen*

"*The Face of the Buddha* is surely one of the most remarkable studies of Buddhist sculpture ever undertaken. When one of the greatest literary critics of the 20th century applies his incisive intellect to the analysis of the structural principles of images of the Buddha, unexpected insights emerge. In particular, William Empson's

discovery of the asymmetrical composition of the Buddha's countenance in many works of East Asian and Southeast Asian art is revelatory, enabling him to illuminate a profound psychological tension between active and passive, between salvific and compassionate on the one hand and contemplative and meditative on the other, constituting the Buddha-nature as a whole." --Victor H. Mair, Professor of Chinese Language and Literature, University of Pennsylvania

"Empson's fascinating monograph, which for its sheer exoticism will astonish any Empson buffs who weren't aware of its existence, may not convert the scholar of world religions or of Buddhism or of Buddhist art to its views, as the neophyte will learn from the admiring and helpful introduction by Rupert Arrowsmith. It is nonetheless an exciting tour of the one artform--early Buddhist sculpture--that seems to have captured Empson's full attention. *The Face of the Buddha* is a thrilling surprise, though, mainly because here, in a work of the left hand long known only to a few, we find Empson's brilliance and the deadpan comedy of his prose in top form." --Paul Fry, William Lampson Professor of English, Yale University

"Anyone interested in Buddhism or oriental art will find Empson's book fascinating, and Rupert Arrowsmith's Introduction complements it perfectly: he is Boswell to Empson's Johnson, faithfully following in his footsteps, elucidating his intellectual and historical context, and quite as hooked on the subject as the master himself. Occupying practically as much space as the text, it is its indispensable companion." --Peter Popham, author of *The Lady and the Peacock* and *The Lady and the Generals*

"...richly learned..." -*New Statesman*

About the Author

William Empson

Rupert Arrowsmith is an alumnus of Christ Church College, Oxford, and a fellow of the School of Advanced Study at London University. He is the author of numerous books and articles on Asian and European art and culture, and has twice been ordained as a Buddhist monk in Myanmar, where he currently resides.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Jerry Hernandez:

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Sharon Broome:

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