

KINKAKU-JI TEMPLE

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Annotation: this article is devoted to an academic study of Japan's Kinkaku-ji Temple. The historical origin of the temple, its construction and author, as well as its architectural and cultural significance are analyzed. The views of scholars are examined and compared with the new approach proposed in the article. The study presents Kinkaku-ji Temple as a scholarly, historical, and cultural object.

Keywords: Kinkaku-ji, Golden Pavilion, Muromachi period, Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, Zen Buddhism, Japanese architecture, Buddhist temple, Cultural heritage, Cultural identity, Social memory, Aesthetic values.

Introduction

Japanese culture and architecture have been formed over centuries in close connection with religious beliefs, aesthetic views, and historical processes. In this development, Buddhist temples occupy a special place. Among them, the Kinkaku-ji (金閣寺) temple located in the city of Kyoto—also known as the Golden Pavilion—is distinguished by its unique architectural design, profound philosophical meaning, and historical significance. This structure is not only a religious center, but also an important historical monument that reflects the political, cultural, and aesthetic views of Japan during the Muromachi period. This article provides an academic analysis of the initial emergence of the Kinkaku-ji temple, the individuals who commissioned its construction, and the main purposes behind its establishment.

Literature review and methodology

The Kinkaku-ji (金閣寺) temple, as a part of Japan's religious, cultural, and architectural heritage, has been studied by many scholars. 1906's *The Book of Tea*, Okakura Kakuzou places Zen philosophy and Japanese aesthetic thought at the forefront. The author interprets religious structures as metaphysical symbols in material form and connects them with the Wabi-sabi aesthetic. This approach provides a scholarly foundation for explaining the external splendor and internal spiritual harmony of Kinkaku-ji. In Soushitsu Sen's *The Japanese Way of Tea* (1997), the practice of Zen philosophy is explored through chado (the tea ceremony). The author analyzes the relationship between the culture of the ceremony and the temple environment. These insights allow for a deeper understanding of the natural landscape surrounding Kinkaku-ji and its architectural-compositional structure. Morgan P.'s *Japanese Tea Culture: Art, History, and Practice* (2013) demonstrates how religious architecture is closely intertwined with art and social life. The author evaluates Kinkaku-ji as a symbol of the aesthetic

ideals of the Muromachi period and examines its role in society. This combination of methodological approaches enables a scholarly analysis of Kinkaku-ji not only as a historical monument but also as a multi-layered cultural and philosophical phenomenon.

KINKAKU-JI 金閣寺

Kinkaku-ji Temple (officially known as Rokuon-ji) is located in Kyoto, Japan, and its construction began in 1397. This structure belongs to the Muromachi period (1336–1573), which is characterized by the rise of political power, culture, and art in Japan [8:45]. Kinkaku-ji was commissioned by the third shogun, Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (足利 義満) [1:88]. According to historical sources, Ashikaga Yoshimitsu purchased this land from the former aristocrat Saionji Kintsune (西園寺 公経) family and built his personal retreat, the Kitayama Palace, on the site [7:30]. The Golden Pavilion served as the central part of this palace complex. Originally, it was not a temple but a luxurious residence designed to express the shogun's political influence, aesthetic taste, and relationship with Zen philosophy. Architecturally, Kinkaku-ji consists of three stories, each built in a different style. The first floor reflects Heian-period palace architecture, the second floor embodies samurai (buke) style, and the third floor incorporates elements of Zen Buddhist architecture [8:50]. The gilding of the upper two floors symbolically represents Ashikaga Yoshimitsu's political power and his pursuit of spiritual perfection. After Ashikaga Yoshimitsu's death in 1408, according to his will, the Kitayama Palace was converted into a Zen Buddhist temple and began functioning as a religious complex belonging to the Rinzaï Zen (臨濟禪) school. Subsequently, the temple officially received the name Rokuon-ji, but among the public, it remained widely known as Kinkaku-ji (Golden Pavilion) due to its striking appearance. Throughout history, the temple suffered several fires. The most significant event occurred in 1950, when the pavilion was completely destroyed [4:70]. However, it was reconstructed in 1955 based on historical records, and in 1987, its golden coating was further reinforced. Today, Kinkaku-ji is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site and is recognized as one of Japan's most important historical and cultural monuments [2:22]. The pond surrounding Kinkaku-ji, known as Kyōko-chi (鏡湖池, Mirror Pond), is also of scholarly interest. Architecturally, the pond enhances the pavilion's visual impact while embodying the Zen concept of "reflection and reality." Scholars regard the pond as a compositional element that complements the temple's spiritual meaning. Another important aspect is that Kinkaku-ji is one of the central symbols of Kitayama culture, which developed during the Muromachi period. Researchers emphasize that the pavilion's three floors represent the three main worldviews in Japanese society: secular life, military-discipline structure, and spiritual perfection. This makes Kinkaku-ji not only an aesthetic structure but also a philosophical model. Kitayama culture is based on a fusion of Chinese art, Zen ideas, and Japanese traditions, and Kinkaku-ji serves as a material expression of this cultural process. This aspect underscores the need to study the temple not only regionally but within the broader context of East Asian cultural relations. Furthermore, in modern scholarly perspectives, Kinkaku-ji is analyzed from the viewpoints of cultural tourism and heritage management. Researchers note that the temple's international fame brings to the forefront the balance between preserving historical value and allowing public access.

Discussion and results

Previous scholarly studies on Kinkaku-ji Temple have primarily interpreted it as a symbol of Zen Buddhist aesthetics and Ashikaga Yoshimitsu's political authority [3:106]. Many authors have evaluated the Golden Pavilion as an architectural monument reflecting the power of the Muromachi period, with its gilded exterior explained as a symbol of political influence and wealth [1:318]. However, this article adopts a different academic perspective. The temple is analyzed not merely as an object representing political power or religious aesthetics, but as a symbol of social memory and cultural continuity. Kinkaku-ji is not only a product of the Muromachi period; it is a cultural phenomenon that has been reinterpreted across various historical stages. In this way, the article expands upon existing scholarly views and allows Kinkaku-ji to be understood as a multi-layered historical and cultural phenomenon. Throughout history, the temple has endured multiple trials, both natural and human-induced. Notably, the fire in the 20th century holds particular significance in Kinkaku-ji's history. This event led to the loss of the pavilion's original structure and prompted society to reconsider its relationship with cultural heritage. The reconstruction of Kinkaku-ji after the fire allowed it to be interpreted not merely as a historical building, but as a continuously evolving cultural process. Scholars associate this process with the preservation of cultural memory and society's effort to restore its aesthetic ideals. In this sense, Kinkaku-ji exists as a cultural phenomenon that transcends the boundaries of time and space. This historical event is also deeply reflected in Japanese literature. In Yukio Mishima's work, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, Kinkaku-ji is portrayed as a symbol of beauty and perfection, juxtaposed with the inner conflicts of the human mind [9]. In the text, the temple takes on a broader meaning than a religious building, becoming a symbol of the tension between aesthetic ideals and human vulnerability. This demonstrates that Kinkaku-ji should be studied not only as an architectural object but also as a philosophical and literary subject. Thus, Kinkaku-ji Temple is a multi-layered monument situated at the crossroads of history, architecture, culture, and literature. Its scholarly significance is not limited to the period of its construction. The processes of destruction and reconstruction allow it to be interpreted not as a static historical object but as a cultural phenomenon that evolves alongside society.

Conclusion

Kinkaku-ji Temple is not only a historical monument but also a symbol that harmonizes the spiritual and aesthetic values of Japanese culture. Through it, people connect with past eras, appreciate cultural heritage, and recognize society's respect for its own history. In this regard, Kinkaku-ji is more than a complex of buildings; it is a means of shaping social consciousness and cultural identity. Studying, analyzing, and evaluating this temple continues to provide a permanent source of inspiration for scholarly and cultural research.

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