ON STATUES OF THE TWELVE DIVINE GENERALS IN THE MUSEUM OF ORIENTAL ART, VENICE

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Venice’s Museum of Oriental Art houses a collection accumulated by Enrico di Borbone, Count of Bardi (1851–1905), during his circumnavigation of the earth between September 1887 and December 1889. At the end of his trip, from February through November 1889, Count Borbone resided in Japan, where he exuberantly explored the country in regions as remote as Kyushu and Hokkaido. The Japanese art he amassed on these trips consists primarily of decorative and applied arts, including armor, swords, ceramics, lacquer, metalwork, and textiles, however his wide-ranging acquisitions also included such genres as Buddhist and secular painting and Buddhist sculpture.

Among the Japanese sculpture brought back to Italy by Borbone are two statues from a set of Twelve Divine Generals (Japanese, Jūni Shinshō). Despite their incompleteness, the excellence of condition — including the polychromy decorating the surface — and sculptural quality of these two hitherto unknown statues make them highly valuable material for scholarly discourse. This article relates detailed information and brief observations about the sculptures before discussing their significance in the context of Japanese sculptural history.

The iconography of the two figures resembles the relief-carved Twelve Divine Generals (National Treasure) owned by Kōfuku-ji Temple in Nara, which have been attributed to the style of Genchō. In terms of structure and technique, however, they bear many similarities to the works of sculptors — primarily of the Kei school — who were active in Nara during the early Kamakura period. Though the artist and provenance of these works is unclear, the Twelve Divine Generals figures from the Museum of Oriental Art, Venice, will definitely become essential components for our understanding of Kamakura-period sculptural history.