



CENTRE FOR ASIAN AND
TRANSCULTURAL STUDIES

INSTITUTE OF
EAST ASIAN ART HISTORY



UNIVERSITÄT
HEIDELBERG
ZUKUNFT
SEIT 1386

12TH FORUM EAST ASIAN ART HISTORY
ONLINE KEYNOTE

Telling the Stories of Buddhist Makers: Methodologies to Recover the Cultural History of Medieval Japan

Dr. Halle O'Neal (University of Edinburgh)

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With the cataclysm of death, what happens to those remaining fragments of a life, which appear disposable to others but become the mourner's heart-breaking distillations of both loss and trace? While a fading practice today, handwritten letters in medieval Japan were the primary form of communication between long-separated lovers, parents unlikely to reunite with their children, and distant friends, artists, and poets. In this rich epistolary culture, letters – reused, recycled, and reframed – figured prominently in Buddhist memorial rituals. With the death of a loved one, family members gathered the dead's letters and transcribed sacred scripture on their surface, transforming the original missive into a letter sutra (*shōsokukyō*). But a study of this topic faces numerous obstacles, from silent sources to a lack of surviving examples. This keynote, therefore, workshops the methodological challenges of understanding such palimpsests through the angles of haptics, materiality, and the history of emotions.



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