

# Ugui Royal Portraits not seen since Battle of Okinawa, Recovered and Returned

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**Abstract:** Four ugui portraits of kings of the Okinawan kingdom of Lūchū (Ryūkyū) were returned to Okinawa in March 2024 along with sixteen other artifacts stolen by American soldiers during the 1945 Battle of Okinawa. These are the first such royal portraits to be confirmed extant, and the first such royal treasures to be recovered since 1953. This essay describes the repatriated portraits, as well as the theft and search for the royal treasures looted in 1945 and their cultural and emotional significance for a people who lost a great volume of their tangible heritage in World War II.

**Keywords:** Okinawan art, Ryukyu Kingdom, Cultural Properties, Repatriation, Battle of Okinawa



[Fig. 1 (cover image): *Ugui* memorial portrait of King Shō Iku (r. 1835-1847). Ink and colors on paper. Mid-19th c. Photo courtesy Okinawa Prefectural Board of Education.]

On March 15, 2024, the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) Art Crime Team announced that some twenty Asian artifacts, including four priceless royal portraits looted from a mansion of the former royal family of Lūchū (J: *Ryūkyū*) in 1945<sup>1</sup>, had been recovered from a Massachusetts family and returned to Okinawa (FBI). These represent but a few of an unknown number of Buddhist temple bells, sculptures, historical manuscripts, paintings, and other royal treasures and historical and cultural artifacts, as well as diaries, photographs, swords, flags, mortuary tablets, and other personal effects of Japanese and Okinawan soldiers and civilians stolen by U.S. military personnel during the 1945 Battle of Okinawa or in its immediate aftermath.

Decades of Imperial Japanese colonialist and assimilationist policy, from the time of Okinawa's annexation in 1879 through 1945, did untold damage to the tangible cultural heritage (including artworks, artifacts, architecture, and historical documents) and cultural traditions of the Okinawan people (Rabson; Christy). This culminated in the 1945 Battle of Okinawa, in which it is said the Imperial Japanese government "sacrificed" Okinawa, its people, and its culture, allowing the island to become a battlefield as a last-ditch effort to prevent the same from happening to the Japanese "Home Islands" (Medoruma). One of the largest and deadliest battles of the Pacific War, and the only land battle to take place within the 47 prefectures of Japan, the Battle of Okinawa saw not only the devastation of much of the main island of Okinawa, and the deaths of one-quarter or perhaps as much as one-third of the civilian population, but also the loss of countless items of priceless historical and cultural value. With so much lost, every historical or cultural artifact that survives, or is returned, is a precious treasure, an invaluable resource for Okinawan efforts to recover and understand

<sup>1</sup> The independent kingdom which ruled the Ryukyu Islands from the 15th or 16th century until the 1870s, when it was unilaterally abolished and annexed by the Empire of Japan is most often referred to by the Japanese name "Ryūkyū." However, Lūchū (sometimes spelled Loochoo) more closely represents the pronunciation of the placename in the native Okinawan (*Uchinaaguchi*) language.

their history, and to revive cultural traditions and pride in Okinawan identity.

Hundreds of artifacts, and thousands of personal effects, have been returned to Okinawa in the decades since, but many are believed to still remain in the possession of American veterans, their next of kin, or others (Honan 1998; Honan 2000; Okinawa Times 2021; Okinawa Times 2022a; Okinawa Times 2022b; Okinawa Times 2023).<sup>2</sup> The repatriation of twenty artifacts this March marks the first time that posthumous royal portraits (known as *ugui* 御後絵 in the Okinawan language and *ogoe* in Japanese), long feared lost forever, have resurfaced, and the first time since 1953 that any of the royal treasures looted from the former royal family's Nakagusuku udun mansion have returned to Okinawa (Takayasu 2024). Along with many other royal treasures, these paintings had been known largely only from textual references and black and white photographs taken by *mingei* (Folk Crafts) scholar Kamakura Yoshitarō in the 1920s. This is therefore a tremendous discovery.



[Fig. 2: *Ugui* memorial portrait of King Shō Iku (r. 1835-1847). Photograph by Kamakura Yoshitarō, 1920s. Image courtesy Okinawa Prefectural University of Arts, University Library & Arts Museum.]

From the perspective of art historical knowledge, the newly recovered *ugui* are invaluable resources for discovering new insights and deepening and expanding knowledge not only about traditional Luchuan court painting, of

<sup>2</sup> Honan writes in the *New York Times* in 1998 that in just the previous 12 years, one Marine Corps general, James L. Day, “played a major role in returning more than 130 works of art and artifacts that had been removed by Americans during and after the war.” I have not been able to find a more recent citation or one indicating an overall count.

which few examples survive, but also about court costume and other aspects of Luchuan “high” culture. The *ugui* portraits also constitute a landmark instance of the recovery of Okinawan heritage; these are precious items recovered for a culture, a people, who lost so much to colonialism and war in the 19th–20th centuries. As Sakihara Kyōko, a curator at the Okinawa Prefectural Museum, said on the occasion of the return of a bronze temple bell in 2021, the return of artifacts such as these “are the keys to uncovering Okinawa’s history... recovering cultural items means regaining our history and culture” (Higa). In a formal statement, Governor of Okinawa Prefecture Denny Tamaki further described the returned *ugui* portraits as *kenmin no kokoro no yoridokoro* (県民の心のよりどころ), a phrase that is difficult to translate, but suggests something which “supports the spirit,” or is a source or point of reference for the heart of the Okinawan people. This phrase has also been frequently used to refer to *Sui gusuku* (J: *Shurijō*, Shuri castle), the former Luchuan royal palace that is currently being restored after an extensive fire in 2019 (Mainichi 2019; Okinawa Graph 1989).

As I have been unable to obtain any information from the FBI, Smithsonian, or Okinawan prefectural government or Prefectural Museum beyond what has been officially released to the public, there is much which remains unclear. Of particular interest is a typewritten letter which the Massachusetts family found along with the artifacts, which reportedly indicates, or strongly suggests, that the items were taken from Okinawa towards the end of World War II (FBI; NHK 2024a). The full text of this document has not yet been released, however. The Massachusetts family, who have chosen to remain anonymous, indicated that they discovered these works while going through the belongings of their late father, who served in the U.S. military during World War II, but not in the Pacific Theater (FBI). Other than the royal portraits, the remaining items include a hand-painted map of the Yaeyama Islands (a sub-group of the Ryukyu archipelago, south of Okinawa and north of Taiwan) and fifteen ceramic, porcelain, wooden, or metalware objects, all believed to date to the 19th century at the latest and to have been luxury daily use items for members of the Luchuan elite, likely taken from the Shuri area (Okinawa Prefectural Museum 2024a).





[Fig. 3: *Ugui* memorial portrait of King Shō Sei (r. 1527–1555). Ink and colors on paper. Late 16th or early 17th c. Photo courtesy Okinawa Prefectural Board of Education].



[Fig. 5: *Ugui* memorial portrait of King Shō Kei (r. 1713–1752). Photograph by Kamakura Yoshitarō, 1920s. Image courtesy University Library & Arts Museum, Okinawa Prefectural University of Arts.]



[Fig. 4: *Ugui* memorial portrait of King Shō Kei (r. 1713–1752). Ink and colors on paper. Late 18th c. Photo courtesy Okinawa Prefectural Board of Education].

Three of the recovered portraits have been identified as those of kings Shō Sei 尚清 (C: Shàng Qīng, r. 1527–1555), Shō Kei 尚敬 (C: Shàng Jīng, r. 1713–1752) and Shō Iku 尚育 (C: Shàng Yù, r. 1835–1847) (see Figs. 1, 3, 4).<sup>3</sup> Each is roughly 160×160 cm, and those of Shō Kei and Shō Iku are believed to have been painted in 1817 and 1852, respectively (NHK 2024a). Incredible and invaluable as the discovery and recovery of these long-lost *ugui* portraits is to begin with, Dana Masayuki, head of the committee overseeing the conservation of the works<sup>4</sup>, noted that the survival and recovery of the portrait of King Shō Sei is all the more precious, as scholars will now be able to examine not only *ugui* from the later Qing dynasty, but one from the Ming dynasty as well (NHK Okinawa).

<sup>3</sup> Though the names of the kings of Lūchū are most often given according to a Japanese-language reading of their names, the surname 尚 (J: Shō, C: Shàng) was formally granted them by the Ming emperor, and was a name closely tied to their identity as formally invested, as recognized, by the Ming and Qing Empires. Thus, I include the *pinyin* for a Mandarin Chinese rendering of their names as well.

<sup>4</sup> Dana is head of both the *Henkan bunkazai hozon shūfuku kentō iinkai* 返還文化財保存修復検討委員会 (roughly, “committee for considering conservation and repair of the returned cultural properties”) and the *Ken bunkazai hogo shingikai* 県文化財保護審議会 (roughly, “prefectural council for protection of cultural properties”).





**[Fig. 6: Damaged *Ugui* memorial portrait of an unknown figure. Ink and colors on paper. Photo courtesy Okinawa Prefectural Board of Education].**

The fourth portrait (Fig. 6) is in poor condition, having been split into three parts and with some further sections missing. The face of the central figure is severely damaged; though experts have identified the figure as a king of Lūchū based on the surrounding iconography and composition, his specific identity has yet to be determined (Okinawa Prefectural Museum 2024a; NHK Okinawa). While the portraits of Shō Kei and Shō Iku could be confirmed through comparison to Kamakura's photographs, and while that of Shō Sei has the characters of that name written on the wooden rod of the hanging scroll mounting, this portrait does not appear among the ones photographed by Kamakura (Kamakura 1982a: 222–224; Kamakura 1982b: 310–319). Given that the figure is depicted wearing a Chinese-style *wūshāmào* 烏紗帽 court cap rather than the formal investiture crown (玉冠, O: tamanchaabui) worn by kings in other *ugui*, Dana has suggested this might be a king who underwent accession ceremonies in Lūchū, and ruled, but was never formally invested by China, such as Shō Ken (尚賢, C: Shàng Xián) (NHK 2024a). Shō Ken took the throne in 1641 as the Ming Empire was falling and died in 1647 before he was able to receive investiture from either the Ming or the newly-established Qing Empire. This is, however, only one possibility; it is hoped that further analysis of the paintings themselves, and of textual

sources, will allow for further insights into the possible identity of the subject of this portrait (NHK 2024a).

The recovered royal portraits are two from a set of roughly twenty<sup>5</sup>, that went missing in 1945, along with numerous other artworks and artifacts seemingly looted from the Nakagusuku *udun* mansion following the end of the Battle of Okinawa and the U.S. military's takeover of the mansion (NHK 2024b; Hirakawa 2018: 27–29; Majikina: 167). While similar paintings, such as a portrait of Confucius in a similar style and composition, have provided indications as to the style, composition, and media employed in these royal portraits, the *ugui* themselves were not known to have survived until now, and could be studied only in the form of Kamakura Yoshitarō's photographs of ten of them (Kamakura 1982a: 222–224; Kamakura 1982b: 310–319). Unfortunately, during Kamakura's survey of Okinawan cultural properties in the 1920s, religious authorities at the Engaku-ji temple in Shuri insisted upon the sacredness of the *ugui* held there and refused Kamakura access to even view, let alone photograph, the portraits. They are now believed lost, with no visual record of their appearance (Kamakura 1982a: 222).



**[Fig. 7: View of a portion of the Nakagusuku *udun* mansion grounds. Photo by Kamakura Yoshitarō, 1920s. Image courtesy of University Library & Arts Museum, Okinawa Prefectural University of Arts.]**

5 Majikina Ankō and Higa Chōken record viewing 16 *ugui* portraits of kings (plus several others of royal princes) during a 1925 survey of objects held at Nakagusuku *udun*.

Thanks to a firsthand account by Maehira Bōkei (1921–2015), who was a steward in service to the Shō family at the time, we know in some detail which royal treasures were kept at the Nakagusuku udun mansion, and that they disappeared not in the course of fighting in 1945, but some months later (Maehira). The royal family had been forced out of the royal palace, *Sui gusuku* (Shurijō in Japanese, commonly Shuri castle in English), in 1879, as the Empire of Japan dismantled the formerly independent Ryukyu Kingdom and installed a Japanese governor over the newly-declared “Okinawa Prefecture.” While the last king, Shō Tai 尚泰 (C: *Shàng Tàì*), was named a Marquis in the new Western-style Japanese *kazoku* aristocracy and granted a mansion in Tokyo to which he was obliged to relocate, his family was permitted to retain some presence in Okinawa. Nakagusuku udun, up until then the mansion of the Crown Prince, then became the chief residence of those members of the former royal family who remained in Okinawa. It became the home, too, of many of the royal treasures relocated from the palace but not taken with the Marquis to Tokyo. The former site of this mansion, across the street from the Ryūtan pond below the former palace, can be easily recognized today by the high stone walls that still encircle the property, though the interior of the grounds has sat vacant since the relocation to the Omoromachi/Shintoshin neighborhood of the Okinawa Prefectural Museum, which had operated on the former Nakagusuku udun grounds from 1966 to 2006 (Okinawa Prefectural Museum 2007: 143).<sup>6</sup>

Maehira relates that in late March 1945, he was a steward helping to manage and protect the Nakagusuku udun mansion and the treasures within it, as the Battle of Okinawa came to an end. Stewards hid treasures in roughly seven locations around the mansion grounds, including in a drainage culvert, atop the rafters in various rooms, and simply in holes they dug in the ground, in an effort to protect them from fire or other damage, or from being found and looted (Maehira: 24, 26). These included royal crowns, court robes and textiles received from Ming & Qing emperors, paintings, items of calligraphy, porcelains and ceramic items, musical instruments, ritual implements for court ceremonies, and manuscripts of official histories of the kingdom, among others. The *ugui*, in particular, were hidden above the rafters of a tin-roofed bathhouse on the grounds, each in its own separate box. For want of sufficient hiding spaces, numerous additional items were simply gathered in the rooms of the mansion (Maehira: 26–27).

Much of the mansion burned down in the fighting in early April, but Maehira and others witnessed that the royal crowns; important manuscripts such as the *Omoro sōshi*, *Chūzan seikan*, and *Chūzan seifu*<sup>7</sup>; and the *ugui* portraits were unharmed. The mansion was then taken over by Japanese troops, and later by American troops; meanwhile, after “wandering around the battlefields” for several months, Maehira was captured by U.S. forces and placed in a displaced persons camp for several months. When he finally returned to Nakagusuku udun in October 1945, he found that most, if not all, of the treasures were gone (Maehira: 27–29). He writes that although much of the mansion had burned down, some of the buildings, as well as the drainage culvert and the hole they had dug in the ground, appeared to be undamaged by fire or shelling, and yet the treasures they had held were gone; a set of safes that had held jewels and items of gold and silver had been forced open and lay empty (Maehira: 28–29). He writes explicitly that, in his opinion, a great many of the treasures could not have been destroyed in the fighting, but rather that if someone had not stolen them, they would have remained.<sup>8</sup> Since the U.S. military was in control of the site during this period, the implication is that the objects were stolen by individuals associated with the military.

Some of these treasures turned up in the United States mere months after the fighting ended. In December 1945, a Commander Carl Sternfelt visited the Harvard Art Museums with the *Omoro sōshi* manuscript and a number of other treasures, to ask Prof. Langdon Warner to help identify and appraise the items. According to some accounts, once Warner realized the significance of the artifacts, he and Sternfelt “did the right thing” and worked to see them returned to Okinawa (Tritten); according to others, Warner worked to help Sternfelt find a private buyer for them (Honan 1997). Ultimately, federal agents recovered the *Omoro sōshi* manuscript from Sternfelt, along with a number of other treasures, including a large golden hairpin and heavy necklace worn by the kingdom’s chief priestess (*chifujin*, J: *kikōe ōgimi*), and some sixty red and black lacquered memorial tablets inscribed with the names of the successive kings in gold. These were returned to Okinawa in a formal ceremony in 1953 also marking the centennial of Commodore Matthew Perry’s famous visits to Japan and Ryūkyū (Maehira: 29; Honan

<sup>7</sup> The *Omoro sōshi*, the oldest surviving Luchuan text outside of inscriptions on stone monuments, is a collection of poems that, like the Japanese *Manyōshū*, contain extensive historical, mythical, and cultural information. The *Chūzan seikan* and *Chūzan seifu* are official histories of the kingdom produced by the royal court in the 17th–18th centuries.

<sup>8</sup> 「ここは艦砲(射撃)も直撃を受けていない。人が盗まなければ宝物も残っている場所なんですよ。」Maehira, quoted in NHK News 2024b.

<sup>6</sup> From 1966 to 1972, the museum was known as the Government of the Ryukyu Islands Museum (*Ryūkyū seifu hakubutsukan*).

1997; Nakasone: 3, 22).

Still missing, however, are a jeweled investiture crown and associated investiture robe worn by the king of Lūchū as a symbol of the legitimacy of his sovereignty, granted and recognized by the Ming and Qing Empires. The only investiture crown known to survive has been named a National Treasure by the Japanese government and is regularly displayed in a place of pride in the Naha City Museum of History. Its missing counterpart, meanwhile, is a powerful symbol for all the cultural treasures lost or stolen during the war. Kishaba Shizuo (“Alex”), president of the Ryukyu-American Historical Research Society, has for decades been one of the individuals working most actively to track down and arrange for the return of Okinawan artifacts. Due to the crown being hidden in 1945 immediately alongside the *Omoro sōshi* and other items brought to Harvard by Sternfelt, Kishaba long asserted his strong belief that Sternfelt had taken the crown as well, and that it remains today either in the possession of his relatives, or of a Boston-area museum. Both the family and the museums, however, have explicitly stated that they do not have these treasures, and that if they did, they would eagerly pursue the proper processes for repatriating them.<sup>9</sup>

Maehira visited the United States in 2000 along with curator Hagio Toshiaki and several other experts from Okinawa. Following their meeting with FBI officials, and also through the efforts of Takayasu Fuji, a member of staff at the U.S. consulate in Okinawa, thirteen of the items believed looted from Nakagusuku udun, including the missing crown, investiture robe, and *ugui* portraits, were added in 2001 to the FBI Stolen Art File (Okinawa Prefectural Museum; RBC News).

It was through consultation with this list that the Massachusetts family realized the cultural identity and significance of what they had found. They turned over the objects to the FBI, who had their authenticity confirmed by experts at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of Asian Art; the objects were then formally returned to Okinawa on March 15, 2024 (FBI). The items were later shown to a limited audience of media (press) and experts on April 30, 2024 (NHK Okinawa).<sup>10</sup> An exhibition of the ceramic, metalware, wooden or bamboo, and lacquerware objects, as well as the map of the Yaeyama Islands and reproductions of the royal portraits currently undergoing

9 “The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, unequivocally denied ever coming in contact with the crown... ‘The object is not in the museum’s collection, nor is there record of it ever being present at the MFA.’” Tritten.

10 This private press showing included only two of the recovered portraits, and reproductions or mock-ups of the other two, which were not shown due to conservation concerns.

conservation, was then opened to the public for just three days, from May 8 to 10, 2024, at the Okinawa Prefectural Museum (Okinawa Prefectural Museum 2024b).

The committee of experts overseeing the conservation of the items has estimated that, due to their poor condition and limited resources for their conservation, it will take two years to complete conservation work on each of the four portraits; they anticipate that while the museum might be able to put one on display by 2027, it will likely take eight years before all four are in a condition to be exhibited to the public (Ryukyu Shimpo).

There is much to be learned from these portraits regarding the production and style of traditional Ryukyuan painting, as well as royal costume and other details depicted in the works. But beyond their value for scholarly knowledge, many in Okinawa and in the extensive Okinawan diaspora see these treasures as invaluable touchstones for their history, culture, and identity. Speaking of the still-missing royal investiture crown, curator Hokama Masaaki expressed that “the symbol of the kingdom, the heritage that we take pride in, was taken away from Okinawa because of the war” (Tritten). Now, for the first time in more than seventy years, several treasures of the cultural heritage of the royal family and royal court culture of the Lūchū Kingdom, long feared lost, have been restored to their homeland, strengthening hope that further such artifacts are to be discovered and recovered soon.

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