

## Emile Guimet, Nineteenth-Century French Traveler

Emile Guimet (1836–1918) was a French merchant, traveler, art expert, and collector. He founded the Museum of Religions in Lyon. The collection is now held by the Guimet National Museum of Asian Arts in Paris.

After visiting Kotokuin, Guimet wrote a travel account (*Promenades japonaises*) in which he described the head of the Great Buddha as rising “like a copper hillock” from among the surrounding trees. He correctly noted that the gigantic statue was not a representation of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, as was often thought by Westerners. But he mistook it instead for a depiction of the cosmic Buddha Rushana—the Great Buddha is now universally recognized by Japanese Buddhists as Amida Buddha. Guimet describes an entrance in the base of the statue that provided access to the interior, as is still the case today. He goes on to describe the interior of the statue as a complex sacred space, filled with images of the Buddha set at differing heights. This description may have been accurate at the time, but no such images are found inside the statue today.