

# The Legacy of Buddhist Art at Nara

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More than twelve centuries ago, when the ancient world was ruled by Byzantium and the Umayyads to the west and Tang China to the east, a Japanese emperor called Shōmu attended the consecration of a colossal gilt-bronze statue of the Cosmic Buddha that he had sponsored (fig. 1). It was a moment of anticipation and fulfillment, for the project had been under way for many years. This statue meant much to the emperor, as a statement of his personal faith and as a symbol of cultural and political legitimacy for his government. When he saw it towering above him, its golden body gleaming in the light, he must have thought: This is the true form of Buddha and of the empire that I rule in his name. Now all rulers from Tang to Byzantium will know that my kingdom is a righteous domain.

The emperor's statue occupied a great worship hall at the center of the most important religious institution of his reign, the monastery Tōdai-ji. It stood among rolling hills on a low mountain called Mt. Mikasa (Mikasyama) where deer roamed freely. Those who ventured up the slopes of Mt. Mikasa looked back to see monastery grounds descending toward a bustling city that stretched to the horizon. Perhaps the emperor had found time to make the climb. In the distance, across a sea of buildings arranged in blocks along an orderly grid of avenues, he would have seen his palace and government offices. Here and there the pagodas of the city's ubiquitous monasteries rose into the sky. The green tile roofs of hundreds of buildings, some painted in bright vermilion, glittered under the sun. Faraway mountains framed the broad basin on which the city spread like a chessboard.

This was Nara, imperial capital of the Japanese archipelago since 710, and one of the great cities of the ancient world. Poets called it the city of greens and vermilions. It was the geographical and cultural hub of the Japanese islands, where all roads converged and people made their way to seek fortune and civilization. City streets were crowded with merchants, artisans, pilgrims, laborers, and monks. There were also visitors from across the sea, sometimes merchants from China and Central Asia, even a few monks from India. For Nara, capital of Japan, was also the eastern terminus of the Silk Road, an ancient trade route that traversed the Eurasian continent. A traveler to Nara in 710 might have come from as far away as Rome.

Shōmu ruled over this great city from 724 until his death in 756, first as its reigning monarch, then in retirement as its devoutly Buddhist senior emperor. In 749 Shōmu had abdicated the throne in favor of his daughter, Kōken, to pursue the project to which he had then dedicated his life: the construction of a colossal Buddha as an act of devotion in keeping with Buddhist ideals of faith and imperial benevolence. For counsel he had turned to his wife, the redoubtable empress Kōmyōshi, who had similar political and religious goals, and to their affiliates in the monastic and palace communities. Kōmyōshi had been instrumental to the construction of Tōdai-ji, and had in fact built it around her own tutelary chapel on Mt. Mikasa. The completion of the Cosmic Buddha, and its enshrinement at Tōdai-ji, provided Shōmu with the symbol he needed to articulate a vision of holy Buddhist empire that he shared with his powerful wife and their priestly confidants.

Fig. 1. Daibutsu (Great Buddha), originally made in AD 752 of gilt bronze, in the Daibutsuden (Great Buddha Hall) of Tōdai-ji, Nara

When Shōmu attended the consecration ceremony, in 752, he was met by ten thousand monks gathered at Tōdai-ji to mark the occasion. He had asked a monk from India, Bodhisena, to preside. A Chinese monk, Daoxuan, led Shōmu, Kōmyōshi, Kōken, and hundreds of dignitaries in prayers and chanting. Thousands of monks recited from scripture under the direction of Bodhisena and Daoxuan. The international flavor of the ceremony was enhanced by the statue itself. The Great Buddha (Daibutsu), as it came to be known, was modeled on other Great Buddhas in China and along the Silk Road. It was also based on scriptures and an iconography only recently introduced from the continent, whose focus was the Cosmic Buddha called Birushana.

Newly consecrated in its beautiful setting at Tōdai-ji on the slopes of Mt. Mikasa, the Great Buddha would serve Shōmu well as an emblem of Buddhist empire. But the huge statue was also a technological feat. Its political and religious significance was deepened by the sheer complexity of its construction, which testified to the ability of a Japanese emperor to muster the economic and technical resources to erect such a monument in the name of Buddha and state. The statue had been years in the making as thousands of workers labored under the direction of government artists and designers. What they produced was as much a manifesto, of the power of art to fulfill a Buddhist dream, as it was a symbol of empire.

The Daibutsu embodied a vibrant artistic culture that had flourished in Nara since the city's foundation in 710. It was a culture deeply rooted in Buddhist ideals, of benevolent government and monastic rule to be sure, but also of art as a means to understanding and enlightenment. Through art the world of Buddhist doctrine came alive, its various Buddhas and Buddha-beings given form as sculpture or in painting, its realm of practice made manifest in chapels and halls filled with objects of prayer and ritual. This affiliation followed directly from the teachings expressed in sutras, the scriptures of Buddhism, and encouraged a strong orientation toward the plastic arts. Tremendous spiritual merit is gained, the sutras say, by the construction of monasteries and pagodas, the making of Buddhist images, the copying of scriptures. In

Buddhism the study of text and doctrine has always been tempered by vision and insight, and by the creation of images to facilitate understanding.<sup>1</sup>

From the beginning Nara was a city of art and artists engaged in visionary exploration of Buddhist teachings. The Great Buddha symbolized this above all, its ideological agenda notwithstanding, for it was a monument to the visual arts as the expression of Buddhist doctrine and practice. Nara was literally filled with art and architecture sponsored as a result of Buddhist devotion. There were monasteries or temples virtually everywhere, their precincts home to all manner of sculptures, paintings, and decorative objects. Tōdai-ji alone contained hundreds of works of art. This profusion of objects was not simply a function of didactic goals, such as the explication of scripture, nor did it signify the accumulation of merit alone. It was at the same time an exuberant celebration of visuality as a path to illumination and insight through the experience of "awesome beauty" (*shōgon*).

The Nara that Shōmu knew, then, was as much an art capital as it was the administrative and political hub of empire. Sponsorship and production of Buddhist art and architecture was a constant in the lives of court aristocrats but also for the state and at monasteries. Hundreds of artists and artisans were employed in the execution of various commissions. Most artists were based at prominent monasteries in Nara, but the government maintained its own workshops, as did the imperial palace. Kuninaka no Kimimaro, the principal designer of the Daibutsu, had come to Shōmu as head of the top government studio and was in effect a civil servant. He traced his family lineage back to the Korean kingdom of Paekche. The man in charge of casting the statue, Takechi no Ōkuni, was from an immigrant Chinese family.<sup>2</sup>

So diverse a community of artists, with immigrants arriving from China and Korea on a regular basis, contributed to a high level of experimentation in medium and style. The Great Buddha was one such example. For these reasons the art of Nara was characterized by formal and technical sophistication but also by steady transformation through the various media of metal, lacquer, clay, and wood. It was an art where the concerns and strategies of artists were ever evident. The visual culture





that developed out of this matrix, in effect the classical foundation of Japanese Buddhist art, was one of such creative energy that its legacy lasted for centuries.

After Shōmu died in 756, Kōmyōshi presented the Great Buddha with his personal collection of art objects. It was an act that perhaps better than any other summed up the full potential of the colossal statue at the heart of Nara. For if the Daibutsu was a symbol of state and mandate, as it surely was, it also bore witness to the abiding importance of art as a treasury of Buddhist understanding. As such the Great Buddha, receptacle of Shōmu's treasures, became in the end a symbol of the most important role that Nara as a cultural capital would play in history: the preservation of Buddhist art and tradition.

In 784 the Japanese government moved out of Nara to new quarters at Nagaoka and finally to Kyoto in 794. The metropolitan monasteries were left behind in the old capital, and the Great Buddha stayed as well at Tōdai-ji on Mt. Mikasa. Through the coming years of political and cultural transition, Nara retained its original character as a Buddhist capital and the base of venerable artistic traditions. The Daibutsu was destroyed and rebuilt a number of times through the eighteenth century, and the Nara monasteries also experienced vicissitudes over the centuries.

Nonetheless, so much was preserved and maintained at Nara, whether as material culture or the philosophical ruminations of monks, that the old capital remained what it had always been, one of the great Buddhist cities of East Asia.

Today Nara is a busy metropolis with all the conveniences and nuisances of modern life. The monasteries still survive and have even flourished as tourists and pilgrims fill the city year round to admire and to worship before painted and sculpted images as old as Nara itself. Inside worship halls at Tōdai-ji are the same objects that Shōmu and Kōmyōshi knew. It is easy to imagine for a moment that nothing has changed in twelve centuries, not the art and its power to hold our gaze, not the worshipers whispering nearby, not even the deer on Mt. Mikasa. The monks in their habits, their cellular phones notwithstanding, pray as monks have done since Nara was founded.

The importance of Nara is exactly the opportunity it affords, in the modern age, to know the past through Buddhist vision and the physical artifacts of Buddhist practice. An extraordinary opportunity to explore that vision in depth is provided by the objects in this exhibition. In their diversity and beauty they embody the vivid Buddhist culture of Nara and its lasting traditions. It is to better

know these objects, and the world of Buddhism that gave rise to them, that a closer look at Nara and its culture is warranted.<sup>3</sup>

#### *The Nara Capital*

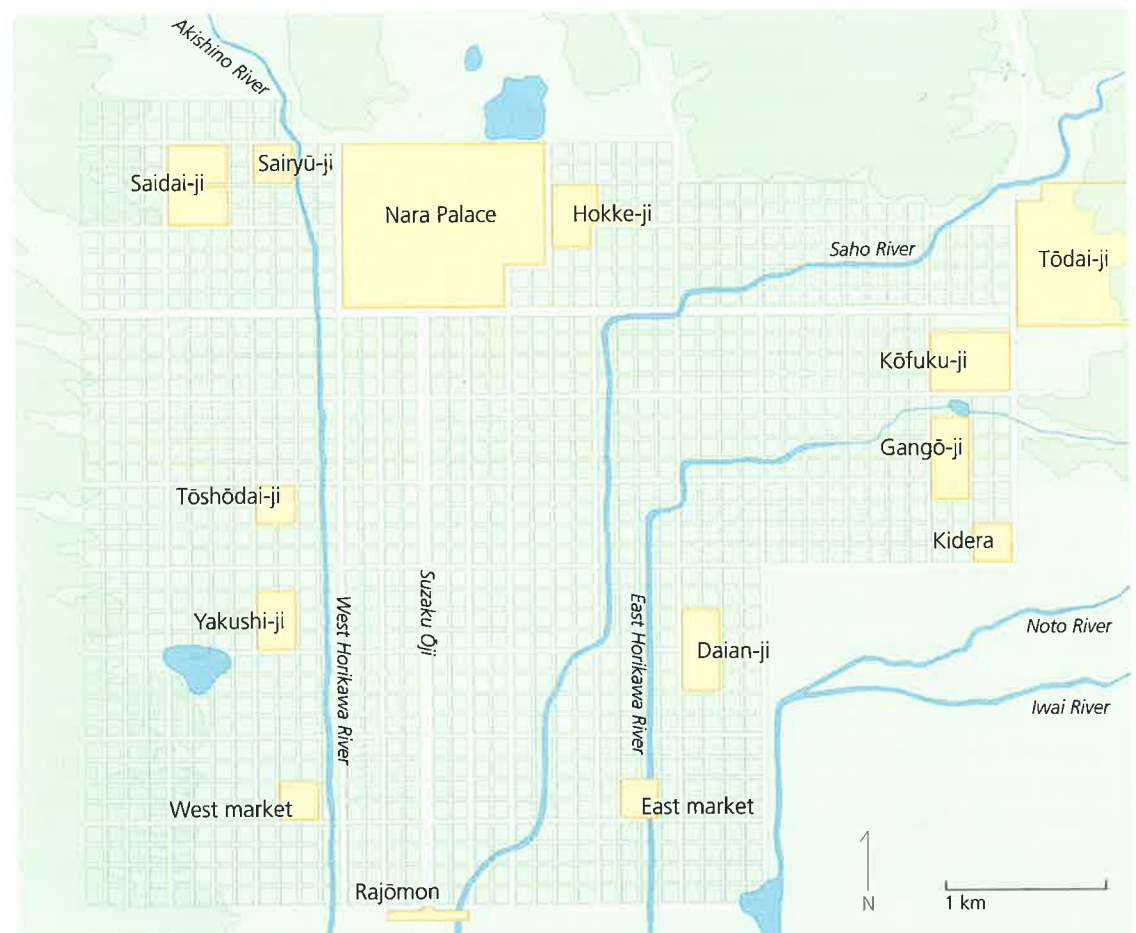
The capital city of Nara was built at the southern end of the Nara Plain in central Japan. Since the early days of the Japanese state this region had been called Yamato and was regarded as the cradle of Japanese civilization. The area was dotted with the tombs of emperors going back to the fourth century and had seen the construction and abandonment of several capitals before Nara, among them Asuka and Fujiwara. Indeed, Nara was the first Japanese capital to survive beyond a generation. Its formal name was Heijō-kyō, borrowed from the old Chinese capital at Pingcheng, although most people probably called it Nara even in the eighth century. In its prime, when Shōmu was on the throne, Nara boasted a population of more than 100,000 inhabitants.<sup>4</sup>

The decision to construct a new capital at Nara was taken by Empress Genmei in 708 from her palace at Fujiwara some twenty kilometers south of the planned site. Her

government had grown rapidly with the institution of a centralized bureaucracy based on Chinese and Korean prototypes, and there was need for expanded quarters for a burgeoning metropolitan population. Moreover, the increasing demands of diplomatic and commercial exchange with the continent necessitated a more strategically accessible site. There was also the matter of imperial succession. Genmei had recently lost her son, Emperor Monmu, to smallpox and probably wanted to remove her grandson Obito, the future Shōmu, to a palace and capital untouched by such pollution. In this sense Nara began as peripatetic Japanese capitals always had: in flight from disease and death.

That Nara was intended to last is clear from the scale of the enterprise and its ideological framework. Certainly Genmei and her closest advisor, the powerful nobleman Fujiwara no Fuhito, had empire in mind as they planned the city where Shōmu would reign. As their model they used Changan, the celebrated capital of Tang China. Famed throughout the ancient world for its riches and cosmopolitan culture, Changan was a formidable palace-city that housed the Chinese imperial

Fig. 2. Reconstruction drawing of Nara capital





family. Nara would be a new Changan, where the Silk Road brought diplomats and traders as well as the Buddhist monks who would in time shape the destiny of the city and its rulers.

Nara was laid out on flat land as a rectangle that measured nearly three miles north to south and two-and-one-half miles east to west (fig. 2). About a third the size of Changan, its streets formed a regular grid pattern similar to a chessboard: eight boulevards running north to south; twelve avenues east to west. The main boulevard, Suzaku Ōji, divided the city into eastern and western sectors. Visitors to Nara entered via the main gate on the south, Rajōmon, and made their way up Suzaku Ōji into the city proper. Two rivers were diverted to flow through the eastern and western sectors. Eventually a subsidiary sector was attached on the northeast as an outer capital. The city was surrounded by elevated terrain on three sides: the Nara hills to the north; the mountains Mikasa, Kasuga, and Wakakusa on the east; and Mt. Ikoma on the west. To the south stretched the Nara Plain and the rice paddies on which the economic structure of the city rested.

Genmei moved her court to Nara in 710, and the city became the political and religious capital of Japan and its first permanent capital. During earlier regimes, indeed since the dawn of the early Japanese state some time in the fifth century, there had been no permanent capital. When a ruler died, the palace and often its surrounding city were deserted and a new site chosen for a new palace and capital. For example, the Fujiwara capital, where Genmei's son Monmu had been enthroned as emperor, had replaced an older palace and government complex at nearby Asuka on the death of its monarch, Tenmu. Subsequently Genmei ordered a move out of Fujiwara in 708, after the death of her son Monmu in 707.

As it grew over the next few decades Nara became home to three interdependent populations whose presence gave the city its distinctive flavor. The aristocracy was clustered in mansions in the north of the city around the palace compound where the imperial family and government were based. The commoners, their homes packed closely around the busy markets and street communities of trade and craft, occupied the eastern and

western sectors of the capital. The religious community—so large that ten thousand monks could be summoned to the consecration of the Great Buddha in 752—transected the city high and low, for its members bridged the worlds of aristocrat and commoner as they served the Nara populace at large in the inculcation of Buddhist ideals. At the top of the monastic community was an aristocracy of high prelates and administrators, often drawn from the ranks of the nobility, which would play an enormous role in the emergent Buddhist political and visual culture of Nara in the time of Shōmu and Kōmyōshi.

The Nara capital was dominated by its palace sector, a walled city within a city that stood at the northern end of Suzaku Ōji and measured approximately one-half mile square. The compound was called the Great Palace (Daidairi) and contained various residences and government buildings. The imperial family lived there, as did members of their extended families and a security force. Most government business was conducted at the compound, where the reigning sovereign held court in a hall of state. The main gate to the compound, on Suzaku Ōji, was opened each morning shortly after sunrise and closed at sunset.<sup>5</sup> The business of state took place at the Ministries Compound (Chōdōjin), a complex of twelve government offices, or in the Great Hall of State (Daigokuden), where the emperor or empress held formal audience on a daily basis. Here, as well, were staged the various Buddhist services directed to the peace and prosperity of the Nara state. To the rear of the Daigokuden was a domestic sector, the Inner Palace (Dairi), where the imperial family resided. There were private chapels in this sector, where icons were enshrined and cherished, and rooms for the daily round of private Buddhist prayer and recitation that was as important to rulership as politics and state ceremony.

Architecturally the structures of the Daidairi conformed to two standards, one continental, the other indigenous to Japan. Government buildings looked much like similar structures at Changan: stone foundation and podium; wood construction with a complex roof support system of brackets and bearing blocks; heavy ceramic tiles as roofing; and exterior decoration in green and vermilion. The residential halls followed the native tradition of

plain wood construction with rounded pillars set directly into the ground, a raised floor, and cypress-bark shingles over a simple roof framework of transverse beams. If Shōmu held audience in a hall appropriate to a Chinese emperor, its roof glittering with green tiles, he spent the private hours of his day in a traditional wooden home probably not that different from those of his subjects.

Outside the Daidairi it was the monasteries of Nara that dictated the life of the city from its incipience, especially those that literally had been carried to Nara with Genmei and her court as the primary religious centers of the Nara state. Daikan Dai-ji, the foremost state temple of the Asuka capital, was dismantled, reconstructed in Nara in 716 as the principal religious establishment of the city's eastern sector, and renamed Daian-ji. The imperial temple of Genmei's lineage, Yakushi-ji, was brought from Fujiwara to Nara in 718 as the principal religious establishment of the western sector. An additional sector, called the Outer Capital (Gekyō), was constructed some three blocks east of the Daidairi to accommodate two more monastic complexes from the Asuka region. One was Yamashinadera, the tutelary temple of the Fujiwara family, rebuilt as the state temple Kōfuku-ji in 710; the other was the state monastery Asukadera, rebuilt as Gangō-ji in 718. Shōmu knew this group of early Nara temples as the Four Great Monasteries (Shi Dai-ji). After he took the throne in 724, still more state temples would be built through the second reign of his daughter, Kōken, under her new name, Shōtoku: Kōmyōshi's Hokke-ji of 745, a convent abutting the Daidairi on the east; her Shinyakushi-ji of 747, in the hills east of Kōfuku-ji; Tōdai-ji on its mountain in 752; and Shōtoku's Saidai-ji, constructed a few blocks west of the Daidairi in 764. Added to these were the numerous private temples and chapels scattered throughout the Nara capital, many of their names now lost to history. By the close of the eighth century, Nara contained upward of twenty-five major monastic complexes and had become a veritable monk's metropolis.

Most of these monasteries were based on Chinese and Korean prototypes—the model for temple architecture since the early seventh century. They conformed to the grand continental style seen at the Daidairi, with its

vermilion and green structures opening on broad courtyards. Monastery sites tended to be square or rectangular in plan, situated on level terrain (even Tōdai-ji stood on land excavated so as to be flat despite its mountain setting), and surrounded by thick earthen walls. Typically a monastery precinct contained seven main structures in keeping with the Chinese and Korean tradition that a proper temple had seven halls: pagoda (*tō*); main hall or "golden hall" (*kondō*); lecture hall (*kōdō*); library of scriptures (*kyōzō*); bell-fry (*shurō*); refectory (*jikidō*); and dormitories or cells for monks (*sōbō*).

The halls were usually arranged along a north-south axis in the enclosed courtyard formed by the precinct walls. Formal access was from the south through an external gate (*nandaimon*) and internal middle gate (*chūmon*). Most buildings in the monastery precinct stood atop a podium on a stone foundation, were square or rectangular in plan, supported a complex roof system of brackets and bearing blocks, and had plaster walls with beams, pillars, and other wood elements painted a bright vermilion. Elaborate roof tiles of the type in the exhibition were typical of such structures [1a–h].

The most striking structure at a monastery tended to be the towerlike pagoda, which rose in multiple stories sometimes to a height of one hundred feet. Some of that flavor is preserved in the ceramic model of a pagoda [3]. The pagoda as an architectural construction is a distant relative of the Indian stupa, or burial mound, and has a complex iconography that makes it both a symbol and a manifestation of Buddha. It represents the place where a relic of Buddha is kept and worshiped, and, as such, can be understood as the holiest site within a monastery complex. It is also equated with the Buddha body itself and worshiped as the absolute form of Buddha at the moment of enlightenment. The ceramic model, from the Sanage kilns near modern-day Nagoya, shows yet another facet of this symbolic framework: it was probably intended for use as a reliquary of some sort, possibly containing bits of bone or ash from cremated human remains.

To step into the interiors of a Nara monastery, into the rooms and sanctuaries of its many buildings, was to enter a world of visual splendor. The doors of a main hall, for

instance, typically opened on an inner space filled with statuary, paintings, altar furnishings, ornaments, and offerings. It was a colorful space, bright with the iridescent hues of traditional Buddhist decoration, and one that provided sensual as well as spiritual enjoyment even as the protocols of worship were observed. Lamplight and candles enhanced the radiance of gold and silver; fragrant incense rose in clouds; monks chanted and sometimes sang their lines of scripture. Within the precincts of Kōfuku-ji or Yakushi-ji, or any number of the thriving Nara temples, monks and laity mingled in the celebration of Buddha through visually stimulating environments crowded with images and decorations.

The words “monastery” and “temple” are used interchangeably for these complexes, “monastery” because monks lived and meditated there, “temple” because, as in the *templum* of Greece and Rome, the religious exercises performed in that space involved a corpus of mediating priests and yielded a variety of benefits from spiritual merit to hope for the future. When Buddhism first emerged as a systematic philosophy and practice in ancient India, the monastery and the temple were separate institutions: a monastery was where communities of monks lived and studied; a temple, built around a relic of Buddha, was where laymen and laywomen came for worship and instruction. At Nara, as elsewhere in China and Korea of the eighth century, monastery and temple had been merged into one religious complex that addressed the needs of monks and laity alike.

It was in large part at these religious complexes in Nara, where the public and private universes of monks and patrons met, that the classical Buddhist culture of Nara came into being and was perpetuated for centuries. What has come to be called Nara Buddhism took form among the monks who studied and philosophized at these establishments and who shared their ideas, and agendas, with Shōmu and other monarchs. At monastery halls and chapels were held the sundry rituals of meditation, prayer, and instruction that sustained the Buddhist community that was Nara, from the Daidairi to the commoners who thronged its congested streets. Here was a world for which art mattered, for every moment of practice from meditation to prayer involved Buddhist images and visual stimulation.

### *Nara Buddhism*

Buddhist philosophy and practices were long established in Japan by the time that Nara was built.<sup>6</sup> Around the middle of the sixth century a Korean king had sent Buddhist scriptures and statuary to his Japanese counterpart, and the new philosophy soon gained a following in palace society. For some time there was conflict between proponents of Buddhism and those who wished to preserve the native system of belief in gods called *kami*. However, by the close of the seventh century an equilibrium had been reached, and both Buddhist and *kami* worship flourished under state patronage.

Shōmu and Kōmyōshi were devout Buddhists, to be sure, but it must be emphasized that the celebration of *kami* was also an integral part of their lives. The imperial house claimed the foremost *kami* of all, the sun goddess Amaterasu, as their progenitrix, and messengers were regularly dispatched with offerings to her shrine at Ise on the coast of what is now Mie Prefecture. Eventually Amaterasu would be equated with the Great Buddha and worshiped as a manifestation of the Cosmic Buddha. There were also shrines for *kami* worship at many Nara temples. For example, Tōdai-ji included within its precincts a shrine to Usa Hachiman; Kōfuku-ji was bordered on the east by the Kasuga Shrine, where a family of *kami* were worshiped as the tutelary gods of the Fujiwara house [see 54]. Nonetheless, it was the Buddhism of Nara that most overtly informed the political and cultural life of the city and profoundly affected its rulers, as seen in the legacy of art and culture that they left behind.

In a pattern known throughout the Buddhist world, from India to China, the rulers of Japan had found much in the person and teachings of Buddha that they could relate to their own needs and circumstances. It is not surprising that emperors saw the figure of the Historic Buddha—the Buddha who is part of human history—as especially compelling. The Historic Buddha, one of myriad Buddhas in the infinite Buddhist cosmos, appeared in our world system in the late sixth century BC out of compassion toward sentient beings trapped in the cycle of transmigration. He was born an Indian prince, the famous Siddhartha, and grew up as the scion of the powerful Śākya clan of northern

Indian kings. But Siddhartha in due time renounced his heritage, choosing instead to seek and finally attain enlightenment as a Buddha or “knower of the truth of all things.” He lived out the remainder of his days as an itinerant monk in simple robes, who, given the name Śākyamuni or “Sage of the Śākyas” by his followers, preached a message of liberation for all sentient beings.

Basically the message consisted of four propositions: all is suffering; suffering arises from illusion and desire; there is a realm free from suffering called nirvana; there is a path of practice that leads to nirvana. These “four noble truths,” preached by Śākyamuni and disseminated by his disciples, formed the backbone of a body of teachings that came to be called Buddhism. In the millennia since Siddhartha completed his quest for enlightenment and provided humans with a means to transcendence, there have been many schools of Buddhism and diverse systems of Buddhist practice, but all share a common ground in this core teaching of the four truths as first realized by Siddhartha at the moment he became Buddha.

Kōmyōshi and her circle would have known the story of Siddhartha well, for narratives about the past lives of Buddha were as important to the inculcation of Buddhist values as the subtleties of doctrine. Indeed, illustrated biographies of the Historic Buddha, called Shaka in Japan, were among the articles presented to Tōdai-ji by Kōmyōshi in 756 in memory of Shōmu. On exhibit is a biography in the same vein, *Kako Genzai E-inga-kyō* (Scenes from the life of Shaka) [14], that was probably commissioned by Kōmyōshi or someone at her court around the same period. Naive and engaging, the brightly painted figures of Siddhartha and his retinue provide a lively pictorialization of the static text that stretches below them. This work addresses a theme surely of interest to a Nara ruler such as Shōmu: the origins of Buddhism in the benevolent actions of a prince who, not content with kingship over men, sought a greater and more universal role as the paramount king of all, Buddha.

For there is no question that, whatever Siddhartha’s status as a simple monk who begged for a living, as Buddha he was a king of kings. The conflation dates to earliest times and has been connected to the ancient Indian

ideal of the benevolent monarch called a Wheel-roller (Cakravartin) because, granted a cosmic wheel by which to rule on behalf of the gods, he brings order to the world by turning the wheel of mandate like the sun crossing the sky and illuminating the earth. The Ichiji Kinrin mandala on exhibit [42] presents this symbology of kingship clearly. Buddha is shown in the garb and aspect of a king: he wears a crown and jewelry, sits atop a lion throne, is silhouetted against a solar disk, and has a golden wheel strung around his torso on a thread.

Shōmu and Kōmyōshi certainly would have understood Buddha in these regal terms if only by virtue of their own visual culture. To enter the sanctuary of any one of their worship chapels, at Tōdai-ji or elsewhere, meant an encounter with an image of Buddha seated on a throne or dais, attendants and retinue at the ready, and tribute presented in the form of offerings. Even the word of Buddha, those sermons recorded as scripture, was understood as the law or dharma (Japanese: *hō*) that gave order to all things. Such an encounter, monarch to monarch, might have encouraged a certain humility in a devout emperor such as Shōmu, for one bracing moment not the most powerful figure in the room. But it also no doubt raised the fundamental fact that, all things considered, Buddha and emperor came from the same privileged class.

Another reason that Buddhism appealed to rulers such as Shōmu derived from scriptural assurances that a benevolent monarch would gain the support and protection of Buddha through study and devotion. This notion was especially strong in the diverse system of teachings called Mahāyāna Buddhism, which was developed in India around the beginning of the common era and then spread into Central Asia as monks and lay believers introduced its various forms to communities along the Silk Road.<sup>7</sup> By the fifth century, Mahāyāna Buddhism had emerged as the principal variety of Buddhism practiced along the Silk Road and from there made its way into China, Tibet, Korea, and Japan.

As doctrine, Mahāyāna Buddhism is a dauntingly complex collection of philosophical treatises on the notion of nonsubstantiality or emptiness, the nature of Buddha and mind, and other intellectual concerns well



outside the purview of ordinary people. At the same time, Mahāyāna Buddhism is a resilient system of devotional practices centered around numerous Buddhas and other Buddha-beings as objects of cultic worship. As such it marks a significant departure from an earlier order of conservative Buddhist philosophy and practice that was primarily monastic in emphasis, with a strong bias toward self-sufficiency in the pursuit of wisdom and enlightenment.

Mahāyāna Buddhism, by contrast, offered the easier path of reliance on Buddha through faith and devotion as well as discipline. This transformation, toward what might be called a user-friendly form of Buddhism in view of human foibles, has been linked to the rise of lay devotion in the centuries following the death of Shaka, known as the “final nirvana” or “final cessation,” around 480 BC. Initially such lay devotion had tended to focus on the stupa, that distant relative of the pagoda, where a relic of the Buddha had been entombed. At first there were but eight stupas, for the eight relics taken from the body of Shaka after his cremation, but later centuries saw the proliferation of such sites for the worship of Buddha in the form of his burial mound. All Buddhist reliquaries, even those on exhibit [78, 79], are distant relatives of these first burial mounds.

Another formative element in the development of the Mahāyāna movement was the biographical narrative. Like veneration of stupas, it was a function of the human need to somehow recover the beloved Buddha after the final nirvana, or *parinirvāna* (Japanese: *hatsunehan*), when he completely disappeared from the world. Representations of the final nirvana, such as the canonical *Nehan* (Death of Buddha Shaka) [37], were typical of the trend toward biography and, in showing the distress of Buddha’s followers, underlined the deep sadness posed by his passing. The narrative impulse led to devotional practices involving images of Buddha and to related meditational strategies for the recollection of his form. It was also a major factor in another prominent aspect of Mahāyāna Buddhism: its reliance on the visual arts as a means to seeing and venerating Buddha.

As the Mahāyāna movement gained acceptance, new scriptures were compiled from the second through fifth centuries, among them a

collection of sutras on wisdom (or gnosis) popularly known as the *Prajñāpāramitā* (Japanese: *Hannyaharamitsu*) literature: the *Kegon Sutra* (Sanskrit: *Avatamsaka sūtra*; Japanese: *Kegon-kyō*) on Buddha’s enlightenment and the nature of the bodhisattva, or compassionate being destined for Buddhahood; the *Lotus Sutra* (*Saddharmapundarika sūtra*; *Hokke-kyō*) on the purity of mind and Buddha nature, the perfect enlightenment of Buddha, and the expediency—the “one-vehicle” efficacy—of Mahāyāna tenets; the *Golden Light Sutra* (*Suvarnaprabhāsa sūtra*; *Konkōmyō-kyō*) on benevolent kingship; the *Land of Bliss Sutra* (*Sukhāvativyūha sūtra*; *Muryōju-kyō*) on rebirth in paradise and the liberating power of faith; and many others. On the one hand complicated philosophical tracts addressing various matters of doctrine, these Mahāyāna sutras also describe a universe of practice that encompasses, not simply Buddha, but manifold Buddhas and literally hundreds of Buddha-beings as objects of worship.

Such Mahāyāna devotion pivots on the idea that there are many Buddhas, not just one (although all share in the same nature), and that these Buddhas are attended by bodhisattvas and other beings often in great numbers.<sup>8</sup> Buddha is understood as having three bodies: absolute, magical, and manifest. The absolute body is the prime—Buddha as the state of enlightenment itself—and strictly speaking cannot be conceived; as such the absolute body is the cosmic essence, or support, of the other two bodies. It is this Buddha body, the absolute body of the dharma, that the stupa and pagoda symbolize. The manifest body appears, or manifests itself, in a world system such as ours; the Historic Buddha is an example, but there are many more since there are infinite world systems in the Buddhist cosmos. The magical body is the form taken by Buddha in one of an infinite number of paradisaic Buddha-fields, or pure lands, that exist as a kind of visionary virtual reality granted to those who have achieved advanced understanding. On exhibit is a representation of one such paradise, that of Amida in Gokuraku, his “Land of Bliss” in the western quadrant of the cosmos [52]. Known as the Taima mandala, the painting shows Amida enthroned at the heart of his pure land and was probably used as a teaching aid in the explication of the rigorous sixteen-

step visualization practice characteristic of Amidist worship.

As important to Mahāyāna devotion as the idea of multiple Buddhas, and also the foundation of its doctrinal framework, is the ideal of the bodhisattva. A bodhisattva is a being who has evolved through practice and wisdom to a state of such perfection that enlightenment is imminent. The term means as much: *bodhi* is the Sanskrit term for the Buddha nature that brings about enlightenment; *sattva* means a living sentient being. Out of compassion, however, the bodhisattva stops short of ultimate release and remains in the world of the sentient to guide others along the path to enlightenment. For early Buddhists this notion marked a radical departure from the former ideal of the *arhat* (Japanese: *rakan*) or reclusive holy man, who focused on his own enlightenment rather than that of others. The arhat remained an object of reverence in Mahāyāna Buddhism, but the bodhisattva came to embody the Mahāyāna philosophy of compassion.

As the paintings and statues in the exhibition amply demonstrate, there are many kinds of bodhisattva. One of the most prominent is the versatile Avalokiteśvara, or Kannon as the bodhisattva is popularly known in Japan. Androgynous and changeable, Kannon is regarded as a compassionate savior who takes a variety of different forms in order to expedite the process of bringing sentient beings to enlightenment. On view are six varieties of Kannon, from the simple to the complex [22–23, 26, 29, 31, 45–49, 67]. Shōmu and Kōmyōshi would have been familiar with most of these forms in connection with the Mahāyāna Buddhism that flourished at their court and the emphasis on Kannon as one of its exemplars.

They also would have known that the Buddhas and bodhisattvas of Mahāyāna belief, along with the various subsidiary guardian beings that surrounded them, could act on the world to protect those who worshiped them and cherished their scriptures. Such worship took several forms besides prayer, faith, and the study and self-discipline required of serious students of Buddhism. One of the greatest of meritorious acts was the making of Buddhist imagery. This included sponsoring and financing a wide variety of objects: paintings, sculptures, sutra transcrip-

tions, ritual implements, altar decorations and furnishings. It extended as well to the construction and maintenance of monasteries and temples. In the world of Shōmu and Kōmyōshi, such activity was an essential part of the practice and indeed the experience of Buddhism. Art garnered protection and merit, to be sure, but it was also a magnificent display of faith in Buddha according to the Mahāyāna tradition.

For help in this task, and instruction, Shōmu and Kōmyōshi turned to the erudite community of monks who inhabited the Nara monasteries. Monks had their own history within Buddhism as its preservers and sustainers. Sworn to lives of strict discipline in the pursuit of their own enlightenment, monks also studied and commented on Buddhist scripture, debated doctrine, gave instruction on Buddhist tenets, oversaw the daily round of worship, and for the most part served as the representatives of Buddhism to the lay community at large. They were expected to pattern their lives after Shaka, who spent the forty-odd years of his ministry as a peripatetic wanderer who begged for his food, ate one meal a day, dressed in a simple robe, and slept under trees or atop stones.

The monks of Nara were kept to this ideal by the state, which legislated through its administrative codes a specific set of requirements for those who would enter the monastery and thus escape taxation and military service. Regulations promulgated in the decade following the move to Nara made it compulsory that a monk live at a monastery and not wander through the countryside, study doctrine and give sermons, meditate, and recite scriptures. The state also controlled the monastic community through a centralized system of ecclesiastical ranks and as overseer of the ordination of monks. The monks named to the top positions in this religious hierarchy, akin to its pope and cardinals, held power over the Nara monastic population as its ranking prelates. Such men could come from any one of the Nara monasteries but traditionally had been drawn from Yakushi-ji, the principal imperial temple of the old Fujiwara capital and a key institution for the imperial lineage to which Shōmu belonged. Not surprisingly, prelates were usually affiliated with the imperial house or noble families. It is doubtful that any but a

handful of these aristocrats, strongly bound to the state as they were, lived strictly in accordance with their precepts.

But there were some monks in Nara who believed in the Shaka ideal and went out to preach among the common and the outcast. One such populist was Gyōki, who kept to a life of poverty and itinerancy modeled on that of Shaka. Another was Rōben, who kept to an austere lifestyle in a small chapel on Mt. Mikasa detached from the world of monastic politics. Both Gyōki and Rōben, although influential in the lay community, were marginalized by the Nara establishment for much of their lives. Gyōki in particular was censured repeatedly for his refusal to abide by the regulation that monks not venture outside their monastic compound. That Gyōki and Rōben would eventually have prominent roles in the planning and construction of Tōdai-ji may have come as a shock to more conservative members of their community. For Shōmu and Kōmyōshi, however, theirs was a praxis that surely would have seemed a model of simple Buddhist piety in the complicated world of doctrine embraced by the Nara monastic establishment.

The salient characteristic of this establishment, aside from its close association with the Nara state, was a scholastic orientation in the practice and exposition of Buddhism. Several philosophical traditions coexisted at the Nara monasteries and were studied assiduously by monks in a seminar or study group format. In the early years the Sanron and Hossō traditions were especially prominent, their proponents meeting at Hōryū-ji, Daian-ji, Yakushi-ji, Kōfuku-ji, and other monasteries for discussion and debate. These were rarefied matters: Sanron adepts focused on three early Mahāyāna tracts on the notion of the middle path and a doctrine of eight negative truths in its realization; Hossō thinkers pursued the “consciousness-only” doctrine of Yogacara philosophy, a fifth-century branch of the Mahāyāna movement. Similarly abstract in emphasis were the Jōjitsu and Kusha traditions. With the introduction of the Kegon and Ritsu schools under Shōmu at mid-century, Nara became home to six Mahāyāna intellectual traditions of distinctly philosophical cast. Later these were called the “six schools” of Nara Buddhism.

Scholasticism meant a sometimes pedantic or dogmatic approach to Buddhism and a corollary emphasis on exegesis over faith, but it also encouraged intellectual diversity in the Nara community. Many monks traveled to China to study or seek Buddhist masters to invite back to Nara as new participants in a thriving society of thinkers. Bodhisena and Daoxuan had come to Nara in this way in 736. The scriptures and treatises introduced through such exchange prompted yet more interpretation, more argument, more philosophizing. It is probably accurate to say that Nara Buddhism by the time of Shōmu was first and foremost a Buddhism for scholars.

Shōmu and his peers turned to these scholars, especially the most erudite and respected among them, for advice and guidance in matters of religion public and private. Such experts oversaw the Buddhist rites that preserved the safety of the nation under the rubric *chingo kokka* (tutelary protection of the national polity). These rites, held at the Daigokuden, were a staple of the Nara government and served to promote a sense of stability even in times of high anxiety resulting from political assassination, epidemic disease, earthquake, and, toward the end of the century, war with recalcitrant tribesmen in the north. But the most influential role for a Nara monk was that of private advisor to a member of the imperial house or a high aristocrat. It was to such men, from the Nara hierarchy but also from its margins, that Shōmu and Kōmyōshi turned for instruction in the scriptures, teachings, and rites that would become the basis not only for the Great Buddha and Tōdai-ji, but also for the outpouring of art that came to describe their regime.

#### *Iconography and Vision*

The monks who served Shōmu and Kōmyōshi and gave them advice, whether for worship activities or for sponsoring images, needed to negotiate a body of iconography and ritual practice handed down over centuries as part of the Mahāyāna canon. In this sense the Buddhist art of Nara, in all its complexity and aesthetic sophistication, stood atop an edifice of Mahāyāna visual culture that stretched back into the deep past of Buddhism itself. It was an edifice built on the power of sight, and insight, in the quest for Buddhist transcendence.

Strong emphasis on visual materials in meditation and ritual is characteristic of Mahāyāna Buddhism, whose primary scriptures encourage visionary engagement with various Buddhas and Buddha-beings. The importance of seeing these figures, of making contact with them through vision and contemplation, is consequently a critical aspect of Mahāyāna practice. The very process of awakening itself, through which enlightenment becomes possible, is understood as one of seeing or gaining insight.

What worshipers saw at the beginning of Buddhist art, in the first centuries after the final nirvana, was Buddha as symbol: Buddha represented by a wheel or a stupa, by footprints, by an empty throne. This system of representation, called aniconic, has been likened to epithets or nicknames for the Buddha presence, which cannot be localized in one place. It is possible that reluctance to depict Buddha in human form—human existence being a product of the world of illusion—also contributed to the early proliferation of aniconic representation. In time fully anthropomorphized figures of Buddha became the norm, but aniconic imagery continued to form the deep grammar of Buddhist visual culture. The pagoda is but one example of the lasting power of this formative symbolic order.<sup>9</sup>

Representation of Buddha in human form has been linked to the Mahāyāna movement. The ideal of the Buddha body is fully articulated in the *Sutra of the Great Nirvana* (*Mahāparinirvāna sūtra; Daihatsu nehan-kyō*), a central Mahāyāna text that is believed to be a record of the final sermon of Buddha. The sutra describes how Shaka, preparing to enter the final nirvana, displayed his naked body to his disciples and showed them the major and minor characteristics that identified it as a Buddha body. There were thirty-two major characteristics and eighty minor marks. Among the major characteristics were long fingers, broad heels, soft and delicate hands and feet, a sheathed penis, a rounded body, golden skin, blue eyes, white teeth. After the viewing, Shaka died and was cremated. The resulting ash and bone were distributed for deposit in stupas.<sup>10</sup>

This account, written hundreds of years after Shaka disappeared from the earth, nonetheless articulates the basic features of Buddha's figuration in art. First of all, Buddha

causes his own representation to be seen as an act of compassion. The representation is that of a beautiful human male. This is not to say that Buddha, as the state of enlightenment, is gendered; Buddha should properly take the pronoun "it." The male body is simply a strategy for representing Buddha to humans. Like other expedient means in the quest for insight, it makes it possible to visualize Buddha as if he were still in the world in the form of Shaka, once an Indian prince, now an enlightened being for whom gender is ultimately meaningless.

By the sixth century, as the Mahāyāna movement spread through the various communities of the Silk Road, the expediency of images in devotion and meditation had resulted in a proliferation of Buddhas and Buddha-beings. Early Mahāyāna scripture and practice generated thousands of iconic possibilities for Buddha alone, an example being the *Kegon Sutra* with its myriad Buddhas and Buddha-realms emanating from the sunlike Cosmic Buddha that is the central image of the text. Shōmu knew this iconography well. There were pictures of those myriad realms engraved on the gilt-bronze lotus petals attached to the pedestal on which the Daibutsu sat enthroned.

A means to managing this burgeoning population of Buddha-beings, which grew exponentially as Buddhism crossed Central Asia, was developed in the Vajrayāna or "Diamond Vehicle" movement. Emerging from within the Mahāyāna fold during the sixth century, later to be brought to Japan as the Shingon school in 806, Vajrayāna Buddhism promoted high levels of ritual interaction with Buddha-beings and developed a systematic understanding of the Buddhist universe as a hierarchical space. Adepts were initiated into secret teachings transmitted directly from Buddha and accessible only to those taught esoteric ritual behaviors including hand gestures, mantras and other chants, and visualization techniques. Mastery of the behaviors was expected to produce union with Buddha or a Buddha-being, magical power resulting from such contact, and various earthly benefits and merits. The emphasis on secrecy, initiation, and transmission explains why the Vajrayāna movement is also called Esoteric Buddhism (Japanese: Mikkyō). Other designations for the movement are

Mantrayāna, after the extensive use of mantras by practitioners, and, more generally, Tantrism after the importance of tantras or secret scriptures.

The central Buddha of the Vajrayāna system is Dainichi, the Great Sun Buddha, who is an amplified form of Birushana, the Cosmic Buddha of the *Kegon Sutra*. Dainichi is understood as having revealed the ultimate secret teachings of Buddha in the form of two scriptures: the *Dainichi Sutra* (*Mahāvairocana sūtra*; *Dainichi-kyō*), which explains the Womb World (Garbhadhātu; Taizōkai) and the presence of Dainichi as a manifest energy at the heart of all things; and the *Diamond Crown Sutra* (*Vajraśekhara sūtra*; *Kongōchōkyō*) on the Diamond World (Vajradhātu; Kongōkai) and the all-pervasive wisdom of Dainichi as imminent in the world. These texts emphasize that the universe, as substance and as form, is generated from the body of Dainichi and can be conceptualized as the Womb and Diamond worlds. To make the matter clear, the *Dainichi* and *Diamond Crown* sutras refer to visual aids called mandalas that picture the universe as emanating from Dainichi in the form of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and other Buddha-beings.

The Ryōkai mandala on exhibit [41], completed in the twelfth century but entirely consistent with the canonical mandala format of Vajrayāna Buddhism, is a finely wrought representation, in gold and silver on indigo-dyed silk, of this universe of emanations. As a mandala, or transformation of doctrine into pictures, the painting shows the paired Womb and Diamond realms in a schematic geometrical arrangement that presents the universe as a crowd of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and other beings emanating from Dainichi. There are 414 images of Buddha-beings in the Womb mandala, taken from the second and ninth chapters of the *Dainichi* sutra; and 1,461 for the Diamond mandala as explained in the second part of the *Diamond Crown Sutra*. It is a dizzying explication in pictures of the generative force that is Dainichi in the world.

As such the Ryōkai mandala exemplifies the enormous importance of the visual arts in the explication and dissemination of Buddhist doctrine. The prelate Kūkai said as much when he introduced Vajrayāna teachings to the Japanese court in the early ninth century:

In truth, esoteric doctrines are so profound as to defy their enunciation in writing. With the help of painting, however, their obscurities may be understood. . . . Thus the secrets of the sūtras and commentaries are depicted in art, and the essential truths of the esoteric teaching are all set forth therein. . . . Art is what reveals to us the state of perfection.<sup>11</sup>

While these words are directed specifically to Vajrayāna practice, they are grounded in centuries of Buddhist emphasis on the importance of visuality in the quest for insight.

The mandala is an important manifestation of this need to make doctrine perceivable through vision and has taken many forms since its beginnings in ancient India as an altarlike structure, or dais, containing two-dimensional and three-dimensional representations of sacred teachings or gods.<sup>12</sup> In its broadest sense a mandala is a transformation of words into pictures, or concepts into their graphic forms, and thus takes many shapes: the orderly Ryōkai mandala; the Taima mandala with its perspectival depth and juxtaposition of geometric with natural imagery [52]; the “shrine” mandala with its rolling landscape and schematic architectural elements [54, 56].

The crucial place of visual materials as an armature for doctrine is made clear in the *Dainichi* and *Diamond Crown* sutras when they explain their respective mandalas. There is little doubt that the compilers of the texts were working from visual records at hand. For example, the *Dainichi Sutra* describes Shaka as having a purple-gold body that displays the thirty-two marks, and Dainichi as wearing a crown of gold with colored lights streaming out from his body.<sup>13</sup> The language is so pictorially specific that the sutras recall the Greek rhetorical art of ekphrasis or vivid description of a painting, sculpture, or building.

Such specificity indicates the existence of a coherent Buddhist iconography by the time that the *Dainichi* and *Diamond Crown* sutras were compiled. As the Buddhas and Buddha-beings of Mahāyāna Buddhism proliferated, a general taxonomic structure was developed for their description and classification. The Vajrayāna movement prompted yet more classification through a fully articulated Buddhist iconographical movement directed to



the needs of ritual and meditation. Consequently, a systematic Buddhist iconography was in place by the close of the sixth century. It was further codified and streamlined through various iconographic manuals that combined textual references with specific images, such as the *Iconographical Sketches of the Deities of the Taizōkai Mandala* [40]. The Mahāyāna emphasis on visuality had produced both a vast system of imagery and its codification through visual aids—mandalas and manuals—of critical importance to the preparation of artistic and ritual environments.

Shōmu and Kōmyōshi would not have known the complex Vajrayāna iconographical system as represented in the Ryōkai mandala, for it would be another fifty years before its teachings reached the Japanese court. However, they would have been acquainted with the fundamentals of Buddhist taxonomy—the root structures on which later Vajrayāna iconography was based—and with the idea that the universe emanated from a Cosmic Buddha. The Daibutsu at Tōdai-ji, after all, was precisely such a Cosmic Buddha whence emanated infinite worlds as engraved on the lotus petals of the dais. The fundamentals of Buddhist iconography were also in evidence throughout the temples of Nara, whose various structures contained a strikingly diverse community of Buddhas and Buddha-beings rendered as paintings and statuary.

Buddhist iconography begins with two paramount concerns on initial encounter with a Buddhist image: who is it, and what can it do?<sup>14</sup> The first concern, of typing and identification, is addressed by a hierarchical ordering of Buddha-beings into four general classifications—Buddha, bodhisattva, wisdom king, and god—and by assignment of distinctive personalities and behaviors to the members of each classification. The second concern, about intentions and interactions, is resolved through a reading of hand gestures and implements displayed by individual members of the various classifications.

Hand gestures, called mudras after the Sanskrit term *mudrā* (*insō*), are like a sign language that structures the relationship between icon and beholder. A mudra might signal meditation or trance [10, 63]; indicate an active state of preaching and comforting [19,

24]; suggest a state of creative energy [20, 30, 42]; demonstrate prayer [35–36]. Implements held in the hands, called attributes, also relay information about the image. One of the most common attributes is the lotus, which symbolizes purity and transformation because it blossoms above muddy water. The numerous attributes held in the hands of the thousand-armed version of Kannon—lotus, magic jewel, rosary, water jar, wheel—signal in no uncertain terms the vast capabilities of this powerful bodhisattva [46, 48].<sup>15</sup>

For the most part Buddhas, bodhisattvas, wisdom kings, and gods, each with its respective mudras and attributes, take the human form as their point of departure. There is considerable androgyny for Buddhas and bodhisattvas, especially in the East Asian interpretations of Mahāyāna iconography, paralleled by strongly gendered representations for wisdom kings and gods. The variations on human anatomy can be striking: multiple eyes, heads, arms, even legs; multicolored bodies; a wide range of affect from the furious to the delighted. There are even a few zoo-anthropomorphic figures, such as the form of Kannon that has the head of a horse [29]. Such variety supports the basic premise of the Mahāyāna pantheon: Buddha displays—and takes—many forms in order to expedite the salvation of sentient beings through the expedient means of visuality and devotion. The role of Buddhist iconography, with its four orders of Buddha-being and their respective conventions, is to make those many forms comprehensible.

The “Buddha” order is structured around the notion of the three Buddha bodies of absolute enlightenment, magic, and manifestation. Developed early in the Mahāyāna movement, this idea allows for the singularity of Buddha to generate multiple Buddhas of the past, present, and future. Thus there are many Buddhas possible as bodies of enlightenment, magic, and manifestation. There has been only one manifestation body in human history, of course, that of Shaka, but there will be many more in future world systems. One such Future Buddha, now a bodhisattva in a state of suspension awaiting the next world, is Miroku, who will begin a new world system once the current one has ended.

The cosmic Birushana and Dainichi are bodies of pure enlightenment, or dharma, and

represent Buddha in the most abstract sense. So cerebral is the emphasis that there is even a form of dharma body called Wisdom Peak Buddha, or Butchōson, after the cranial protuberance atop Buddha's head. The Ichiji Kinrin mandala [42] and Daibutchō mandala [43] contain representations of the most powerful of the Wisdom Peak Buddhas, Ichiji Kinrin. The Buddhas Amida and Yakushi, by contrast, represent blissful enjoyment bodies eternally present in their respective pure lands to the west and east. These Buddhas make themselves manifest to men and women in visions or waking dreams, often as a reward for meritorious behavior, and are capable of acting on the world. Amida comes to take the dying back to paradise, as shown in the "welcoming descents" or Raigō [53, 72]. Yakushi, the Healer Buddha, grants aid to those suffering from illness; thus Yakushi Nyorai [24] raises his right hand in a soothing gesture while holding a medicine jar in his left hand.

There are two conventions for the representation of the Buddha body, although each includes some of the characteristic marks described in the *Sutra of the Great Nirvana* such as a cranial protuberance, long earlobes, snailshell curls, and tuft of hair between the brows. The most common convention is Buddha as monk. In this guise Buddha wears a simple robe thrown over the left shoulder to leave the chest bare and a skirtlike loincloth known as a dhoti [37]. There is neither ornament nor jewelry, and the head is bald or covered in short curls. The second convention is Buddha as an Indian king, which is limited to depictions of the dharma body such as Dainichi and Ichiji Kinrin. Buddha wears his hair long and bound in a high topknot; is dressed as a prince in dhoti and sash, his chest bare; and displays ornaments such as a crown, thick jewelry, and a golden wheel [see 42]. Such raiment symbolizes the role of Buddha as the ultimate Cakravartin even though he appeared in human history in the guise of an ordinary monk.

Most figures of Buddha are shown in a state of meditation or in quiet poses of instruction and reassurance. For example, Dainichi sits still with legs folded even as his hands form one of the most aggressive mudras, that of the "wisdom fist," which signals the procreative force of the Cosmic Buddha and sets

the world in motion [see 42]. The emphasis on stasis follows logically from the notion that Buddha is in essence the state of enlightenment, the doors of which are opened by meditation. In the stillness and symmetry of the Buddha image is reflected an ideal moment of complete containment and centeredness.

The "bodhisattva" order has many members in keeping with the importance of the bodhisattva to Mahāyāna doctrine and devotion. Bodhisattvas take numerous forms, for they embody the infinite ways in which Buddha makes it possible to find the path to enlightenment. Dressed like dharma bodies in dhoti and sash, covered in jewelry from head to foot, their scarves fluttering: bodhisattvas are the high royalty of Buddhist iconography [22, 48]. There are a few exceptions, such as Jizō Bosatsu [27], who is dressed as a monk for journeys along the six paths of existence to help those trapped in the cycle of reincarnation and suffering. But most bodhisattvas, even the zooanthropomorphic Batō Kannon, are depicted as Indian princes.

Bodhisattvas are understood to be extroverted, ready to grant aid to those in need, and so their representations often suggest that the figure is moving through space. A bodhisattva may stand in a languorous pose with hips swaying; may sit in relaxation with one leg bent at the knee; may seem to walk toward the viewer; may even fan multiple arms in a cobralike display of attributes [48]. Some bodhisattvas ride animals with which they are totemically linked. For example, Monju [34] is often depicted atop a roaring lion that, lunging forward, symbolizes the voiced teachings of Buddha and the wisdom of Monju as caretaker of those teachings. Fugen [35–36] rides a steadily advancing white elephant which possibly symbolizes the longevity and knowledge that the bodhisattva bestows.

The "wisdom king" order originates in the Vajrayāna notion that certain syllables and words are supercharged with the vast energies and wisdom of the Cosmic Buddha. A wisdom king is a syllable or chant embodied and, as such, is a manifestation of the secret teachings of Vajrayāna Buddhism—its generative wisdom—and the enormous forces that the teachings unleash. Through the wis-

dom king these forces are channeled toward the obstruction of evil, the destruction of illusion, and the awakening of sentient beings to the Buddha nature within. Of all the Buddha-beings of the Mahāyāna pantheon, it is the wisdom king who is the most overt articulation of the terrible power that is latent within Buddha.

Wisdom kings are usually depicted as angry or belligerent, their bodies flushed red or blue or yellow with emotion, and they rarely stand still [51]. They grimace like monsters, throw their muscular male bodies into a variety of dramatic poses, and generally make a spectacle of themselves [77]. Even the costume of a wisdom king is intimidating. Over clothing akin to that of a bodhisattva, a wisdom king might wear an animal skin, a necklace of human skulls, even a writhing snake. Beneath his feet he might even trample a demon writhing in agony. The Aizen Myōō on exhibit [30] well illustrates the typical demeanor and accouterments of a wisdom king, here in a body stained red with human lust transformed into its opposite: the conquest of desire.

The "god" classification in Buddhist iconography encompasses the many benevolent supernatural beings who, with humans and animals, ply the world of illusion. As distinguished from Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and wisdom kings, whose fundamental task is to guide sentient beings toward enlightenment, gods have a more mundane duty as tutelary protectors of Buddhism and its community of believers. They are fully gendered, not surprisingly, and for the most part are either aristocratic or military in bearing. The aristocratic types are usually shown in some form of fancy dress with a local provenance instead of the classical Indian costume worn by Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and wisdom kings. For example, the ten female gods in the Fugen and Ten Rasetsumyo [36] wear Japanese court robes.

In striking contrast to these elegant women are the rough types, the bodyguards and bouncers, who make up the military gods. These macho figures embody the protective powers of Buddha that can be mustered in the name of Buddhism to safeguard the faithful. Most wear suits of colorful Central Asian armor and brandish weaponry while grimacing furiously; others appear with chests bared

in a display of musculature. The figure of Bishamonten in the Hekija (Extermination of Evil by Buddhist Deities) [39] exemplifies the typical military god, here protecting a virtuous monk by chasing away demons. Another protector, the Rikishi with chest and arms flexed in a show of muscles [20], represents the type of military god called a "strongman" (*rikishi*), who stood guard at the entrances to temples and cities. Genmei had colossal statues of such sentries placed inside Rajōmon, gateway to the Nara capital.

The taxonomy of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, wisdom kings, and gods is just that: a classification system that provides a convenient way of sorting the various Buddha-beings of the Mahāyāna pantheon. But it must be emphasized that this classification system charts a world of interrelations, unities, potentialities, and constant shifts of identity. Whether in scripture or ritual, Buddhas and Buddha-beings are always in some sort of relationship. They are usually presented in the company of other Buddhas and Buddha-beings; with crowds of humans and sometimes animals nearby; entertained by various magical creatures, among them the humanized songbird *karyōbinga* depicted in one of the *keman* (hanging votive ornament) on exhibit [68].

Most figures of Buddha are provided with attendant bodhisattvas. The standard configuration is that of the Buddha triad, in which Buddha is flanked to each side by a bodhisattva especially important to that particular cult. For example, Shaka is usually shown with the bodhisattvas Monju and Fugen, as seen in the Shaka Nyorai triad [33]. Kannon and Seishi accompany Amida and are seen directly to his right and left in the Taima mandala [52]. Usually such a triad is surrounded by images of military gods known as the *shitennō*, or four heavenly kings, who guard it from danger at the four cardinal points.

Sometimes Buddhas and bodhisattvas require especially large retinues of attendants and guardians. A figure of Shaka, for example, might be accompanied by images of Monju and Fugen, the original ten disciples of Buddha, the four heavenly kings, and the five hundred arhats who symbolize the earliest community of Buddhists. Yakushi has a retinue that includes ten bodhisattvas, twelve guardian generals, and seven emanations

from his own body. Amida is often depicted with twenty-five attendant bodhisattvas or in nine emanations that symbolize the nine sectors of his paradise.

The phenomenon of emanation is a basic tenet of Mahāyāna philosophy. Fundamentally speaking, the whole of the Mahāyāna universe emanates from Buddha, and Buddha as the cosmic dharma body—Birushana or Dainichi—generates all Buddhas, bodhisattvas, wisdom kings, and gods. In this sense there are no stable iconic identities but rather various states of multiplicity and intersubjectivity. Thus Amida takes nine identical forms for the nine levels of rebirth in his pure land; and the bodhisattva Jizō has six identical forms for the six paths of existence.

In a complex articulation of the same principle, Buddha gives rise to five hypostatized forms, or condensations of Buddha, collectively known in Vajrayāna doctrine as the five Great Wisdom Buddhas. They are seen in the most important sectors of the Diamond and Womb mandalas. For example, the sector at the middle of the Kongōkai mandala shows the group clearly [41]: Dainichi in a circle at the apex or center; Amida to Dainichi's west in the circle above; Fukūjōju to the north in the circle to the right of Dainichi; Ashuku to the east in the circle below; and Hōshō to the south in the circle to the left of Dainichi. These Buddhas trigger their own sets of emanations in the form of bodhisattvas and wisdom kings, here shown surrounding each Buddha at the center of its circle. Thus Dainichi is also the bodhisattva Fugen and the wisdom king Fudō.

A remarkable set of emanations occurs in the case of Kannon, who seems to be the most versatile bodhisattva of all in the art of shape changing. There are at least thirty-three forms of Kannon, "the all-seeing and all-hearing," whose chameleonlike aspects are emphasized in scripture. Shōkannon is the prime or "original" Kannon and usually appears in simple human form with extra eyes hidden in the palms of its hands [67]. Other forms of Kannon are memorable for the imaginative and even freakish shapes that they take. Jūichimen Kannon has eleven heads and multiple arms [23], Senju eleven heads and a thousand arms [46, 48], Batō the head of a horse and an angry face [29]. Fukūkenjaku, a third eye transecting its fore-

head vertically, grasps in two of its six arms the rope and hook by which it reels in humans like fish from the sea.

Buddhist iconography as a taxonomy organizes this universe of emanations in efficient ways directed toward devotional practice. For it is ultimately devotion itself that drives the need to sort, arrange, and connect the various Buddha-beings of the Mahāyāna pantheon. When Shōmu and his advisors followed iconographic protocols in the making of Buddhist imagery, there was more at stake than simple accuracy of depiction from a textual or doctrinal standpoint. Even more extensive connections had to be made: between icon and worshiper, and heart to heart. The rules of iconography offered a means to vouchsafe the proper ritual environments for these engagements.

#### *Domains of Worship*

The temples of Nara, from magnificent Tōdai-ji to the humble establishments frequented by the inhabitants of its market districts, held in common a heritage that stretched back to ancient India and the first temple, Jetavana, where Buddha had lived and taught after attaining enlightenment. Fundamentally, Nara temples were places where a worshiper might still hope to encounter Buddha and hear his voice. They were also places for gifts, decoration, and the experience of shōgon in the celebration of Buddha and his teachings. It was a world suited to art and aesthetic experience.

Shaka had been an itinerant preacher for much of his life and did not collect material goods. But he was frequently invited into the homes of his followers, proffered food and clothing, and entertained as a prelude to the sermon it was hoped he would give. A special setting was prepared for the occasion. Furniture was brought in, cloth hangings put up, lamps and incense lit, food and water set out in containers, flowers arranged in attractive ways. From these early gestures of hospitality arose the protocols of Buddhist ritual practice: preparation and decoration of a ritual environment; presentation of offerings; and spiritual and intellectual engagement.

By the time that Shōmu was building Tōdai-ji, the basic Mahāyāna worship space had already been standardized. At the center of the space, in its sanctuary, was a raised

dais of square or octagonal format that served as the altar. Objects of worship were placed on the altar in a variety of ways. Statues typically occupied a lotus pedestal or some form of throne; paintings were hung inside a shrine or occasionally suspended from ceiling beams; sutras might have their own elaborate container such as the shrine for *Daihannya Sutra*s [75]. There were also altar furnishings, such as the three-legged table [85] and stand for a *kei* (ritual chime) [83].

Above the altar was a ceremonial canopy decorated with strings of beads and other ornaments. The pillars and beams of the sanctuary space around the altar were hung with textiles, such as the *ban* (ritual banner) [71], and openwork ornaments called *keman* [68–70]. On the altar were placed containers for the precious offerings of Buddhist worship: incense, flowers, and light. The set of ritual implements [84], although considerably more complex an assortment than anything Shōmu or Kōmyōshi would have known in their day, provides a full complement of such containers.

The creation of a beautiful ritual space—fragrant, radiant, replete with offerings—ensured a proper environment for prayer and transcendence. It was an environment meant to bring to mind the universe of a Buddha or Buddha-being. Completely distinct from the world beyond its walls, such a space allowed worshipers who entered it to cross over into a domain of spiritual engagement in which art—statuary, paintings, ornamentation—set the parameters of religious experience. Here was the territory of worship and ritual so important to Shōmu and his peers, where Buddhist images in their decorated sanctuaries became the object of intense devotion and desire.

Such devotion was predicated on the awakening of a Buddhist image to its ritual environment and the beauties offered therein. After all, even the Great Buddha in the last analysis was nothing but a pile of bronze over which artisans had climbed with their chisels and hammers. Like all Buddha images—statues, paintings, mandalas—the Great Buddha had needed to be “awakened” in a consecration ritual known as the *Kaigen Kuyō*, or Eye-opener. The ritual was held whenever a newly completed (or repaired) image was readied for worship in its sacred environment. It consisted of a simple but

powerful act: the painting of pupils into the eyes of the icon so that it could see.

The Eye-opener for the Great Buddha had been a spectacular event. Bodhisena had presided in the early summer of 752 and painted in the pupils from a scaffolding far above the crowd of monks and courtiers gathered in the courtyard below. From the large brush that he held in his hands stretched an indigo-blue cord at least six hundred feet in length. It reached down to Shōmu, Kōmyōshi, Kōken, and many others behind them who took it in their hands and thus participated directly in the ritual. When the ceremony ended and the Daibutsu awoke, dancers and musicians filled the courtyard with the joyous sounds of celebration.

By the mid-eighth century the world of Buddhist ritual practice, dominated by the interventions of Nara monks before such awakened images, consisted largely of four areas besides the spontaneous moments of individual prayer characteristic of Buddhism in general: the reading and chanting of scriptures; communal worship involving the presentation of offerings followed by formal prayers or sermons and, depending on the circumstances, penitential rites; formal debates on points of scripture; and funerary or memorial rituals. Most services of this type were held at temples, either on a platform in front of the main hall where the primary object of worship was housed, or in the subsidiary halls and chapels prepared for individual worship. Some were staged at the imperial compound or in aristocratic residences. One of the most important state rituals of the eighth century was the *Gosaie*, a series of worship services held annually at the Daigokuden in conjunction with readings of the *Golden Light Sutra*.

What did Shōmu and others hope to gain when they held such services in the opulent sacred spaces of Buddhist ritual practice? One objective was the generation of spiritual merit, which, like money saved in a bank, could be exchanged for safe passage in the afterlife, perhaps toward a better reincarnation. Another was the garnering of earthly benefits such as tutelary protection, good health, affluence, the comfort of high status. The *Gosaie* was expected to generate such benefits on a national scale for the Nara state: peace, prosperity, a good harvest.



The construction of the Great Buddha, seen against this context of devotional practice and ritual space, was the making of a sacred domain at the heart of the Nara imperium. In a sense it made the whole of the Japanese archipelago into a temple that enshrined the colossal unifying force symbolized by the huge gilt-bronze Buddha. Having negotiated the terrain of iconography and practice, Shōmu and his advisors arrived at a magnificent formula for Buddhist empire as expressed through art and worship. That Nara would remain the cradle of Japanese Buddhism for centuries to come, even as the Nara state itself was lost, is eloquent testimony to the wisdom of that formula.

#### *The Beauties of Scripture*

In ancient Sanskrit the word *sūtra* means “thread,” but it is also used for aphorisms, teachings, or philosophical arguments that have been committed to writing as if strung on a thread of logic. The first Buddhist sutras were recorded in the early centuries following the final nirvana, to swell to an enormous literature with the advent of Mahāyāna philosophy. More than one thousand sutras made up the Buddhist canon as Shōmu and Kōmyōshi knew it, written out in ink on paper in upward of five thousand fascicles, or rolls, in the standard handscroll format common throughout East Asia.

In 736 Genbō, a Kōfuku-ji monk resident in China for nearly two decades, had brought a recent edition of the canon back with him to Nara.<sup>16</sup> It was written in Chinese translated from original Sanskrit texts. No doubt Shōmu and Kōmyōshi were educated enough to read the Chinese texts and copy them as well because both had been raised among scholars and were accomplished calligraphers in the Chinese tradition. But it is clear that Shōmu and Kōmyōshi, like most of their peers, would have relied on their Nara Buddhist masters for full exegesis and instruction.

Aside from study and analysis, sutras lent themselves to votive transcription and worship as beautiful objects. The copying of sutras was regarded as a highly meritorious activity and indeed was promoted in the texts of many sutras. Kōmyōshi was an especially active patron of votive sutra transcription. By 727 she had her own scriptorium at the Nara palace, where calligraphers produced thou-

sands of fascicles of copied sutra texts. For example, in 736 as a memorial to her parents Kōmyōshi had sponsored a full transcription of the canon brought back by Genbō. Votive transcription of sutras was also carried out in behalf of the state as an offering to Buddha and to garner protection and prosperity for the nation.<sup>17</sup>

Sometimes sutras were placed in metal or ceramic containers and buried on mountains or at temples. The practice was an ancient one having to do with faith in the Future Buddha, Miroku, and in the tremendous merit to be gained by preserving the Buddhist teachings until he arrived on Earth. It was believed that, shortly before the coming of Miroku, there would be an apocalyptic “devolution” of the dharma that would trigger social chaos and the destruction of Buddhism itself. In time a sutra burial cult emerged in Japan in connection with worship of Miroku. The various sutra containers on exhibit were used for such burials, which often involved the construction of sutra tombs (*kyōzuka*) to accommodate the large numbers of sutras deposited.

Most sutras were copied in the standard format of ink on paper and averaged seventeen characters per line. The *Ajaseō-kyō* (*Sutra of King Ajaseō*) in the exhibition [11] exemplifies this type of transcription. The postscript indicates that it was copied in 742 as part of the Buddhist canon ordered by Kōmyōshi, which took nearly a decade to complete. Sutras were also transcribed in gold or silver pigment on decorated or dyed papers. Such luxurious transcriptions, with their lavish appearance and costly materials, were largely the province of imperial patronage. Adornment of sutra texts in this manner was regarded as an offering to Buddha that enhanced the copying itself. On exhibit are two examples of the embellished format: the *Golden Light Sutra* in gold pigment on purple-dyed paper, completed in 746 at Shōmu’s request [12]; and the *Kegon Sutra* in silver pigment on indigo-dyed paper [13]. Typically such luxurious sutras would be kept in a sutra repository [6–9], in sutra boxes [74], or placed in sutra shrines [75].

The rich decoration of the *Golden Light* and *Kegon* sutras is also related to the great importance these texts held for Shōmu and Kōmyōshi. With the *Lotus Sutra* they formed

the philosophical and ideological foundation of the Nara regime. They were also part of a new wave of Buddhist teachings that had entered the Nara monastic community in the early years of Shōmu's reign to produce notable doctrinal ferment. The *Lotus Sutra* had been well established in Japan since the seventh century and would remain a prominent force in state Buddhism for centuries. On the one hand a dense exposition of Mahāyāna philosophy, the *Lotus Sutra* at the same time encouraged lay practices such as penitence, good works, and making art as a means to garner, for state or for person, the tutelary protection of Buddha and the Buddhist gods.

The teachings of the *Golden Light* and *Kegon* sutras, over a foundation of belief and practice centering on the *Lotus Sutra*, gained importance in Nara during the second and third decades of the eighth century. Both were useful to the type of centralized government that Shōmu and his advisors envisioned. Like the *Lotus Sutra* each addressed complex matters of doctrine but simultaneously offered practical instructions on earning merit and protection. Each also offered a model for Buddhist empire. The *Golden Light Sutra*, which had been newly translated into Chinese from Sanskrit in 703, was brought to Nara in 718 by the Japanese monk Dōji from the Chinese capital at Changan. Its focus on righteous kingship in the name of Buddha, and on the benefits granted a virtuous ruler, made it especially attractive as a philosophical basis for empire.<sup>18</sup>

The *Kegon Sutra* marked a doctrinal watershed by addressing enlightenment, or the state of awakening, through the image of a cosmic and absolute Buddha—Birushana (Resplendence)—at the center of a vast universe of Buddha worlds. Hallucinatory and dream-like, the text of the *Kegon Sutra* is a record of what Buddha preached in the moment of his enlightenment through the medium of light (he did not speak) as interpreted by the bodhisattvas Fugen and Monju. It also sets out the various stages on the path to becoming a bodhisattva. It is a difficult text, Esoteric in orientation and very hard going for the uninitiated or casual reader. But the sutra's notion of a Cosmic Buddha as the organizing principle of the universe is readily grasped. Its appeal as a symbol of empire must have been significant.

By the middle of the seventh century the teachings of the *Kegon Sutra* had become the basis of a school of Buddhism in China. In 733 two experts on *Kegon* teachings, the monks Bodhisena and Daoxuan, met with a Japanese delegation in Changan and were invited to Nara. They arrived in 736 to begin a program of instruction in *Kegon* doctrine and ritual, bringing with them a new translation of the sutra in sixty fascicles. Another translation, in eighty fascicles, was introduced by the monk Genbō that same year as part of the Buddhist canon that he carried home with him from China. Within a few years Rōben, from his base on Mt. Mikasa, had developed a special interest in the *Kegon Sutra* and in 740 asked a Korean expert on the sutra to deliver a series of lectures about it. Shōmu and Kōmyōshi are believed to have attended these lectures and to have relied on Bodhisena, Daoxuan, Rōben, and Genbō, then the highest ranking prelate in Nara, for subsequent advice and instruction.

It is evident that Shōmu and Kōmyōshi were influenced in their political and cultural decisions by the influx of scripture and doctrine arriving from China in the 730s. Indeed, the introduction of teachings based on the *Golden Light* and *Kegon* sutras was critical to the philosophy of benevolent empire that Shōmu had begun to develop in those years. The most important advisory role in this project fell to Rōben, who was both a proponent of *Kegon* teachings and a close affiliate of Kōmyōshi and her Fujiwara relatives. His independence from the Nara monastic community may also have allowed him freedom in developing new lines of practice that led away from scholasticism toward more devotional goals. They led also to the notion of Buddhist empire sustained by the sponsorship and execution of temples and art in the name of Buddha.

In 741 Shōmu instituted a system of state monasteries and convents whose role was to support, through prayers and offerings, the central government at Nara and thus the Nara imperium. Each monastery in the network bore the same name, Konkōmyō Shi Tennō Gokoku no Tera (Monastery for the Protection of the Nation by the Four Heavenly Kings of Golden Light), and enshrined a copy of the *Golden Light Sutra* in its pagoda. The nunneries were named Hokke Metsuzai no

Tera (Convent for the Eradication of Sin through the Lotus) and enshrined a copy of the *Lotus Sutra* in their main halls. Over the next decade, as the culmination of an ideological and political program of unification, Shōmu and Kōmyōshi saw to completion the Cosmic Buddha and, around it, the great temple Tōdai-ji as the philosophical seat of their empire.

*The Great Buddha at Tōdai-ji*

The decision to construct a colossal image of the Cosmic Buddha of the *Kegon Sutra* was made by Shōmu in the winter of 743.<sup>19</sup> In sponsoring the statue, he said, "Our fervent desire is that, under the aegis of the Three Treasures, the benefits of peace may be brought to all in heaven and on earth."<sup>20</sup> Inspiration for such a project came from the *Kegon Sutra* and related scriptures whose focus was a central figure of the radiant Birushana. Here, the advice of Rōben, Genbō, and other monks was critical. Inspiration also came from the continent, where the Tang Emperor Gaozong had commissioned an enormous figure of the Cosmic Buddha—more than fifty feet in height—at the Lungmen cave temples in 672, and his wife, Empress Wu, ordered a similarly large statue in the city of Luoyang in 700. Possibly Bodhisena or Daoxuan told Shōmu about these colossal sculptures. Moreover, the Nara region already boasted a large statue of the Cosmic Buddha, at a temple called Chishiki-ji, which Shōmu had visited several times in 740.

Originally the Daibutsu was planned for a subsidiary capital outside Nara proper. Work began late in 744 with the construction of a scaffolding for the huge statue. By the summer of 745 the site had been moved to Mt. Mikasa on the eastern border of the Nara capital. This was the home of Rōben, who had lived since 728 in a small monastery on Mt. Mikasa built for him by Shōmu and Kōmyōshi in memory of their son. In 742 this small monastery was designated a state temple and given the standard title Konkōmyō Shi Tennō Gokoku no Tera. At first called Konkōmyō-ji, after the first word in its title, the monastery by mid-century was known as Great Eastern Temple (Tōdai-ji) in reference to the enormous complex it had become on the eastern edge of the outer capital.

For several years work on the Great Buddha at Konkōmyō-ji proceeded slowly as a new frame was assembled and, over it, a clay core built up. In the winter of 746, Shōmu and Kōmyōshi held a lamplit ceremony to dedicate the clay core. Casting in bronze began in 747 and continued through 749, with the statue prepared in eight segments moving upward toward the head. It took another three years to cast details, such as the canonical snailshell curls atop the Buddha's head, and to complete the two bodhisattva attendants. Gilding began early in 752 and would continue through 757 because of fluctuations in the availability of gold and mercury.

Once cast, the Daibutsu marked a spectacular achievement. It stood more than fifty feet in height and weighed at least five hundred tons. Temple documents indicate that a labor force of some 218,000 workers had been mustered in its construction.<sup>21</sup> The job was a dangerous one: molten metal took its toll, as did mercury during the gilding process. One of the most important figures in the organization and management of these workers was the monk Gyōki, who in 743 joined the Great Buddha project at the behest of Shōmu. Gyōki also raised funds and promoted the Daibutsu among commoners. In 745, in an irony surely not lost on his critics, Gyōki was named to high ecclesiastical rank.

Expansion of Konkōmyō-ji into the great monastery that would be called Tōdai-ji proceeded in tandem with erection of the Great Buddha. In 748 the government established the Office of Tōdai-ji Construction (Zō Tōdai-ji Shi) and assigned a large area of land on Mt. Mikasa to the new complex. The monastery was laid out on flattened land along a north-south axis. It had two southern main gates, twin pagodas on the east and west respectively, a main hall, a lecture hall, and numerous other halls and chapels. Construction continued well into the 760s as more structures were added to accommodate the increasing religious and administrative importance of Tōdai-ji. The earlier monastery where Rōben had lived and preached was retained as a subsidiary precinct. It stood on a steep slope of Mt. Mikasa just east of the new compound and was at first named Kenjakuin (Kenjaku Precinct) after the important lacquer statue of the bodhisattva Fukūkenjaku Kannon that it enshrined.

The main hall at Tōdai-ji was built for the Great Buddha. Construction began in 750 after the statue had been cast in bronze, and by its completion in 751 the building rose nearly ninety feet into the sky. Appropriately enough, it was named the Great Buddha Hall (Daibutsuden). One of the largest monastic structures of its time, and certainly the most spectacular with its golden Buddha and green and red trim, the Daibutsuden was an appropriate emblem of empire. For it seemed to echo in religious terms the centralized political structure at Nara, where Shōmu and his heirs held audience from a splendid hall in the heart of the palace compound.

Consecration of the Daibutsu took place in 752 with performance of the eye-opening service by Bodhisena and Shōmu. Numerous offerings and gifts were presented to the newly awakened image in beautifully crafted receptacles such as the Jar with Hunting Scene [4]. There was music and dance, prayer, the fragrance of incense and flowers. The throngs

of courtiers and monks who crowded the Daibutsuden and its courtyard for the ceremony would have understood that, with this dedication, Shōmu had achieved a dream many years in the making. Rōben was named abbot of Tōdai-ji and thus became the most powerful monk in Nara as the monastery became the administrative headquarters of the network of provincial temples. It also replaced Yakushi-ji as the monastery whence high prelates were drawn. In 754 Shōmu, Kōmyōshi, Kōken, and others took vows of bodhisattva practice before the Great Buddha and pledged benevolent rule as their aspiration. When Shōmu died in 756, he must have taken comfort in the statue that symbolized his regime, his good works, and his visionary ideals.

#### *Tenpyō Culture*

In 729, on hearing reports of an auspicious omen in the form of a tortoise, Shōmu changed the era name of his reign to Tenpyō

Fig. 3. Shaka triad, 623, originally gilt bronze, in the Kondō (Golden Hall), Hōryū-ji, Nara





(Celestial Equanimity). Kōmyōshi was awarded the status of empress shortly thereafter. Thus began an epoch in Japanese cultural history, the Tenpyō era, whose significance lasted well beyond its conclusion in 749 when Shōmu ceded the throne to his daughter, Kōken. For during the Tenpyō era, in the thriving international climate of eighth-century Nara that by extension has come to be called the Tenpyō culture, the classical foundations of Japanese civilization were laid. Shōmu and Kōmyōshi were but the most prominent of a community of patrons for whom art was a critical part of public and private life. Through art the Buddhist teachings became tangible, whether as beautiful objects that were also didactic, or in the symbolisms by which Nara rulers negotiated power in the name of Buddha. The Great Buddha embodied this marriage of art and doctrine from the personal and political perspectives. It was in this sense the Tenpyō monument par excellence and drew upon a world of culture that encouraged exuberant art production as a manifestation of faith and benevolence.

What made the Tenpyō culture especially rich in art and technology was a constant engagement, on the part of patrons and artists alike, with continental civilization. The court of Shōmu itself was attentive to developments in China and Korea. Wary of the Silla empire on the Korean peninsula, the Nara government dispatched regular diplomatic missions to the Tang Chinese capital at Changan and to the northern Korean kingdom of Parhae. In fact, it was during such a mission to China in 733 that Bodhisena and Daoxuan were invited to Japan by a contingent of Nara monks. Such contact furthermore ensured that Nara rulers were also aware of cultural developments along the Silk Road. Shōmu had collected musical instruments, glass vessels, metalwork, textiles, and other objects whose provenance led to Central Asian states such as Khotan. It was this collection that Kōmyōshi presented to the Great Buddha when Shōmu died in 756. The objects were deposited in a storehouse called the Shōsō-in, which itself became synonymous with Tenpyō culture and the reign of Shōmu as a receptacle of motifs and techniques known throughout the ancient Eurasian world. The statue as well may have had roots in Central Asia and even India. Shōmu and Kōmyōshi

were familiar with the travel diary of the Chinese monk Xuanzang, who in 630 had made his way to Bāmiyan in what is now Afghanistan, where a colossal statue of the Historic Buddha had been built to a height of some 150 feet.<sup>22</sup>

Crucial to the efflorescence of Tenpyō art was the community of Chinese and Korean artists resident in Nara as part of its burgeoning population of builders, sculptors, painters, and other art workers. Some belonged to families of artisans that had settled in central and southwestern Japan early in the seventh century; others were newly arrived from the continent through the avenue of diplomatic missions or monastic exchanges. That the most prominent artist lineages tended to be continental in origin, such as the Paekche Korean family of Kimimaro, reflects again the international cast of art production under the Shōmu regime. It also suggests that in the eighth century Nara, on the eastern end of the Silk Road, was part of a broad community of cultures across Eurasia for whom a key point of exchange was art and specifically Buddhist art. If Nara patrons of Buddhist art tended to look to the continent for new techniques and new styles, supporting those artists most familiar with such trends, it was in large part due to the fundamentally cosmopolitan character of the global culture to which they belonged.

From the outset art making was a prominent facet of life in Nara, whether by the state or through private donations. Most residents of Nara would have seen at least once the construction of a major temple complex; many probably even participated as laborers. The many monasteries built throughout the city, culminating in a project like Tōdai-ji, required the production of immense numbers of sculptures and paintings as well as the preparation of sutras for chanting and the decoration of buildings. So important was art making that the government itself was involved in the organization and management of artists. Many artists were in effect civil servants. For example, painters were assigned posts in the Painting Office (Gakōshi) of the Ministry of Central Affairs (Nakatsukashō); bronze workers and lacquerers belonged to the Metalwork Office (Imono no tsukasa) and Lacquer Office (Nuribe no tsukasa) of the Ministry of the Treasury (Ōkurashō); and





Fig. 4. Yakushi triad, early 8th century, originally gilt bronze, in the Kondō, Yakushi-ji, Nara

woodworkers and architects served the Bureau of Carpentry (Mokuryō) in the Ministry of the Sovereign's Household (Kunaishō). The calligraphers who worked for Kōmyōshi, preparing votive sutra transcriptions and the like, were probably recruited from the Bureau of Books and Drawings (Zushoryō) in the Ministry of Central Affairs.<sup>23</sup>

They might also have come from workshops at influential monasteries such as Yakushi-ji, Kōfuku-ji, and, by mid-century, Tōdai-ji. Although it is evident that most artists and artisans belonged to the lay community and were not monks, there were indeed active studios at various monasteries. At such workshops monks and government artists cooperated to produce a broad spectrum of sculptures and paintings in a variety of media and styles. The excitement and energy of these works, a good number of which have survived into the modern era, make the Tenpyō period one of the most exciting in the history of Japanese art. By the very circumstances of their times Tenpyō artists were granted license to experiment, to test the limits of technology and representation, as they fulfilled the goals of patrons who themselves promoted innovation. It is clear that, for the better part of the eighth century, an aesthetically sophisticated cohort of patrons and artists was active in Nara and made possible the emergence of an artistic culture of extraordinary breadth.

The most striking medium in which this Tenpyō sensibility was brought to bear is sculpture. Hundreds of statues were produced over the course of the eighth century in a variety of iconographic types. Those that survive provide clear evidence of a technically and stylistically diverse workshop milieu in Nara. Basically there were four materials favored for statuary through the end of the eighth century: bronze, lacquer, clay, and wood. Documentary evidence also exists for small sculptures of gold or silver and in fragrant woods such as sandalwood. Of these materials, bronze would have been for Shōmu and his circle the medium with the most prestigious associations. Costly and difficult to work, bronze had been used since the seventh century for the great sculpture projects sponsored by the imperial house or high aristocracy. Immigrant artists at Hōryū-ji and Yakushi-ji had prepared the ground for the

Great Buddha with such works as the Shaka triad of 623 at Hōryū-ji (fig. 3) by a sculptor called Tori Busshi, and the Yakushi triad at Yakushi-ji (fig. 4), a magnificent example of bronze casting at its finest completed sometime early in the eighth century.

The gilt-bronze Shaka in the exhibition [17] well illustrates the stylistic characteristics of what came to be called the Tori style of the seventh century. It is hieratic and symmetrical in appearance, posed stiffly as if frozen, and generally reticent in expression. The Yakushi-ji style, often understood as signifying a formal shift toward what would become Tenpyō taste, is seen in the gilt-bronze Yakushi [19]. Lively and lifelike, it shows attention to volume and fluid drapery emphasizing the physical presence of body beneath cloth. Bronze images such as these were cast according to the lost-wax technique. In this technique a wax model was first prepared over a clay core. The model was then encased in a clay mold and molten metal poured into the mold to displace the wax. This complicated procedure reached an apogee with the Great Buddha of 752, to be sure, but it also came to an end. Subsequently dwindling resources and stylistic change brought a gradual decline in bronze statuary in favor of works in wood by the close of the eighth century.

Lacquer statuary was produced over a relatively short period in the first half of the eighth century under strong imperial and Fujiwara patronage. As was the case for bronze imagery, sculpting in lacquer was a complicated procedure that required a workshop setting with numerous laborers. It is believed that the impetus for this technique, not common in Japan in earlier times, came from China and Central Asia. Possibly news of the technique, perhaps even a few examples, reached Kōmyōshi with the returning diplomatic mission of 736. Her subsequent interest in lacquer imagery suggests she was ready to promote what was seen as an innovative continental technology in sculpture.

Making a lacquer statue involved considerable investment of time and energy. It was also a dangerous endeavor: lacquer fumes are toxic, and the sap causes a skin rash and other irritations. To make a sculpture using lacquer, a clay core was first modeled in the desired form. At least five layers of hemp cloth or linen dipped in lacquer were then



Fig. 5. Ashura, 734, lacquer with polychromy, in the Saikondō (West Golden Hall), Kōfuku-ji, Nara

applied and shaped over the clay core, with ample time between layers to allow for complete drying. Next a thick paste of lacquer and sawdust was spread over the image for further modeling. Once dry, the statue was cut open at the bottom or back and the clay core removed. Typically a wood frame was inserted to prevent shrinkage. Finally the image was painted and gilt. The Rikishi on view [20] was executed in this difficult technique.

The two principal workshops for lacquer statuary were located at Kōfuku-ji and Tōdai-ji. The Kōfuku-ji workshop was in operation by 720 and, closely connected to the Fujiwara family as the atelier of their clan temple, would become one of the great studios of Buddhist sculpture and painting. In 734 the head sculptor of the studio, Shōgun Manpuku, completed a large group of lacquer images for the Saikondō (West Golden Hall) at Kōfuku-ji. The request had come from Kōmyōshi, who built the hall in memory of her mother. The vividly lifelike appearance

of the works, some of which survive, may reflect her personal tastes (fig. 5). It has been noted that Kōmyōshi may have opted for lacquer instead of bronze, the more standard choice for such a commission, because she had become interested in what was seen as a new Chinese fashion in sculpture.

Lacquer statuary was also made at the Tōdai-ji workshop, which was headed by Kimimaro after 746. An important group of sculptures in lacquer survives today in the principal hall, variously called the Sangatsudō and Hokkedō, at the old Kenjaku Precinct where Rōben lived at Tōdai-ji. It includes a colossal image of Fukūkenjaku, said to have been the primary object of worship at the precinct, and a group of attendant and guardian figures (fig. 6). The works are dated to mid-century and thus were contemporaneous with the Daibutsu. Since Kōmyōshi had promoted Rōben from early in her reign and was responsible for the small monastery out of which the Kenjaku Precinct had grown as a core com-

Fig. 6. Fukūkenjaku Kannon (center), lacquer with gold leaf, and Nikkō (right) and Gakkō (left), clay, mid-eighth-century, in the interior of Sangatsudō, Nara





Fig. 7. Kōmokuten (Shitennō), mid-eighth century, clay, Kaidan-in, Nara



plex within Tōdai-ji, it is conceivable that she ordered Kimimaro to sculpt the lacquer images for Rōben.

The versatile Tōdai-ji workshop also produced sculptures in unbaked clay around the same period, such as the group of guardian figures in the monastery's ordination hall (fig. 7). Clay had been used extensively for statuary since at least the seventh century but was highly perishable. Relatively few sculptures in clay survive despite evidence that, on the continent as well as in Japan, it was often the medium of choice for statuary. One type of clay sculpture did tend to survive, however, since it was usually baked: roof tiles and eaves-end tiles. The Tōdai-ji eaves-end tiles in the exhibition [1] were probably made by the Tōdai-ji workshop around the time the Great Buddha was built.

Workshops such as those at Kōfuku-ji and Tōdai-ji usually counted painters among their ranks for decoration of finished statuary and other tasks. Because of the demand for murals and other wall art to embellish the ob-

jects of worship on the altar or to complete iconographic programs, many monasteries also had painting ateliers. Although most of these works have been lost, those still extant, such as a cycle of wall paintings originally at Hōryū-ji dating to the early eighth century, show striking technical and stylistic affinity to continental prototypes in China and Central Asia. Their naturalness and ease of pose recall Tenpyō statuary as well. Here, too, the cosmopolitan sophistication of eighth-century Nara artistic culture is evident.

Painters also served the court of Shōmu and Kōmyōshi either at palace ateliers or through the Painting Office. Among them would have been those who copied, in an archaic style reminiscent of seventh-century Chinese paintings, the *Kako Genzai E-inga-kyō* [14]. One of several such copies from the eighth century, the work dates to the period 749–56 and was probably commissioned by Kōmyōshi or someone in her circle. It is the earliest known example of an illustrated handscroll in Japan. The naive style is understood as deriving from



Fig. 8. Screen with ladies under trees, mid-eighth century, ink and color on paper, Shōsō-in, Nara



Fig. 9. Sketch of a bodhisattva, 8th century, ink on hemp cloth, Shōsō-in, Nara

the sixth- or seventh-century original, which the painter and calligrapher sought to replicate. But it also assumes a certain level of sophistication, even connoisseurship, in the knowledge of archaic modes of painting. Such an awareness is not surprising in such a milieu as that of Shōmu and Kōmyōshi, with their interest in art and collecting as expressed in the Shōsō-in depository.

In the Shōsō-in collection, which represented the tastes and interests of both Shōmu and Kōmyōshi, were drawings and paintings that epitomized the Tenpyō artistic culture of the eighth century. Works surviving from the original collection include depictions of secular themes, such as a set of screen panels each depicting a lovely woman beneath a tree, as well as Buddhist images with a ceremonial intent. The ladies under trees, their robes originally covered in bird feathers, show Chinese and Central Asian fashion in the representation of corpulent women (fig. 8). Among the Buddhist paintings are colorful banners with images of bodhisattvas drawn in the latest Central Asian mode, and an expertly rendered sketch of a bodhisattva on hemp cloth (fig. 9). These Shōsō-in works offer ample testimony that, in painting as well as in statuary, the Tenpyō sensibility was fundamentally cosmopolitan and gave rise to aesthetic and artistic flair.

The Tenpyō era, seen from the wider frame of Japanese art history, was a time when the basics were laid down under the auspices of a regime of patrons, headed by Shōmu and Kōmyōshi, who prized the visual splendors of Buddhist culture. In sculpture various materials and techniques were brought to maturity at the Nara monasteries, which became the foundation for some five centuries of enthusiastic sculpture production through the medieval period. The pigments, techniques, and formats of what was to become traditional Japanese painting were also developed in the Tenpyō era. Any one of the numerous later works on exhibit, from handscroll to hanging scroll, belongs to a heritage of painting that reaches back into the eighth century. Even in form and style the Tenpyō culture left a legacy of the lifelike image at ease in space and full of energy. It would be an enduring paradigm in subsequent stylistic shifts and transformations.

#### *New Directions*

In 754 a Chinese monk called Jianzhen arrived in Nara and was greeted with fanfare by Shōmu and Kōmyōshi. Known as Ganjin to his Japanese contemporaries, he had been invited to Nara in 733, along with Bodhisena and Daoxuan, but encountered great difficulties in making the sea crossing. By the time Ganjin reached Nara, on his sixth attempt, he was blind and in poor health. Nonetheless he set about introducing the Buddhist teachings in which he was expert, the rules and regulations of monastic life called *ritsu* (Sanskrit: *vinaya*), and founded the Ritsu school of Buddhism in Japan. In this capacity he was asked to ordain Shōmu and Kōmyōshi in the bodhisattva precepts. Within two months of his arrival, Ganjin initiated Shōmu, Kōmyōshi, and Kōken into the bodhisattva path on an ordination platform built expressly for that purpose in front of the Daibutsuden. With the Great Buddha their witness, Shōmu and his wife and daughter vowed on that day to dedicate their lives to good works and exemplary behavior as bodhisattva novices.

Such sentiments were surely understandable in a period of increasing tensions at court. Even as the Great Buddha had been constructed as a symbol of peaceful empire, factional strife disrupted the inner circles of government at Nara. The rapid rise to power of Fujiwara no Nakamaro after 743 was the major contributing factor. Ambitious and ruthless, Nakamaro was the nephew of Kōmyōshi and an older cousin of Kōken, whom he bullied. His enemies were many. In 745 he had engineered the exile of Genbō despite the prelate's high standing in the Nara monastic community. A few years later, in 749, Shōmu named Nakamaro to the highest post in the government and in effect gave him control of the empire. The death of Shōmu in 756 granted Nakamaro still greater leverage through his close association with Kōmyōshi and Kōken. Rivals attempted to unseat him in 757 but were mercilessly put down. In 758 Kōken ceded the throne to Junnin, a protégé of Nakamaro, and went into semi-retirement with her mother.

Ganjin thus came to Nara in a time of much tension. At first he was based at Tōdaiji, having been welcomed there by Rōben and Bodhisena, but in 757 he moved to a plot of land given him by the Nakamaro court



so that he could establish a private monastery. That Ganjin chose to leave Tōdai-ji for this rather distant site, in the south of the capital near Yakushi-ji, suggests that he was not at ease in the Nakamaro circle. In 759 work began on Ganjin's new monastery, Tōshōdai-ji. Many of the workers are believed to have been Koreans and Chinese who accompanied Ganjin on his journey from China. The monastery became one of the great Nara establishments but retained its private status as Ganjin's headquarters.

Although Ganjin is best remembered as a specialist in the Buddhist precepts and in matters of ordination, he was also a proponent of Kegon teachings. Indeed, Ganjin had brought with him from China a new version of the

*Kegon Sutra* in forty fascicles. Thus it is not surprising that the principal object of worship at Tōshōdai-ji was Birushana, the same Cosmic Buddha as enshrined in the Daibutsuden at Tōdai-ji. The statue can be seen today in the main hall of the Tōshōdai-ji complex (fig. 10). It is a large lacquer sculpture that measures more than ten feet in height and was originally covered in gold leaf. The name of the project supervisor, Mononobe no Hirotari, is known from an inscription inside the pedestal. Contemporary records indicate that Hirotari worked for the government as a manager of artisans, suggesting that Tōshōdai-ji initially was viewed as an official endeavor by the state.<sup>24</sup> It is conceivable that the choice of lacquer for the Birushana image had to do

Fig. 10. Birushana, mid-eighth century, lacquer with gold leaf, in the Kondō, Tōshōdai-ji, Nara





with such semi-official status. Perhaps artists from the Tōdai-ji workshop were assigned to the job for similar reasons.

Other sculptures at Tōshōdai-ji depart significantly from Tenpyō technical standards for statuary. These are the works thought to have been sculpted in the 760s by the community of continental artists in residence at Tōshōdai-ji as part of Ganjin's original entourage. Wood was their material of choice even for images clearly based on the lacquer technique. For example, the colossal statue of Senju Kannon that stands next to the Birushana imgae at Tōshōdai-ji strictly speaking is a lacquer sculpture (fig. 11). However, the lacquer has been layered over a wood core that, unlike the removable clay core of

earlier lacquer statuary, is an integral part of the sculpture. The large corpus of wood sculptures at Tōshōdai-ji, of a type not found at Nara monasteries of the Tenpyō era, further indicates a strong emphasis on wood at the complex. Like the Yoryū Kannon on exhibit [22], these works are carved for the most part from a single block of wood. It is clear that such wood carving was what the Tōshōdai-ji workshop knew best, and that this predilection marked a paradigm shift related to changing continental standards at mid-century. Statues once modeled and shaped were now hewn from blocks of wood and carved.

With technological innovation came a formal vocabulary and style that profoundly

Fig. 11. Senju Kannon, late 8th century, lacquer over wood core, Tōshōdai-ji, Nara



differed from the Tenpyō mode. Virtually every sculpture produced by the Tōshōdai-ji workshop has a solemn and monolithic appearance. Gone is the naturalism and liveliness of form so characteristic of Tenpyō taste, as also the pleasures of elaborately modeled and adorned surfaces. In part this development has to do with the limits of technology: carving a statue is fundamentally different from modeling one from clay and then casting or lacquering it. But the works at Tōshōdai-ji also address another aesthetic entirely, in which Buddha and Buddha-beings are understood as awesome forces capable of generating great magic when ritually invoked. Dour and forbidding, they signal a changing Buddhist world view and visual ideology.

This new order of Buddhist knowledge and visibility, the Vajrayāna movement, began to take hold in Nara as Kōken and others developed an interest in Esotericism and in the monks who were its skilled proponents. The growing attention to the powerful unseen forces of Buddha, which added an element of fear to the activities of worship and ritual, found its most direct expression in solemn and increasingly abstract representations of Buddhas and Buddha-beings. The wood statuary produced at Tōshōdai-ji exemplified this trend, which jettisoned the naturalistic for the metaphysical. Esotericism in effect triggered a paradigm shift in the visual arts.

The Nara monastic community included in its ranks many monks who used Esoteric rituals to heal or comfort members of the lay community. Rōben initially came to the attention of Shōmu because of the magical powers of an image he worshiped as his own tutelary protector on Mt. Mikasa. Genbō had been the personal healer of Tachibana no Michiyo, the mother of Kōmyōshi. Monks in Ganjin's entourage no doubt were familiar with Esotericism as well, since so much of the imagery at Tōshōdai-ji shows iconographical and stylistic evidence of the new trend. The old ties that bound the Nara monastic community to the imperial house, a function of the ideological program of Buddhist empire, ensured as well that in times of stress or illness it would be Nara monks from the great metropolitan monasteries who were called to the palace. Of the many factors that led to the demise of the world that Shōmu had built at Nara, none was more devastating in the long

term than this close association between monk and ruler.

In 763 Kōken arranged that her personal healer, a priest called Dōkyō, be allowed free access to the palace. Nakamaro objected furiously but was overruled by the empress. She had grown close to Dōkyō in the years following her mother's death, in 760, in part because he had healed her depression; he seems also to have shared her bed. When Nakamaro attempted a coup d'état in 764, Kōken had him beheaded. Within a month of Nakamaro's death, she had named Dōkyō to a new post she invented for him, Daijin Zenji (Buddhist Minister); exiled the reigning emperor, Junnin; and taken the throne herself under a new name, Shōtoku. In 765 she appointed Dōkyō to still higher status, Dajō Daijin Zenji (Buddhist Prime Minister), in effect granting him control of her government. By 769 Kōken had decided to make Dōkyō emperor. However, she died before the appointment was formalized, in 770, and Dōkyō was exiled soon thereafter by the outraged statesmen who had watched helplessly as he rose to power.

The Dōkyō scandal set in motion a process that led to a new regime within two decades. The imperial lineage whence Shōmu had emerged, to build the Nara capital, gave way to the rival lineage that had preceded it in the seventh century. For four centuries the Shōmu lineage would remain in its shadow. A new capital was subsequently built to the north at Kyoto, and by 784, led by the new emperor, Kanmu, the court and the government had vacated Nara. One of the great cities of the ancient world, filled with art and monastic traditions, was summarily abandoned to time and history. The Daibutsu, once a symbol of empire, would now come to signify the classical Buddhist civilization of old Japan.

#### *The Southern Capital*

The move from Nara to Kyoto did not include the monastic community. Kanmu had decreed that Tōdai-ji, Kōfuku-ji, Yakushi-ji, and the other Nara monasteries remain behind at the old capital. New directions in Buddhism were afoot as Esoteric teachings gained ascendancy at court in the form of the Tendai and Shingon schools. Kanmu and his circle, all too familiar with the likes of Dōkyō, were

also wary of heavy monastic involvement in government and palace life. It was better that the powerful monks of Nara remain behind in their monasteries and keep to the traditions of scholasticism. At first only two temples were constructed at the new capital, neither of them directly affiliated with Nara. They stood to each side of the main gate into the city, Rajōmon, and were charged with tutelary protection of Kyoto and its imperial compound.

Tendai and Shingon teachings, newly introduced to a community ready for change in Buddhist doctrine and practice, also encouraged the construction of temples and monasteries outside metropolitan areas. The Tendai school, a philosophy and program of meditations centered on the *Lotus Sutra* that was introduced from China by the monk Saichō in 805, flourished at a mountain complex on Mt. Hiei northeast of the Kyoto capital. Vajrayāna Buddhism, introduced in 806 as the Shingon or “True Word” sect by Kūkai in reference to the magical chants used in its teachings, had its first monastic headquarters on Mt. Kōya several days’ journey to the south in what is now Wakayama Prefecture. There were also facilities at the imperial compound for Tendai and Shingon worship. In due time temples of both denominations were constructed inside city walls as their followers increased in number and their monks grew powerful at court.

The scholastic Buddhism of Nara was displaced over the ensuing centuries by forms of Buddhism that emphasized devotional practices, magical rituals, and faith as expedient means toward enlightenment and salvation. While equally formidable as intellectual traditions, and by no means inferior to the six schools of Nara in terms of doctrinal complexity, the Tendai and Shingon schools allowed greater lay involvement and opened a path to the truly popular forms of Buddhism that emerged in the early medieval era. Out of the Tendai fold came Pure Land Buddhism as taught by Shinran, whose forceful personality is well represented in his portrait in the exhibition [58], and others at the close of the twelfth century. Believers were instructed to have faith in Amida, chant his name, and through these simple measures expect a deathbed encounter with Amida and his entourage come to take them away to the

land of bliss as in the “welcoming descents” [53, 72].

Shingon philosophy for its part encouraged a syncretic view of divinity and Buddhahood that promoted the integration of kami worship into the Buddhist fold. The Sannō mandala [57] exemplifies this syncretism in its canonical representation of the Buddhas and kami of the Mt. Hiei complex as sharing in the same essential nature. As such the mandala demonstrates the theory of *honji suijaku*, in which kami are understood as manifestations (*suijaku*) of an original Buddha identity (*honji*). Another result of the turn toward syncretism was the development of composite deities such as Zaō Gongen, who was the central object of worship in the Shugendō movement of mountain ascetics that emerged in the early medieval era [28, 64]. For these rugged monks, Zaō Gongen represented Shaka manifest as the resident kami of Mt. Kimpusen near Nara. Syncretism also brought about the invention of a new medium, that of the mirrorlike relief sculpture called a *kakebotoke* (hanging votive plaque), for iconic representations of Buddhas and kami alike [65–67].

As new directions took hold in the century following the move from Nara northward to Kyoto, Nara itself took on a new character and came to be called Nanto (Southern Capital). This was not Nara as a political or administrative center, although Tōdai-ji and the other monasteries remained influential, but rather Nara as a religious and artistic center. Indeed, no sooner had Kanmu set up government in Kyoto, along with a new cultural regime, than Nara began to be called Shaji no Miyako (Shrine and Temple Capital). The name stuck and even today is seen on travel posters and other advertisements for Nara.

As a religious capital Nara was similar to Rome or Jerusalem in the historical and spiritual significance of its institutions and places of worship in a world rapidly changing. Preserved at Nara were the first great monasteries of Japan, whose presence had vouchsafed the emergence of empire and a flourishing classical culture of Buddhist art and learning. By the twelfth century they were called Nanto Shichidai-ji (Seven Great Temples of the Southern Capital): Tōdai-ji, Kōfuku-ji, Gangō-ji, Daian-ji, Yakushi-ji, Saidai-ji, Hōryū-ji. There was also the magnificent Kasuga Shrine,

home to the tutelary kami of the Fujiwara house, and in a sense the native guardian of the old Yamato culture on which Buddhism and state had been erected at the dawn of Japanese civilization.

Consequently, the Nara legacy remained powerful and its monastic community influential even as the actual scene of political and cultural leadership shifted to Kyoto, Kamakura, and finally Tokyo in the early modern era. In a pattern that would become typical, Kūkai studied at Tōdai-ji before embarking on the trip to China that would lead him to the Vajrayāna movement. Even after his return, as the founder of the Shingon school in Japan, he maintained close ties with Tōdai-ji and other Nara monasteries. For the many Buddhist teachers and diverse Buddhist movements to come, be they Tendai, Shingon, or the Zen tradition in all of its idiosyncrasy, Nara would keep its role as the spiritual and philosophical home of Buddhism in Japan.

The Nara establishment for its part was equally attentive to developments at the Kyoto capital. By the tenth century, Nara prelates from Tōdai-ji, Kōfuku-ji, and Yakushi-ji were involved in numerous Buddhist activities at court, from chanting and studying sutras to various annual prayers. Indeed, Nara monks expected to be called to participate in such events and were prepared to lodge suits if they were denied equal standing with their Tendai and Shingon peers at court. So powerful was the Nara monastic community by the twelfth century that, led by Tōdai-ji and Kōfuku-ji, it even waged war on competitors such as the Tendai complex on Mt. Hiei. Tōdai-ji and Kōfuku-ji were famous—and feared—for their large standing armies, which they mustered in behalf of allies while bullying opponents at court. Such militancy, by no means unusual for the unstable social conditions of early medieval Japan, would eventually lead to grief for Tōdai-ji and Kōfuku-ji as newly emergent military rulers, unrestrained by earlier taboos, saw fit to destroy them.

The move from Nara to Kyoto had important repercussions for the world of Buddhist art as well. In 789 the official Tōdai-ji workshop was closed and its artists moved on to the Kyoto capital for other assignments; other Nara ateliers, such as that at Tōshōdai-ji, followed suit. Many of these artists were

employed in 796 in the construction of Tō-ji and Sai-ji, the paired temples built to the east and west of Kyoto's Rajōmon respectively, and were able to adapt styles and techniques developed in Nara, such as the woodcore lacquer medium for statuary, to the emerging Shingon aesthetic promoted by Kanmu and his successors. Kūkai was named abbot of Tō-ji in 823, and his longstanding association with Tōdai-ji probably kept its artistic traditions alive as well.

One Nara atelier was not shut down and indeed flourished as others closed in the wake of the new ninth-century aesthetic of plain wood and stylistic abstraction seen in the Miroku Nyorai [25] and Yakushi Nyorai [24]. This was the Kōfuku-ji workshop, whose painters and sculptors—well supported by the Fujiwara family—began a long history of conservation, preservation, and connoisseurship that would last into the thirteenth century and beyond. Much of their business was repair: old statues in and around Nara, works brought from Kyoto for appraisal and reconstruction, an occasional new commission in a style reminiscent of the Tenpyō tradition. It was to be a lasting responsibility. Even today, as traffic hums along busy streets nearby, Kōfuku-ji remains the pre-eminent center for the technical study and restoration of Buddhist statuary in Japan.

But the Kōfuku-ji workshop would play another role as one of three ateliers dominating the world of sculpture patronage and production in the twelfth century. The other ateliers were based in Kyoto, not at temples but in studio-residences within the city itself. Theirs was a technology and style that had little direct association with Nara, having emerged in the context of Tendai belief from a lineage of sculptors based on Mt. Hiei, and belonged more to the world of Kyoto palace society than to the classical Buddhist environment of the southern capital. There was fierce competition among these ateliers, but Kōfuku-ji held its own as the guardian and preserver of Nara traditions. So prestigious did the workshop become that leading Kyoto sculptors sought appointment as master artist of the Kōfuku-ji atelier.

Politics and a propensity for warfare made Tōdai-ji and Kōfuku-ji targets in the civil war that erupted at the end of the twelfth century. They were burned to the ground in 1180 by

members of the Taira family, a military lineage seeking to gain control over the imperial house and the Kyoto government. The flames that engulfed the Great Buddha, horrifying the Nara monks who gathered in a futile attempt to save the colossal statue, signaled the end of the great civilian empire that Shōmu and Kōmyōshi had once envisioned. In a few years the warlord Minamoto no Yoritomo would come to power as the de facto ruler of Japan, his military government firmly in place in distant Kamakura, and a new social and cultural order—that of the samurai—rapidly taking shape on the old landscape of Buddhism and state.

One of the first tasks that Yoritomo undertook was the reconstruction of Tōdai-ji and Kōfuku-ji. Both monasteries had been fully rebuilt by the early thirteenth century and enjoyed a resurgence as centers for the reformist movement within Buddhism that gained prominence after the civil war. Reform meant a revival of Kegon and Hossō teachings, as well as increased interest in Tenpyō sensibilities in art. The Kōfuku-ji workshop flourished in this climate, backed by the Minamoto regime, and became home to the vaunted Kei school of sculptors led by Kōkei and his disciples Unkei and Kaikei. These artists crafted a new vocabulary of style that, based on Tenpyō forms, adapted contemporary tastes—aristocratic and military—to a Nara aesthetic and reconfigured the parameters of Japanese Buddhist sculpture for a new age.

Nara in the time of Yoritomo briefly revived its old role as a cosmopolitan capital. Chinese artists participated in the reconstruction of Tōdai-ji, working closely with the Kōfuku-ji workshop, and there was considerable intel-

lectual ferment as the radical teachings of Zen Buddhism were introduced and began to flourish under military patronage. But the major significance Nara would hold in the coming centuries, in the diverse religious and cultural climates that developed as shōguns ruled from Kamakura, Kyoto, and Tokyo, would be as the receptacle of a classical Buddhist past. Nara would be the backbone of tradition that gave structure, cognitively and physically, to the future.

Although Nara and its monasteries experienced vicissitudes during the wars of the sixteenth century, warlords and monks alike worked to rebuild and preserve its monuments. The city's unique role in Japanese culture, as the home of an ancient Buddhism and its treasures, made such endeavors not only possible but inevitable. In 1945, as the threat of bombing loomed large, scholars and curators scrambled to carry the statues at Kōfuku-ji and other Nara monasteries to safety. If the art of Nara was lost, they believed, so was their heritage.<sup>25</sup>

The Nara National Museum has sustained the Nara legacy through its treasury of Buddhist art. Founded in 1875, the museum held its first exhibitions in the Great Buddha Hall at Tōdai-ji. Thus the Cleveland Museum of Art, in bringing the art of the Nara National Museum before an American audience, shares in a heritage that began with the Great Buddha and the cosmopolitan world of Shōmu and Kōmyōshi. The appreciation of these celebrated objects, in all of their richness and diversity, is in itself an act of lasting merit that helps to preserve one of the great traditions of Asian art.