

Explamation of the cover illustration

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Explanation of the Cover Illustration

The cover illustration for this issue is a photographic detail of the drapery in the robe of a statue of the Buddha. The statue, enshrined in the Main Hall of the Muroji Temple, is said, according to the results of recent research, to be a representation of *Yakushi Nyorai*: the Buddha of Healing, or the Physician of Souls.

The Muroji temple was built, deep in the mountains of Nara Prefecture, between the late 8th and early 9th century: that is, in the period during which the Imperial capital was moved from Nara to Kyoto. From ancient times, it was believed that there were dragons living in three caves in the heart of these mountains; dragons were associated with rain, and the Muroji was originally founded as a shrine to the animist god of bountiful rainfalls. Later, it became a temple of the Shingon sect of Tantric Buddhism.

The worship of *Yakushi Nyorai* as the particular aspect of Buddha who heals the sick began to flourish in Japan towards the end of the 7th century. Typically, *Yakushi Nyorai* is represented in sculpture holding a medicine jar (or sometimes a jewel) in his left hand; the Muroji figure, lacking the medicine jar, is difficult to distinguish from a *Shaka Nyorai* (the Historical Buddha). From the depictions painted on the halo and from other evidence, however, it is now considered to be a *Yakushi Nyorai*, albeit of an older form.

In general, the hands of a Buddhist sculpture express deep symbolic meanings. The right hand of the Muroji figure is in the position called *semui-in*, expressing the most important attribute of the Buddha, that of dispelling the manifold terrors that afflict all mankind, and bringing peace of mind. The left hand is in the position called *segan-in*, which signifies that the Buddha bestows blessings on mankind in response to prayer.

The main elements of the figure—head, body and feet—were carved from a single block of wood. The face is slightly rounded; the shoulders and chest are full; the mass of the lower half, from the hips to the feet, creates an impression of robustness and strength. The overall effect well represents the characteristics of Japanese sculpture in the early Heian period (8th-9th Century). However, one additional feature of the Muroji figure, that is, the expressive drapery of the robe, with its sharply-defined edges and symmetrical flow, creates a feeling of heterogeneity in the *honpa* ("fluttering wave") style—a reiterated alternating pattern of billowing and linear pleats that is another major characteristic of early-Heian sculpture. Thus the drapery of the Muroji figure is in what is known as the *renpa* ("rippling wave") style. We might call this a Japanese transformation of the *honpa* to a *renpa*; in that regard, we can date the making of the Muroji figure to the period from the latter half of the 9th century to the beginning of the 10th, when a distinctively Japanese style of Buddhist sculpture was beginning to emerge.

The entire body of the Muroji figure has been painted, but research indicates that most of what we see today was done at a later date. But the red coloration of the robe is considered to be a restoration of the original Indian ocher. As we can see in this photographic detail, moreover, the ridge lines of the drapery are accented in gold; this was done, not with gold paint, but by the application of finely-cut pieces of gold leaf—again a representative technique of the period when the figure was made.

The cover photograph catches the beauty of the drapery with its ancient red and gold highlights.

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Yakushi Nyorai (Bhaisajyaguru)

Wood, originally polychromed.

Early Heian Period (9th-10th Century).

Height: 234.8cm.

Owned by Muroji Temple, Nara Prefecture.