

Explamation of the cover illustration

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journal or publication title	Nichibunken Japan review : bulletin of the International Research Center for Japanese Studies
volume	3
page range	166
year	1992-01-01
URL	http://id.nii.ac.jp/1368/00006129/

Explanation of the Cover Illustration

The illustration on the cover of this issue of the *Japan Review* is a photographic detail of an embroidered tapestry depicting the Gautama Buddha preaching. Gautama, in the center of the composition, is seated beneath an ornate canopy called a *tengai* on a splendid throne with a base in the shape of a lotus blossom; to the left and right are ranged the Bodhisattvas: the Buddhist "saints" whose role it is to guide all living creatures on the path to Enlightenment; in the air above the Buddha, on both sides, are heavenly figures called *tenjin* seated on clouds and playing various musical instruments; other heavenly figures called *jinsen* are depicted riding birds. In the lower part of the composition, we see the ten disciples of the Buddha and a group of ordinary mortals, listening to the Buddha's sermon.

The various groups in the composition are rendered in embroidery, in brilliant varicolored silk thread: red, crimson, brown, green, indigo, purple and white. What is particularly unusual and unexpected in this work is that two techniques of embroidery are employed: one, called *kusari-nui*, creates a chain-like pattern in the stitching; the other, called *sagara-nui* or *tama-nui*, leaves a pattern of knots in the threads pulled through to the surface of the fabric. The background of the composition is completely in *kusari-nui*; in some places the thread used for the embroidery is thicker than in others.

Shūbutsu, the depiction of the Buddha and of Buddhist devotional figures in embroidery, has a long history. A great number of such works, in large scale, were made in China between the period of the Six Dynasties (5th century) and the early T'ang (7th century). In Japan, we know from historical accounts that there was a considerable flowering of this embroidery between the Asuka and Nara periods (7th to 8th centuries), but few of the actual works have survived. The "Tenjukoku Tapestry," in the Chūgūji Temple in Nara Prefecture, is the oldest known example in Japan, and dates to the first half of the 7th century.

The cover illustration here is from the "Kajūji Tapestry," so named because it has been preserved in the Kajūji Temple in Kyoto. One school of thought considers the original provenance of the work to be Chinese, another regards it as Japanese; in certain aspects of form, however—most notably the arrangement of the Bodhisattvas with the Buddha in the center—it bears similarities with the murals of the Kondō Hall (the central building where the most important figures of the Buddha are enshrined) of the Hōryūji Temple in Nara. From this, it is conjectured that the maker of the tapestry was a craftsman of the Nara period (8th century) who had fully mastered the Chinese techniques of embroidery.

With the Heian period (9th century), depictions of this type in embroidery largely cease to be made. From the Kamakura period (13th century) on, the examples are much reduced in scenic scale; the compositions become standardized and conventional. In that regard, the 8th century when this present work was made can be regarded as the high point of Buddhist embroidery in Japan.

The photograph for the cover illustration is a detail of the cloud on which the leftmost *tenjin* in the composition is seated. The painstaking work of the *kusari-nui* embroidery creates a swirling pattern that is bold and generous, yet serene; in it, we can feel the spirit of the age.



Embroidered Tapestry Depicting the Gautama Buddha Preaching

Embroidered Silk, 208.0 × 158.0cm.

Nara National Museum

Nara Period (8th Century); designated a National Treasure

Photographed by Naomi Maki