

Explanation of the Cover Illustration

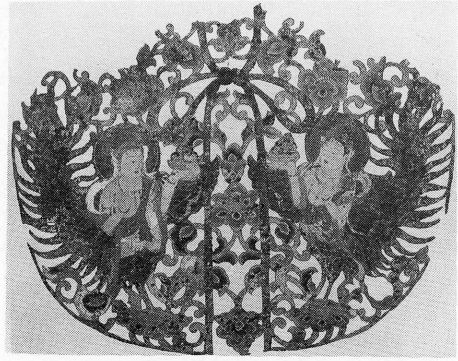
The illustration on the cover of this issue of the *Japan Review* is a photographic detail of a *keman*, or floral wreath, found in Buddhist temples as a ritual ornament. The Sino-Japanese word *keman* derives ultimately from the Sanskrit *Kusmamālā*, which originally refers to ornaments made of flowers strung together on a thread. In ancient India, these were offered to the Hindu gods and to members of the nobility. The custom passed into Buddhism, where the wreaths were used as offerings to the Buddha, to adorn statues of the Buddha, and eventually to decorate the interiors or rooms symbolizing the realm of the Buddha.

Along with this shift in function, to the decoration of Buddhist sanctuaries, the *keman* came to be made not only from real flowers but also from more durable materials: those that have come down to us from the remote past here in Japan can be classified accordingly, into those made of gilded bronze, wood, precious stone, cloth and leather. The *keman* we see here is a superb example of the latter.

In that it was cut and shaped from a single piece of tanned cowhide, it might be seen from our contemporary perspective as being in conflict with the Buddhist prohibition against the slaughter of animals. Nevertheless, the fact that leather *keman* can be found in the Tōshōdaiji Temple in Nara, and that leather boxes containing various Buddhist ceremonial objects have been preserved in the storehouse of the Tōdaiji Temple in Nara, gives us reason to believe that in the early days of Japanese Buddhism there was no sense of repugnance about the use of leather.

As in the present example, the *keman* is in the form of a round fan, bound in the middle with dangling cords. The motif of flowers and the mythical phoenix as a bearer of good fortune were carried over into the Heian Period and came to typify the Japanicized *keman*. The pattern covering the surface is composed of vines and *hōsōge* peony-like flowers frequently used in the decoration of Buddhist ritual implements. Facing each other to the right and left of the cords are mythical birds known as *karyōbinga* with human heads and bird-like bodies. The detail of the cover photograph, however, gives only a partial view of the motif.

According to a tradition handed down with the *keman* at the Tōdaiji Temple in Kyoto, it was used in the ceremony consecrating the temple's five-story pagoda, completed in 1086. Modern research, however, suggests that it was made somewhat later. Its age aside, the *keman* is of exceptional quality, as can be seen by the mineral paints—patina turquoise, sea blue, cinnabar, Paris white and gold leaf—that cover the black lacquer. Thin lines of gold, known as *kirikane*, are added to the motif with extraordinary precision. One clearly senses in this work the same quality of serenity and depth that pervade the Buddhist paintings of the period.



A *Keman* (floral wreath) of the late Heian Period

Painted and lacquered leather, 43.0×43.5cm.

Nara National Museum

12th Century; designated a National Treasure

Photographed by Naomi Maki