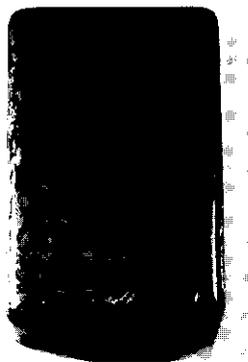


Explanation of the Cover



Box with *Hōsōge* Designs and *Karyōbinga* Mythical Birds

Heian period, ca. 10th century
 L 33.9 cm. W 22.4 cm. H 10.6 cm.
 Ninnaji, Kyoto
 National Treasure

The photograph on the cover is an enlarged detail from the lid of a box made 1,080 years ago. According to the inscription on the lid's exterior, this box was created to hold a 30-volume set of scriptures which Kūkai (774-835) brought back from China. Kūkai, also known as Kōbō Daishi, is the most famous Buddhist priest in Japan. He went to study Buddhism in Tang China and is credited with transmitting the new teachings of the Shingon sect to Japan. According to the *Engi gyōki*, the sutras stored in this box were copied by Kūkai during his training period in China. After Kūkai's death, the box was placed in the sutra storehouse at Tōji in Kyoto, and later moved to a temple on Mt. Koya. When it looked as though they would be dispersed, the sutras were gathered together by imperial decree. This box was made for the occasion of viewing by the emperor; the fact that the date is clearly known makes it an especially important piece.

This box was made using the dry lacquer technique; the foundation consists of multiple layers of hemp cloth soaked in lacquer, and black lacquer was applied on the surface. The decoration was done in the technique of gold and silver *togidashi makie*, and features the *hōsōge* (a kind of arabesque) pattern, *karyōbinga*, clouds, birds, and butterflies. Coarse gold and silver powder was sprinkled among these motifs.

The *karyōbinga* (Sanskrit: *kalavinka*) is an imaginary bird believed to live in Buddhist paradise. It has a wondrous cry that one never grows weary of, and is represented with the head of a human and the body of a bird. In the *hōsōge* pattern long stems from one flower create another flower of the same shape. This is an important decorative motif in East Asia and is frequently seen on Buddhist statues and implements. While the painted design on this box displays classical Chinese features, they have been softened by Japanese taste. This can be especially seen in the flowing quality of the brushwork describing the *karyōbinga*.