

Ritual Implements

Ritual implements and other utensils and objects used to adorn the sanctuaries and to accompany rituals are still little known to us even though they not only possess great religious and symbolic significance but are also among the most beautiful and interesting works of East Asian craftsmanship.¹⁰⁵ Depending on the purpose for which they are used, these implements may be: 1. part of a temple's furnishings and accessories of cult figures; 2. robes and symbolic or rank insignia of priests; 3. cult implements in the narrower sense of the word, used during performances of rituals on altars in direct relationship to the cult images; 4. reliquaries; 5. those sepulchral monuments which are more symbolic than architectural in character.

1. Temple Furnishings and Cult Figure Accessories. Sanctuary furniture directly linked to architecture and cult statues has already been mentioned in previous chapters. Such objects consisted of decorations of the inner space around altar platforms, pedestals, halos, and canopies of particular figures or groups of figures (28, 31, 38). Even during the classic period of Buddhist art, when ornamentation had not yet degenerated into mere splendor for its own sake, all figures were abundantly ornamented. But this was done with dignity and restraint. The most prominent forms of such decoration included ornamental as well as figurative carvings, inlays (of wood, metal, mother-of-pearl), affixed metal surfaces (such as flat, pierced ornamental strips or hammered relief plates), and also decorative painted surfaces. The dominant impressions are generated by the luxuriantly colored painted patterns, applications of black and red lacquer and, above all, the lavish use of gold.

Relatively few such works from the classic period of Buddhist art have been preserved. Most renowned is the bronze-covered figure pedestal (38) for the main cult statue of Bhaiṣajyaguru Buddha (Yakushi) in the Yakushi-ji in Nara. It not only displays noble proportions, but also marvelous decorative motifs which show remarkable resemblance to Hellenistic ornamental designs. These may in fact have reached Japan via China which had preserved elements of the "late ancient Buddhist art of Central Asia" (von Le Coq). Several motifs used in older Buddhist ornamental designs in China from the Wei to the T'ang (in Japan from the Asuka to

Nara) periods can be traced in a nearly continuous line right across the continent to Near Eastern, Byzantine, and Hellenistic forerunners.¹⁰⁶ I should hasten to add that this in no way supports the Hellenocentric theory for the origin of Buddhist art.

Figure pedestals (28, 29, 31, 58, 69), particularly lotus pedestals, are frequently masterpieces of wood carving. They are beautifully proportioned and divided into numerous layers, each with its own symbolic meaning. Collectively these layers represent Mount Sumeru, the world-center according to Indian cosmology. The pedestal is, therefore, narrowest at its waist and widest at the top and bottom. Each pedestal's proportions and total dimensions are closely related to those of the halo, and both, in turn, are related to those of the figure itself. This was always found to be the case in those (unfortunately not too frequent) instances where the original ensemble has been preserved or reconstructed.

The artistic splendor of the halos' basic forms and motifs (18, 19, 24, 28, 29, 42, 52, 57, 151-153) cannot even be approximately described here.¹⁰⁷ Both head and body halos are round or radially shaped. They frequently form circles narrowing at the top in the manner of the Cintāmani jewel (151) or they circumscribe a standing figure shaped like a boat. (The mandorla frequently found in Christian art is a different phenomenon.) Rays or small flames may emanate from the halos, or the halos themselves may consist entirely of lively flame and cloud forms (28, 69). Some of the greatest triumphs in Buddhist artistic design can be found in these halo types, where the motifs may be either carved or cast in shallow relief or where the entire halo forms a work of masterly open-work carving, partly done in the round. Small figures in more or less prominent relief may frequently be found on the surface of these halos. These are primarily of two types: firstly, there are Buddhas depicted as main figures, who either represent forerunners during previous eons of the Buddha or miraculous manifestations of the Buddha in the innumerable worlds which exist beyond our own (18, 52). Secondly, there are "angelic" Bodhisattvas (not at all comparable to Old Testament or Christian angels) venerating (pûjâ) the Buddha and offering flowers, incense, music and dance to him (152). They, and the Apsaras' resembling them, are frequently, but imprecisely, called "flying heavenly beings" and the like. Such small figures are usually absent from the halos of Bodhisattvas and Vidyârâjas where they are replaced by flower and vine motifs in the former case, or by flame gloriolas in the latter. Exceptions to this rule are the most simple, almost undecorated ring-shaped halos which are also generally used for Devas and holy men (Arhats).

In our chapter on architecture, we have already described the fine craftsmanship which went into the design of the canopies or the temple ceilings substituted for them, all of which possess a wealth of ornamental beauty. Some of them, as, for example, the halo of the Amitâbha triad in the Tachibana shrine of the Hôryûji (ca. 700), deserve to be called absolutely perfect (152, 153).

Such shrines or tabernacles are an important part of the temple's furniture if they contain the main cult image or other figures venerated there together with the main figure. They usually have the form of a simple shrine with doors at the front and a canopy-like crowning roof. Their interior walls and doors, in some instances



28* Outer cover of a Sūtra scroll. Gold painting on dark blue paper.

even their outer walls, are painted with figures which, together with the cult figure contained inside the shrine, form an iconographic program. Rich ornamental motifs, frequently in lacquerwork, decorate the exterior. These shrines were popular for use in private domestic cultic observances and, in those cases, contain miniature figures. The Amitābha triad mentioned above is still standing in its original Tachibana shrine, which once belonged to a lady of Japan's highest court aristocracy.

Similar in structure, but a little older (Asuka period), is the famous Tamamushi Shrine (150) in the Hōryūji. Its name means "gold beetle shrine" because the areas between the metal-fittings of ornamental openwork were originally covered with the iridescent wing covers of these beetles (*Chrysochroa elegans*). The shrine contains very important, well-preserved and also technically remarkable paintings (see p. 131) on its exterior surfaces. The entire shape of such shrines reproduces the structure of a temple hall in a simplified and stylized, usually elongated manner designed for display on an altar. Some details are imitated so faithfully that particular shrines may provide important clues for the history of Japanese temple architecture.

Tabernacles occur also in miniature form for domestic use and as portable altars for travelers. Frequently, they measure only a few centimeters in height. Wood, preferably precious wood suitable for miniature carving, such as boxwood, is the most widely used material, but shrines made of metal can also be found. The miniature figures in the interior of such tabernacles occasionally are charming examples of exceptional craftsmanship in carving. The exterior is kept very simple and maintains, quite appropriately in view of its purpose, the shape of a simple box with folding doors.

Among the furnishings of temple interiors we also have to count various adornments attached to posts and beams. Long floating banners are usually made of painted or embroidered silk but also of openwork of gilt bronze. There are also the so-called *keman* (165) which are openwork gilt or painted oval plates made of bronze, wood, and occasionally of leather. These are decorated with plant or flower patterns, or figures of legendary birdmen (*Gandharvas*) and worshipping *Bodhisattvas*. They hang above or next to altars, are affixed to posts and cross beams, and may be regarded as transformed flower garlands. Curtains of brocade and colored silk frequently contribute to the decoration of the cult room. They have the function of veiling the cult image or rendering it only partially visible, i.e., of creating inside the sacred precinct of the cult hall yet another innermost sanctum.



29* Metal pendant on the lance of one of the Four Heavenly Kings in the Golden Hall of the Hōryūji.

But even such objects of great decorative value do not have this mere ornamental function as their only objective. Rather, this ornamental function is pervaded, justified and transcended by a religious significance. In all highly developed religious art, and in many instances even in that of primitive peoples, adornment and decorative beauty are vehicles of numinous powers and meaningful symbolism. The enjoyment of ornamental play and sensual splendor, no matter how naively displayed as the apparent center of attention, should not be mistaken for secularization or aestheticism (cf. p. 186).

A more practical function is served by other pieces of furniture. These include short- or long-legged tables on which are placed the holy books used during psalm-like recitations or the utensils needed in front of the cult images; low altar platforms for the performance of certain special rituals; and armchairs with high backs and frequently covered by a canopy for abbots or other leading priests. These Buddhist dignitaries are seated on such chairs in a meditative pose, i.e., with their legs crossed under their bodies and hidden under their wide robes (cf. 132). Such furniture is usually made of simple lacquered wood, but more lavishly designed and decorated pieces may also be found, particularly among the altar tables, which may include in their design Rococo-like curved and graceful legs and fine inlays of

mother-of-pearl. In China elaborate carvings of the much-favored red lacquer can be found.

2. Priestly Robes and Insignia. An important role in the total impression made by a temple hall was played by the robes of the priests who filled the hall during the performance of cult ceremonies. Robes could be made of simple yellow, grey, brown or black material or could be a sort of lavishly decorated brocade stola (*J. Kesa*) and similar garment worn during the services in front of the cult images by those higher ranking priests who were entitled to them. Old brocade pieces from priestly garments were later used for mounting picture scrolls or as covers for precious utensils, such as those used for the tea ceremony. In this way many such pieces were preserved for surprisingly long periods of time. Even the most precious cult garments consisted of small pieces of material sown together in rectangular patterns. This was intended to recall the robes made of rags which were worn by the mendicant monks in early Buddhism.

Another important relic from the ancient tradition of mendicant Buddhist monks is the alms or rice bowl. In medieval East Asia, as demonstrated by numerous well-preserved pieces made of beautiful iron, bronze or lacquered wood found in temple treasures, these were functionally designed objects of noble simplicity with their nearly hemispheric shape slightly narrowing at the rim and totally devoid of decoration.

Buddhist priests were equipped with additional symbolic emblems or insignia of rank, such as the rosary, priestly staff, scepter, and flywhisk. The rosary¹⁰⁸ consisted of a symbolically significant number of wooden, ivory, stone or crystal beads, and served to keep count of prayers or invocation formulas, recitations of sacred passages or cultic exercises. The number of beads varies from between 16 to 18 to 108 or 112, according to the individual Buddhist schools using the rosary. The long priest's staff (cf. 65) has a metal top, frequently containing a miniature stupa, with six rings symbolizing the six realms of existence. Their rattling sound, according to the original interpretation, was intended to warn all animals off the path of the monk so that he would not unknowingly or unintentionally kill even the lowest creature. It also allowed him to attract the attention of residents during his begging trips without making it necessary for him to voice his request. The scepter consists of a gently curved flat piece of wood, bamboo, animal horn or metal, 30 to 100 centimeters in length, with a "cloud-shaped" widening flat shovel-like top. It is the ancient Chinese scepter (*ju-i*, *nyo-i*), originally perhaps a weapon but reinterpreted in Buddhist terms and later changed into a good luck symbol. The flywhisk serves to scare off flies and symbolizes the driving away of all evil. It consists of a short handle and long strands of white hair.

We are not devoting more time to these objects because they are of only marginal importance in Buddhist art. Nevertheless, they are frequently attractive thanks to their craftsmanship, and are important for understanding the iconography of portraits of priests and other works of art.

3. Ritual Implements. Ritual implements proper, i.e., those used to venerate holy beings during the performance of rituals in front of their images, may be divided into two main groups: vessels for sacrificial offerings and cult symbols.

They were primarily developed by esoteric Buddhism, which imbued them with profound mystical significance.

There are six main ritual offerings: scented water, scented powder (which also takes the form of ointments), flowers,¹⁰⁹ incense, food, and the light of lamps. Each of these parallel different spiritual achievements and virtues in a manner which varies widely in the various Buddhist schools. For example, the offerings may correspond to the six pāramitās: compassion, observance of the commandments, equanimity, striving, enlightenment, and supreme wisdom. Or they may symbolize generosity, moral discipline, patient compassion, energy, meditation, and enlightenment. These six offerings may be supplemented by flower garlands, hymns, dances, and cultic plays. Buddhist craftsmanship has created vessels for these sacrificial offerings which are usually of simple but often noble and dignified design.



30* Sounding plate (kei).

Bowls for water and food, flasks for holy water (166), boxes for incense and scented powder, incense basins, flower vases, lamps and candlesticks form the complete set of ritual implements. Some pieces come in pairs arranged on both sides of the altar. The most frequent arrangement, even for later pieces of porcelain, consists of an incense vessel placed in the center and flanked by a pair of flower vases and a pair of candle holders. The latter were usually made of copper, bronze or brass and occasionally inlaid with symbolic motifs or mystic letters (Siddham; see p. 156). However, most of them were either entirely without decoration or were given only a very restrained ornamentation. This restraint leaves an impression of overwhelming austerity, solemnity and perfect craftsmanship. It allows these implements to share both an inner relationship and equal status with the cult figures of the sacred beings whom they serve. During later periods, however, they were frequently endowed with lavish or even overly rich decoration as, for example, in the carved lacquerware of the Ming and Ch'ing periods.

The ritual implement with the greatest variations in form is the incense vessel. It may appear in the shape of an open bowl or chalice placed on a high pedestal, or in that of a mountain having several peaks with openings between them through which incense could rise. Such incense vessels are sometimes made of glazed ceramic. Incense burners with long handles are not found on altars in front of cult images, but are held by officiating priests and could be carried during processions (131). A special offering of incense might involve pouring incense powder onto a round place to form a maṇḍala or symbolic letters (Siddham)

representing certain sacred figures. Such round plates could occupy the center of a many-petaled open lotus flower resembling the pedestal of images. Many such implements are preserved in the Shôsôin in Nara and elsewhere. Incense vessels of monumental dimensions, such as giant bronze cauldrons bearing votive inscriptions, can be found in front of temple halls--monuments of piety imparting vigorous accents to these courtyards.

Lanterns underwent an evolutionary process which took them beyond the sphere of the temple interior and immediate use in the cult. To be sure, lanterns are found, frequently in large numbers, both in cult rooms and in the corridors of temple precincts. But they play their most important role when found in monumental sizes, made of bronze or stone, lining the paths of temples, as the focal point of temple yards or accompanying graves in cemeteries. Lanterns accumulated in large numbers over the course of centuries at such sacred spots as pious offerings by the faithful. They frequently bear detailed inscriptions.

Lanterns were characteristically designed with quadrangular, sextagonal or octagonal head pieces to hold oil lamps or candles. Such head pieces, in turn, rested on tall, round or polygonal pedestals. The whole ensemble is covered by a projecting roof with a decorative top--making this basic shape resemble that of a pagoda. Monumental masterpieces of stone masonry and metal casting may be found among these temple lanterns. The most important of them, a work from the middle of the 8th century which has miraculously survived, stands in front of the hall of the Great Buddha in the Tôdaiji at Nara (154). It is distinguished by its harmoniously proportioned dimensions and beautiful grid panels carrying reliefs of Bodhisattvas playing musical instruments (155). Though this work was surely patterned on Chinese prototypes of the Tang period, none like these have survived in China. Normally, these lanterns were made of stone. Lanterns have continued to play an important role right up to the present in garden architecture. Their origin as religious objects should caution us against regarding these as merely decorative enrichment.

The ritual symbols used in esoteric Buddhism are placed on the altar either in a lying or standing position and are held and handled by priests during the course of ritual performances in different, mostly symbolic and therefore minutely and strictly prescribed ways. The most important of these implements is the Wheel of the Teaching or of the Law (dharma-cakra; 158, 32*).

Originally an Indian disc-like throwing weapon, it later became the sign of a ruler, and hence appropriate for the Buddha. It is also a sun symbol, and above all, became the symbol of the doctrine "set in motion" by the Buddha's act of "Turning the Wheel of the Law," which began with his first sermon at Sarnath and illuminated the world like the sun. At the heart of all this is the widespread ancient symbolism of the wheel for cosmic cycles of the world and life itself. The Vajra symbol (101, 156, 157, 160, compare 73, 14*), the ancient thunderbolt of Indra and other deities, which is also called the diamond scepter, symbolizes in esoteric Buddhism both the Absolute and Emptiness as the indestructible, ultimate reality which is just as indestructible as a diamond. It penetrates everything and destroys evil but itself



31* Frieze with vine motif on the upper rim of the pedestal of the main cult image in the Yakushiji, Nara.

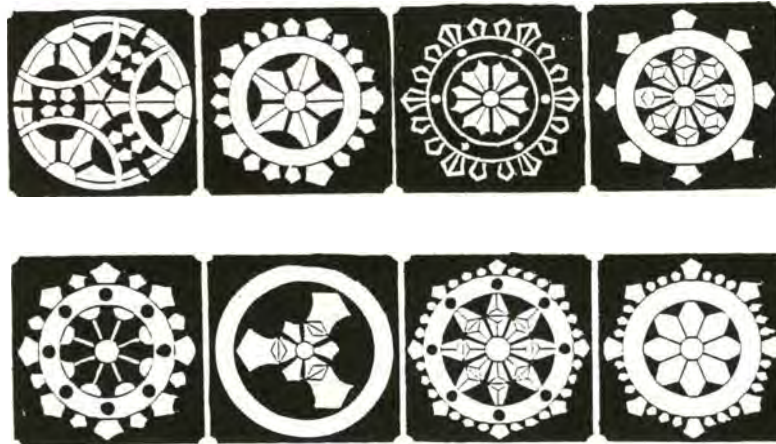
cannot be penetrated, split or destroyed. The vajra also symbolizes the "bodhi mind," the innermost unchanging essential nature of all existing beings who have to be liberated and made to realize this true "bodhi mind" during the process of enlightenment. Vajras are made of metal (usually bronze) and take the form of a short club with a bulge in the middle and sharp-edged prongs at both ends. The number of these prongs differs: one prong symbolizes ultimate metaphysical unity; three prongs its three-fold manifestation in body, speech, and mind; five prongs point to the five wisdoms and the five Wisdom Buddhas corresponding to them. Prongs of many-pronged vajras are bent towards the central axis in a claw-like fashion. As tangible realization of *śūnyatā*, the quintessential metaphysical concept of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the vajra serves as the central cult symbol of that school of Buddhism which gave Buddhist art its most fertile impulses.

The counterparts of the vajras are the bells (frequently with many-pronged vajras as handles) (157) symbolizing the phenomenal world, according to the scheme of the Diamond and Womb Worlds depicted in the pair of mandalas. As transitory and illusory as the phenomenal world, the sounds of the bell vanish; but seen from another vantage point, the vajra-bell is considered to be the symbol of awakening and enlightenment. The sexual-magic school of esoteric Buddhism, Śāktism, understands vajra and bell as symbols of the male and female principles.

We should stress at this point that every esoteric (and not just esoteric) Buddhist symbol may be interpreted in a variety of ways depending on its context, the particular school using it, or the doctrinal tenet it is intended to symbolize. As a matter of fact, it may be called one of the fundamental principles of such mystic symbolism that it is so multi-faceted and multi-layered that its symbols have to be interpreted in a variety of ways. The predilection of the East Asian mind for combination, classification and interpretation (including mystification) has been allowed to run wild in this particular area in such a confusing manner that we should refrain at this point from attempting to describe and explain Buddhist symbolism. We arrive here at a borderline beyond which our quest for specific information

should not carry us, but we should at the same time be mindful of the fact that this border should not be drawn too narrowly.

Another important cult symbol is the "eye opener," a metal object resembling a one-pronged vajra but with a small pearl at each end. It evolved from an Indian instrument used during eye operations for cataracts and is thought to open the spiritual eye of the initiate to the saving truth. There are many other symbols, but they do not play as important a role as works of creative craftsmanship as those described above.



32* The Wheel of Dharma as motif in family crests.

Mention should be made, however, of the "Seven" or "Eight Treasures" because they are frequently placed on altars or depicted in Buddhist paintings as favorite ornamental motifs. The Seven Treasures are the most valuable treasures of a world ruler (cakravartin): They are the elephant, horse, wish-granting jewel, a beautiful consort, a good minister, a good general and the wheel (to symbolize universal rule). The "Eight Treasures," which also belong to the world ruler and have been ascribed to the Buddha in his role as spiritual world ruler even more frequently than the seven, are: the umbrella (a canopy being the symbol of a sovereign), two fish (symbol of fertility and expansion), a conch shell (for its victoriously penetrating sound), the lotus flowers (the symbol of the purity and perfection of essential nature unsoiled by the mud of the world), the jar (for the drink of immortality, or holy water), the unending knot (of infinite life), the victory banner, and the Wheel of Dharma. One or another of these often appears as a decorative motif on late Chinese porcelain. The wheel symbol, like all these signs deriving from very ancient Indian notions, is also found in Buddhism in the form of a swastika which, running counter-clockwise, frequently appears on the chest, palms, or soles of Buddha figures. In East Asian maps or city guides it serves usually as a topographic sign for a Buddhist temple just as Western maps use the sign of a cross to mark the location of a church.

Several musical instruments are also part of the ritual performances and have occasionally been shaped in an artistically attractive manner. Closely related to the altar objects and cult symbols mentioned above are various sounding boards and gongs (162-164, 30*), and sound basins which are struck with wooden sticks or hammers. The number of beats, their rhythm and the sound itself all have deep symbolic meaning.

The sound basins have the simplest design. They are plain hemispheric bronze or brass bowls resting on a cushioned frame. They are struck with cloth-covered wooden sticks or, in the case of small basins, with thin metal rods. Characteristically Buddhist instruments are the drums made of woody gourds or wood and furnished with wide, mouth-like openings. These rest on cushions and when struck emit a hollow, deeply resonant, yet dry sound. More elaborate designs can be found on gongs and sound boards suspended on wooden or metal frames. These may be simple sounding stones--an ancient Chinese kind of chime--but are more commonly made of bronze. They not only have beautiful shapes and proportions but are also attractively adorned, usually with symbolic lotus flowers. Their frames may be of simple lacquered wood, but occasionally are also lavishly executed works of art in their own right.

Bells are the main instruments found outside the temple halls. Small bells with clappers activated by the wind hang from the eaves of temple halls and pagodas, and their sound proclaims the true doctrine to the world. But most of all, any sanctuary worthy of the name has a large temple bell (167). Usually these bells hang in their own free-standing towers or bell pavilions, but could also be incorporated in the galleries. Frequently splendidly monumental, these very heavy bronze bells are struck from the outside by a wooden beam horizontally suspended at their side. Their deep, sonorous and long vibrating, characteristic sound is one of the most impressive experiences a visitor may have in a temple precinct. It contributes more intensively than virtually anything else to the peculiar mood of "emptiness" which is the goal of meditative Buddhist mysticism.

Bells are among the most refined large-scale works of Buddhist art, and derive their artistic vigor from their plain and austere shape, nobly simple design, and the economy and dignity of their ornaments. Ornaments are frequently limited to the "heads" (usually consisting of three-dimensional dragon figures) from which the bell is suspended, and to the point where the bell is struck (where a lotus flower is placed). Occasionally there is also an ornamental stripe along the lower rim. The rest of the bell's surface, divided into rectangles by narrow stripes, is left empty. Some bells, particularly in Korea, are distinguished by charming floating Boddhisattva figures cast in low relief and by more lavish decorations in the form of blossoms and vines. Both types, the simple and the elaborate one, are most likely derived from ancient Chinese models.

The rows of wart-like protrusions on the upper exterior of East Asian bells are supposed to be there for acoustic reasons. From an artistic point of view they contribute substantially to the liveliness of the object by providing a contrast to the smooth portions of the surfaces of the bells. Inscriptions are common. These are valuable because they contain exact information about donors and dates, though their purpose was certainly not to provide future generations with historical data. Rather, it was to allow the blessed and liberating sound of the bell to proclaim the

name of the donor of the pious offering and his religious merits to all realms of the world—even to purgatory where the sound comforted the suffering and kept alive their hope that they, too, might finally travel the path to salvation.

The counterparts of the bells are large drums or gongs. These are found inside the cult halls or, like the bells, are housed in separate, towerlike pavilions. Frequently the frames from which they are suspended are artistically more important than the gongs themselves. Their lavish gilt or painted carvings resemble the halos of the cult figures. Bells and gongs are sounded in connection with performances of rituals, but also in order to mark certain times of the day or night. Particularly important are the 108 strikes which are intended to erase the 108 sins, or, more appropriately in the Buddhist sense, obstacles to enlightenment (*kleśa*), and to drive away all powers which are hostile to the doctrine and block the way to liberation. The sound of drums, just like that of bells, comforts and blesses all beings, even those suffering in purgatory, leading them onto the path of salvation.

Regular musical instruments, like flutes, drums, string instruments, etc., also serve the cult. Though frequently of attractive artistic design, they are not properly part of our subject, primarily because they are also used outside the Buddhist sphere. They may be heard during the sacred masked dances (*bugaku*), which are of non-Buddhist origin but are included as offerings in Buddhist ritual. These dances have been an essential part of the grand temple festivals for many centuries, at least in Japan, where virtually everything adopted from the China of the T'ang period has been preserved with surprising faithfulness. The musical element in Buddhist rituals should not be overlooked. It contributes substantially to the religious meaning and atmosphere of the ritual, and no one who has ever listened to the hymns of Buddhist monk choirs, reminiscent of Gregorian chants, and akin to the sound of the bells, has failed to be profoundly impressed.

Among the most important elements of rituals are recitations of sacred scriptures. The actual texts of these scriptures, whether in the form of scrolls written in beautiful calligraphic style and richly decorated with pictures and other ornaments, or in the modest form of bound volumes, are ritual objects in their own right or instruments used for venerating the Buddha. But the sacred words are only brought to life during solemn recitations in the style of psalmody. For such occasions the scriptures are spread out on special small reading tables. At any other time they are kept in lacquered boxes, frequently covered with gold lacquer, mother-of-pearl inlay and metal ornament decorations. Such Sūtra boxes and chests and the receptacles for priestly robes, scepters and related objects are among the most important examples of medieval lacquerware. By comparison, the world-famous masterpieces of the Chinese and Japanese secular lacquerware are only relatively recent latecomers.

4. Reliquaries. As the Buddhists understand it, the sacred word is also a sacred body: A mystic syllable or sequence of syllables—whether recited or written—may contain the entire essence of a Buddha, Bodhisattva or Vidyārāja. For this reason Sūtra texts or dhāraṇīs may be made the nucleus of a cult statue which allows the statue to attain its numinous efficacy (see above, p. 83). The Buddha body is also present in relics (*śarīra*), and these, as we have already seen in the case of

pagodas, play an important, if not dominant, role in Buddhist sanctuaries and their rituals.



33* Stone gorintô.

Small wonder that precious reliquaries, preferably in the shape of pagodas or related shapes, have been dedicated to such relics during all periods. The most popular form was the tahôtô (see p. 70f). Another favorite was the gorintô which was also popular as the shape of tombstones. It consisted of a pagoda-like arrangement of superimposed cubic, spherical, pyramidal, semi-spherical and pearl-like shapes as symbols of the five world elements: earth, water, fire, air, and empty space (159). Small boxes, flasks, and similar receptacles made of precious material, such as gold, silver or rock crystal, could also serve as reliquaries (159). Occasionally, creative artistic imagination and exquisite craftsmanship found outlets in other shapes (161). These, however, are still suggestive of the pagoda shape. Reliquaries are either placed on the altars of special relic chapels fitted into the temple precinct, or they are lowered into the ground below the altar during consecration ceremonies. The importance of the relics enclosed in the central foundation stones of the pagoda has already been described earlier (p. 70).

5. Grave monuments. Pagodas and pagoda-like shapes of stone or metal, above all the gorintô, may also appear as tombstones (33*) and even constitute their most important type. Symbolizing, as they did, the embodiment of the Buddha, they were appropriate receptacles for his historical or spiritual body. Therefore, they were also considered befitting for those of the dead who were assumed to have entered Buddhahood through enlightenment and liberation. Next in frequency are simple slab-like stone steles placed on pedestals. Relatively rare were tomb sculptures. The most common type are figures of the Bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha (Titsang, Ji-zô) who, as helpmate for all those suffering in the nether world, was quite appropriate for serving this function.

In East Asian countries, Buddhism was most commonly responsible for funeral rites and continues in part to be so; cemeteries are, therefore, still predominately Buddhist in character. Because of the preponderance of only a few

types of grave monuments with strictly regulated forms and proportions, Buddhist cemeteries are distinguished by their great uniformity. Despite a certain tendency to monotony, the result contrasts favorably even for modern tastes with that aggregation of hollow tastelessness frequently disgracing our cemeteries. Grave monuments, in the simple monumentality of their traditional limited repertoire of types, represent an achievement of Buddhist art which should not be slighted. The spirit of Buddhist art lives in them just as it does in the cult figures and temple buildings. Their common inner inspiration is clearly evident.

Surveying the works of Buddhist craftsmanship which served as furnishings for Buddhist sanctuaries and as ritual implements during cult performances, we notice a certain polarity. On the one hand, these objects are distinguished by their solemn simplicity and profundity; on the other hand, they are objects bearing lavish, occasionally overly rich ornamentation (cf. 167 and 161). While their quality depends on the degree of expertise displayed in the sheer mastery of the materials employed and on the power of the basic shapes produced, it depends also on the great technical virtuosity and on the free play of melodious ornamentation.

This polarity permeates the entire world of Buddhist art and life. The Buddhas, remote in the emptiness of nirvāṇa, and their solemn undecorated figures, have been simplified to the point of abstraction. But they are confronted by lavishly decorated Bodhisattvas and deities placed within the full splendor of the supra-earthly realms of bliss. The idea of "Emptiness" is confronted by the wealth of a beatified reality which revels in beauty. The motive of ascetic meditation aiming at ultimate essence is confronted with the motive of "accumulating merit" through veneration, offerings, and accumulating treasures. In order to symbolize that which is ultimately real and most sacred, nothing can be too simple and "abstract." The symbol must be reduced to the utmost possible simplicity of its essential core. But for the purpose of veneration, nothing is too splendid and precious. The two aspects do not contradict but rather complement each other, each saving the other from an overly rigid one-sidedness. The abstract bestows metaphysical depth on the concrete. The concrete bestows on the abstract the vibrant wealth and fullness of the real and supra-real play of forms. In terms of Mahāyāna teaching, both aspects, though not identical, are also not quite non-identical in their ultimate essence.

Ornamental Motifs

Ornamentation assumes an important role in objects produced for ritual purposes. For this reason a few comments are appended here about this important field of East Asian, specifically Buddhist, art which so far has attracted little attention. It extends beyond the art of mere implements to that of Buddhist architecture whenever a building or its contents display sculptured and painted decoration of cult images whose garments, jewelry, and attachments (halos, etc.) are frequently strewn with ornamental elements, but also to painting. Technically speaking, ornaments may be executed in metalwork (such as cast, engraved, applied or inlaid ornaments), wood carvings, mother-of-pearl and other inlays, colored or gilded lacquerware, or painted surfaces. The fields of Buddhist art identified above share not only techniques but also decorative motifs. We may distinguish between three basic groups of such decorative motifs, each characterized by that superb

beauty of line and lively surface texture for which East Asians appear to have particular talents.

1. Geometric-abstract motifs. That is, systems of lines and surfaces occurring, for example, as patterns on the robes of Buddhist figures in sculptures and paintings (25*) or as lattice work, which is richly developed in East Asian architecture. The surface design occurring on large bells may also be included in this group (167). A special form is constituted by the wave, volute and spiral line patterns covering the surfaces of halos (17, 151) which represent the light aureoles of the sacred beings. But this kind of decoration is clearly less prominent than the following group.

2. Nature motifs. These consist predominantly of plants and flowers but animals have also occasionally been used. Most prominent among the latter are symbolic animals, like lions, elephants, peacocks, phoenixes and dragons which are either of Indian-Buddhist or ancient Chinese origin. The same is true of plants. Some, like the lotus, were brought by Buddhism from India to East Asia. Others come from the rich repertoire of Chinese nature motifs with their own complex pre-Buddhist symbolism.¹¹⁰ These Chinese flower and vine motifs dominate the ornamental decorations of Buddhist art to a high degree. The fully and splendidly developed T'ang ornamental style, in particular, displays an overabundance of almost corporeal organic life, yet manages it with the kind of restraint which yields classic perfection. The T'ang decorative style exerted a more dominant influence during all later periods than the more abstract ornamentalism of the archaic Wei style (43; 29*) which had dominated the early phase of Buddhist art in East Asia with its austere and cool beauty.

This T'ang ornamental style was transported from China to Korea and further on to Japan where it was, at least in the Buddhist sphere, only slightly modified and expanded. The objects of basically Chinese origin, dating approximately from the first half of the 8th century, which have been preserved in the treasure storehouse Shōsōin in Nara, comprise the richest surviving collection of this international classic ornamental style and represent it in its purest form. The major plant motif, aside from that of the lotus, consists of arabesque-like intertwining vines with inward and outward curling stems, leaves, and blossoms, from which new leaves and flowers branch off (163, 165; 20*, 25*, 28*, 30*). Placed between such arabesques or constituting independent ornamental motifs in their own right are forms which we may call lotus-palmettes. But the most important truly Buddhist symbolic plant motif has been the lotus flower with its infinitely varied patterns of petals and leaves. Among the innumerable examples, a surprisingly large number are of outstanding noble beauty--a beauty which is either of austere loftiness or of gentle elegance (153).

3. Buddhist Motifs. In contrast to the first two groups of motifs which are predominantly of non-Buddhist origin or were at least not limited to Buddhism alone, there is a group of purely Buddhist symbols. These have already been described: the wheel of the doctrine, the swastika, the stūpa, the wish-granting jewel, the diamond thunderbolt (vajra), and many more. Together with their symbolic function they also serve as decorative motifs, either independently or as

elements of complex ornamental patterns. They may appear on a vast array of objects and are executed in every available technique, even in instances where one would not expect them--such as Japanese family crests displayed on garments and utensils (32*).

In the total repertoire of Buddhist ornaments a kind of historical stratification may be seen. Many motifs originated either in India or China, and a few were added by the Japanese after they accepted the entire store of Indian-Chinese motifs. In addition, there is a sizeable number of motifs of more or less clearly Hellenistic inspiration. These, as already mentioned, had found their way to East Asia from Bactria and Northwest India via Central Asia. There are also some of pure Sassanid origin which, though originating during a substantially later phase of development, also made their way to East Asia via Central Asia. The *Hôryûji* in Japan, for example, has preserved a seemingly typical Sassanid piece of silk from the 7th century which does, however, betray its East Asian origin by such peculiar features as the Chinese characters woven into it. After the early phase of East Asian Buddhism, during which foreign elements were readily adopted, such influences receded and, beginning with the mature T'ang period, the stock of motifs of essentially Indian and Chinese origin described above had consolidated. But Buddhism, which had penetrated most of Asia and had become the vehicle for far-reaching cultural contacts and the receptacle for numerous cultural traditions, displays its universal character particularly clearly in the array of its decorative motifs.¹¹¹

In all religious art, there is an imprecise borderline between those motifs which are an inherent part of the content of a particular work, are therefore iconographically relevant, and may serve as carriers of symbolic meaning, and those which are intended for purely ornamental purposes. This is perhaps so because in all cultures ornamental motifs were derived largely from meaningful symbolic images and signs. On the other hand, true symbols, such as the lotus flower, wheel of doctrine, or vajra, for example, may also play a strong ornamental role (69).

But the borderline between representative and ornamental functions is also imprecise for another reason. In East Asia there exists a preference for ornamentalizing the forms of concrete objects. For example, garments streaming in the wind and scarflike stripes may be turned into a melodic play of lines serving the obvious purpose of decorating a large surface, and thus developing a highly ornamental value of their own (152). East Asian art in general tends to view the objects which it depicts in terms of their purely formal values and, without weakening their natural vitality to any degree, tends to stylize them with cipherlike or ornamental formulas. This feature characterizes the secular art of all periods as well but may be observed particularly in Buddhist art, which puts so much emphasis on the spiritualization and sublimation of phenomenal and empirical forms.

The following brief sketch may suffice to indicate the composition and design principles of Buddhist ornamental art. The three kinds of motifs described above are usually combined. A favorite combination is one consisting of natural and symbolic motifs and serving as the main design adorning a geometrically decorated surface. Other favorites are medallion- or rosette-shaped centralized motifs framed by secondary motifs inside a bordered field. Radial patterns inside such fields may

also be found. Tight arrangements of ornaments to cover surfaces are frequent and occasionally create the impression of arabesques without, however, approaching the complicated interlacing patterns of that form of Islamic ornamental art. Generally speaking, a relatively simple and manageable order prevails even in cases where forms abound.

Three elementary types of arrangement stand out: the centralizing type, usually a field with a central rosette; the surface-covering type, characterized by a certain *horror vacui*; and the ribbon-like type, preferably in the form of ornamental lining stripes with continuous geometric patterns, wave-like vines and similar motifs. Symmetry generally dominates without ever becoming rigid, for the simple reason that all ornamental shapes already have a certain inner movement of their own which is, however, always restrained to a mild flow and softened to create a calming total effect. This movement arises essentially from the natural vitality of many of these motifs, but their peculiar "plasticity" may also be due to their immanent formative power. This creates modulated surfaces, which often produce the illusion of three-dimensionality, bestowing an organic freedom on such surface-bound patterns (28*).

Graphic devices, such as curved lines patterned after organic forms, overlapping lines, etc. all contribute to this effect. But, above all, it is produced by shadowing and coloring techniques (entirely non-naturalistic, of course). Coloring is multi-faceted, often graduated like a rainbow and divided into stripes and layers (20*) according to the *ungen* method described above (p. 62). But no matter how rich the interweave of colors and the wealth and variation of forms, certain restraints are strictly observed. Gold is lavishly used but the resulting effect is always one of dignified and somber beauty. Only during the late periods was there degeneration into vulgar overindulgence. The norm was to aim for a clarified and restrained variety, a harmonious balancing of opposite forces, a vitality refined into nobility of form, a play of forms rising out of a natural enjoyment of beauty, yet spiritualized in something supra-real. In all these respects Buddhist ornamental art is not only of truly classic quality, but is also a genuine and appropriate expression of the Mahâyâna spirit.