

# Waters in the Pure Land Paradise

By Nobuo Tsuji

**T**he ancient Japanese envisioned the realm of the dead as a gloomy underground world of unclean spirits, and it was not until Buddhism was introduced from the Asian continent early in the 6th century that they were given the alternate vision of a heavenly paradise.

The Western Pure Land Paradise of Buddhist teachings is a peaceful land of floating lotuses above which dance graceful angels, the whole paradise aglitter with the golden rays emanating from the great Amitabha in the center. The Amitabha is compassionate, and those who entrust their souls to his keeping will be delivered from the trials and tribulations of this world and may enter the Pure Land. This vision was reinforced by exquisite paintings and sculptures, and it is no wonder that the Japanese court nobility flocked to embrace this new religion.

The Buddhist art objects brought over from the Asian continent were marvels of refinement and skill to Japanese eyes. But the Japanese were soon creating their own masterpieces with astounding speed after having learned from immigrant craftsmen or imported works. In particular, the Japanese Buddhist art produced in the Asuka and Hakuho periods extending from the end of the 6th century to the end of the 8th century, while having an archaic simplicity, are every bit as elegant and beautiful as the continental works on which they are modeled.

The example shown here is a late 7th century Buddhist statuette belonging to the Horyuji temple in Nara that is said to have been owned personally by Tachibana-no-Michiyo, an influential court lady who was mother to Empress Komyo (701-760), consort of Emperor Shomu (701-756). The cabinet, or so-called Shrine of Lady Tachibana, stands 2.7 meters high, and behind its front panels is a scene right out of the Pure Land Paradise.

A bronze floor panel is etched to resemble a pond with floating lotuses, three



The Amitabha and the attendant Bodhisattvas, Horyuji temple, Nara City

of which rise up out of the water. On these three lotuses are enthroned a 34-centimeter high Amitabha triad: the Amitabha in the center flanked on either side by the attendant Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta. Their plump features and kindly mien are characteristic of the Buddhist sculptures of this period. Behind the triad is a bronze screen decorated with a lyrical motif of angels resting on lotus petals. The undulating lines of the lotus stems and the angels' robes reflect the soft folds of the triad's garments. Traces of gilt indicate that the shrine and the images within it were once completely covered with gold.

The lotus pond etched onto the floor panel is a fine piece of craftsmanship. The way the lotus flowers lean this way and that, the ripples on the water, and the en-

tire mood suggest a breeze that one can almost feel – perhaps one of the finest representations of a breeze-caressed pond in the world.

Water is one of the few resources that Japan has in abundance, and the seas, the lakes, the rivers and the brooks have long provided ample models for Japanese artists. The delicate lines of the water motif of the Shrine of Lady Tachibana represent the roots of an artistic tradition that continued through the centuries and was carried forth by the famed Edo-period painter and designer Ogata Korin (1658-1716).

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The bronze floor panel of the Amitabha triad, Horyuji temple, Nara City