

The National Treasure Jūichimen Kannon Painted on Silk

KAJITANI Ryoji
Nara National Museum

Worship of Jūichimen Kannon (Sk. Ekādaśa-mukha) had flourished in Japan even prior to the arrival of systematized, “pure” esoteric Buddhism during the Heian period. The earliest extant painting, from the Asuka (Hakuhō) period, is that found on twelfth wall of the Kondō at Hōryūji. In terms of sculpture, there are many examples dating from the Asuka and Nara periods as well as examples of works that were imported from Tang China. The worship of Jūichimen Kannon continued to thrive after the Heian period. However, while there are numerous masterpieces of sculpture from across the ages, the number of extant paintings is surprisingly small. This celebrated painting is rare image in that it can uniquely be traced back to late Heian times.

In this painting Kannon faces to the viewer’s left; the right arm is extended before the knee, forming the yōgan’in (mudra of bestowing wishes); and several jewels hang from the wrist. The left arm is bent before the chest and holds a water ewer in which a red lotus flower are inserted. Atop the head are eleven faces, including three of a benevolent aspect (*jihisō*), three of an angry aspect (*shinmusō*), three with white fangs protruding upward (*hakugejōshutsusō*), one with a violent howl (*bōaku daishōsō*), and one of topmost crowning the others (*chōjōbutsumen*), and with the face of the main sculpture there are all together twelve. The image conforms to description in the *Jūichimen shijushingyō*, a sutra which had been translated by Xuanzang (Genjō). The arrangement of the faces atop the head is somewhat jumbled, but some have pointed out that they conform almost perfectly to the iconographic drawings of the head of Jūichimen Kannon painted on the doors of a portable shrine at the Kaidan-in by the priest Nōe of Tōdaiji. In addition, the depiction of the undergarment beneath the skirt near the stomach is also seen in a number of examples of bodhisattvas painted on the doors of lacquered alcoves for Buddhas in the Shōsō-in from the Nara period. Moreover, given the peculiar depiction of the right arm, it appears likely that the iconographical type can be traced back to the Nara period.

A special characteristic of this image is that the body is turned obliquely and does not face straight forward as in most images. Images of a bodhisattva in this oblique pose can be seen in Heian-era iconographic collections, but similar images can also be traced back to the bodhisattvas of the Asuka (Hakuho) periods on the walls of the Kondō of Horyūji. In terms of the pictorial elements of this painting, it appears that at least in the case of the iconography of Kannon, the composition has been adopted from earlier images.

On the other hand, the form of the garment draped over the lotus pedestal, the large ornamental canopy, and the open-work style nimbus, as well as the consummate technique displayed in coloring and cut gold foil used in these elements should be understood as firmly situated within the rubric of Heian Buddhist painting.

The flesh of Kannon is rendered in a pale red, with vermilion outlines, and deep crimson *kumadori* shading. Both the background pattern and main motif of the clothing are in multilayered, finely cut gold foil designs. The canopy have a design of gentians in several colors appear in together gradated shades. The designs of gentians are thought to have been motifs that were recently brought from Song. Furthermore, the water ewer held by Kannon is translucently showing the stem of the lotus. This seems to be a representation of Song-era glass. This imagery contains many elements that display the aesthetic excellence of Heian Buddhist painting.

The painting had been at Hōkiji in Nara until early-modern times. It can be supposed that its composition was based on the ancient paintings such as that on the wall of the Kondō at Hōryūji. There exists today at Hōryūji a fragment of a Heian-era Buddhist painting with bold *kumadori* shading similar to that in this painting. The circumstances behind the creation of this painting are an intriguing issue for further study.

(translated by Michael Jamentz)