

# CONSERVATION OF THE BLUE KONGŌ ON SILK AT JŪRINJI, NARA

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In recent years a painting of a Blue Kongō (a demon king who serves as a guardian of Buddhism) was discovered at the Jūrinji in Ōnohō in the city of Nara and named a Designated Cultural Property. Depicted on a single-width hanging scroll are the Blue Kongō, two youths, and four demons (Jpns., *yasha*) based on the *Daranijikkyō*. The vast majority of the extant images of Blue Kongō were produced during the Edo period and had become stereotyped, but this painting was produced in the Muromachi period and is considerably older, superbly executed and may be deemed a masterpiece. It is also noteworthy that according to the record of past repairs written on its storage box, it can be surmised that it was used in Kōshin rituals conducted during the Edo period in the local area.

However, this image had been severely damaged. The silk had been torn and portions lost and pigments had flaked off. The color applied to the back of the silk was in danger of being lost. The mounting had been greatly damaged, and it was even difficult to hang the work. Due to this damage, the Bunkazai Hozon Corporation undertook the conservation of this work from October, 2002 through January, 2004 in the atelier of the Conservation Center of the Nara National Museum.

The main acts of conservation were to remove dirt, stop loss of pigment, supplement the silk, renew the mounting, and construct a new storage box. These required high levels of technical skill. For example, in order to replace the paper adhering to the back of the painting without a loss of backing color, it was necessary to wet the backing paper in parts with a small amount of water, and loosen the paper fiber to remove them. At that time, an easily water-soluble glutinous paste (Jpns., *funori*) was developed by Bunkazai Hozon Corporation and the National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, Tokyo, and the silk and pigments of this painting were preserved with it. In those locations where silk had been lost, silk degraded by electron beam was cut in the same shape as the missing portions and applied, and appropriate coloration was added.

As a result of this painstaking and careful process, not only were the silk and pigments preserved, but the iconographic detail was made clearer. The painting was restored to a state in which the image could be more easily appreciated. In the conservation process, it was confirmed that the backing color was applied to each figure, and one could ascertain the skilled technique of the painter. Because there have been few art historical studies of the Blue Kongō, the establishment of the iconographic type and its development remain to be elucidated in the future. For this reason, it is of great significance that this example of what can be judged a representative Blue Kongō was discovered at Jūrinji, underwent conservation, has been preserved in excellent condition, and has been made available to the public.