THE SHÔSÔ-IN’S Landscape Screen Panels in Clamp-Resist Dyeing and Nara-Period Painting

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A series of folding-screen panels entitled Landscape Screen Panels in Clamp-Resist Dyeing (J., Sansui kyokechi byôbu) are among the best documented works in the Shôsô-in Repository. Their provenance is considered traceable to a record in the 756 (Tenpyô Shôhô 8) Record of the Nation’s Rare Treasures (Tôdaiji kenneotsucho, or Kokka chinpo cho), which lists “Twelve landscape screens in clamp-resist dyeing” as part of the one hundred favorite screens left by Emperor Shômu (701-756).

Stylistically, the scenes in these screen panels can be divided into two basic types, both of which share the compositional elements of mountains in the upper section, pastoral terrain in the center, and seas with islands in the lower part. These sections are given equal emphasis and are executed with a flat sensibility that mitigates any sense of depth. The elements making up the scenes as well as the compositions themselves have much in common with representative paintings of the Nara period (710-794), suggesting that the underdrawings for these clamp-resist-dyed landscapes were the work of a top-class artist of the day. Each of the original screens was joined from six panels, including the two extant design categories and perhaps additional landscape varieties. The lateral surface of the six panels would have functioned to de-emphasize the height of the mountains and accentuate the horizontal expanse of the landscape.

One element that comes to mind when pinpointing the subject of these screens is the motif of four sage-like figures who ride on clouds emanating from the foot of mountains in one type of panel. Such mystical figures are not unusual in Nara-period pictorial scenes, but differ from the rarer Chinese-style representations, in which hermetic figures themselves form the main theme. Instead, the mountain sages in Nara paintings tend to be small and situated in the periphery of the scenes, providing an auspicious or mystical air to the Buddha’s paradise or the mountain retreat.

In these screen panels, too, the sages are rendered as small, inconspicuous figures apparently embellishing the main subject, which seems not to be clearly manifested in the scenes. Considering the familiarity with which the mountain landscape is depicted, however, we might reasonably deduce that the unexpressed subject of these screens is hermits enjoying their mountain refuge. We know from poetry of the day that Nara-period emperors and members of the nobility maintained hermetic aspirations, which were indulged through periodic revelry in the mountains. Landscape screens such as these allowed such aristocratic ideals to be appreciated within the comfort of interior residences.