ON THE MOTHER OF PEARL,
SHITAN-NURI LACQUERED CABINET SHINE AT SENTAI-JI
(PART 1)

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Sentai-ji, a Pure Land sect temple in Tango no Shōchō, Yamato-Kōriyama in Nara Prefecture, possesses a large-scale zushi (cabinet shrine), that is officially described as a rosewood mother of pearl coated cabinet shrine (Jpns., shitan nuriraden zushi). It houses the Amitābha triad (Amida sanzon) that is the main worship object of the temple. The zushi has been put on display in recent years in a special exhibit at the Nara National Museum. This study argues the date of its production based on data obtained at that time.

This zushi is composed of four broad boards that have been erected above the temple’s traditional platform altar, in the form of Mt. Sumeru (Jpns. shumidan) and is topped with a roof. Removable doors were previously fixed to the front, back and lateral sides of the zushi. The shumidan sits on a lotus pedestal (Jpns., rengeza), the posts (Jpns. tsuka), and frames (Jpns. kamachi) are decorated with a covering of tiny shell fragments, in a technique known as mijinraden. It is finished with ornamental metal fittings on which arabesque pattern known as hōsōge karakusa has been carved in relief. The ten patriarchs of the Pure Land sect are painted on the wooden panels (Jpns., hameita) of the shumidan. Columns are ornamented in shitan nuri, a lacquer technique mimicking rosewood grain. In this, the first of two articles, the expression of the artisanship in the rengeza, raden, kanagu, the arabesque pattern, known as karakusa, on the edges of the hameita, and the shitan nuri, which can be appreciated from all sides, is examined, and the age of the production of each is postulated. As a result this study concludes that the zushi itself was produced in the early-Kamakura period (the first half of the 13th century) and indicates that its form reflects the processional (Jpns., gyōdo), a form of worship-practice of the Pure Land sect. Furthermore, this study indicates that the two attendant figures in the Amitābha triad are a set, and emphasizes the necessity of examining the style of these Buddhist sculptures (the figure of Amitābha tathāgata is an Edo-era replacement). The expression of the painting on the zushi and the sculpture are subjects of examination in the forthcoming issue.