

THE ROAD TO GRIDHRAKŪTA: REGARDING THE SHAKA RYŌJUSEN SEPPŌ-ZU IN THE COLLECTION OF THE NARA NATIONAL MUSEUM

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The scene of Śākyamuni (J. Shakamuni) preaching at Gridhrakūta (E. Vulture Peak. J. Ryōjusen), the mountain said to be his Pure Land, is a common theme, frequently depicted in a wide variety of Buddhist paintings; extant images on hanging scrolls and illustrated frontispieces to sutras are plentiful. The Nara National Museum painting has recently once again come to the attention of the public, and it is one of the largest in scale among the type and the iconography is unique.

In the upper portion of the painting a peak in the shape of a vulture, conforming to the standard iconography, rises in the center, and lesser promontories stretch to right and left, forming Vulture Peak. There are many figures concentrated in the central portion of the painting, and at the very center Śākyamuni is represented in the traditional manner, facing straight forward. Flanking him to the left and right are eighteen seated figures, which are not found in any other example of this type, but which are thought to be based directly on descriptions in the *Lotus Sutra*. Seated in the foreground are the ten major disciples of Śākyamuni, who seem to have been modeled on Song images of the Arhats. They are among the most vividly depicted groupings in the painting. The replacement of one of four Celestial Kings by Skanda (J. Idate) is also thought to show the influence of Song paintings. The depiction of the two figures waiting among the standing Deva and lay believers directly before the Buddha is unusual as they carry a lute (*biwa*) and a koto in sacks in preparation for a musical offering. This is thought to represent the fact that they have just arrived on the scene.

Below this group is a landscape separated by mist. It conforms to the tradition of the Yamato-e style, which had developed from Chinese painting, and uses smooth curving lines to create explicit forms and bright colors, mainly a fresh green here. The impression of the quite stylized scenery is similar to the landscape screen at Jingoji, which is thought to have been produced at the start of the Kamakura period. There are few objects in the rather forlorn landscape, but when the locations of two erect stupas are discovered, one realizes the space depicted here is one suited to the practice of Buddhist austerities. At the bottom edge of the painting there is a bridge that serves as the entryway from the viewer's point of view, crossing into the center of the painting. The road stretches into the distance between mountains on right and left, and finally reaches the location of the sermon on Vulture Peak.

There are several similar examples from the late-Heian to the Kamakura period of the imagery of the preaching at Vulture Peak whose composition includes, in this fashion, the road that leads there. Among the eight frontispieces of the 12th-century *Lotus Sutra* of the Kagawa Prefectural History Museum for example, there are two whose composition depicts the crossing of a bridge, climbing a mountain, and going through a cave to reach the place of the sermon. Since the people on the road appear to be the same type as those sitting before Śākyamuni, the significance of the depiction of the road is clear. In the case of one of frontispieces from the twelfth-century *Lotus Sutra* at Sensōji, the scene of preaching at Vulture Peak has been rendered in minuscule in a corner of the composition, and instead the empty space before it is emphasized as the main image. There are no contrived elements such as the cave included, and the end of the road, which is shrouded in shadows, soon opens to the site of the preaching in a naturalistic manner.

In the *Konkōmyō saishōōkyō kinji hōtō mandara* (Mandala of the Stupa of the Sutra of the Bright

Light of the Victorious Kings in Gold Ink) at Daichōju-in and *Hokekyō kinji hōtō mandara* (Mandala of the Stupa of the Lotus Sutra in Gold Ink) at Tanzan Jinja the element of climbing the mountain has almost been completely eliminated, and the road to the location of preaching is gently sloping, giving the sense of leading the viewer on in a more gentle manner. As the Kamakura period dawned, in the images such as those on the wooden panels of the pedestal of the statue of Amida nyorai at the Kondō of Hōryūji, which is thought to have been created in 1232, and the images on the doors of the portable shrine reliquary from Shōkaiji, and the Eight Events in the Life of Śākyamuni (Shakassōzu) at Jōrakuji and Jikōji, the bridge and mountain path have become fixed compositional elements, indicating that there was a tendency for their relationship with the site of Śākyamuni's preaching to become ambiguous. It appears that the significance of this portion of these images was gradually lost.

Nara National Museum painting can be seen in this way to be located within the stream of these types and fits therein on the basis of style, and it can thus be understood as a work from the early Kamakura period. The profoundly interesting historical background suggests at that time Vulture Peak was not understood as some conceptual Pure Land far removed from the real world, but was seen instead to be a site to which one might actually travel.