Introduction to the Shōsō-in Exhibition

The Shōsō-in Repository

The Shōsō-in Repository was originally one of several repositories belonging to the temple of Tōdai-ji. Built in a log-cabin construction (anahakihanabe) using three-faceted timbers interlocking at the corners of the building, it is thought to probably date to some time between 741 and 750. The Repository consists of three adjacent buildings known by their placement as the North Section, Middle Section, and South Section. Although originally it was meant to store grain, already in the Nara period (710-794), the Tōdai-ji Shōsō-in held valuable treasures. These treasures have been protected over the centuries because the building was kept locked under imperial seal, the times when it was opened being strictly monitored by the Tōdai-ji priests and imperial household officials. Today the Office of the Shōsō-in under the Imperial Household Agency administers the Repository.

The Treasures in the Shōsō-in

The treasures stored in the Shōsō-in Repository came there for various reasons and purposes, but can be broadly divided into those that were dedicated to the Great Buddha or to other Buddhist icons in Tōdai-ji and those that were religious implements or documents used at Tōdai-ji. Dedication objects include the personal belongings of Empress Shōtō (701-756, r. 724-749) that his wife, Empress Kōmyō (701-760), offered to the Great Buddha in 756, and offerings from the imperial aristocratic families for the Consecration Ceremony of the Great Buddha, which took place in 752. The Buddhist implements used at Tōdai-ji include objects for offerings used during rituals and decorative items adorning worship halls, as well as the tools used by the Tōdai-ji Construction Bureau and the scriptorium along with their written records. In addition, the inclusion of ritual tools used in palace rites suggests the broad scope of the items stored in the Repository.

The Number, Dating and Provenance of the Treasures

Today, the number of treasures in the Repository is said to be about 9000, counting bundles of related objects as single pieces. It is thought that 95% of these were made in Japan during the Nara period, but one also finds items of the same period imported from various Asian countries, such as the Tang dynasty China, and the Korean kingdom of Unified Silla, as well as items that traveled through China from Sassanian Persia and South East Asia. The great majority date to the 8th century, though a few are from preceding centuries and some others from later centuries.

The Shōsō-in Exhibition

The Repository is opened for about two months each autumn, during which time the treasures are inspected and research conducted. At the same time Nara National Museum holds a public exhibition of some sixty to seventy previously selected items. In selecting these items consideration is given to presenting an overall view of the treasures and to items reflecting recent research or comprehensive implications. The first public Shōsō-in exhibition took place in 1946. As a rule, ten or more years must pass before any given item is displayed again, so every year presents a new set of treasures.