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The Shoso-in Textiles of the Era of Emperor Shomu

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Tempyo, meaning heavenly peace, is the name of the era of Emperor Shomu in the mid-eighth century. However the era was quite different from the name. This disparity is because the reality of the society was very severe. And many people were anguished.

Because social anxiety was increased by a civil war, Emperor Shomu, hoping for the peace and prosperity of the nation, had decided to build the great Buddha. Together with the common people, beyond the many difficulties, the ceremony of opening the eyes of the Great Buddha of Todaiji Temple took place in the year 752 (figure 1). Incidentally, Todaiji Temple was built in Nara.



Figure 1. The Great Buddha Hall of Todaiji Temple.

After the demise of Emperor Shomu in the year 756, his Heritages, the core of the treasures of the Shoso-in, were dedicated to the Great Buddha of Todaiji Temple by the Empress Komyo. Even today, the Shoso-in treasures convey the characteristic atmosphere of the Tempyo age. The textiles of Shoso-in had been used in the everyday life of Emperor Shomu (701-756) (figure 2).

The textiles of Shoso-in consist of articles of various different kinds. This textile collection used in the memorial service, which was held at Todaiji Temple, number more than 5000. To reach approximately 200,000 individual pieces, one counts each fragment of textile. The vast majority of the eighth-century textiles preserved in Japan are stored in the Shoso-in new repository (figure 3) which is under the management of The Imperial Household Agency. Indeed, the only other comprehensive collection of textiles from ancient times in Japan belongs to Horyuji Temple.

¹ The Imperial Household Agency of Japan.

The textiles in these two collections have been well preserved. Their ancient colors are still brilliant today□



Figure 2. Textiles used in the everyday life of Emperor Shomu.



Figure 3.

Contents and Characteristics of the textiles of Shoso-in

The particularly gorgeous colors of the Shoso-in textiles, as well as the Chinese taste (figure 4) and Iranian taste (figure 5) of design, which were strongly influenced by Sui (581-619) and Tang (618-907) dynasty techniques and patterns, and were markedly different from colors-and-patterns produced in earlier periods in Japan, drew the attention and appreciation of the specialists as early as the Edo period (1603-1867). But it was not until the textiles began to be systematically classified in the Taisho period (1912-1926) that a comprehensive study actually got under way.



Figure 4.



Figure 5.



Figure 6.



Figure 7.



Figure 8.

The textiles of Shoso-in have been formed into a variety of different objects. There are Buddhist instruments (figure 6) such as banners, canopies, flower plaques (花鬘), and priests' robes (袈裟); clothing such as bugaku dance costumes, belts, ornaments, and working clothes (浄衣); items of furniture such as textile screens (figure 7), kinds of armrests (挟軾), curtains (幕), partition curtains (帳), mats on the desk (褥), covers (幘), and flower-patterned felt rugs (花氈) (figure 8); and bags for items such as medicines, screens, gigaku masks, swords, musical instruments. The musical instruments are for example a flute, a biwa-lute, a koto, and a kind of harp. There are also cords for mirrors, linings for mirror boxes, cloth masks, and other objects. This textile collection gives a picture of everyday life of the period. It is one characteristic of the textiles of Shoso-in that they have been used for a wide variety of objects.

The types of fabric are brocade (錦; multi-color patterned weave), twill (綾; figured twill), plain-weave silk (平絹), gauze (羅; complex gauze, 紗; simple gauze), tapestries (綴れ), and plain weave cloth made by ramie-and-hemp (麻布). And the types of dyeing are kyokechi (夾纈; clamp-resist), rokechi (臈纈; wax-resist), Kokechi (纈纈; bind-resist), painting (彩絵) and woodblock prints (摺絵). Other textiles are mainly embroidery (刺繍) and braids (組紐).

It is considered that the sources of dyes used in the textiles of Shoso-in are sumac (haze), sappanwood (suo), safflower (benibana), gardenia (kuchinashi), gromwell (murasakigusa), madder (akane), miscanthus (kariyasu), Japanese indigo (tadeai), phellodendron (kihada) and acorns (tsurubami). Sappanwood was imported, but the others could have been collected in Japan.

Recent scientific investigations into the sources of dyes used in the textiles of Shoso-in have established that the standard materials were as follows: blue was made with indigo; red with Japanese madder (nihon akane) and safflower (benibana); yellows with phellodendron (kihada),

miscanthus (kariyasu), and sumac (haze); and purples with gromwell (murasakigusa). Though it seems likely that dyes were made using animals such as "purple-producing shells" (kaimurasaki) and "red beetles" (enji) because they existed in the Nara period, so far no textiles using these dyes have been found in the textiles of Shoso-in.

We can see almost all of the basic technology of modern dyeing-and-weaving in the textiles of Shoso-in. These textiles revive the rich world of ancient matured textiles in the present age. However, the textiles made in China of the Sui and Tang Dynasty are negligible in the Shoso-in textiles. Moreover, none of the textiles of Shoso-in has been manufactured in Europe, such as Persia, Central Asia, or the west of China. The majority are made in Japan. The reason is probably that textile production system would have been already equipped in the Nara period because production of textiles was necessary for Japan's political system modeled on the China's political system.

Shoso-in are characterized into three types.

The first characteristic of the textiles of Shoso-in is that many pieces either bear inscriptions or have tags attached. Therefore the history of the textiles of Shoso-in is explained by inscriptions and tags. The most numerous pieces were used either at the ceremony of the opening of the eyes of Great Buddha at Todaiji temple in 752 or on the first anniversary of the demise of Emperor Shomu in 757. A majority of the pieces were thus created and used within a period of several years in the middle of the eighth century.



Figure 9.

The second characteristic of the textiles of Shoso-in is the inclusion of many types of textiles. To give an example that was stated previously, consider, brocade (錦; multi-color patterned weave), twill (綾; figured twill), plain-weave silk (平絹), gauze (羅; complex gauze, 紗; simple gauze), tapestry (綴れ), linen and hemp cloth (麻布), embroidery (刺繍), braid (組紐), kyokechi (夾纈; clamp-resist dyeing), rokechi (臈纈; wax-resist dyeing), kokechi (纈纈; bind-resist dyeing), painted textiles (彩絵), and woodblock print textiles (摺絵). They are almost all of the basic technology of modern weaving and dyeing.



Figure 10.

The third characteristic of the Shoso-in textiles is an international aspect. The textiles of Shoso-in make use of numerous original patterns from around the world: grapevine arabesque scrolls and palmette patterns from Greece; lotus patterns from Egypt and India; animals under a tree (figure 9), beaded medallions (figure 10) and hunting scenes from Persia. In addition, the pattern created in China has been added to the above pattern of the textiles of Shoso-in. Such Chinese patterns are magical clouds, scenes of sacred Mt. Horai, phoenixes, kylins, dragons, tortoises, karahan (composite flowers), and hosoge (an imaginary flower based on the peony).

History of the textiles of Shoso-in

In a historical meaning, the textiles of Shoso-in contain five other types of articles: articles used at the ceremony of the opening of the eyes of Great Buddha, articles used at the ceremony of the demise of the Emperor Shomu, articles dedicated to the Great Buddha of Todaiji temple, articles used on the First Anniversary of the demise of Emperor Shomu, and other types of articles.

There are textiles used at the ceremony of the opening of the eyes of Great Buddha on the ninth day of April in the year 752; two hundred costumes for use in performances of outa, tokogaku, tochugaku, tosangaku, komagaku, doragaku, and kuregaku (gigaku) dances, some ritual banners, some linings for musical instruments.

There are textiles used at the ceremony of the demise of Emperor Shomu on the second day and the nineteenth day of May in the year 756; the sashes and cover for his coffin; flower plaques and plain silk cords; etc.



Figure 11.

At the demise of Emperor Shomu in the year 756, the Empress Komyo dedicated large numbers of Emperor Shomu's heritage to the Great Buddha of Todaiji Temple on four different occasions: on the twenty-first day of the sixth lunar month of the eighth year of Tempyo Shoho (756), on the twenty-sixth day of the seventh month of the same year, and on the first days of the sixth and tenth months of the second year of Tempyo Hoji (758). The pieces were transferred to the North Section of the repository of Shoso-in. This is the origin of the Shoso-in treasures.

The textiles dedicated to the Great Buddha include priests' robes (kesa); the stitched and patched robe and the tapestry-weave robe mentioned in the section of the eighth-century inventory Record of Rare National Treasures (Kokka Chinpocho) that details the objects offered on the twenty-first day of the sixth month of the eighth year of Tempyo Shoho; a twill bag for a priest's robe, and a rokechi bag for a box holding a priest's robe. Other pieces included among the offerings were twill linings for mirror boxes, screens dyed in kyokechi and rokech, plant-fiber screen bags, a large

pillow covered with twill, and round nishiki armrests. A notation in the Record of Various Medicines made on the same day as the Record of Rare National Treasures entry cited above mentions silk and plant-fiber medicine pouches and pouch linings, and a notation made in the Record of Screens and Flower-patterned Felt Rugs on the twenty-sixth day of July of the eighth year of Tempyo Shoho (756) mentions a patterned felt rug and a pair of brocade footwear decorated with embroidery.



Figure 12.

There are textiles used on the First Anniversary of the demise of Emperor Shomu on the second day of May in the year 757, six large brocade ceremonial banners (大灌頂幡), about seven hundred brocade and gauze hall banners (道場幡), etc.

There are other textiles: a few dozen pieces of tax plain-weave silk, and many plant-fiber cloths paid as tax.

Among some catalogs of the inspections of the treasures of Shoso-in, after medieval times the records from the fourth year of Kenkyu (1193), the seventeenth year of Keicho (1612), the sixth year of Kambun (1666), the sixth year of Genroku (1693) and the fourth year of Tempo (1833) are known. Judging from these lists, many of the textiles had fallen apart, losing the appearance of their original form. This disintegration can be concluded because in the seventeenth and nineteenth century catalogs the notes of lists have been written about the textiles such as "A scrap of silk", "A scrap of cloth", "An old scrap," and "A fragment of clothing".

From the Meiji and Taisho era, the restoration and categorization of the Shoso-in textiles was

started, and until now has continued. Fragments of the textiles have continued to be categorized and mounted for preservation, with the result that today a staggering total of approximately two hundred thousand fragments and scraps have been preserved in approximately five hundred and seventy one-panel screens (figure 11), nine hundred booklets (figure 12), five hundred glass mountings (figure 13), and two hundred and fifty scrolls. Since 1960, work on the preservation of fragments and scraps has been accompanied by new preservation aimed at restoring more or less recognizable textiles such as banners, articles of clothing, and pads to approximations of their original forms. Therefore this preservation has been nearly completed, and we are recently beginning to have the first complete picture of the textiles of Shoso-in.

Finally, it should be mentioned that new East and West Treasure Repositories were completed respectively in 1953 and 1962, and that all of the treasures of Shoso-in are now stored in these two ferro-concrete buildings, which are entirely climate controlled and fire-resistant.



Pl.13 glass mounting and wardrobe



Pl.13 glass mounting

Figure 13.