



# Pagoda reliquary containing a printed charm

---

## On display

**Title/Description:** Pagoda reliquary containing a printed charm

**Born:** 0764 AD - 0770 AD

**Object Type:** Reliquary

**Materials:** Gesso, Wood

**Measurements:** h. 216 x w. 100 x d. 100 mm

**Accession Number:** 280a

**Historic Period:** Nara period (AD 710-794), 8th century

**Production Place:** Asia, East Asia, Japan

**Credit Line:** Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

---

Between 764 and 770 Empress Shōtoku (718-770) commissioned the production of one million miniature pagodas and prayers (J. *hyakuman-tō darani*) for distribution between the ten major Buddhist monasteries in western Japan. [1] The prayers (J. *darani*) offered thanks to the protective deities who had assisted the Empress in crushing a rebellion led by Emi no Oshikatsu (Fujiwara no Nakamaro; 706-764) in 764. [2]

The wooden pagoda is surmounted by a detachable finial that conceals the hollowed-out cavity created for the storage of a prayer scroll (see object number: 280b). The pagoda's form is made of cypress that has been turned on a lathe to produce a cone shape with an undulating profile. Its wide circular base narrows to a central column before extending outwards at three regular intervals to create ledges that encircle a vertical shaft. These three rings reference umbrellas (Skt. *chatra*), which are ancient Buddhist symbols of royalty and divinity, and the shaft (Skt. *yaṣṭi*) is comparable to the heart pillar central to a pagoda's structure. [3] The heart pillar 'makes manifest the invisible path of the Buddhist practitioner's aspiration, which rises along a vertical axis, ... to unite with the absolute.' [4]

Embellished with seven flanges (J. *ukebana*; literally 'support flowers'), the finial or spire (J. *kurin*) replicates the form of the pagoda and is topped with the teardrop-shaped, sacred jewel of Buddhist wisdom (J. *hōju*; Skt. *cintāmaṇi*). [5] Carved from a hardwood, the finial is used to plug the pagoda's hollowed cavity. Residual traces of colour indicate that the pagoda's wooden form was once painted white. [6]

The Metropolitan Museum has a similar object in its collection (object number: 30.47a-c) that was donated in 1930 by Benjamin Strong. According to the Metropolitan Museum's records, their pagoda "belonged to the temple Hōryūji in Nara, where three thousand of the one million pagodas were given away in 1908 to those contributing to an appeal for funds." [7]

The padoga in the Sainsbury Centre Collection is also likely to have come from Hōryūji Temple. Bickman, writing in 1975, stated that 'all [pagodas] except those held by Hōryūji have been destroyed or lost at one time or other, and the number possessed by this temple has been drastically reduced during the present century.' [8] The *Continuation of the Chronicles of Japan* (*Shoku Nihongi* 新編日本書紀), completed in 797, records that the miniature pagodas were presented to ten temples. The recipient temples were possibly Dai'anji, Gangōji, Kōfukuji, Yakushiji, Tōdaiji, Saidaiji, Gufukuji/Kawaharadera, Shitennōji, and Jūkanji of Sūfukuji. [9]

In Japan, this item is referred to as a pagoda (J. *tō*) but it derives its shape and religious function from stupas, which originated in around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. in India. [10] The word *stūpa* is a Sanskrit word meaning 'funeral heap', used to describe a domed burial mound that covers human remains, or a container for housing relics. [11] At the deaths of the Historical Buddha (Siddhārtha Gautama) and his followers, stupas were constructed as religious monuments and became sites for pilgrimage, ritual offerings and worship. [12]

Vanessa Tothill, May 2020

[1] Michael Ryan, Charles Horton, Clare Pollard and Elaine Wright, *The Chester Beatty Library*, (London: The Chester Beatty Library, Dublin in association with Scala Publishers, 2001, repr 2007), p. 98.

[2] Lawrence Smith and Yutaka Mino in Steven Hooper, ed., *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection: Catalogue* (Newhaven; London: Yale University Press in association with University of East Anglia, 1997), vol. 3, p. 143; Christine Starkman, Miyeko Murase and John M. Rosenfield, *Unrivalled Splendor: The Kimiko and John Powers Collection of Japanese Art*, (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, 2012), pp. 30-31; Ryan, p. 98.

[3] Penelope Mason, *History of Japanese Art*, 2nd edn (New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005), pp. 64-65;

Cologne Digital Sanskrit Dictionaries: The Purana Index

<https://www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de/scans/PUIScan/2020/web/webtc2/index.php> [accessed 1 May 2020]; <https://sanskritdictionary.org> [accessed 1 May 2020].

[4] Mason, pp. 64-65.

[5] Inoue Kazuto, 'Mokusei kotō no seisaku zansai - Hyakumantō seisaku kobō no arika ni tsuite' (Residual pieces of fabrication for the small wooden pagoda -The location of the working places for the One Million Pagodas) (Nara: Nara Bunkazai Kenkyūsho Kiyō, 2001), pp. 24-25.

[6] The white colour is attributed to the presence of white lead by Brian Hickman in 'A Note on the *Hyakumantō Dhāranī*', *Monumenta Nipponica*, 30:1 (Spring 1975), 87-93 (p. 89). Starkman refers to

the coating as gesso; however, it is described as white earth or China clay (J. *hakudo*) on the National Diet Library, Japan, website (Japanese language), object reference WA3-1 [https://www.ndl.go.jp/exhibit/50/washo\\_1.html#item2](https://www.ndl.go.jp/exhibit/50/washo_1.html#item2) [accessed 29 April 2020].

[7] <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/44955> [accessed 20 April 2020].

[8] Hickman, p. 89.

[9] The temples are named in *Gathered Dust* (*Shūgaishō* 書影), which was compiled by Fujiwara no Kinkata (Tōin Kinkata) in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Reference number: 32973 of the Union Catalogue of Early Japanese Books and Catalogue of Early Japanese Books at National Institute of Japanese Literature, Waseda University Kotenseki Sōgō Database (object number: □03\_02420. vol. 3, sect. 9)

[https://archive.wul.waseda.ac.jp/kosho/i03/i03\\_02420/i03\\_02420\\_0003/i03\\_02420\\_0003\\_p0014.jpg](https://archive.wul.waseda.ac.jp/kosho/i03/i03_02420/i03_02420_0003/i03_02420_0003_p0014.jpg) [accessed 1 May 2020]

See also, Starkman, pp. 30-31.

[10] The earliest stupas possibly date back to the reign of Emperor Aśoka (reigned c.265–238 BCE; also given as c. 273–232 BCE) <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ashoka> [accessed 1 May 2020]

[11] <https://www.encyclopedia.com/literature-and-arts/art-and-architecture/architecture/stupa> [accessed 1 May 2020]

[12] Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich, eds, *The World of Buddhism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), pp. 62-63; 94-95; Ryan, p. 43 referencing the summary of the *Mahāparinibbana Sutta* in Maurice Walshe, trans, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom, 1987), pp. 264-77.

---

## Further Reading

Bechert, Heinz, and Richard Gombrich, eds, *The World of Buddhism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984)

Hickman, Brian, 'A Note on the Hyakumantō Dhāranī ', *Monumenta Nipponica*, 30:1 (Spring 1975), 87-93

Hooper, Steven, ed., Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection: Catalogue, 3 vols (Newhaven; London: Yale University in association with University of East Anglia, 1997)

Inoue Kazuto, 'Mokusei kotō no seisaku zansai - Hyakumantō seisaku kobō no arika ni tsuite' (Residual pieces of fabrication for the small wooden pagoda -The location of the working places for the One Million Pagodas) (Nara: Nara Bunkazai Kenkyūsho Kiyō, 2001), pp. 24-25.

Mason, Penelope, *History of Japanese Art*, 2nd edn (New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005)

Ryan, Michael, Charles Horton, Clare Pollard and Elaine Wright, *The Chester Beatty Library*, (London: The Chester Beatty Library, Dublin in association with Scala Publishers, 2001, repr 2007)

Starkman, Christine, Miyeko Murase and John M. Rosenfield, *Unrivalled Splendor: The Kimiko and John Powers Collection of Japanese Art*, (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, 2012)

Walshe, Maurice, trans, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Digha Nikaya* (Boston: Wisdom, 1987)

---

## **Provenance**

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1967. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.

---