



Kasuga Deer Mandala (Kasuga shika mandara) 鹿の曼荼羅

On display

Title/Description: Kasuga Deer Mandala (Kasuga shika mandara) 鹿の曼荼羅

Object Type: Scroll painting

Materials: Fibre, Gold, Ink, Paper, Silk

Technique: Painting

Measurements: h. 831 x w. 402 mm

Accession Number: 1188

Historic Period: Muromachi period (AD 1333-1568)

Production Place: Asia, East Asia, Japan

The Kasuga Deer Mandala is a Shintō-Buddhist scroll painting (J. *kakejiku*) from the 15th- 16th century. [1] This type of deer mandala (J. *shika mandara*) is associated with the Kasuga Grand Shrine, which is located beneath Mount Mikasa on the Nara plain.

Central to the composition is a sacred white deer dressed with a red and black saddle, and a red bridle decorated with gold bells. The deer and the stylized, white clouds that cling to its hooves have been painted in white *gofun* pigment, made from ground oyster shells. According to Shintō animist belief, the free-roaming deer are sacred messengers that mediate between this earthly realm and the divine realm of the gods. They are regarded as manifestations of the Shintō deities of the Kasuga shrine (J. *Kasuga myōjin*). [2]

From the saddle of the deer grows a sakaki tree (Lat. *Cleyara ochracea*), its branches festooned with blossoming wisteria. Branches of the sakaki are used to demarcate sacred Shintō spaces and in purification ceremonies, while the wisteria (J. *fuji*) is emblematic of the founders and first patrons of the Kasuga shrine - the Fujiwara family.

Above the deer and sakaki tree is a large, round, golden mirror, which is also a sacred Shintō symbol. The mirror represents the brightness of the sun goddess, Amaterasu. The mirror is extremely important within Shintōism and is one of the three sacred treasures that serve as the imperial regalia of Japan. The mirror depicted in the Sainsbury Centre Collection's *shika mandara* is a plain golden disc. In some examples of this type of *mandara*, depictions of the five Shintō-Buddhist deities worshipped at the Kasuga shrine complex and neighbouring Kōfukuji Temple are superimposed on the mirror. [3]

The Kasuga shrine complex is suggested by the malachite-green hills in the upper section of the

painting, and there is a subtle depiction of the shrine's entrance at the bottom of the composition. Instead of physically performing a pilgrimage to the shrine, the viewer is invited to enter the sacred space through meditation and visualization.

Founded by Fujiwara no Fuhito in 709 adjacent to Kōfukuji Temple, the Kasuga shrine was originally used as 'an ancestral clan shrine' [4]. In 768 the shrine was moved to the bottom of Mount Mikasa, and was extensively rebuilt in 1178-1179. [5] The Fujiwara family were influential patrons of the Kasuga cult, possessing sub-branches in the aristocratic court and the military samurai elite.

In the early 13th century, the spiritual leader Myōe Shōnin (Myōe Kōben 明恵上人; 1173-1232) encouraged people outside of the Fujiwara family to worship the deities enshrined at Kasuga. [6]. Depictions of the shrine compound were popular from this period onwards, and are indicative of the spread of Kasuga-shrine veneration through religious confraternities. [7]

A similar painting from the early Edo period (1600-1868), can be viewed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art (object number: 2005-145-1). [8]

Vanessa Tothill, May 2020

[1] In November 2011, Professor Mimi Yiengprukasawan (Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut) and Professor Sano Midori (Gakushuin University, Tokyo) viewed the *mandara*. During the viewing it was suggested that the work was 16th century (late Muromachi period), and that it may have been a sketch for a bigger painting. They also observed that some restoration work might have taken place.

[2] Stephen Little, 'Shintō-Buddhist Syncretic Images' in *Visions of the Dharma: Japanese Buddhist Paintings and Prints in the Honolulu Museum of Arts* (Honolulu: The Honolulu Academy of Arts, 1991), pp. 121-125 (p. 121). 'Kasuga Myōjin' is usually used to refer to all five Shintō deities enshrined at Kasuga: the founding Fujiwara ancestor, Ame no koyane no mikoto; Himegami; Takemikazuchi no mikoto; Futsunushi no mikoto; and Ame no oshikumone no mikoto.

[3] Michael Goedhui, *One Thousand Years of Art in Japan* (London: Colnaghi Oriental, 1981), pp. 38-39, no. 13. *The five Buddhist 'original forms' or honji associated with the Kasuga shrine were the historical Buddha Shaka (Skt. Śākyamuni), Miroku (Skt. Maitreya), Yakushi (Skt. Bhaiṣajyaguru), Jizō (Skt. Kṣitigarbha), and Jūichimen Kannon (Skt. Avalokiteśvara) in Little, p. 121.*

[4] Little, p. 121.

[5] Little, pp. 121-23

[6] Royall Tyler, *The Miracles of the Kasuga Deity* (New York; Oxford: Columbia University Press, 2016). *The Metropolitan Museum holds Myōe Kōben's 'Section of a Dream Diary' (Yume no ki 夢記, c.1203-10), object number, 2014.719.3*

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/60437>[Accessed 4 February, 2023]

[7] Little, p. 125 referencing Leonard Bruce Darling Jr., 'The Transformation of Pure Land Thought and the Development of Shinto Shrine Mandala Paintings: Kasuga and Kumano'. Doctoral Thesis. Presented to University of Michigan, Ann Arbor in 1983, p. 293.

[8] Philadelphia Museum of Art, object number: 2005-145-1.

<https://philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/294273.html?mulR=1065375277> [accessed 28

May 2020]

Further Reading

Darling, Leonard Bruce, Jr., 'The Transformation of Pure Land Thought and the Development of Shinto Shrine Mandala Paintings: Kasuga and Kumano'. Doctoral Thesis. Presented to Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1983

Goedhuis, Michael, *One Thousand Years of Art in Japan* (London: Colnaghi Oriental, 1981)

Little, Stephen, *Visions of the Dharma: Japanese Buddhist Paintings and Prints in the Honolulu Museum of Arts* (Honolulu: The Honolulu Academy of Arts, 1991)

Murase, Miyeko, *Bridge of Dreams: The Mary Griggs Burke Collection of Japanese Art* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000)

Tyler, Royall, 'A History of the Kasuga Shrine' in *The Miracles of the Kasuga Deity* (New York; Oxford: Columbia University Press, 1990)
