

The Tamamushi Shrine



Tamamushi Shrine, c. 650. Cypress and camphor wood, with lacquer and paint.

Height: 84 inches. Hōryū-ji Treasure House.

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The Tamamushi Shrine, shown in the black and white photograph above, features the only surviving examples of Japanese painting from the seventh century. The shrine is now kept in the Hōryū-ji Treasure House. The shrine is made of lacquered cypress and camphor wood and consists of a rectangular pedestal, a dais, and a *kondō* or image hall. Buddhist narratives, bodhisattvas, and the Four Guardian Kings are painted in red, yellow, light brown, and green against a black lacquer background on the outside panels of the dais and image hall. In contrast to Asuka period sculpture, which is based on Chinese Northern Wei (386-584) prototypes, the paintings on this Shrine are similar to contemporary paintings created in Tang China. Originally, the edges that surrounded these decorative panels and the projecting open metalwork of the pedestal and the image hall were covered with the iridescent wings of



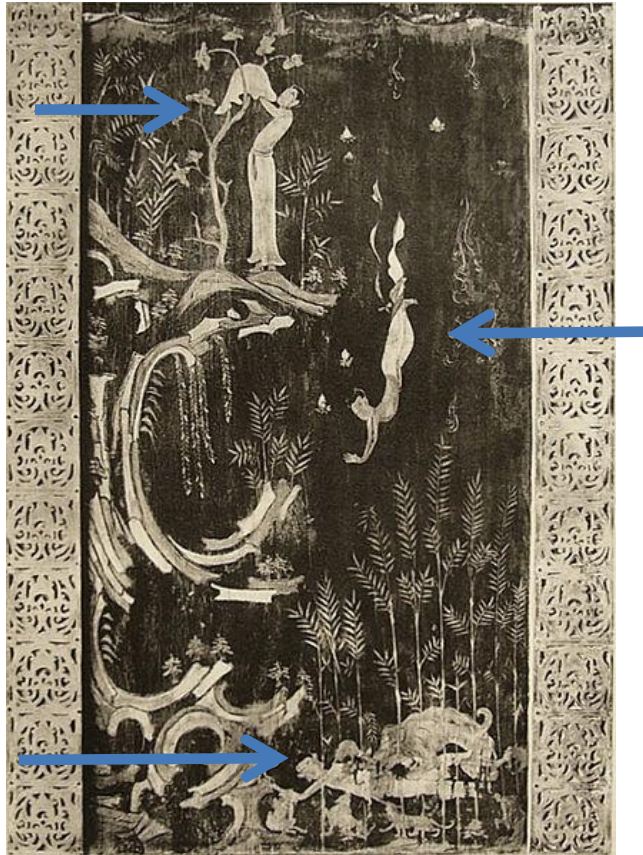
tamamushi or beetles, from which the shrine takes its name. The shrine is an important example of Asuka period architecture as only two real Asuka period buildings—the Golden Hall and Pagoda of Horyū-ji—survive.



Bodhisattvas depicted on the side doors of the Tamamushi Shrine.

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On the front doors of the shrine's image hall, the Four Guardians Kings are depicted clad in armor with long flowing scarves. On the side doors, Bodhisattvas (as depicted in the above detail) are represented holding a lotus blossom. A statue of the Bodhisattva Kannon, a later addition to the shrine, can now be seen in the interior. The walls on the inside of the image hall are decorated with small rows of seated Buddhas.



The Hungry Tigress Jataka depicted on a side panel of the Tamamushi Shrine.

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Buddhist narratives are depicted on the four rectangular sides of the dais. On the front of the dais, two monks are shown seated in front of relics, offering incense. The back depicts Mount Sumeru, which lies at the center of the Buddhist universe, separating the heavens, earth, and the oceans. Two jataka tales (stories about the Buddha before he achieved Enlightenment) are represented on the sides of the dais. The most famous of these is the Hungry Tigress Jataka, in which the Buddha kills himself in order to feed a hungry tigress and her cubs in an act of selfless compassion. The painting is shown in the above detail. The story is conveyed as a continuous narrative beginning at the top of the painting, where the Buddha is first depicted on a mountain taking off his robe. He is then shown mid-air towards the middle of the composition after he has hurled himself off the cliff. Finally, the Buddha appears at the bottom of the composition while the tigress and her cubs devour him. This method of pictorial storytelling is also found on Indian stupas and in Chinese cave paintings at Dunhuang.